

Overview

Since the war in Ethiopia's Tigray region began last November over 52,000 people have died, and an estimated 1.7 million have been displaced internally.

The Ethiopian government imposed a communications blackout at the beginning of the conflict. Nevertheless, reports continued to filter through of appalling crimes perpetrated largely by Eritrean soldiers, who from the beginning fought alongside Ethiopian soldiers and militia from the country's Amhara region. These crimes include brutal acts of sexual and gender-based violence, indiscriminate bombing, the possible use of chemical weapons, extra judicial killings, and looting of homes, businesses, and historical and religious sites.

There are worrying indications that atrocity crimes - war crimes, crimes against humanity and possibly genocide - may have occurred and could still be underway. In the words of a [priest](#) from the Catholic Eparchy of Adigrat interviewed at the height of the occupation: 'They want to annihilate Tigray. By killing the men and boys, they are trying to destroy any future resistance...They are raping and destroying women to ensure that they cannot raise a community in the future. They are using rape and food as weapons of war.' By June 2021 researchers at Belgium's University of Ghent had documented [10,000](#) deaths and 230 massacres, with many more incidents yet to be fully investigated and victims identified.

Eritrean soldiers also embarked on extensive looting. Civilians are forcibly deprived of money and jewellery, while homes are comprehensively cleared, including of blankets, cutlery, shoes, and clothing. Hospitals have been emptied of medication, factories of equipment, and stores of goods. Anything not transported to Eritrea was destroyed. Livestock were seized and eaten, while crops were burnt in fields. Farmers were prevented from preparing their fields for the rains, ensuring there would be no harvest.

The Ethiopian premier's declaration of a unilateral humanitarian ceasefire following the hurried withdrawal of Ethiopian and allied forces was disingenuous. During the withdrawal on 28 June, which was occasioned by significant reversals on the battlefield, Ethiopian troops disabled communications systems, including those in NGO and UN premises, emptied banks, and commandeered vehicles in the Tigrayan capital, Mekelle. A bridge vital for transportation of humanitarian aid to Tigray was destroyed following the ceasefire declaration, and the region has remained under a de facto siege, facilitating the continued use of starvation as a weapon of war.

In an attempt to break the siege, the Tigrayan Defence Forces (TDF, which consist of non-TPLF affiliated Tigrayans), launched a new offensive on 13 July, rapidly expanding operations into the Afar and Amhara regions. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), more than 76,500 people have been displaced by fighting in Afar region, while an estimated 150,000 have been displaced in the Amhara region.

In seeming response to the military advances, ethnic profiling of Tigrayans has increased across Ethiopia, with reports of enforced disappearances, [arbitrary detentions](#), including of young [children](#), and seizures and forced closures of some [48,000](#) Tigrayan-owned businesses in Addis Ababa. 700 Tigrayan serving and retired soldiers and their families are reportedly held in a camp in the Oromia region. Disturbing video and still pictures continues to emerge of severe ethnicity-based violations, including from Gondar of a young man being [assaulted](#) due allegedly for being a Tigrayan, and of the bodies of [at least ten](#) men of Tigrayans and Qemant ethnicity - the latter tribe is deemed to be related to Tigrayans. In Humera, on the border with Eritrea and Sudan, Amhara soldiers reportedly conducted a "door-to-door" search for ethnic Tigrayans, forcing thousands into makeshift detention centres. Subsequently, tightly bound male bodies bearing Tigrayan tattoos and marks of torture began to [wash up](#) on the Sudanese side of the Setit/Tekeze river.

Hate speech dehumanising people of Tigrayan descent has also proliferated, with the Ethiopian Prime Minister, other political leaders and even some religious personalities describing them as "cancer" or "weeds" that Ethiopia must get rid of in order to prosper.

Press freedoms are increasingly restricted, with journalists and media that seek to report impartially experiencing [physical attacks](#), [arbitrary arrests](#), [expulsion](#), the [raiding](#) of at least one home, the [suspension](#) then [reinstatement](#) of the publishing licence of the Addis Standard, a respected media house, and [two murders](#).

Conflict-related sexual violence

Prior to the Ethiopian and Eritrean withdrawal, there were regular, disturbing reports of systematic, mass rape, generally lasting for days, and committed primarily, but not exclusively, by Eritrean troops and allied Amhara militia.

It appears increasingly that the mass rape reported from and documented in Tigray was not only being used as a weapon of war and "[a means to humiliate, terrorize, and traumatize an entire population today and into the next generation](#)," it may also amount to a constituent element of a possible genocide. Assailants spoke frequently of [cleansing their victims' bloodline](#), and many arrived at medical facilities having suffered additional traumatic injuries to their reproductive organs inflicted by attackers to [prevent them from bearing children](#). In March CSW received disturbing video footage of victim who was raped repeatedly by 23 Eritrean soldiers over 10 days undergoing the removal of stones, nails, used tissues and other objects that were inserted inside her before she was dumped on a road.

Survivors range from the very young to the elderly, are overwhelmingly female and but include some males, and even [Catholic nuns](#). They were generally held captive and raped multiple times by several assailants for extended periods.

The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in Ethiopia estimated in April that 22,500 women would require support as a consequence of conflict related sexual violence.

Refugees

In December 2020, the UNHCR [reported](#) that 46,000 Ethiopian refugees had arrived in Sudan since the start of November, and that they were continuing to arrive in the hundreds. Numbers are now estimated at over 60,000, including some Eritrean refugees.

The war on Tigray has also heightened the vulnerability of the estimated 150,021 registered Eritreans (many of whom are unaccompanied minors) who had sought refuge in Ethiopia from their repressive government. Most were housed in four camps in Tigray, and two of them, Hitsats and Shimelba, were destroyed by Eritrean forces. In what would amount to a gross violation of the United Nations and African refugee conventions, at least 6,000 refugees are alleged to have been forcibly returned to Eritrea.

In January, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi confirmed that approximately 20,000 refugees who were formerly in the Hitsats and Shimelba refugee camps were missing, and [said](#) many refugees appear to have been “caught in crossfire, abducted and forced to return to Eritrea under duress by Eritrean forces.”

As the TDF moved against the Eritrean forces in July, access to the two remaining camps, Mai Aini and Adi Harush, where an estimated 24,000 Eritrean refugees reside, was impeded for over two weeks, raising concerns for the wellbeing of refugees. Reports indicate that on the night of 13 July events on 13th July, bullets and artillery fire rained down on Mai Aini camp.

Even prior to the war refugee camps were vulnerable to raids by armed gangs or Shifita. While the fighting continued and communications within Tigray were yet to be restored, information filtered largely through Eritrean sources linked to the governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia of refugees experiencing severe violations at the hands of the TDF. These were amplified internationally by Eritrean government supporters and government officials but were disputed by TDF supporters.

The [UNHCR](#) subsequently highlighted reports from Mai Aini camp of the murder of one refugee on 14 July, and another being killed after that date by armed elements operating inside the camp. On 6 August the [UN Special Rapporteur on Eritrea](#) stated he was “extremely alarmed at reports of reprisal attacks and killings, sexual violence, beatings of Eritrean refugees and looting of camps and property. This violence directed at refugees must stop.” He added that the recent fighting had also displaced thousands of people in the Afar region, which hosts an additional 55,000 Eritrean refugees.

In August limited access was restored, and efforts are now being made by the UNHCR, in cooperation with the Ethiopian government and the TDF, to facilitate the transfer of refugees from Tigray to other areas of the country. On 4 August the Ethiopian government began to issue temporary identification documents to Eritrean refugees in Addis Ababa that are valid for three years and guarantee assistance, services, and protection.

In reality, no area of Ethiopia is truly safe for Eritreans who genuinely seek refuge from their government, as Eritrean soldiers, informants, and security agents are currently operating across the country.

Looming Famine

According to the [Tigray External Affairs Office](#), 150 people died of hunger in August.

According to the UN around 90% of the Tigrayan population are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, including 400,000 people who are already “facing famine-like conditions.” Millions are also on the brink of hunger in the areas of the Afar and Amhara regions that share a border with Tigray. [UNICEF](#) recently alerted that over 100,000 children in Tigray could suffer from life threatening severe acute malnutrition in the next 12 months, constituting a tenfold increase to the annual average.

“Food stocks already ran out on 20 August. A minimum of 100 trucks of food, non-food items, and fuel must enter Tigray every day to sustain an adequate response. To date, and since 12 July, only 335 trucks have entered the region – or about 9% of the required 3,900 trucks. Not one single truck has entered the Tigray region since 22 August. Currently there are 172 trucks stranded in Semera and substantial supplies are stockpiled in Djibouti, Adama and Kombolcha due to federal and regional administrative constraints.”

Deaths are also occurring due to sicknesses that could previously have been treated or prevented. Prior to retreating Eritrean forces had looted Tigrayan infrastructure extensively and destroyed clinics, equipment, medicines, and medical records. In March, Médecins Sans Frontiers ([MSF](#)) reported that 70% of the 106 medical facilities its teams had been allowed to visit had been looted and only 13% of them were functioning fully, undermining medical treatment for those in need. The continuing siege of Tigray has meant vital medical supplies cannot be replenished sufficiently.

There are also ongoing gross violations of humanitarian law. Twenty-three aid workers have been killed so far, including three security guards working for the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), an International Rescue Committee (IRC) staff member, a USAID employee, three MSF employees and 11 staff members of the Relief Society of Tigray (REST). Hostility towards humanitarian workers was heightened further by the unguarded utterances of Ethiopian officials, who have levelled unfounded accusations against aid agencies, including UN agencies, claiming that they are [transporting arms](#) and supplies to the TDF, and are “fabricating facts and figures from afar” in a campaign aimed at “disrespecting and defaming Ethiopia”. On 30 July, Ethiopia suspended the activities of the Norwegian Refugee Council and Doctors Without Borders for three months reportedly due to their “public advocacy” and allegedly failure to obtain proper permissions for foreign staff.

USAID has accused the TDF and its allies of looting its humanitarian aid stocks in the Amhara region. The TDF has [denied](#) the accusation, claiming most of the looting is locally orchestrated and undertaken by local people in the knowledge the TDF will be blamed.

Targeting of religious sites

Tigray's ancient heritage, of significance to all three Abrahamic religions, its monuments, and its archaeological sites have been pillaged. The renowned 6th century Debre Damo monastery was shelled and stormed; the al Nejashi mosque, one of the oldest in Africa, was shelled and looted of manuscripts dating back to the 7th century. The [Cherkos Church](#) in Zalambesa was bombed and looted. A museum of artefacts from the pre-Christian era was damaged and looted, and medieval manuscripts have reportedly been burnt. The premises of the Catholic Church in Adigrat diocese was used as a military command centre despite the presence of clergy and nuns, and the Adigrat minor seminary was damaged. Orthodox churches have been looted of ancient manuscripts and sacred objects.

Clergy and worshipers have been killed in large numbers. According to a [17 February statement](#) from the employees of Mekelle Diocese and the administrators of 45 monasteries and churches, almost every monastery and religious school in Tigray has been bombed by drones or heavy weapons, and "a lot of clergymen, deacons, congregation members of Sunday schools, religious students, and children, especially those clergymen who were on religious service, were massacred like animals."

The indiscriminate bombing and destruction of ancient churches, mosques and other religious institutions, and the extensive looting of irreplaceable historical artefacts and manuscripts appear to be part of a multifaceted campaign that includes cultural cleansing. Not only do these actions violate international humanitarian law; according to the Rome Statute intentionally directing attacks against religious buildings and historic monuments can also constitute a war crime.

The wanton disregard for the sanctity of sites of religious and historical significance also mirrors the Eritrean government's treatment of its own religious and belief communities. For example, the nonagenarian legitimate head of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios, has been under house arrest officially since 2007, and is currently gravely ill after being injected forcibly. In a video smuggled from Ethiopia, the Orthodox patriarch, Abune Mathias, had [described events in Tigray as genocide](#), highlighting atrocities and urging international intervention. He was insulted for being of Tigrayan ethnicity, and officially placed under house arrest.

Instability in East Africa

The ramifications of the war on Tigray increasingly threaten the stability of East Africa. Ethiopia withdrew troops from Somalia to fight in Tigray, undermining anti-terrorism efforts. The Somali government has now admitted supplying forces for the initial attack on Tigray, whose whereabouts remain unknown. There has been fighting along the border between Ethiopia and Sudan, with the latter seizing disputed territory. Sudan and Egypt continue to express dissatisfaction about Ethiopia's desire to fill its Great Renaissance dam, and have also signed a [defence pact](#).

More recently, a [shipment of weapons](#) and night binoculars that had arrived on an Ethiopian Airlines flight was reportedly seized at Khartoum Airport. According to Sudan News Agency (SUNA) "There are suspicions that they were meant to be used in anti-state crime, to impede [Sudan's] democratic transition, and prevent transition to civilian rule."

Ethiopia itself has become more unstable. In statements that call into question the current condition of the national defence forces, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has called alternatively for regional defence forces, ordinary citizens, Ethiopian youth and the able-bodied to join the defence forces and government-allied militias. Meanwhile the TDF has formed a military alliance with seven other regional uprisings, including insurgents from the Oromo tribe, Ethiopia's largest ethnic group.

Successive international calls and regional proposals to secure a ceasefire, the full withdrawal of Eritrean troops and completely unhindered humanitarian access have so far gone unheeded. Ethiopia's designation of the TPLF as a terrorist organisation adds a further obstacle to inclusive peace talks. In addition, both the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments appear determined to secure a military victory: large numbers of Eritrean soldiers have now re-entered Ethiopia; Ethiopia has [signed](#) a "military and financial cooperation deal" with Turkey, and is reported to have secured armed drones, possibly from [Iran](#).

As the war continues, the spectre of the collapse of this strategic African nation in a manner akin to the former Yugoslavia looms ever larger. The current situation constitutes a threat to regional and international peace and security, and must be addressed decisively while it can still be contained.

Conclusion and Recommendations

A genocide may be unfolding before the eyes of an international community that continues to respond far too tentatively. 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 extremely 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.

CSW therefore calls on:

The United Nations (UN) Security Council

- To act swiftly to ensure an immediate cessation of hostilities, the departure of Eritrean forces from the entire region, unimpeded access to all of Tigray for local and international aid agencies, and facilitate the convening of an inclusive national dialogue. The imposition of an arms embargo on all identified warring parties, would be an important initial step towards achieving these goals;
- Work with the African Union to create a hybrid peacekeeping force, mandated to protect civilians, and enforce a ceasefire; and with the AU High Representative for the Horn of Africa, to promote peace, security, stability, and political dialogue.
- To prioritise justice by ensuring implementation of the recommendations of the 2016 report of the UN Commission of inquiry on Eritrea (COIE), and 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;”

The United States, European Union, Canada, United Kingdom and other nations with sanctions regimes

- To coordinate international efforts for the imposition of targeted sanctions on military and political persons and entities of both nations identified as complicit in human rights violations in Tigray, and particularly on the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea, who are the main protagonists of this war and who therefore bear ultimate responsibility for the egregious human rights violations that are being committed with impunity by their respective armed forces.

The UN Human Rights Council (HRC)

- To mandate a genuinely independent inquiry into alleged human rights violations in Tigray and securing justice. Partnering with a Commission financed and appointed by one of the main parties to the conflict may ensure access, but also raises legitimate concerns, given the pressure and intimidation already experienced by Ethiopian journalists who have reported accurately on events in Tigray. The mandate of the independent Commission could also be broadened to enable it to work with UNESCO and INTERPOL on cataloguing and registering looted religious and historical artefacts.

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