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Catastrophe stalks Tigray, again

Analysis and eye-witnesses indicate Tigray is lurching back to the dark days of manmade famine.

Ever since I started research in Tigray in 1994, the fight against famine has been a major priority. With academic colleagues we tried to assist through studies and projects for environmental conservation.¹ But now it feels like we are back to square one.

For February to May, more than half of Tigray's territory is expected to suffer "Emergency" outcomes by the U.S.'s Famine Early Warning System Network—the last stage before "Famine".²

What is reported is therefore catastrophic; worse even than anticipated in our prescient paper in November.³ In that analysis we warned that food security in Tigray was already critical before the start of the conflict: for instance large areas were on a path towards hunger, for instance due to a desert locust invasion that significantly reduced harvests.

We wrote: "The conflict not only affects the harvest season that has just begun. It also has led to a complete stop of potential aid and government funding to the region." However, we did not anticipate the many more disasters to come, such as the countless war crimes, systemic looting, bank closures, and telecoms blackout.

Grinding emergency

Now, some in Tigray are dying of starvation in the street. Very little assistance is brought outside of Mekelle. It has now been over a month since the 8 January meeting between Ethiopian officials and international aid groups in Mekelle.⁴ However, the situation has not shown much improvement, and access to large parts of Tigray is still restricted. For example, the Ethiopian Red Cross recently reported its concerns that 80 percent of the region is not getting aid.⁵

Two sources tell us that people go to the bushes and collect branches and leaves of non-toxic thirst-quenching plants such as sorrel (*Rumex nervosus*) in order to have at least something in their stomachs. In some places there are not even matches available to light a fire for cooking.

Even if farmers have grains, in many villages and towns, there are no operating mills in many towns. Thus, people can't make bread or *tayta* (fermented flatbread) and many are living on roasted barley and whatever else they can find.

Traditional grinding is done between two stones shaped for that purpose, but many homesteads do not have such stones anymore, as mechanized grain mills have been built all over the place. The situation is even more difficult for the internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have no way to obtain such grinding stones.

Rural reprisals

A witness from a village near Hagere Selam name-checks several slain farmers whom I know from fieldwork. When the fighting started in the area, the people moved from the village to the mountains; after a time, they thought that the fight had ended and they came back to their homesteads.

The eye-witness's father then ran into the soldiers who were slaughtering his cattle. The dog which had been with them to the mountains started barking at the troops and they shot it. Afterwards, they started hitting his father and he quickly became unconscious. They hit him very badly and left him for dead in the courtyard of his family house.

Villagers found him and cured him using local medicine. One said: "The soldiers were asking us very basic information: where is this village, where is that village? They have killed around 30 people of our community, some of them between rock outcrops, some in a gully, and they left them dead over there. They wanted them to be eaten by hyenas."

A source near Hagere Selam states that the Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers are searching after the ousted regional leaders in every cave and every enclosure.⁶ They warn the people: "For each soldier that is killed by *woyane* (a generic name for TPLF, Tigray Defence Forces, and any Tigrayan resistance), we will kill five or ten villagers".

Eye-witnesses in Adigrat, where intermittent telephone communications are now possible, say that the men have fled to the mountains for fear of being killed. They shelter in caves, gorges, and forests, but not in churches because those are not considered safe anymore. From there, many join the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF).

Price of war

A Tigrayan in Belgium mentions that he expects many friends and relatives have been killed. But it's a culture in Tigray not to tell death of relatives to someone overseas. Yet, some are now preferring to inform those abroad so that people don't face shocking social media posts reporting a friend or relative has been killed.

For instance, a Tigrayan student in Belgium learnt that there have been large massacres in their village with an uncle and two cousins killed. The student concludes: “I am overdosed with worries for my friends or relatives. A stronger worry is now for the society at large!”

The situation was well summarized by The Economist, in an op-ed published in January that said the impediments to humanitarian aid reaching the people of Tigray may be down to a lack of political commitment from the federal government. The Economist pointed to an additional obstacle – confirmed by many witnesses: the Eritrean army and Amhara militia have been spotted diverting aid coming into the region. Ground evidence shows that very little is received by the most in need.⁷

The effects of the war are, of course, not confined to the regional state. Wars are expensive, and someone has to pay for them. Due to the government lacking financial resources; it has imposed a “voluntary” contribution of a full month’s salary by civil servants in order to fund the war.

Even in Mekelle, after resuming work, the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia staff had to contribute 30 percent of their salary for the war on their own region. The sooner the war stops, the better for all people of Ethiopia.

“It’s just fake news”

Ethiopian government supporters tend to say things like: “This law and order operation has ended in late November, the government did what it had to do, all is well now”. A business traveler who was on a short mission to Ethiopia said “my taxi driver told me that it is all over now, there is full peace in Tigray, everybody is happy”. These statements reflect the official view of the federal government, not the reality; the reality is that conflict and misery are still going on in Tigray.

Government communication has contributed to desensitizing part of the Ethiopian public from the plight of the Tigrayan people. While the war is viewed as a necessary sacrifice by radicalized Ethiopian and Amhara nationalists (such as this angry comment that I received from a professor of Bahir Dar University: “this is the war that we have been waiting for since 48 years”), the experience is completely different for the Tigrayan people.

The conflict has not only brought the destruction that is always part of war but has been accompanied by occupying forces committing massacres, looting, and sexual violence of biblical proportions.

It is also further isolating Tigrayans from the Ethiopian state and laying more obstacles to creating the officially proclaimed harmonious federation. “Mothers will tell all this to their children; this will leave much more imprints than the Derg’s atrocities. We must be

independent from Ethiopia; if not this generation, the next generation will achieve it,” is now typical mainstream thinking among Tigrayans.

Capital relief

On the telephone at the end of January, one friend could confirm that things are getting a little better in Mekelle. Banks have opened, cafes and hotels are opening slowly. Civil servants have started to get back to work despite not receiving regular salaries. There has also been food assistance to around 70,000 people through *tabya* (sub-district) offices (30 kilograms of wheat per person and oil).

Mekelle is now considered safer than other towns and rural areas because of the uncontrolled presence of soldiers in those places. Hence, people in Mekelle try to host their relatives; and, in turn, the more affluent people from Mekelle try to temporarily move to Addis Ababa.

Many shops in Mekelle (construction materials or electronics shops, for instance) have been converted into groceries. Though prices have decreased a little, food is still the most lucrative good. Also, shop owners bring the food to the shop in the morning and take it back to their houses in the evening so as to prevent the food from being robbed as there are no armed police in town.

People with some capital are starting new businesses like importing cement from Addis to Mekelle and selling it there, one or two lorries at a time. We know one person who started a business of selling cigarettes ‘imported’ from Addis to the soldiers, especially the Eritrean troops.

Terrorized and terrified

A town like Adwa, nominally under Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) control, has no administrative bodies; it can be three to four days without the presence of military. The villages surrounding the town are a kind of no man’s land. The army is not there, but an Eritrean or ENDF military unit may decide to go to control a village and loot.

Some people move few kilometers away from the towns and go to places where there is a presence of Tigray Defense Forces. Such places host displaced people who moved there to be safe from the Ethiopian and Eritrean armies.

When approaching Mekelle, the army is again occasionally present, with the city fully under control of ENDF and Eritrean soldiers. Our eyewitnesses have told us that Eritrean contingents are regularly rotated to prevent them from ‘bonding’ with the local people; there is also in-fighting with ENDF.

When telephoning Mekelle, we hear about daily fatal shootings. People are shot dead for missing curfew. There was also the targeted murder of journalist Dawit Kebede Araya from Tigray TV, apparently upon release from police custody.⁸

We were in contact with a close friend who lives near Maryam church in Mekelle. She is terrorized and terrified after witnessing a scene in front of her door: two Eritrean soldiers shot a young man. One said, "Finish him!". The other: "Let him agonize." As the young man did, with terrible moans.

A witness from Mekelle also mentions the importance of information: "We have a lot of information from television, particularly TMH (Tigray Media House). I have seen horrible things on television, which the government will not tell. We also hear about Somalia, that mothers are demonstrating. In Amhara the mothers do not demonstrate. Those mothers know that many of their boys are killed in Tigray, but they still hope that their son will get a piece of land in western Tigray."

Protesting propaganda

On 7 February, Ethiopian President Sahlework Zewdie visited Mekelle. Several contacts in the city mentioned that she was not welcomed there. Solicited members of the civil society did not show up during the visit. The president insisted to visit survivors of gender-based violence at Ayder hospital; and, despite being warned by doctors, the first female president of Ethiopia walked into the hospital room with members of the Ethiopian military, causing—according to people present—a frenzy amongst the women that now suffer from post-traumatic stress.

Very few photos or footage have been made public about this visit, probably because the atmosphere was so hostile. The Ethiopian News Agency published one photo of Sahlework trying to interact with internally displaced people.⁹ The sad face of the woman and those sitting behind her in the photo says it all.

Yet, the official propaganda is that all of Tigray is happy after Abiy restored law and order.

On 9 February, a protest started in Mekelle to dispel this narrative that all was good and well in the 'northern region'. It started when people were forced to go to a meeting with a delegation of elders and religious leaders that came from Addis Ababa for a planned three-day stay. According to insiders, a particular reason for the protests was that the visiting delegation included the controversial Daniel Kibret,¹⁰ reportedly one of Abiy's closest advisors.

Most businesses were closed; the youth blocked roads and faced the soldiers. At least one of them was killed and many were injured in the streets. Mekelle's elders and religious leaders

refused to meet the delegation that came from Addis—the visitors departed in a hurry after just a day.

Refugees flee

A fellow academic talked with one Eritrean refugee who came with his wife from Shemelba refugee camp in Tigray to Addis Ababa by bus on 16 January, as well as with another Eritrean refugee who arrived in Addis the same day from Hitsats camp. It seems there is nothing left of these two refugee camps after they were looted and basically destroyed, as also documented by analysis of satellite imagery.¹¹

Some 5,000 refugees have relocated to the two camps around May Tsebri (Adi Harush and May Ayni), some were forced back to Eritrea, and some travelled far and near to escape the horrors of war.

First, Eritrean soldiers came and tried to take those who were wanted by the Eritrean government for political reasons and eventually sent them back to Eritrea. Afterwards Tigrayan militia chased the Eritrean soldiers out. Several refugees were killed in these skirmishes. The man also said he had never been so afraid in all his life. They had not had any food rations for two to three months. He said: "we ate what we could find, even plants and leaves".

On the trip to Addis, they had to pay much more than normal bus fare prices for the trip: 200 Birr from Sheleba to Shire, 1,000 from Shire to Mekelle, and 1,500 from Mekelle to Addis, per person. On 9 to 11 of December, Eritrean refugees who had fled to Gondar and Addis Ababa were forcefully escorted back to 'their' camps in Tigray by federal policemen, with the apparent support of the International Organization for Migration.

The Irob's plight

Academic and commentator Kjetil Tronvoll notes that, as with all minorities, the Irob minority group in Tigray is particularly vulnerable in the war as it straddles the Ethiopia-Eritrea border, and part of its homeland was granted to Eritrea by the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission.¹² Killings, looting, and coercive 're-identification' as Eritrean are reported.

We had a telephone contact with an older man from an Irob village. He confirmed that Eritrean identity cards are being handed out. Literally everything has been stolen. People only have the clothes that they are wearing. Many have fled to the mountains and are hiding in caves; just like they did 20 years ago during the Ethio-Eritrea war.

There's no food, no money, and two of his grandchildren were killed. He had come to Mekelle to collect cash and buy some food. Mekelle is 150 kilometers from his village, but it is the

only closest place with functional banks. They can only use the road when no local fighting is occurring.

Cradle of...

In Hawzien and Gheralta, where there is ongoing warfare,¹³ much is said of looting, and damage to some of the historical rock-hewn churches. One witness who was clearly uncomfortable about it, specifically named the Debretsion Abuna Abraham and Yohannes Ma'iqudi churches in relation to the fighting and hinted that they may have been damaged. Tourist lodges in the area are also destroyed.

In such places where there is an ongoing warfare, civilian young men are not safe as they are suspected to belong to the TDF. By mid-January, an eyewitness from Inticho reported that "those who don't have cattle already died".

With the restoration of telephone lines to Aksum, we also managed to talk with a church servant about the mass killings in November that are yet to be investigated and brought to light. At first, he simply could not speak; the trauma was too much. In a second call, a few days later, he says the reported number of 750 casualties¹⁴ has been underestimated and that the number of casualties is in the thousands.

"People (mostly men but also women) were killed en masse within the church compound. They raped women from the church. Killings and rape also happened outside of the church throughout the town and in rural areas. They do whatever they want...they destroy things, loot, rape and slaughter," he said.

According to him, there was shelling towards the church from a distant location, but the church was not hit.

Kagame's concern

The witness from Aksum mentioned that there is still active fighting in the vicinity and that civilians are still being slaughtered (as he says it: ይህረዳ) both by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers. He says: "Eritreans are not only killing people. They rape women, kill, loot people's houses, they cut legs and remove eyes and leave people to die". He adds: "Just killing would have been fine."

Despite all that, he mentioned that no *kahin* (collective name for deacons and priests) was killed at Tsion church, unlike in other churches. He believes the ark is still there: "As they fear the church (and also the ark) will be looted, residents took turn protecting it— they sleep there."

Refugees coming from Aksum are telling their experiences to family members. Their accounts are about people being killed in the streets and inside their houses, in some cases all the male inhabitants of a house, sometimes everyone.

Aksum is as the heart of Tigrayan religious identity, which may explain why it had been especially targeted. By now the situation is described as calm, but people are terrified by their experience. Basic services such as banks have not resumed.

In an interview broadcasted on 3 February with the Hoover Institute,¹⁵ Rwanda's President Paul Kagame expressed his concern about the situation in Tigray and asked the international community to prioritize the crisis. He also stated that the world may risk not learning its true toll until it's too late. With such a statement from the president of Rwanda, the implicit link to 'genocide'¹⁶ is hard to ignore.

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