

Framing the Humanitarian Crisis in Tigray and the Response of the United Nations

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Introduction. – The outbreak of the war in the Tigray region in November 2020 has caused a serious humanitarian crisis in a country that was already unstable due to ethnic regionally divisions. The population faces grave starvation, the health system of the region is shattered and sexual and gender violence pervades the country. These factors are causing a considerable displacement of people within the country as well as outside the borders. The international community is urged to take action in order to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in the region. The article will firstly provide a brief overview of the historical background that led to the disruption of the war in the region. The impact of the conflict on the population and the emerging humanitarian crisis will then be further investigated. Finally, the actions taken by the United Nations Security Council and the United Nations Human Rights Council on this matter will be analyzed.

Historical background: the root causes of the War in Tigray – In order to comprehensively understand the conflict in Ethiopia, it is firstly fundamental to frame the country as a diverse multi-ethnic society. Ethiopia consists of more than seventy ethnic groups that are divided into ethnic-based and politically autonomous regional states, also known as *kililoch*. One of these *kililoch* is the region of Tigray, located in the northern part of Ethiopia and bordering Eritrea.

The origins of the War in Tigray can be traced back to April 2018, when Abiy Ahmed Ali was selected by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) as the new Prime Minister. The EPRDF was a coalition of parties, which also incorporated the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that at the time was ruling the regional state, and it elected Abiy Ahmed Ali as the new pm hoping that he could bring peace and unity to the extremely fragmented country that was Ethiopia¹. In his first months of ruling, the new prime minister reintroduced civil liberty reforms, released numerous political prisoners and he stipulated a peace agreement with Isaias Afwerki, the despotic Eritrean tyrant. This guaranteed Mr. Ahmed the nomination for the Nobel Prize on Peace in 2019². What remains controversial about the peace agreement is the fact that Mr. Ahmed did not involve the region of Tigray and its leader in the negotiations for peace, despite Tigray neighboring Eritrea. The TPLF immediately suspected that both Afwerki and Ahmed were plotting to eliminate the Liberation Front. In this climate of fear and uncertainty, Mr. Ahmed failed to control the army and the police, which were brutally suppressing the different ethnic movements and the opposition to the

¹ Abai et al., "War in Tigray and Crimes of International Law", *Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture*, January 6th, 2021.

² Ibid.

government³. Intercommunal conflicts and violence emerged and this resulted in the internal displacement of more than two million people. Furthermore, Ahmed accused Tigrayans of corruption and expelled them from government, security services and state-owned corporations. In October 2020, Mr. Ahmed's term was meant to expire but he postponed the coming elections employing the pretext of the Covid pandemic⁴. The TPLF considered this act unconstitutional and decided to carry out their regional elections anyway. Abiy Ahmed Ali declared the elections as not valid and impeded international journalists to witness the elections. The TPLF was condemned by Mr. Ahmed as a terrorist group and on November 4th, 2020, war was declared against the state of Tigray⁵.

The impact of the war on the population of Tigray. – The war in the Tigray region has generated a serious humanitarian crisis. Humanitarian organizations have reported that millions of people are experiencing food insecurity and risk dying from starvation or lack of medical supplies⁶. The World Food Programme (WFP) has declared that the 40% of people in the Tigray region are suffering “an extreme lack of food” and that the 83% of the population rely on just one meal a day⁷. Aid agencies attempt to work in the region by providing food supply and basic needs. However, it seems that no aid trucks were able to deliver aid to Tigray since mid-December and the agencies were forced to transport necessities by air, which is extremely costly and inefficient⁸. The unceasing fighting blocks the main routes and fuel scarcity in the Tigray region hampers the work carried out by the agencies in providing basic needs. The government has imposed a humanitarian aid blockade on Tigray also by negating access to telecommunications, electricity and banking services.

Moreover, the war has seriously damaged the health system of the region: the healthcare manpower has faced severe losses and the infrastructures have been destroyed by the ongoing conflicts. The safety of healthcare workers is not guaranteed and this particularly affects female workers who are subject to numerous incidents of sexual violence⁹. Furthermore, the healthcare financing programs (including health insurances) have entirely collapsed preventing people from accessing basic medical care¹⁰. Furthermore, the rising number of COVID cases contributes to hampering the normal functioning of health facilities even in major cities¹¹.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Istratii, Romina, “War and domestic violence: A rapid scoping of the international literature to understand the relationship and to inform responses in the Tigray humanitarian crisis”, *Bridging religious studies, gender & development and public health to address domestic violence in religious communities*, SOAS University of London (2021): 7.

⁷ “Almost 40% of Tigrayans suffer ‘extreme lack of food’, WFP warns”, *Aljazeera*, January 28, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/28/almost-40-of-tigrayans-suffer-extreme-lack-of-food-wfp-warns>.

⁸ Mwai, Peter, “Ethiopia’s Tigray crisis: What’s stopping aid getting in?” *BBC*, March 18, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/57929853>.

⁹ Gesesew H, Berhane K, Siraj ES, et al. “The impact of war on the health system of the Tigray region in Ethiopia: an assessment”, *BMJ Global Health* (2021): 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Almost 2.3 million people need aid in Ethiopia's Tigray - U.N. report”, *Reuters*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict-idUSKBN29D1XF>

Sexual and gender violence has also been reported as a disturbing repercussion of the Tigray War. In March 2021, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission published a brief bringing to light the abuses that thousands of women experience by the federal militias on the basis of their ethnicity¹². According to a report published by Amnesty International in late 2021, Tigrayan women are constantly exposed to rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, sexual mutilations and other kinds of torture committed by soldiers and militias¹³. The intention behind these despicable acts was to terrorize and humiliate the victims of the Tigrayan ethnic group. According to *The Telegraph*, after being raped or injured by the militias, hundreds of women head to hospitals in order to seek medical aid or contraception¹⁴.

The conflict that broke out in Tigray in 2020 led to extensive displacement of people, who either flee to neighboring Sudan or internally migrate to other areas of Ethiopia. In 2021, the UN reported that about 45% of refugees are children. The extensive displacements and the overcrowded conditions related to them facilitate the transmission of the pandemic¹⁵.

Actions taken by the organs of the United Nations on this matter. – The humanitarian crisis in the Tigray region that emerged after the eruption of the war must be urgently addressed by the UN Security Council (UNSC). Since the explosion of the conflict, the UNSC has only published two media statements on the situation in Tigray: the former in April 2021 and the latter in November 2021. The first Security Council Press Statement in April 2021 called for an urgent and effective humanitarian response and the continuation of the international relief efforts in the provision of emergency assistance¹⁶. The members of the UNSC also expressed their concern regarding the human rights violations and abuses occurring in the region and promoted the investigation by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission into these issues¹⁷. Both these institutions document the human rights violations currently taking place in the Tigray region and call the perpetrators to account. The statement also confirms the UNSC support to the regional organizations and reaffirmed its “commitment to the sovereignty political independence, territorial integrity and unity of Ethiopia”¹⁸. The second statement published by the Security Council after one year from the eruption of the war called for respect of

¹² Istratii, Romina, “War and domestic violence: A rapid scoping of the international literature to understand the relationship and to inform responses in the Tigray humanitarian crisis”, *Bridging religious studies, gender & development and public health to address domestic violence in religious communities*, SOAS University of London (2021): 7.

¹³ “Ethiopia: Troops and militia rape, abduct women and girls in Tigray conflict – new report”, *Amnesty International*, August 10, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/08/ethiopia-troops-and-militia-rape-abduct-women-and-girls-in-tigray-conflict-new-report/>.

¹⁴ Kassa. L. & Pujol-Mazzini, A. “We’re here to make you HIV positive’: Hundreds of women rush to Tigray hospitals as soldiers use rape as weapon of war”, *The Telegraph*, March 27, 2021, <https://eritreahub.org/were-here-to-make-you-hiv-positive-hundreds-of-women-rush-to-tigray-hospitals-as-soldiers-use-rape-as-weapon-of-war>.

¹⁵ “Almost 2.3 million people need aid in Ethiopia's Tigray - U.N. report”, *Reuters*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict-idUSKBN29D1XF>.

¹⁶ United Nations Security Council, SC/14501, April 22, 2021, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14501.doc.htm>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

international law, secure humanitarian access and humanitarian assistance. The UNSC members re-affirmed their support to regional organizations and their “commitment to the sovereignty political independence, territorial integrity and unity of Ethiopia”¹⁹.

Another organ of the United Nations addressed the issue of the Tigray War and the humanitarian emergency related to that in various resolutions. In July 2021, the Human Rights Council (OHCHR) adopted a resolution concerning “the situation of human rights in the Tigray region of Ethiopia”. The resolution expressed concern regarding the involvement of Eritrean troops in the conflict, the famine and humanitarian crisis that the population is facing and the threats posed against aid workers. Furthermore, it demanded advice and technical assistance from the High Commissioner. In September 2021, the High Commissioner informed the Council that the war expanded beyond the Tigray province into the regions of Afar and Amhara. More recently (December 2021), the OHCHR held a Special Session in order to discuss the serious human rights situation in Ethiopia. In the 33rd Special Session, violations of human rights, international humanitarian law and refugee law committed by the Ethiopian National Defense Forces, Tigrayan Forces and Eritrean Defense forces were reported. The Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed great concern about the lack of access by humanitarian aid organizations and urged all the parties involved to allow humanitarian workers to access civilians in need²⁰. Additionally, the Chair of the Coordination Committee of Special Procedures firmly accused the sexual and gender-based violence occurring in the region and requested the Ethiopian government to take action in order to protect women and girls²¹.

Conclusion. – The ongoing war in Tigray is leading the region into a serious humanitarian crisis. The international community is urged to further take measures in order to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. The continued conflicts and fighting have led millions of people to face food insecurity and starvation and prevented aid agencies from accessing the population in need. The health system is collapsing and people do not have access to basic health care assistance. Sexual and gender violence is spreading in the region and civilians started displacing within the country or in the neighboring territories. The UNSC and the OHCHR have published public statements and resolutions on the matter and expressed great concern regarding the human rights violations occurring in Tigray and the lack of access by humanitarian aid organizations. Further actions should be pursued by the international community and the UN organs to condemn the atrocities occurring in Tigray and prevent the worsening of this already tragic situation.

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¹⁹ United Nations Security Council, SC/14691, November 5, 2021, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14691.doc.htm>.

²⁰ “Report of the 33d Special Session of the Human Rights Council on the grave human rights situation in Ethiopia”, *Universal Rights Group*, last modified March 27, 2021, <https://www.universal-rights.org/blog/report-of-the-33rd-special-session-of-the-human-rights-council-on-the-grave-human-rights-situation-in-ethiopia/>.

²¹ Ibid.