

# Inventing hell: how the Ethiopian and Eritrean regimes produced famine in Tigray

Human Geography

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## Abstract

It has been a year since a devastating war broke out in the Tigray region, Northern Ethiopia, where hundreds of thousands of Tigrayan civilians are killed, millions internally displaced and tens of thousands have fled to seek refuge in neighboring Sudan. An alarming development linked to this war is the manmade famine in Tigray that now threatens the lives of the millions of civilians who survived the horrific atrocities during the war. This piece is an attempt to explain why millions of Tigrayans from all walks of life face famine and concludes that famine was from the start an end goal of the Ethiopian and Eritrean regimes and they employed different tactics to ensure that it unfolds the way it does now. Among others, the tactics include (1) the systematic looting and destruction of Tigray's basic economic infrastructures, (2) implementation of different financial measures to deprive people in the region of access to cash, and imposition of a complete siege that hindered access to supplies including lifesaving humanitarian assistance.

## Keywords

humanitarian, ceasefire, violence, genocide, wipe out, Mekelle, Amhara, Abiy Ahmed Ali

It has been a year since a dreadful war broke out between the combined national armies of Ethiopia and Eritrea as well as allied ethnic Amhara militia loyal to the Ethiopian regime on one side and the forces under the regional government of the state of Tigray in Northern Ethiopia on the other side. Although Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali declared victory following the capture of Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region, on the 28th of November 2020, fierce fighting continued in rural areas and the mountains across the region. At the end of June, the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) routed the Ethiopian army and recaptured most parts of Tigray including Mekelle (Walsh, 2021b) pressing the Ethiopian regime to declare a “unilateral ceasefire” (Walsh and Marks, 2021).

A disturbing feature of this war is the scale of horror that has been and continues to be deployed against the civilian population in the region and beyond. The war has so far allegedly killed hundreds of thousands of civilians, forced over 70,000 to seek refuge across the border in Eastern Sudan and internally displaced over 2.2 million people into crowded displacement camps in towns across the region. Tens of thousands of women and young girls have been subjected to weaponized sexual violence characterized by severe brutality (see Amnesty, 2021). USAID Aid Administrator Samantha Power described this campaign against the women and girls of Tigray as “a campaign to shatter families

and destroy the reproductive and mental health of their victims” (USAID, 2021) by Eritrean and Ethiopian national armies and ethnic Amhara militia loyal to Abiy Ahmed Ali's regime who had controlled most of Tigray for 8 months.

Ethnic Amhara militia allied to the Ethiopian regime in particular have been charged with “ethnic cleansing” (Walsh, 2021a) of Western Tigray, which accounts for almost a third of the constitutionally established territory of Tigray, most of which is still under their control. Homes, businesses, farms, and other civilian properties, particularly in Western and Southern Tigray, were systematically looted and destroyed by these forces and the owners have either been killed (Elbagir et al., 2021), thrown into concentration-camps (Hutson, 2021) or fled for their safety. There are also reports that remaining properties previously owned by Tigrayans in western Tigray, an area which still remains under the control of the Amhara militia and the Eritrean army, have been reallocated to settlers who were

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mobilized to move from the Amhara region that borders Tigray from the south (Hourelid et al., 2021).

Many observers and particularly Tigrayans consider what is happening in Tigray to be a full-scale genocide citing the scale of targeted killings and systematic rape and sexual violence, and the use of food as a “weapon of war” (Paravicini and Hourelid, 2021) through the systematic destruction and looting of the region’s basic economy and prevention of access to humanitarian aid. While the genocidal campaign in Tigray consists of all the features of historical genocidal campaigns elsewhere, the use of famine is one of the features that stands out the most. Starvation has for example been reportedly used by the Germans during the Namibian genocide (Becker, 2020) and the Holocaust (Bruaas, 2021), the Hutus in Rwanda, the Nigerian regime in Biafra (Norman and Ueda, 2017) and elsewhere and proven to be a very effective way of eliminating large numbers of people.

In a very alarming address in early June 2021, Mark Lowcock, UN Humanitarian Chief at the time declared that, unless the world wakes up and intervenes, Tigray is set to see yet another famine crisis like the 1984 famine crisis (Smith, 1987) that reportedly claimed the lives of over a million people most of whom were Tigrayans (De Waal, 1991).

According to the World Food Program’s projection in October 2020, Tigray was one of the least food insecure regions in Ethiopia (WFP, 2020). By contrast, according to World Food Program projections for June-September, of an estimated 6.3 million Tigrayans 35% are internally displaced and almost the entire population of 6.3 million are in need of emergency assistance as food stocks have been looted and systematically destroyed, farming prevented, and trade of basic commodities curtailed. By the beginning of June this year, 350,000 Tigrayans were already facing “catastrophic” levels of food shortage and were on Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) category 5, i.e., famine (IPC, 2021). There is no *Phase 6* in the IPC classification. About 3.3 million were in phase 4 and could easily slide into famine in the absence of external assistance, which seems very likely as Eritrean and Ethiopian troops continued to block aid distribution, prevent farming (Corey-Boulet, 2021), and loot humanitarian food assistance given to people in need (Hourelid and Paravicini, 2021). The rest of Tigray’s population was in phase 3, which is “crisis”, and not far from facing famine.

Mark Lowcock’s plea to the international community did not receive the attention it warranted, and the humanitarian situation has only further deteriorated since then (Anna and Lederer, 2021). Martin Griffiths, the new UN Humanitarian Chief, reported at the end of September that more people than was projected in June are likely to be facing famine conditions (Nichols, 2021). Griffiths also noted that “[the famine] is man-made, this can be remedied by the act of government.” Multiple media outlets in recent weeks indicate

that the situation has worsened, and starvation induced deaths have become rampant across the region. Martin Griffiths recently asserted that the crisis in Tigray is a “stain on our conscience” as the international community failed to intervene while children starve to death under what the UN referred to as a de facto government blockade of all basic supplies including medicine, fuel, and food (Anna and Lederer, 2021).

So, why are the Tigrayans starving? Several factors contribute to creating the current famine conditions in Tigray. Systematic looting and destruction of Tigray’s economy during the war, the campaign of draining Tigray’s financial resources, and the alleged “unilateral ceasefire”, declared by the Ethiopian government at the end of June when it was forced to leave Mekelle following military losses, as a form of violence and as a siege.

### **Systematic looting and destruction of Tigray’s economy**

The current famine in Tigray as Mark Lowcock rightly noted is fully man made.

“Businesses have been destroyed. The economy has been destroyed. Crops have been destroyed. Farms have been destroyed. There are no banking services anymore; there are no telecommunications services anymore.” Lowcock said; (Brown, 2021)

There are numerous reports of the systematic destruction of food production systems in the region. The Eritrean and Ethiopian armies and allied Amhara ethnic militia loyal to Abiy Ahmed Ali’s regime systematically destroyed and looted farms (Németh, 2021), grain stores of farmers and businesses, irrigation schemes (De Waal, 2021), livestock feed processing plants, factories and so on with the ultimate goal of starving Tigray (WFP, 2021). Abadi Girmay, the head of the Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development under the “interim administration” of Tigray set up by Abiy Ahmed for 8 months between November 2020 and June 2021, in an interview said, “*They took all the grain they can carry and added water to whatever was left*” (Tghat, 2021) referring to what the Eritrean troops did to grain stockpiles of farmers in Tigray.

As if destroying and looting food stocks in Tigray was not enough, both armies and their allied ethnic Amhara militia persistently blocked access to humanitarian assistance and prevented farming ensuring that people would starve to death. Abebe Gebrehiwot, Deputy leader of the now ousted “interim administration” also similarly admitted in May that,

“There is a campaign that has been started to prevent farming. Regrettably, this campaign is being done by some of those tasked with law enforcement,”

Farmers in most parts of Tigray which were under the control of Ethiopian and Eritrean forces were systematically prevented from preparing their fields for planting during the rainy season (June to September 2021) in what seems like a strategy to ensure that no food is produced in the region. In many places, Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers went village to village telling farmers not to do any farm work. Farmers who resisted and continued to do so were arrested, tools confiscated and or farming livestock slaughtered by the soldiers (Paravicini and Houreld, 2021). Moreover, transportation and distribution of seed and fertilizers for farmers in Tigray was hindered by Amhara forces that controlled the southern and Western part of the region. According to UN-OCHA, only a quarter of fields in Tigray have been planted and only a 13% of the annual crop productivity is expected as a result.

### **A campaign of draining Tigray's financial resources**

Famine often impacts people involved in primary production practices and the informal sector who are vulnerable to conventional natural disasters. Even in times of armed conflict, urban populations are less impacted by conflict related famine as compared to farmers. The famine in Tigray, according to the UN, affects nearly everyone, including civil servants, factory workers, and wealthy businesspeople. In its attempt to disenfranchise Tigray's population, the Ethiopian government engaged in multifaceted financial measures, which among others, include a sudden change of bank notes a few weeks before the outbreak of war and restricting possibilities for exchanging bank notes in the aftermath as well as the closure of commercial banks in Tigray and the freezing of bank accounts of the entire population of the region.

Two months before the war, Ethiopia's National Bank printed new currency notes to replace the old notes that were in use for the last several years. At the same time, it put restrictions on amounts of money that people could exchange and withdraw from their savings, or deposit into other accounts. When the war started on the 4th of November last year, only a small portion of the Tigrayan population had exchanged the old for the new bank notes. Although Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said that the reprinting was not related to the preparation for the war on Tigray, currency change significantly impacted the financial resources that people had. For example, people who had the old cash notes in their hands have lost almost all their money or had to pay unreasonable amounts of their old money in exchange for new notes from the Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers who invaded the region and who robbed banks during the invasion. When Mekelle fell under the control of the Ethiopian army, and some bank branches reopened, many walked hundreds of kilometers to exchange old

notes or to withdraw money only to find that the "deadline" for exchange had passed and that they could not withdraw their money even if they had savings. When banks allowed withdrawal, the amount was set to 2000 Birr (approx. \$40) a day and people had to wait in long queues to do so. People who somehow managed to withdraw some amount could not travel back to their homes safely. Many have been robbed by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops who were manning countless checkpoints on all roads leading out of Mekelle. On March 23, 2021, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) staffers witnessed the execution of (BBC, 2021) civilians, most of whom were travelling back to their hometowns after withdrawing cash from commercial banks in Mekelle. One of the people who were killed that day was someone that I know, and he was travelling from Mekelle to his village near the town of Adwa in central Tigray with cash that he withdrew for his family.

Moreover, when the war started, the national bank of Ethiopia ordered all commercial banks to suspend bank accounts that were opened in all commercial bank branches in the Tigray region. For a long time during the war, Tigrayans and former residents of the region whose bank accounts were opened in commercial banks with branches in the region, had no access to their savings even when they lived elsewhere in the country during the war. Banks in most of the region have been closed and banking services were limited to Mekelle and three other towns throughout the eight months until Ethiopia withdrew its troops from the capital and declared a "unilateral ceasefire" on the 28th of June 2021.

When the last units of the Ethiopian army left Mekelle after the so called "unilateral ceasefire", local people that I talked to say the soldiers emptied commercial banks of any cash, severed telecommunication installations, switched power off and randomly shot at residents of the city on their way out. Tigray is now free (most parts), but under complete communication and power blackout, and cut off from any transportation to/from outside the region. This has exacerbated the famine conditions and shortage of supplies including basic items such as drinking water, medicines, and food.

### **Ceasefire as a form of violence**

In late June, Ethiopian forces were reportedly defeated on a major battle in central Tigray where tens of thousands were allegedly killed and over 9000 captured by the Tigrayan Defense Forces (TDF) forced the Addis Ababa regime to pull its remaining forces from Mekelle and to immediately declare a unilateral "ceasefire". However, this according to Tigrayans and other observers was not a ceasefire, but a "siege" (Rettman, 2021). The European Union rightly argued that through this siege, Ethiopia is creating 'famine' conditions (Rettman, 2021). Within hours of the retreat of its forces from the region's capital, the Ethiopian regime

disconnected Tigray from power and communication services, blocked all roads that lead to and from the region, and suspended bank accounts of Tigrayans within Tigray and elsewhere. In some cases, retreating soldiers also destroyed bridges that connect Tigray to the rest of the country (OCHA, 2021).

When the Ethiopian regime declared what it called a “unilateral ceasefire” at the end of June, international actors and organizations naively welcomed it and hoped that it would lead to the opening of the region for humanitarian assistance and provide opportunities for dialogue. What many did not realize was that it was an extension of the genocidal war campaign on Tigray, perhaps the worst stage. While the regime claimed that the purpose of the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces and the institution of the “unilateral ceasefire” was “to allow farmers to plant their fields and humanitarian actors to deliver aid”, the Prime Minister and other top officials in their address to the Ethiopian public were more direct in declaring their actual intentions. The real purpose according to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali and other higher officials was to punish the people of Tigray for supporting the Tigrayan forces that routed the regime’s army and its allies in central Tigray in June 2021. In his address to the Federal parliament about the alleged ceasefire, Abiy Ahmed Ali said;

“The ceasefire is because we don’t want to slaughter an ox to cure an ill chicken [the ox is a metaphor for Ethiopia and the ill chicken is Tigray]. Let us see if the people of Tigray can save themselves”<sup>1</sup>

Even without these admissions, however, the Ethiopian regime’s initial claim that the ceasefire was to allow farmers to plant their fields does not hold water. Throughout the 8 months of occupation of Tigray and more so during the last few months, Ethiopian and Eritrean troops as well as ethnic Amhara militia loyal to Abiy’s regime went around rural Tigray and systematically destroyed farming equipment, looted and slaughtered cattle that farmers use to till their land, and stolen seed reserves effectively crippling farming. In many parts of Tigray, soldiers prevented farmers from tilling their land and planting. Only a quarter of the land that is normally planted was planted in Tigray this year for many reasons because, among others, 1) the withdrawal of the occupying forces came very late and much of the planting season had already passed in most parts of the region, and 2) farmers lacked necessary equipment, oxen, and seeds to salvage what remained of the rainy season.

Although the withdrawal of the occupying forces from most of Tigray eased movement of aid within the region, aid warehouses were soon empty as the federal government systematically blocked any movement of aid convoys into the region. Bridges leading to Tigray were destroyed and the remaining roads were blocked by Ethiopian army and

allied forces. According to UN OCHA, only 3% of the much-needed humanitarian supplies were allowed to go into Tigray between 12th of July and 20th of August. Although the United Nations had negotiated for biweekly UN Humanitarian Air Service flights for humanitarian workers to Mekelle since July, the flights are now indefinitely suspended because of ongoing indiscriminate airstrikes on Mekelle and other parts of Tigray by the Ethiopian Air Force.

## The failure of the international community to reverse the situation

More than four months after the UN declared that over 400,000 Tigrayans have “crossed the threshold into famine”, almost nothing concrete has been done by the UN and other multilateral organizations to provide support to the people affected. The region has since then been put under a complete blockade, with no commercial activities, transportation of basic food and medical assistance or other essential services.

The use of famine to exterminate populations is too familiar for anyone who reads the history of genocides, and it should be taken seriously. The entirety of the campaign suggests that the Ethiopian and Eritrean regime may be outdoing the use of famine as a tool of extermination by all previous genocidal regimes. All evidence points to the fact that the famine is man-made and is part of the greater plan to “wipe out” Tigray’s population as Ethiopian officials confided to EU special envoy led by Pekka Haavisto, Foreign Minister of Finland in February 2021 (Anna, 2021). Yet, those who are able and mandated to stop such a catastrophe have to date persist in addressing this crisis as just another humanitarian crisis, as a residual effect of a war and have failed to appropriately respond to the urgency and gravity of the unfolding tragedy.

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## Note

1. Abiy Ahmed Ali justifying the #WarOnTigray - YouTube [language: Amharic]

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