

Introduction

In an attempt to break a government-imposed humanitarian siege that continues to deprive their region of humanitarian assistance, the Tigrayan Defence Forces (TDF), which includes groups that are not affiliated with the Tigray Peoples Liberation Force (TPLF), launched an offensive on 13 July, extending operations into the Afar and Amhara regions.

By the end of November, the strategic towns of Dessie and Kombolcha had fallen as the TDF approached the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa from the north, while the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) with whom the TDF had partnered moved in on the city from the south.

In response to these developments, a nationwide state of emergency was declared on 2 November by the federal government, amid fears of its imminent collapse. As foreign embassies rushed to evacuate their citizens, the capital's residents were enjoined to take up arms and defend the city. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed declared 'total war', and vowed he would personally lead the battle from the [frontlines](#). This caused a surge in nationalistic fervour, and thousands (young, old, male and female) answered the call. It also led to a surge in ethnic hatred and the targeting of Tigrayans in Addis Ababa and elsewhere.

Human rights violations in Tigray

The initial phase of the war on Tigray was characterised by gross human rights violations, some of which may amount to atrocity crimes, and several of which are continuing. These violations, carried out predominantly by the Eritrean Defence forces (EDF) and Amhara militia, included the weaponizing of mass rape and starvation, massacres of men and boys, the destruction of vital infrastructure, the bombing and looting of houses of worship, and the theft of historical artefacts.

Allegations recently emerged of retributive violence in the Amhara region by elements within the TDF. In particular, a [report](#) by Amnesty International stated that 70 women stated they had been raped by forces allied to the TDF between 12 and 21 August. Several victims reported their captors describing their actions as retaliation for the severe violations suffered by Tigrayan women and girls.

TDF forces have also been accused of looting aid stores and health facilities in occupied areas in the Amhara and Afar regions. If these allegations are correct, such actions could be attributable to the scarcity of these items in Tigray following the looting and destruction of clinics and medical facilities earlier in the war, and the continuing humanitarian aid blockade.

State of emergency and mass arrests

The institution of the state of emergency was accompanied by an increased proliferation of hate speech targeting the entire Tigrayan ethnic group both on and offline, despite the Ethiopian government's protestations that its fight is against

the TPLF, which it declared a terrorist organisation.

The state of emergency, which is valid for six months, allows for the detention of suspects without trial for its duration, and house-to-house searches without a warrant. Its expansive terms have facilitated the indiscriminate mass internment of speakers of Tigrinya (the Tigrayan language) of every age and gender across the country. They have been "[seized off the streets](#), in their homes and even in workplaces — including banks, schools and shopping centres — and taken to overcrowded cells in police stations and detention facilities." People were targeted by police and vigilantes on the basis of their surnames, information in their identification cards and drivers licenses, and their pronunciation of the national language, Amharic. The round ups were so indiscriminate that 10 UN local staff members, 34 subcontracted drivers and several [Eritrean refugees](#) were caught up in raids, the latter detained in Addis Ababa and Oromia simply for speaking Tigrinya, a lingua franca in Eritrea.

In a November 2021 [statement](#) on the mass detentions the spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern "that arrests have been continuing over the last couple of weeks in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, as well as in Gondar, Bahir Dar and other locations, as police invoke the excessively wide provisions of the state of emergency declared on 2 November to arrest, search and detain people." Recounting the many ways in which these arbitrary detentions failed to conform with international standards, the spokesperson added that "certain rights are non-derogable even in a state of emergency, including freedom from torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, the right to life and the right to equality and non-discrimination."

In a [statement](#) issued on 6 December the governments of Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) asserted that the declaration of a state of emergency was "no justification for the mass detention of individuals from certain ethnic groups." They also called on "all parties to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law, including those regarding the protection of civilians and humanitarian and medical personnel. It is clear that there is no military solution to this conflict, and we denounce any and all violence against civilians, past, present and future. All armed actors should cease fighting and the Eritrean Defence Forces should withdraw from Ethiopia. We reiterate our call for all parties to seize the opportunity to negotiate a sustainable ceasefire without preconditions. Fundamentally, Ethiopians must build an inclusive political process and national consensus through political and legal means, and all those responsible for violations and abuses of human rights must be held accountable."

In December 2021 Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International [reported](#) that thousands of ethnic Tigrayans had been forcibly expelled, detained or killed in Humera, Adebay and Rawyan in western Tigray by irregular Amhara militia known as Fanos, armed with machetes, guns and

knives. Families were separated, and men and women deemed to be of fighting age were detained in formal and informal detention facilities where conditions are life threatening. The report also warned that those who were detained are “at grave risk.”

UN Special Session

As the fate of the Ethiopian capital and its leader appeared to hang in the balance, the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) convened a special session on 17 December, following a [request](#) by the Permanent Mission of Slovenia on behalf of the European Union, which was supported by 17 HRC Member States and 38 Observer States. However, in its [response](#), Ethiopia expressed “its complete rejection of Resolution A/HRC/S-33/L.1”

The session concluded with the adoption of a resolution establishing an international commission of three human rights experts to thoroughly and impartially investigate alleged violations of international human rights, humanitarian and refugee law committed since 3 November 2020 by all parties to the conflict in Tigray, despite the vehement opposition of Ethiopia and its allies. However, Ethiopia said it would not cooperate with any mechanism.

TDF Tactical Withdrawal

On 20 December the TDF [announced](#) “phase-by-phase withdrawals” from occupied towns, while insisting its overall objective of opening a humanitarian corridor to Tigray remained unchanged.

In a letter addressed to the UN, TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael [stated](#): “We propose an immediate cessation of hostilities followed by negotiations”, demanding amongst other things, the creation of a no-fly zone “for hostile aircraft over Tigray,” while allowing civil and humanitarian flights, the imposition of arms embargoes on Ethiopia and Eritrea, and for a UN mechanism to verify that external armed forces had withdrawn from Tigray. He also proposed the creation of an airbridge and/or a humanitarian corridor to Tigray under a de-militarized route designated for the safe passage of humanitarian supplies to ensure “sustained delivery of humanitarian aid and items essential to survival.”

A major motivation for the withdrawal may have been the [diplomatic pressure](#) exerted on the Tigrayan leadership behind the scenes: “The TPLF leadership are – perhaps a bit paradoxically – astute internationalists who put great efforts into maintaining and balancing international relations, and thus were hesitant to continue an advance on Addis in the face of a broad-based international opposition.”

Arms Purchases by the Ethiopian Government

The TDF’s decision to retreat to familiar terrain may also have been reached in an effort to render its forces less vulnerable to [armed drones](#), which were part of the vast array of weaponry purchased by the Ethiopian government over the previous months from China, Iran, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Russia is also known to be one

of its major suppliers of arms. With two permanent members of the Security Council so heavily invested in the Ethiopian regime, it is perhaps unsurprising that the international community has struggled to formulate a coherent and effective response to the war on Tigray.

During 2021 Turkey’s “[defence and aviation exports](#) to Ethiopia rose to \$51 million in the first three months ... , from \$203,000 in the same period [in 2020], with a jump in August and September.” In August Ethiopia and Turkey had signed a military cooperation agreement, amid reports that the former was planning to deploy drones. The inscription on a [drone fragment](#) found in the Mersa and Haro area by the TDF a month later identified its [manufacturer](#) as the Turkish company [ROKETSAN](#).

In August 2021 Bellingcat [reported](#) that imagery shared on social media provided a “strong indication” that Iranian-made Mohajer-6 armed drones had been sighted at Semera Airport in Afar state.

In September a Netherlands-based [aircraft tracking expert](#) detailed the arrival of Antonov cargo aircraft at Harar Meda Military Airport in eastern Ethiopia, arriving from Chengdu, China and travelling via Islamabad, Pakistan: “According to [Oryxspioenkop](#), this flight could be related to the arrival of Wing Loong I UAVs [armed drones], since Chengdu is where the Wing Loong I is produced.” A second Antonov cargo flight arrived in October.

In November satellite imagery obtained by [Al Jazeera](#) exposed the role of the UAE in providing an air bridge for military supplies to Ethiopia, using a Spanish private shipping company as well as a Ukrainian one. The images also show a Wing Loong drone, and the offloading of military cargo from Ilyushin cargo aircraft. The report revealed that from September and October there were over 90 flights between the UAE and Ethiopia, with many deliberately concealing where they took off from and where they landed.

Air Strikes and War Crimes

Since the beginning of the war airstrikes have targeted Tigray’s civilian population, perhaps the most infamous being an attack [on a market](#) in June 2021 in which 64 people were killed and 180 wounded. So far in January 2022 airstrikes appear once again to have been directed largely at civilians and civilian objects, and have claimed at least 108 lives while injuring around 76 people. Examples of these attacks include:

- On 5 January an airstrike hit [Mai Aini refugee camp](#), located near the southern town of Mai Tsebri, killing three Eritrean refugees, two of them children, and injuring four others.
- According to the [OHCHR](#), “numerous other airstrikes” were reported during the week beginning 3 January, including on a private minibus traveling from Adiet to Axum city that reportedly [killed 25 people](#); on Shire airport, and elsewhere.
- On 7 January an airstrike in the town of [Dedebit](#) in

northwest Tigray close to the border with Eritrea hit a camp for internally displaced people, killing 56 people and injured 30, including children. Three of the injured died in hospital, raising the death toll to 59. The strike occurred on the same day that the Ethiopian government, basking in the TDF's retreat, had released political detainees in an Orthodox Christmas amnesty (see below), stating that "the key to lasting unity is dialogue" and that "one of the moral obligations of the victor is mercy."

- On 10 January an airstrike targeted a flour grinding mill in the town of [Mai Tsebri](#) killing at least 17 people, most of them women, and 21 were injured. It occurred on the same day that US President Biden had [spoken](#) with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, expressing concern about drone attacks and civilian casualties, had commended him for the release of the political prisoners, and had discussed ways in which to "accelerate dialogue toward a negotiated ceasefire, the urgency of improving humanitarian access across Ethiopia, and the need to address the human rights concerns of all affected Ethiopians, including concerns about detentions of Ethiopians under the state of emergency."
- On 11 January three men were killed, and 21 were injured in an airstrike on [Hiwane](#) in the southeast that hit the state-owned Technical Vocational Education and Training institute and reportedly damaged a church.
- Also on 11 January, hours after African Union (AU) Special Envoy and former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo flew into the Tigrayan capital, Mekelle, anti-aircraft guns [opened fire](#), reportedly in response to the arrival of drones.
- On 12 January an elderly man died in an airstrike, according to the OHCHR.
- On 15 January the towns of Korem, Maychew and Samre were targeted by airstrikes, according to the [TPLF spokesperson](#).

In its 14 January statement the OHCHR expressed alarm at "the multiple, deeply disturbing reports" of civilian casualties due to the airstrikes, and called on Ethiopia and its allies "to ensure the protection of civilians and civilian objects, in line with their obligations under international law." It added: "Failure to respect the principles of distinction and proportionality could amount to war crimes."

According to article 8 of the [Rome Statute](#) of the International Criminal Court, intentionally attacking civilians and civilian objects, attacking with the intention of causing death or injury to civilians or damage to civilian objects or widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment which is excessive in relation to the anticipated military advantage, and attacking or bombarding undefended towns, villages, dwellings or buildings which are not military objectives, all constitute war crimes.

Sustained Humanitarian Aid Blockade

The plight of victims injured in airstrikes has been

exacerbated by the ongoing blockade of the Tigray region, which has also suffered a media and telecommunications blackout and a loss of banking services since the beginning of the war.

Some international journalists have managed to access Tigray, including from [the BBC](#), which issued a report on 6 January containing distressing images of severely malnourished children in the Ayder Referral Hospital in Mekelle.

[Reuters](#) was informed by three of its doctors that the 500-bed had received no supplies of medicine or equipment since June 2021. Its scanners no longer work, and it is running out of vital supplies, including of oxygen, antibiotics, and the therapeutic food required by malnourished under-fives, whose numbers doubled in October 2021, and who now constitute over 41% of this segment of the population. In a presentation for international aid agencies on 4 January, hospital authorities stated that "signing death certificates has become [their] primary job." The doctors also identified 117 deaths and cases of infection, amputation, kidney failure, and other complications linked to the shortages of medicines and equipment.

On 14 January the World Food Programme (WFP) [warned](#) that the escalation in fighting across northern Ethiopia had prevented WFP convoys from reaching Mekelle since mid-December 2021. Consequently, stocks of nutritionally fortified food for malnourished children and women are now exhausted, and the last supplies of cereals, pulses and oil would be distributed during the week commencing 17 January.

In a remark that highlighted the depth of the crisis, the WFP's Regional Director for Eastern Africa Michael Dunford said the organisation was now "having to choose who goes hungry to prevent another from starving." He warned the WFP was likely to run out of food and nutrition supplies for millions across Ethiopia next month due to an unprecedented lack of funding, adding that it needed "immediate guarantees from all parties to the conflict for safe and secure humanitarian corridors, via all routes, across northern Ethiopia. Humanitarian supplies are simply not flowing at the pace and scale needed. The lack of both food and fuel means we've only been able to reach 20% of those we should have in this latest distribution in Tigray. We're on the edge of a humanitarian disaster."

During a World Health Organisation (WHO) [press briefing on COVID-19](#) on 12 January, Director General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, an ethnic Tigrayan, revealed that the organisation had requested access to the Tigray, Afar, and Amhara regions, approaching the office of Prime Minister Abiy, the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry "and all relevant sectors," but had only received permission to send medical supplies to the Afar and Amhara regions. He added that apart from measles vaccines supplied by UNICEF, no other medicines had reached Tigray since July 2021, indicating "a blatant blockade" in stark contrast with other humanitarian crises, including Syria and Yemen, where humanitarian

access was granted even at the height of hostilities. Dr Adhanom also urged the international community to call for unfettered access to Tigray: “conflict cannot be an excuse.”

The Ethiopian government responded to this intervention by sending a [letter of complaint](#) to the WHO in which it accused Dr Adhanom of being an active TPLF member who was using his office “to advance his political interest at the expense of Ethiopia.” As part of an expansive gaslighting strategy in which Ethiopia portrays itself as the victim of western machinations and Tigrayan lies that has succeeded in garnering a degree of support among pan-Africanists, it has also claimed the TPLF is responsible for blocking humanitarian access to its own region.

On 12 January, and in a [rare public rebuke](#), the Nobel Committee called for an end to the war, highlighting the “dire and unacceptable” humanitarian situation in Tigray, and asserting that “as prime minister and peace prize laureate, Abiy Ahmed has a special responsibility to end the conflict and contribute to making peace,”

Prominent Prisoners Freed

Ethiopia’s government announced it would be granting [amnesty](#) to several prominent opposition figures to mark Orthodox Christmas, including Sibhat Nega, a founding member of the party, Abay Weldu, a former president of the Tigray region, Jawar Mohammed an Oromo opposition leader, and

the Amhara journalist, blogger and politician Eskender Nega. It stated that the “key to lasting unity is dialogue. Ethiopia will make any sacrifices to this end. Its purpose is to pave the way for a lasting solution to Ethiopia’s problems in a peaceful, non-violent way... especially with the aim of making the all-inclusive national dialogue a success.”

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said the Ethiopian government granted the amnesties in order to achieve national reconciliation and to promote “unity”, yet went on to launch airstrikes on Tigray on and since that day, causing consternation among members of the international community who had moved swiftly to welcome the initiative.

In its response, the OHCHR welcomed the news of the releases, but remained concerned “that many more people – at least hundreds – remain indefinitely detained in appalling conditions and without being brought before a court of law or other tribunal to review the reasons for their detention, among other violations of procedural guarantees.”

However, an unforeseen result of this move was that it has dented the Prime Minister’s standing among extreme nationalists, particularly from the Amhara tribe, some of whom speak openly of the destruction of the Tigrayan people whom they regularly [demonise](#) as “hyenas” “cancer”, “weeds” and worse than the devil, and whose antipathy towards them has been fuelled by the hate speech he allowed to proliferate to serve his purposes.

Continued Eritrean Interference

Eritrean troops continue to occupy parts of Tigray to the Eritrean border. Recent reports indicate that its units may have withdrawn from [Sheraro](#) town after sustaining significant casualties. There are also unconfirmed reports of an Eritrean withdrawal from an area across the Tekeze river, which forms a section of the country’s westernmost border with Tigray, and of poor morale in a force largely consisting of conscripts who were forced to occupy parts of western Tigray, while professional army units were either held back to protect the Eritrean president or stationed elsewhere in Ethiopia.

According to a [communiqué](#) issued on 14 January by the Oromo Liberation Front-Oromo Liberation Army (OLF-OLA) High Command, Ethiopian forces are being withdrawn from the region after failing to dislodge the OLA from recently occupied areas, and are being replaced by members of the EDF who now comprise “the majority of regime-affiliated troops in western Oromo.” Meanwhile Ethiopian forces have reportedly adopted a supportive role, primarily launching air strikes that have “led to a high civilian death toll as they are used on highly populated targets within towns and villages.”

For Eritrea’s leader, Isaias Afwerki, the war on Tigray is the latest episode in a long-held vendetta against the TPLF. He effectively groomed the Ethiopian prime minister and President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohaned (Farmaajo) of Somalia, aided in their own ambitions of centralising and maintaining power in their respective nations.

Over 5,400 young Somalis had been sent to Eritrea for military training in early 2019. In June 2021 the parents of these recruits, who were effectively missing since going to Eritrea, staged an unprecedented [protest](#) in the Somali capital, Mogadishu, after a UN report confirmed the youths were used as cannon fodder in Ethiopia’s Tigray region.

More recently, in [January 2022](#), a recruit who managed to escape from Eritrea returned to Somalia with disturbing allegations. According to the escapee, over 400 unarmed trainees had been killed in an altercation with Eritrean troops, and others had died due to a lack of food and medicines in the camps to which they were dispersed. While some had been deployed in Ethiopia, the majority were detained in three facilities, where he alleges they are being held for “ransom” after the Somali government failed to pay expenses claimed by Eritrea for their food, drink and medicines.

Conclusion and Recommendations

CSW remains deeply concerned by continuing indications of starvation being used as a weapon of war, and the targeting and mass arbitrary detentions of Tigrayan civilians, including infants, in life threatening conditions on the basis of ethnicity. The humanitarian and human rights situation in Ethiopia, and particularly in Tigray and Oromia, remain critical.

CSW is also concerned by reports of massive arms sales to Ethiopia which effectively prolong a war which increasingly appears unwinnable. These sales correlate directly with the increase in airstrikes targeting Tigrayan civilians, which form part of a campaign that has the worrying appearance of being a deliberate attempt to annihilate a people group by all available means. The fact that those involved in the supplying of armaments include permanent members of the UN body mandated with maintaining international peace and security is particularly lamentable.

The Ethiopian government's stated aim of initiating an inclusive dialogue continues to be negated by its actions. The ongoing starvation of the population within Tigray, coupled with the severe mistreatment meted out to Tigrayans outside of the region, will make it difficult, if not impossible, for Tigrayans to agree to continuing to be part of a unified state when this crisis is brought to an end.

The violence in Tigray is systematic and intentional; a genocide may be unfolding before the eyes of an international community that continues to respond far too tentatively.

CSW therefore urges the UK Government to:

- Take the lead in international efforts, including at the UN Security Council, to ensure no fly zones over Tigray and Oromia. Prospects for an end to the conflict remain dim while Ethiopia continues to believe that its airpower will offset the TDF's superiority on the battlefield and will ultimately deliver victory;
- Take the lead in international efforts, including at the UN Security Council, to secure an immediate cessation of hostilities, the complete and verified withdrawal of Eritrean forces, and unimpeded access to Tigray for local and international aid agencies. The imposition of an arms embargo on all identified warring parties would be an important initial step in achieving these aims. In the event that action at Security Council level is impeded, HMG should lead efforts to form a coalition of states willing to impose a ban on arms sales that is as comprehensive as is feasible, and to sanction those who fail adhere to it;
- Urgently consider imposing sanctions on the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea, who bear ultimate responsibility for human rights violations committed with impunity by their respective armed forces, as well as on military and political leaders of both nations identified as having committed or being complicit in these violations, and encourage other nations with the requisite domestic legislation to do the same. So far, the US has sanctioned the Chief of Staff of the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) under Global Magnitsky sanctions, and the European

Commission has mooted the removal of more than €100 million (\$120 million) of development assistance originally designated for Eritrea, citing human rights violations in Tigray. While these initiatives are welcome, they are not in themselves sufficient to ensure an end to hostilities, the withdrawal of the EDF, and the convening of inclusive national dialogue in Ethiopia;

- Lead efforts at the UN Security Council to implement the recommendations of the 2016 report of the UN Commission of inquiry on Eritrea (COIE), and particularly to: "(a) Determine that the situation of human rights in Eritrea poses a threat to international peace and security; (b) Refer the situation in Eritrea to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court; (c) Impose targeted sanctions, namely travel bans and asset freezes, on persons where there are reasonable grounds to believe that the said persons are responsible for crimes against humanity or other gross violations of human rights."

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