

CIVIL WAR IN TIGRAY: WORST HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

By

Areeba Arif

Research Associate

Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CMEA), ISSI

Edited by

Amina Khan

September 15, 2022

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On August 17, 2022 Director-General of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that Ethiopia's conflict-ridden province of Tigray is the worst humanitarian and man-made disaster on Earth.¹ For nearly two years, more than 6 million people have been under siege, sealed off from the outside world with no electricity, no banking services, and access for journalists has been restricted, making it difficult to assess the scale of the crisis.² This has been due to the civil war that has erupted since November 2020, between the government of Ethiopia and Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).³ The war started in the fall of 2020 after Tigrayans held their own elections in defiance of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. The TPLF, a regional political party, had ruled the country for three decades before Abiy came to power in 2018. When TPLF forces attacked an Ethiopian military base in Tigray, Abiy, who was the Prime Minister, launched a military offensive. During the month of November, thousands of TPLF troops advanced to within 200 miles of the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, prompting

- 1 "Lack of help for Tigray crisis due to skin colour, says WHO chief", *Aljazeera*, August 17, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/17/who-slams-unimaginable-cruelty-inflicted-on-tigray#:~:text=WHO%20chief%20says%20the%20situation,attention%20as%20the%20Ukraine%20conflict.>
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 "Tigray crisis An Escalated War", *Aljazeera*, August 17, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/26/ethiopia-forces-accused-of-deadly-strike-as-tigray-war-escalates>

Abiy to say he would lead government forces from the front line. The rebels, who were pushed back in December, returned to Tigray.

In March 2022 with the efforts of the UN , Addis Ababa declared a ceasefire to control the crisis and both sides agreed to observe a ceasefire on humanitarian grounds. Which lasted a few months, but unfortunately was broken on August 17, 2022. The Ethiopian government and TPLF both have confirmed in separate statements that fighting had resumed. Each side accused the other of starting the violence. According to the TPLF, the government began an “extensive offensive” at 5 a.m, after five days of repositioning its forces. The government countered that the TPLF had ignored peaceful alternatives and launched an attack that “officially violated the cease-fire.”⁴ The African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights established a Commission of Inquiry, but the African Union (AU) has failed to make any significant progress in resolving the conflict as the Ethiopian government is not following the instructions being given by AU and its delegation.⁵ AU’s attempt to mediate for the past two years is insufficient in the face of an active genocide. The lack of urgency to resolve the largest humanitarian crisis in modern history raises an important question, why is the international community silent?

Moreover, the war has been marked by accusations of atrocities on both sides. According to a report “Ethiopia Civil War Atrocities” by the United Nations, both sides had “committed violations of international human rights, humanitarian and refugee law, some of which may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.”⁶ Thousands of people have been killed and millions have been internally displaced. According to an estimate by Human Rights Watch 59,000 people have fled Ethiopia and found refuge in eastern Sudan.⁷ The remaining population is in desperate need of humanitarian aid.

During this phase, very limited food, aid and medicine has reached the Tigray Region. The population is still facing multiple outbreaks of diseases, including malaria, anthrax and cholera.

4 “Fighting erupts near Tigray border, dashing hopes of peace in Ethiopia”, *The Washington Post*, August 24,2022

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/24/ethiopia-fighting-tplf-war-tigray/>

5 “African Commission Human and Peoples Rights”, *Africa Union*. November 02, 2021

<https://www.achpr.org/>

6 “Joint UN report on Ethiopia Civil War atrocities blames all sides for violations”Max Bearrak,*The Washington Post*,November 03,2021.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/11/03/ethiopia-war-crimes-report/>

7 “Ethiopia’s Invisible Ethnic Cleansing”, Kenneth Roth, Human Rights Watch. June 2022.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/16/ethiopias-invisible-ethnic-cleansing>

Several attempts have been made to initiate peace talks for the Tigray conflict but unfortunately nothing concrete has been achieved due to lack of interest on the part of the international community. About half a million of the population is food insecure in Tigray, including more than 115,000 children who are severely malnourished. The number of people needing food aid in Tigray and the neighboring regions of Afar and Amhara has increased by 44 per cent since January.⁸

Along with this severe food insecurity, gender-based violence, and lack of access to proper healthcare and social welfare is wreaking havoc in the region. Genocide Watch has placed Ethiopia at Stage 9 of Genocide.⁹ Although the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the World Food Program (WFP) have been trying to provide aid. However, the ongoing conflict in the region is blocking these efforts. Both sides accuse the other of preventing the inflow of aid, and the people of Tigray are suffering.¹⁰

This is not the first time the international community has ignored such a humanitarian crisis. Conflicts in the East and African Nations have often been ignored by the global West. The Tigray conflict has a striking resemblance to the Rwandan Genocide, which resulted in the killing of 500,000 Tutsis in 1994.¹¹

Considering the humanitarian crisis in Tigray the international community must take immediate action, at least to prevent the refugee crisis that would stem from the armed conflict. The Rwandan Genocide resulted in the Great Lakes Refugee Crisis, where around two million Rwandans were exiled to neighbouring countries. The aftermath of this crisis would be similar. In fact, already, records show an exodus of millions of people fleeing to neighboring states.

Countries around the world, despite being parties to the Refugee Convention, have been reluctant to host refugees. The United Nations, AU and other countries such as Sudan, United States, China and countries from EU and the Gulf region can play an important role by arranging a dialogue between conflicting parties (Ethiopian Government and TPLF) and bringing them to the negotiating table. The UN and AU must take immediate action to prevent another Rwanda. Although there are

⁸ "Ethiopia's Tigray region says it will observe", *Reuters*, March 25, 2022.
<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopias-tigray-region-say-committed-observing-humanitarian-ceasefire-2022-03-25/>

⁹ "Genocide Emergency: Ethiopia", *Genocide Watch*, Jan 2022.
<https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/genocide-emergency-ethiopia-1>

¹⁰ "Can Ethiopia build on a truce to end war in Tigray?", *Al Jazeera*, May 25, 2022.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/program/the-stream/2022/5/25/can-ethiopia-build-on-a-truce-to-end-war-in-tigray>

¹¹ "Rawanda Genocide", *The Independent*, August 09, 2022,
<https://www.independent.co.uk/rwandas-genocide-commemoration/>

very limited chances of conflict resolution, the opportunity for peaceful settlement through negotiations still exists.