

The essay below appears as it was published on *Public Orthodoxy*:
<https://publicorthodoxy.org/2021/06/29/conflict-in-tigray/>

ON THE CONFLICT IN TIGRAY

by Romina Istratii

*Please note that this essay was authored two days before the reported re-taking of the regional capital Mekelle by the Tigray Defence Forces, which has led the federal government to declare a ceasefire.

On November 4, 2020, the federal government of Ethiopia began a military operation in the region of Tigray in northern Ethiopia. In the eight months of on-going conflict, involving the Tigray People's Liberation Front/Tigray Defence Forces on the one side and the Ethiopian federal army supported by the Eritrean Defence Forces on the other, innumerable reports have emerged about indiscriminate artillery strikes on residential areas and civilians; the systematic raping of women and girls; the intimidation, harassment, and imprisonment of ethnic Tigrayans; and the looting and destruction of property, hospitals, and religious sites and treasures by federal and ally militant elements. Humanitarian agencies consistently report that a man-made famine is unfolding in Tigray due to restrictions to farming and the systematic looting of agricultural materials by federal and Eritrean soldiers. A June report by the crisis group ACAPS ("Tigray crisis – Impact of conflict on food security, agriculture and livelihoods") noted that the region is now classified in IPC phase 4, which means that it is facing Emergency Outcomes, with 350,000 people being in Catastrophe (IPC Phase 5). Moreover, since the start of the conflict hundreds of thousands have fled their communities, with some villages/towns being entirely emptied, seeking refuge in the regional capital Mekelle or camps in surrounding regions and at the border with Sudan. In April 2021, CARE reported that the conflict had led to the displacement of "over 417,152 people predominantly women and children" ("Tigray Conflict Rapid Gender Analysis").

The current situation is personally agonizing, as I previously conducted long-term anthropological research in Tigray, and I have been working since 2016 to understand local communities' experiences of domestic violence and to help to address the problem from within the local religio-cultural framework of the predominantly Orthodox Täwahädo population of Tigray. In November 2020, I relocated to Ethiopia with the intention of travelling back to Tigray's Aksum city to pilot an intervention working with clergy and secular stakeholders and providers in the surrounding villages. The war erupted just as we prepared to start the project, terminating all our communication with partner institutions in Mekelle and Aksum and making it impossible to know the conditions of our colleagues and the communities there (communication has been partially restored since).

Much has been written about the conflict, and due to the ethnic tensions and grievances that underpin it, there have been conflicting narratives around it. In this essay I am not concerned with reinforcing any of these narratives, but rather to share my personal understanding of the conflict and the humanitarian crisis as witnessed from my current location in Addis Ababa and communicated to me by colleagues in Tigray in order to stress the need for urgent and definitive responses.

The conflict: A reflection of past and on-going grievances

The conflict that erupted in Tigray reflects Ethiopia's complex historical trajectory especially in the past 30 years. This context can only be delineated briefly, but this informs the generally favorable stance of many in Ethiopia towards the offensive military operation in Tigray and the involvement of Eritrea in the war.

In 1974, the last monarch of Ethiopia was overturned and the military regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam, known as the Derg, took over. While this had origins in the Marxism-inspired struggles of university students to respond to the inequalities of the imperial system, it soon became a violent junta. A civil war ensued for the pan-Ethiopian cause of ethnic self-determination. The fight was led from Northern Ethiopia, by the Eritrean and Tigray People's Liberation Fronts (EPLF and TPLF), ending in 1991 with the overthrow of the Derg by the liberation fighters, by then united with their counterparts from other regions. The emerging Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) formed the transitional government of Ethiopia, while Eritrea sought and achieved independence. As a result of colonial legacies and political tensions arising due to border marking, in 1998 Ethiopia and Eritrea went on to fight another war at the border with Tigray, which resulted in long-term hostile relations between the two countries. The Eritrea-Ethiopia war was presumably ended after the new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, came into power and re-established relations with neighboring Eritrea, receiving a Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his efforts.

While Abiy Ahmed's coming into power was motivated by widespread critiques of the previous government and requests for political reform within Ethiopia, it also directly fostered more targeted criticisms and condemnations of the TPLF—discourses that disproportionately emphasized the misdeeds and oppressive tactics of the party yet completely silenced its contributions to the civil war or to the economic development of Ethiopia since the imperial era. Disconcertingly, public discourse in Ethiopia soon overtly conflated the TPLF with the whole of the Tigrayan people—a predominantly agricultural population faced with poverty with substantive numbers supported by the state welfare system. This conflation reflects, in part, the perception among a large Ethiopian majority that the Tigrayans have historically identified with and fully supported the tactics of their party. The fact that many Tigrayans felt disillusioned with the TPLF prior the war and expressed more independent political positions was entirely ignored and was not properly leveraged in Abiy Ahmed's reform strategies.

In the month of November 2020 and as the war in Tigray unfolded, I had the opportunity to speak with a few dozen Ethiopians about their positions on the war, and I found it striking that most of my interlocutors justified or argued in favor of it, with many characteristically stating that innocent civilians perishing in the process of "crushing" the TPLF was an "inevitable evil." More disconcerting have been the responses of some members of the clergy of the prevalent Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahädo Church, with priests shown blessing the Ethiopian army in a televised event in the early days of the conflict. There is no doubt that ethnicity has become a dividing factor in the Church in recent months. The silencing of the pleas of the Tigrayan Patriarch of the Church, Abuna Matthias, against the genocidal violence in Tigray evidences that the Church has been hijacked by interests of ethnic dominance, limiting the canonical authority of the Patriarch over the Church.

Extensive violence against civilians: rape as a weapon of war, shelling of residential areas, executions of men and boys, intentional famine

Widespread violence has been reported against civilians in the current conflict, including systematic shelling of residential places; intentional and repeated sexual violence against women and girls; executions of men and boys; as well as indirect violence in the form of children being maimed by landmines, bombs, or stray bullets, or people experiencing emotional trauma as a result of witnessing violence and losing relatives in the conflict.

A brief by the EEPA Horn Programme published in March cited tens of thousands of women as a conservative estimate of the extent of raping by federal and ally militant elements. Reports and publications by humanitarian agencies have consistently documented an increase in the number of women and girls seeking medical aid after being raped or contraception options to protect against the likelihood of rape.

The reports available reinforce testimonies of the use of rape as a weapon of war, with the worst type of violence enacted reportedly by Eritrean soldiers. In March Insecurity Insight reported testimonies of victims that point to the use of rape as an ethnic cleansing strategy:

Some women have described how while they were being raped the rapists said that they were “cleansing the blood lines” of the women they were raping and that these women needed to change their Tigrayan identity. Another woman recalls Eritrean soldiers saying while raping her that they were ordered “to come after the women”, while another woman recalls Eritrean soldiers saying that their actions were revenge against Tigray.

INSECURITY INSIGHT, “SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN ETHIOPIA’S TIGRAY REGION,” MARCH 30, 2021.

It is important to recognize that Tigray is a highly religious society that appreciates bodily virginity, especially for women and girls prior to marriage, and the systematic and degrading type of sexual violence used seems intentional to permanently damage (physically and socially) the victims, debasing also the religio-cultural values of the people. This is evidenced also from alleged reports of soldiers raping nuns in the town of Wukro and soldiers seeking to rape virgins.

Watch the video by Channel 4, which includes direct interviews with victims:
<https://youtu.be/g0OxwpFlaA0>

A report by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission released in February reported children being maimed by landmines, bombs or stray bullets. The report referred to the extensive looting of hospitals and medical supplies and ambulances by combatants, resulting in the death of patients in need of urgent medical support and the inability of victims of rape to receive medical aid. In addition, many internally displaced populations were reported to have witnessed war violence, including the loss of family relatives, which contributed to grave trauma and sadness that is largely being left unaddressed given the limited access to aid workers and psychosocial support services provided by humanitarian organizations.

What can we do in response to the conflict from where we are?

Beyond the need for an immediate ceasefire in Tigray, it seems extremely important to counter-balance the animosity and hate speech prevalent in political discourse and on social media with calls for peace and reconciliation and to cultivate empathy for the victims/survivors of Tigray.

Members of the Ethiopian diaspora who fled Ethiopia and hold grievances towards the TPLF have been at the forefront of fostering favorable sentiments towards the war, failing to recognize their unwarranted role in dictating Ethiopian political decisions while not sharing the same realities with Ethiopians in Ethiopia. Many Ethiopians within Ethiopia, on the other hand, continue to be guided by ethnicity-based antagonisms, which hinders their ability to acknowledge the plight of the Tigrayan people and show empathy. Internationally, while many Eritreans have opposed the perceived authoritarian regime of Eritrea's leader Isaias Afwerki, not all have been as outspoken in condemning Eritrea's participation in the Tigray war, suggesting that ethno-religious grievances towards Tigray still hold strong among some Eritreans. On the other hand, the conflict has led many Eritreans and Tigrayans to unite their voices and to condemn the participation of Eritrea in the war and the repeat of another war and to call for the Eritrean army's withdrawal from Tigray. Such voices can curve a road to reconciliation and to rebuilding peace in the region. In parallel, it seems important to challenge distorted uses of religious language that seek to justify "patriotic" political aims in mainstream Ethiopian media and political discourse. Whatever positionality one has in the current conflict and no matter how limited power one has to change the situation, it is important to try to "humanize" the current political discourses by focusing on the victims/survivors and stressing everyone's duty to protect human life—no matter geography, ethnicity, or religion. Unless Ethiopians and Eritreans in the respective countries and the diaspora communities openly and strongly condemn violence as a political solution and call out leaders who choose such means, the inevitable and intergenerational consequences of another devastating war will be felt by all.