



A Humanitarian Crisis in Ethiopia's Tigray Region

Edited by: Menna
Khaled

13th of June 2021



A Humanitarian Crisis in Ethiopia's Tigray Region

Amid the pandemic, a military conflict has unfolded in the Horn of Africa. On the 4th of November 2020, a military conflict has erupted in Ethiopia between the federal government of Ethiopia and the regional government of Tigray, in the North. The conflict has rapidly intensified, resulting into humanitarian crisis, regional conflict, and famine.

Tigray region was a historical food deficit region; however, after 1991, the economy developed with the support of international donors to prevent the recurrence of a second tragedy. The major achievement that took three decades to build both by the Ethiopian government and international donors is coming to an end with the ongoing conflict and the resurgence of a famine. The economy and the food system have been hardly hit by the hostilities and the consequent closure of banks, interruption of government resources transfers, and massive looting. These factors, combined with the impact of the covid-19 pandemic, and the low crop yields have led to chronic vulnerability of the people.

The information blackout and the interruption of the means of communication in Tigray have made it difficult to assess the situation of the conflict thus far and its consequences on the civilians. The void left by the media and international organizations to report the situation in Tigray, the passiveness of the international community, and the increasing rising concerns of the escalation of the conflict into a famine have all pushed the Forum for Development and Human Rights Dialogue to raise the Tigray issue, and play a role in calling the international community to support and save the lives of the civilians.

The report focuses on the ongoing armed conflict in Tigray and identifies its implications on the civilians. The first part of the report provides a brief overview on Tigray and the issue of food security prior to the outbreak of war, as it is important to understand the reason behind Tigray vulnerability to a second famine. The second part highlights the reasons behind the armed conflict and the crimes conducted by the belligerents.

The third part of the report identifies the dire implications of the conflict and the inflicted harm and violence caused by the involved parties against Tigray civilians. The looming hunger and food insecurity, destruction of facilities, displacement of population, and lack of humanitarian access are of the most severe consequences of the conflict on the civilians

The fourth part of the report showcases the response of the international community to the armed conflict, which is marked by passiveness.

Brief Overview on Tigray

Tigray, sharing borders with Eritrea, has known unrest for decades, famine, Ethiopian-Eritrean war in 1998, and the years of tension that followed until a peace deal was reached in 2018, to the current armed conflict.

Prior to the conflict, food insecurity in Tigray was already critical. The area was historically a food deficit region dependent on migrant labor. Throughout the years, Tigray has experienced devastating civil war, poverty, climatic adversity, and fragile soils, which has resulted into a famine between 1984 and 1985. The famine resulted into the death of 1 million people dying out of starvation.

As most of Tigray is part of the Tekezze River basin and about half of it is covered by cropland and shrub land, the main livelihood for the citizens is crop production and livestock rearing on small scale family farms. The stony soil of the Tigray lands has contributed to low crop yield and rural livelihoods were dependent on off farm activities to supplement their harvests. In addition to the low crop yields, many areas in the region were on the path of experiencing hunger and food crisis due to desert locust invasion that negatively affected crop harvests. However, Tigray was transformed from an agriculturally unproductive area to one of the most food secure areas in Ethiopia due to the economic change and structural reforms implemented by the government in cooperation with international actors.

After 1991, the economy was developed. The government has made improvements on a different number of social fronts and become one of the fastest growing large economies in Africa. In Tigray, the development was largely driven by grass roots level efforts in rural areas.

The food insecurity was a governmental led project; however, once the Ethiopian government political and economic status has been disrupted, and its relations with neighboring state, Amhara, deteriorated, the region became vulnerable to food insecurity again. The current armed conflict has negatively transformed the positive economic change that took place before in Tigray, leaving the civilians in dire and severe situation.

Ethiopia's Tigray Armed Conflict

The people of Tigray are suffering from a humanitarian crisis. With a total population of 5.7 million people in Tigray suffering from the armed conflict, the United Nations estimated that 4.5 million people are “in need”.

The conflict began on the 4th of November, when the Ethiopian government forces announced to oust the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) from power in the province after the government accused the TPLF for attacking the Northern Command Headquarters, staffed by federal troops from the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF). The armed conflict in Tigray involved four parties: the Tigray Defense Force (TDF) and associated militia; the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF); the Eritrean Defense Force (EDF); and Amhara Regional Special Forces and aligned militias. The ENDF, the EDF and the Amhara forces are allied against the TDF.

Although the conflict started on the 4th of November, there was rising resentment between the TPLF and the Prime Minister Abiy, who implemented a series of reforms that weakened the TPLF since he was inaugurated in 2018. In September 2020, tensions increased due to the postponement of the general elections as a consequence of the pandemic, leading the government to cut the funding to the region. The situation reached its peak with the outbreak of the armed conflict in November. The fighting has intensified throughout the month of November, with Abiy Ahmed assuring that the operation will end “soon”.

After weeks of fighting, the UN raised its concerns to the possibility of war crimes in Tigray. Reports revealed that the Tigray people in the first days of the conflict experienced heavy bombings from Eritrea that led to more civilian targets than the Ethiopian military. In addition, the opposition parties in Ethiopia estimated that more than 50,000 civilians have been killed in the armed conflict till February.

International human rights organizations documented tank fire in Humera across the Eritrean border leading to the damage and destruction of homes, businesses, schools, places of worship, and the town’s main hospital. The armed conflict included human rights violations and war crimes accompanied by killing civilians, rape, torture, looting, destruction of assets, and health facilities.

Despite that the Prime Minister has announced earlier in November that the operations will end “soon”, the fighting is still ongoing. Mounting pressure by the international community is increasing on Ethiopia to halt the conflict and declare a ceasefire; however, there are no signs of ending the conflict. The civilians are suffering the consequences of an entirely man made conflict.

Armed Conflict Implications

The Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers and belligerents in the conflict have completely dismantled the region's economy and food system, leaving the civilians to suffer the dire consequences of the ongoing conflict. The belligerents' actions have deliberately deprived people of essentials indispensable to their survival, actions that amount to international crimes and prohibited by international law. The internal Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) assessments reviewed by the Guardian describe the destruction of "agricultural equipment, seed stocks and infrastructure as well as various deliberate attempts by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops to delay convoys". Reports also reveal that there are theft of food and other essential materials. The most severe and dire consequences of the conflict is evident in the food insecurity, destruction of facilities, displacement of people, and lack of humanitarian access.

Food Insecurity

The armed conflict started in November 2020, which is the peak of the harvest season in Tigray. The disruption of the 2020 harvest season from November to January has left households waiting another year until their first opportunity to harvest. The UN estimated that "over 90 per cent of the harvest was lost due to looting, burning, or other destruction, and that 80 per cent of the livestock in the region were looted or slaughtered".

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), which is a humanitarian framework that uses five phase scale of severity to determines the food security status of geographic areas and populations and is also a system that releases warning about famine, has conducted analysis on parts of Tigray in October 2020, where the food security level was in IPC phase 2 "stressed". The analysis also projected that Tigray was expected to experience food crisis IPC phase 3 in the period of July – September 2021 due to the season of annual hunger in Tigray. According to the IPC, "this is the first phase at which populations are generally considered in need of life-saving humanitarian assistance". However, the date for the updated IPC has not yet been announced, and indeed the situation got further deteriorated as a result of the armed conflict.

On the other hand, Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS Net), an independent organization funded by the United States government, has released updates on the food security situation in Tigray since the outbreak of the war; it released in December 2020, January 2021, and March 2021. According to the analysis of March, FEWS Net affirmed that "the uptick of conflict across the country

is driving displacement and disrupting economic activity, reducing poor households' ability to earn income in affected areas. A below-average is forecast crisis IPC Phase 3 outcomes are expected in many pastoral areas and among IDPs in September. In Tigray, due to the continued conflict and subsequent loss of key food and income sources, especially labor migration, livestock sales, and typical levels of PSNP, Emergency IPC Phase 4 outcomes are likely". FEWS Net has also affirmed that in May 2021, Tigray people living in the eastern, central, and northwestern areas are likely to suffer from a catastrophe of IPC Phase 5 at least through September 2021. The ongoing conflict is restricting millions of people from accessing their essential sources of food and income to survive.

Recently in January 2021, news agencies released leaked notes of an ECC meeting on the 8th of January of an official from the interim administration of the central part of Tigray. The official said "food and non-food items or other livelihoods are either looted or destroyed. He also added, "if urgent emergency assistance is not mobilized hundreds of thousands might starve to death". 5 months after the notes were leaked, emergency and humanitarian assistance were not yet mobilized to reach the vulnerable population, increasing the suffering of the people.

The Ethiopian federal forces, Amhara regional forces, and Eritrean troops' coalition are deliberately committing starvation crimes on a large scale. Despite the severe deficit of information about the depth, the situation, and the consequences of the humanitarian crisis in Tigray due to government restrictions on media coverage and the blockage of humanitarian assistance, Amnesty released in mid-February a detailed report identifying the human rights and humanitarian law violations taking place in Tigray by the soldiers and belligerents including the killings of civilians, hunger, and looting. The report provided detailed information on the massacre conducted by the Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers in the Ethiopian city of Axum, Tigray.

In addition to the killings, the soldiers left the civilians in thrust and hunger, by taking all food items, burning plant crops, and looting. The German television, ZDF, shared footage in March 2021 from Aksum, revealing the violations conducted by the soldiers. Reports also reveal that the soldiers were also engaged in looting of grains, electronic, and goods from farmers.

The asset stripping, burning of crops, and looting have left Tigray people and households in hunger, and have reduced their ability to earn income or produce food. In most of Tigray, communities have been left without food.

Amnesty reports that during the massacre of Aksum, where Eritrean soldiers have deliberately killed hundreds of civilians, the soldiers looted food essentials and took truckloads of sugar, lentils, cooking oil, animal fodder, and flour from trading stores. The soldiers have left the shelves of stores empty. The soldiers have also taken and killed cattle, and camels.

The belligerents seized essential assets, food, and have lit fires in civilians' farms. The fire tracking data from NASA Fire Information and Resource Management System (FIRMS), in addition to internal U.S government reports have revealed that Eritrean and Ethiopian forces burned the leftovers of what they couldn't carry. Other videos identified Eritrean soldiers burning farmers' homesteads, cultivation, and crops during door to door raids.

Late Wednesday 9th of June, a U.N. official said "some 350,000 people in Ethiopia's embattled Tigray region are facing famine conditions". "That's the worst famine problem the world has seen for a decade, since a quarter of a million Somalis lost their lives in the famine there in 2011", says Mark Lowcock, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs.

Facilities and Structures

Soldiers and troops' deliberate military operations have deflected harm not only on the agriculture of Tigray population and sources of food but have also rendered the health infrastructure, leaving most of the health facilities to be largely nonfunctional with lack of facilities and medications. Increasing number of reports from human rights organizations and humanitarian actors reveal the damage caused by soldiers to educational and health facilities, markets, shops, businesses, households, banks, and other institutions and structures. The reports also identify the soldiers' theft or destruction of essential assets such as water pumps, vehicles, medication, clothing, and household items. In January 2021, Oxfam reported that most of the houses in southern Tigray were to be destroyed, crops burned, and assets stolen.

The regional Health Bureau of Tigray and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) have confirmed that most hospitals either have been looted of their equipment and medications or have been bombed. On the 15th of March 2021, Médecins Sans Frontières said "of the 106 health facilities MSF teams visited, one in five had been or was occupied by armed soldiers; one facility is being used as an army base". Médecins Sans Frontières added that of the field visits of the MSF teams between mid-December 2020 and March 2021, only 13 percent of health facilities

were functioning while the rest was nearly 70% looted and 30% damaged. In most of the cases, the MSF identified the damage as “deliberate”.

Few health facilities in Tigray now have ambulances, as most have been seized by armed groups. “Many health facilities have few or no remaining staff. Some have fled in fear; others no longer come to work because they have not been paid in months”, added Médecins Sans Frontières.

The damage caused to the facilities leaves the region and its population with minimal access to healthcare. The assets destruction consequences have been severe for the population. The interruption of the harvesting season, the destruction of complementary sources of food and income, the capture of food and killings of live stocks including animals, left the people in hunger.

The Covid-19 Pandemic puts further strain on the already devastated healthcare system in Tigray. Limited and interrupted monitoring of cases and treatment result in limitations of receiving Covid-19 data from the region; in addition to the impossibility to implement preventative measures such as social distancing and quarantining due to the current situation. The conflict has destroyed the economy, and the health system, leaving the people living in harsh conditions with no means of communication or banking services.

Displacement and Refuge

Of the rising grave concerns of the armed conflict implications is the displacement of the population. Thousands of displaced people have arrived in the conflict hit region in Tigray, staying in schools and empty buildings with very poor conditions and limited services. Médecins Sans Frontières identified that primary and secondary schools in towns and cities across the entire region of Tigray are the “epicentre” of displacement crisis, reaching hundreds of thousands.

As of May 25th, 1.7 million people were displaced according to the estimates of the International Organization of Migration (IOM). 1.7 million people fled towns and cities seeking humanitarian assistance and access to essential services for survival. Yet, the data which was collected by the IOM offices is only indicative of the displacement in accessible areas for humanitarians, which means that there are likely more than 1.7 million displaced people. However, Reuters indicates that a local government official in Tigray said that more than “2 million people” so far have been displaced since the conflict has erupted.

For the first time since the conflict started, the joint OCHA-UNHCR mission gained access to the Shimelba and Hitsats refugee camps in March 2021. According to the data provided by the UNCHR,

the camps were found to be completely destroyed and all the humanitarian facilities “looted and vandalized”, in addition to refugees have fled the camps.

As the conflict rages, a growing refugee crisis is building. Hundreds of thousands are moving everyday into cities in search of safety, food, and humanitarian assistance. The conflict had also regional impact as it has resulted into Ethiopians crossing of neighboring countries borders.

The fighting prompted thousands of people to flee to safety and seek refuge, with Ethiopians crossing borders into Sudan. As of January 2021, the total number of new refugees from Ethiopia in Eastern Sudan was over 61,000. Ethiopians seeking refuge in Sudan also raises concerns on the long contested border dispute between Ethiopia and Sudan that developed into armed skirmishes in December 2020. Most of the refugees are living in reception areas, unused camps or with host communities, challenged with food shortage and lack of shelter items. The camps also lack adequate essential relief items and medical supplies.

The cross border movement and the internal displacement of the population will likely set to continue as a result of the conflict. The numbers of internally displaced people is increasing everyday with no concrete and precise number. In addition, to what extent the humanitarian needs of the Tigray population are being met remains unknown, due to the inability of humanitarian actors and human rights organizations to work in the field.

Lack of Humanitarian Access

There is information blackout in Eritrea especially after the pandemic, as the Ethiopian government have implemented policies in the mid of 2020 that rolled back press freedom and curbed the flow of information to humanitarian actors.

With the eruption of the conflict in November, Tigray has been cut from all means of communications, internet, and landlines. Journalists also reported that the government imposed blackout in order to curb reporting and not to get accurate information or figures about the humanitarian crisis. In addition, the government detained a number of journalists and employees working with the press for their coverage of the ongoing conflict

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that 4.5 million people, which are more than half of the population of Tigray, have been living without electricity, communications and other essential services for more than four months.

International and national humanitarian agencies have reported severally their inability to provide humanitarian access since October 2020, due to the government severe restrictions. Despite that the UN and Ethiopia's Ministry of Peace agreed to establish aid access in December 2020, Ethiopian authorities continue to delay humanitarian supply and personnel clearances. The war caused stumbling blocks to the delivery of aid to the vulnerable communities, particularly in the rural areas.

The International Community

The Ethiopian government efforts aimed to curb down the flow of information from Tigray to restrict the media from covering the humanitarian crisis, which was also manifested in the international community passive response in the beginning of the conflict. However, the crisis quickly gained international focus, but the response of the international community up to date is grossly inadequate.

On the 26th of May, 6 months of the ongoing conflict, President Joe Biden called on the parties to the conflict in Tigray to declare a ceasefire, "belligerents in the Tigray region should declare and adhere to a ceasefire, and Eritrean and Amhara forces should withdraw", he said. "The UN Office of Humanitarian Affairs warned that Ethiopia could experience its first famine since the 1980s because of this protracted conflict. All parties, in particular the Ethiopian and Eritrean forces, must allow immediate, unimpeded humanitarian access to the region in order to prevent widespread famine," the U.S president added.

On the 3rd of June 2021, the Ethiopian government announced that the military forces are close to "finalising operations". With Ethiopia rejecting international calls for ceasefire, U.S imposed sanctions and signaled further economic and security assistance restrictions to Ethiopia, resulting into Ethiopians protests in Addis Ababa criticizing U.S sanctions.

Like the U.S, the United Kingdom called for a ceasefire for the ongoing armed conflict; "a cessation of hostilities by all conflict parties and unfettered humanitarian access so that aid can flow and famine can be averted". The U.S embassy in Addis Ababa tweeted on the 2nd of June "we agree with the UK that the humanitarian situation in [#Tigray](#) is rapidly deteriorating. A break in the fighting NOW, coupled with unfettered humanitarian access, will immediately help avert the risk of famine".

Many other European countries backed the call of the United States and the United Kingdom. The Finnish Foreign Minister, Pekka Haavisto, has announced that he engaged in discussions with the UN

secretary general, António Guterres about the “alarming humanitarian situation in Tigray” and called for the protection of humanitarian workers and the guarantee of humanitarian access.

In the early month of June 2021, the UN announced that more than 90 percent of the Tigray people are in “need” of food aid. The World Food Programme has also raised its concerns on the alarming rate of food insecurity in the area, “A total of 5.2 million people, equivalent to 91% of Tigray population, need emergency food assistance due to the conflict,” said the WFP spokesperson, Tomson Phiri in Geneva.

UN senior officials have also called the UN Security Council to implement urgent measures to avoid famine in Tigray. "There is a serious risk of famine if assistance is not scaled up in the next two months," said Mark Lowcock, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. The UN warned that the situation could escalate, and Tigray could face another 1984' famine.

Despite mounting international calls and diplomatic pressure on Ethiopia to declare a ceasefire, there are no signs of the war against the TPLF is ending. More than six months later, the fighting and human rights violations continue in Tigray, where famine is currently taking place in the region. Since the outbreak of the conflict, the international community didn't take effective steps to halt the conflict and prevent the famine from occurring. Concrete and efficient measures are urgently needed to be implemented by the international community to break the armed conflict, violence, and food insecurity.

Conclusion

Since November 2020, Tigray has been in a humanitarian crisis, with forces fighting against each other's and the civilians suffering the implications of the conflict, with no signs of abating. The government has alternated the political differences into an armed protracted conflict and a humanitarian crisis that could leave its impact on the people for years. The conflict has dismantled the region's economy and food system, leaving the citizens to suffer the dire consequences of the conflict.

The conflict has disrupted the harvest season, which left Tigray people waiting another year to harvest. The conflict added further restraint to the food insecurity in the region due to the looting, burning, and destruction of all food supplies and sources. Weeks after the conflict started, agricultural equipment, stocks, and infrastructure have all been destroyed by the military forces. The military operations have also rendered the region health infrastructure, businesses, shops, and educational institutions.

In addition to the food insecurity, the conflict resulted in the displacement of more than 2 million people, seeking safety. Others sought to refuge in neighboring countries, living in harsh conditions with lack of adequate essential relief items and medical supplies.

The conflict has also resulted in geopolitical challenges with the influx of Ethiopian refugees in neighboring countries, particularly Sudan, which could lead to further instability in the region. The blackout of information in Tigray by the government remains an obstacle for humanitarian organizations and actors to know the precise numbers of people in need of assistance. With the continuous escalation of the conflict, the international community response remains passive, by turning a blind eye to international humanitarian law violations by Ethiopia. Western countries chose to adapt to the diplomatic approach by raising their concerns with few countries implementing economic pressures.

The tragic humanitarian situation of Tigray people in the conflict is very clear. The report observes that the role played by the aid agencies and the international community was utterly inadequate, by having a limited and nearly no added value to the recent conflict. Their alarming and raising concerns lead to no outcome to save the civilians in Tigray and declare a ceasefire. The Ethiopian government in collaboration with other belligerents should be held responsible for their deliberate humanitarian law violations against the civilians, in particular for depriving the people of essentials indispensable to their survival. Killings of innocent civilians, deliberate starvation and hunger, massive looting, destruction of households and facilities, and preventing humanitarian aid have all been reported by human rights organizations. These shocking events require the international community to implement effective and rapid response to save the people from a second famine and to support aid agencies to access inaccessible areas. Immediate mediation on a local, regional, and international level is needed to avert the catastrophic situation, to halt the fighting and save millions of lives.