

Conflict-Related Gender Based Violence in Tigray

Webinar 25 May 2021



**VOICES FROM
TIGRAY**



25TH
MAY 2021

14:00 - 16:00 EAT
13:00 - 15:00 CET
07:00 - 09:00 US EST

**Conflict-Related
Sexual Violence
Against Women in
Tigray**



Registration link <https://bit.ly/3hqFbx1>

Europe External Programme with Africa *ivzw*
115 Stevinstraat, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: + 32 2 231 1659; e-mail admin@cepa.be
Web: www.cepa.be
Registration no: 0452.298.528

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Reports of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Women in the EEPA Situation Report

The first report of rape in Tigray was published by the EEPA Situation Report on 2 January 2021. Since that day, there have been almost daily reports of new incidences, and the widespread sexual violence has been increasingly corroborated by the UN and other international organisations and media.

Summary “Voices from Tigray - Conflict Related Sexual Violence in Tigray”

25 May 2021 - The scale and brutality of crimes of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Women committed in Tigray has drawn widespread condemnation from around the world.

While Tigray has been entirely closed off from communications for three months, and large parts remain closed off, large numbers of sexual violence have been reported.

UNFPA estimated in April that 22.500 women would require support as a consequence of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence.

There is massive underreporting of sexual violence. Large parts of Tigray are closed off. Journalists and aid workers cannot reach all areas. The shame and fear associated with the violence and perpetrators acting with impunity and the destruction of local administration and hospitals compound to the problem of underreporting. What is being reported is the tip of the iceberg.

The reports that are available demonstrate despicable and horrific acts on sexual violence committed without impunity, they are widespread and characterised by their extreme and sadistic nature.

The reports include abduction, gang rape of (groups of) women held in isolated places and drugged, rape in front of relatives including husbands and children, the forced rape of women by their relatives, burning of genitals and forcing of objects into the vagina. Women are abused for being Tigrayan. Children or witnesses are killed.

Many have qualified these as Conflict-related sexual violence, used as a weapon of war used against the civilian population, and committed, in part, with genocidal intent.

Cases reported include include elderly women and girls, as young as eight years of age.

The perpetrators are mentioned as the foreign Eritrean troops heavily present in Tigray and these are most often identified as the perpetrators, followed by Amhara and Ethiopian National Defense Forces.

Eritrean Troops are in Tigray under the so-called National Service, a form of nation-wide indefinite slavery, which the UN Special Commission of Inquiry has qualified as Crimes against Humanity which are ongoing. It has recommended the practice to be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC). In Tigray the National Service practice is deployed in a foreign sovereign state, and those in charge responsible for the perpetration of heinous Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Women.

Due to the destruction of health facilities in Tigray which came under deliberate attack in the war, there are no relevant services available to the victims, while the trauma that was sustained, often severe, may leave the women and girls in dire need of support.

The Eritrean and Ethiopian government have so far denied or belittled the Conflict – Related Sexual Violence against Women and there is no indication of any responsibility taken to stop it. Today the Ethiopian government has convicted three soldiers in relation to rape committed in Tigray.

After months of denial, Prime Minister Abiy has now recognised Eritrean troops as present and identified these as potential perpetrators of sexual violence against Tigrayan women and girls. High-level international calls for Eritrean troops to be withdrawn, the troops remain present.

The perpetration of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence has not diminished and is spreading across the Horn. There must be concerted and coordinated international pressure and targeted sanctions. These atrocities must come to an end, and soldiers and their commanders must be prosecuted.

- The withdrawal of all foreign troops, particularly those from Eritrea
- The referral of the deployment by Eritrea of National Service in a foreign jurisdiction to the International Criminal Court
- All parties in Tigray to end with immediate effect the impunity of the use of Rape as a Weapon of War



Program Schedule

**25TH
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14:00 - 16:00 EAT
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VOICES FROM TIGRAY

**CONFLICT-RELATED
SEXUAL VIOLENCE
AGAINST WOMEN IN
TIGRAY**

OPENING BY

Assita Kanko, Member of the European Parliament

HIGHLIGHTS

- Testimonies from Women in Tigray
- Presentation of Findings from Tigray - Victor Odero, International Rescue Committee
- Perspectives from the Region
- Testimonies from Refugees from Tigray in Sudan - Mohammed Amin
- Testimonies from Eritreans and Ethiopians on the Situations in Tigray - Selam Kidane
- African Women for Peace in the Horn - Mariam Basajja
- European Perspective on Rape as a War Crime - Malgorzata Tarasiewicz, East-West Women Network
- Meaza Gidey Gebremedhim - Human Rights Advocate and Representative of Omna Tigray

CLOSING KEYNOTE

- Hon. Julia Duncan-Cassel, Former Minister of Gender and Social Protection, Liberia

Assita Kanko, MEP. Opening Key-note Address : Webinar on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Women in Tigray

25.05.2021 - Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I am honored and humbled to be here, and to speak to you on this urgent issue.

The testimonies and accounts we will hear today will be heartbreaking. They will make us angry; they will make us sad.

We will feel powerless to protect these women. The stories will at times, seem too horrific to comprehend. But if these women can survive these horrific attacks, then we have a duty to listen and to speak up.

Despite the hard truths that we will hear today, we must commit to a message of hope, and the promise of action.

Undoubtedly, the world has been distracted of late.

A distraction that has provided a cloak of impunity for the perpetrators of these crimes.

But the international community is very capable of addressing more than one crisis or urgent situation at a time.

The safety, health, and futures of thousands of women depends upon it.

It is reported that the women being raped in the Tigray region are aged anywhere between 8 and 72.

These violations are said to be widespread. They are intentional and deliberate. Aid organizations believe that the number of women affected is far higher than reported.

The rapes are being carried out in front of family, husbands, and children. The rapes can last for days, and often inflict life threatening injuries.

Those who speak out know they are placing themselves in danger. There is no mercy or humanity in these barbaric acts.

Sir Mark Andrew Lowcock, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator described the attacks in Eritrea,

“as a means to humiliate, terrorize, and traumatize an entire population today and into the next generation.”

I have said many times, it is beyond comprehension that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, has overseen such destruction, tyranny and depravation.

The people of Tigray and Ethiopia were - until recently, living normal lives. They now risk mass starvation and live in constant fear and enforced isolation.

Today there should be one clear message, that the international community must come together to condemn these atrocities, but that more importantly – they must act.

Governments and institutions have always been cautious to use certain terms: genocide and rape as a weapon of war.

But we mustn't be afraid to use these terms if they accurately describe what is taking place. These words allow for consequences and repercussions for perpetrators.

Sometimes the world views war as the theatre of men.

But it is often women that pay an equal or greater price behind the scenes:

Loss of economic empowerment, rape, forced prostitution, starvation, backsteps in social equality.

Sexual violence against women and girls has been used as a weapon of war for centuries.

The lasting damage clear to see. We saw it with the women of Rwanda, South Korea, Yugoslavia; and these are just the examples of the last century.

But the inaction of the international community makes it seem as though we have learned nothing. President Biden, the G7, the UN, and the EU have all condemned and expressed concern over what is happening,

But words are not enough to make the suffering of women stop. Condemnation is important, but it's not enough to make families sleep soundly tonight in Tigray.

There must be concerted and coordinated international pressure and targeted sanctions. These atrocities must come to an end, and soldiers and their commanders must be prosecuted.

Rape, like war - echoes through the generations, its pain doesn't end, with the end of a conflict.

It is clear, that in order to gain justice for the women of Tigray, the words on the pages of our international laws and treaties must protect women.

Systematic rape by soldiers cannot be treated as a secondary crime of war.

It is only by showing there is no impunity for human rights violators, that these women can begin to move on with their lives.

The fear of being raped or having been raped, has sent thousands of women into hiding.

The economic, family, and social consequences of this are huge. Women's fear of going to work or to the shops is causing economic deprivation and hunger.

It takes great courage for any woman to speak about her experience of rape or sexual assault, especially in traditional and conservative families and communities.

Their bravery must be met by political bravery from Western democracies. The soldiers in Tigray may have tried to impose their control, but they can never take away these women's strength.

Now it is up to us, to try and give them back their power. Every voice matters in urging the international community to act.

We cannot waste another moment in trying to stop this crime against humanity. There is more than one way to commit genocide.

Indeed, the damage of rape as a weapon of war, is as powerful as any gun or bomb. As the armies and authorities seek to silence these women and their communities,

We, therefore, must lend them our voices, and those voices must be determined and loud.

Thank you.

Assita Kanko, 25 May 2021

Testimony 1 Obtained from Tigray

These testimonies were presented at the Webinar 'Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Women in Tigray', Voices from Tigray. EEPA (25 May 2021).

A video was obtained of a victim of rape. The video is a heart-breaking and sickening story of a woman who is raped and physically attacked by a group of Eritrean soldiers. The story is as follows:

The Eritrean soldiers took a group of women to a remote place, their military camp, somewhere out of Adigrat. She estimates the number of women taken by force to the camp are like the number of women in a minibus (full of women in a minibus).

She was raped by a group of five Eritrean soldiers, it was gang rape, three times.

She heard the names of the soldiers (the rapists) when they called each other. Two of them are called Awot and Mohammed. She said the soldiers who raped are from the Bilen tribe of Eritrea. They have scars on their face (around their cheeks).

First, she came to Adigrat Hospital, but she was referred to Mekelle.

On her way to Mekelle (accompanied by the soldiers who had raped her), the soldiers abused and raped her again. This time she doesn't remember how many soldiers and how many times she was raped.

The woman says there was a woman who gave birth recently and was raped (she was among the women taken to the camp). What is so sickening about the story of this woman is her recently born newborn is killed brutally. The soldiers say they kill the newborn because he will become 'Woyane' when he grows up. It is horrific when the woman explains how the soldiers kill the newborn. The mother of the dead newborn was killed as well. The victim continues to tell her painful story...

Her 12-year son was killed in-front of her and she is worried her dead son is eaten by hyenas or wild animals. This imagination and the death of her son has disturbed her unimaginably. From her story and explanation, the death of her son made her mentally unstable.

The survivor said the rapists were taking pictures while they were raping her.

The soldiers strictly warn her to say she is raped by the Ethiopian soldiers, if in case she is asked. If they know she said she is raped by Eritrean soldiers ('Shabiya'), they will find and kill her.

The victim was so hungry. When she found something to eat and tried to eat, she realized that her teeth were broken and lost. In the video, she shows her lost teeth and the injuries she has because of the physical abuses she had. She was raped and physically abused and violated. The soldiers took her jewellery as well. She said they took all her gold jewellery.

When she came to Mekelle for treatment and reached around Agulae, the soldiers injected her, and she became unconscious.

Although it is not clear from the story...it seems the rapists threw her out somewhere between Augulae and Mekelle...and a red-cross ambulance took her to Ayder hospital...

The video where this testimony is narrated is in possession of EEPA.

Testimonies 2: Collected Testimony by a solidarity group in Tigray

These testimonies were presented at the Webinar 'Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Women in Tigray', Voices from Tigray. EEPA (25 May 2021).

A doctor in the city of Adigrat reported that one woman had been left on the side of the road after she had been raped by over twenty Eritrean soldiers. When she received medical care surgeons had to remove stones and nails that had been inserted inside her genitals. A video was circulated.

A twenty-seven-year-old woman had been kidnapped by five Eritrean soldiers and subjected to severe sexual violence for over two weeks. During her captivity she was repeatedly gang raped by Eritrean forces, sometimes up to fifteen soldiers for over eight hours at a time. The ordeal left her with a fractured spine and pelvis.

One woman lost her ability to move her legs and control her bladder after being raped by three Eritrean soldiers and two Ethiopian soldiers.

In the town of Abiy Addi, a teenager lost her right hand after being raped by an alleged Eritrean soldier wearing an Ethiopian military uniform. The soldier initially tried to force the schoolgirl's grandfather to have sex with the teenager but when he was not successful, he shot the grandfather.

In the town of Wukro a husband was forced, by gunpoint, to watch his wife being raped by four Eritrean soldiers.

In Western Tigray, Eritrean soldiers pulled aside 20 women and raped them. The following day only 13 returned. Eritrean soldiers told them to go, saying "We already have what we want."

Reported by The Telegraph:

'Selam, a 26-year-old coffee seller in Edaga Hamus, 100km away from Tigray's capital of Mekelle, said she was abducted by Eritrean soldiers with 17 other women in January.

"They took us into the forest. When we arrived there, there were around 100 soldiers who were waiting for us. They tied the hands and feet of each one of us. And then they raped us without mercy," she told the Telegraph as she fought through tears.

"We stayed that way for three days. After three days the soldiers killed five girls who had been tied with us. They poured [alcohol] over our wounds. They danced standing over us."

By the time she was taken into the forest, she had already been raped several times by men she recognised as Eritrean soldiers. After the first attack, her abusers were waiting for her as she returned to her house from the hospital with contraceptives and post-exposure HIV drugs.

"Why the hell did you want this? We want you to be sick. That is what we are here for. We are here to make you HIV-positive," Selam recalled one of the men as saying.' (The Telegraph, 27 March 2021)

Testimonies 3: Obtained by a Women's Solidarity Group in Tigray

These testimonies were presented at the Webinar 'Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Women in Tigray', Voices from Tigray. EEPA (25 May 2021).

People fled in doves to mountains, caves and churches and mosques when the occupying forces came closer to the Eastern zone of Tigray.

Case One

Atsede Hadera (16), fled from the town of Fireweyni with her family, to the mountains with no food or water. After a week, she came to a deserted town. Assuming there were no soldiers, she walked to her house. Little did she know, she was being followed by two soldiers.

They followed her into her house and told her to take off her clothes or else, they threatened to kill her and burn the house along with her body if she didn't comply. As this was taking place, her neighbour Letebrhan walks into the house to hear this conversation.

Letebrhan overhears the conversation and immediately starts to beg the soldiers to stop what they're doing, she tells them Atsede is underage.

The soldiers ignore Letebrhan and tell Atsede to lay on the bed and take off her clothes. Letebrhan, finally, hopeless and desperate that she won't be able to get their attention, asks them to rape her instead. She was finally able to get their attention, they turned around and looked at Letebrhan - considering her proposition.

The soldiers agree to rape Letebrhan instead, for hours, one after the other. Atsede says Letebrhan didn't leave her room for over a week, she covered her face and body, she didn't speak to anyone. She didn't seek medical care - not that any was available. She remains in her home crying day and night.

Atsede couldn't bare the guilt of what happened to Letebrhan. She holds herself accountable, she cries talking about what happened, she calls it her misfortune. Atsede finally couldn't bear what had happened and runs away to Mekelle, the capital of Tigray.

Atsede, a child, carries the guilt for a crime she neither perpetuated nor had the power to stop.

Tigray is now soaked with stories like Atsede - stories of terror, sexual abuse, massacres, destruction and hate to an unimaginable degree.

Case Two

Lemlem Ataklti (30), is from Semema Adet, just south of Axum. She now lives in one of the many makeshift camps built for IDP's in Axum. She speaks in agony about what happened to her four months back in January of this year.

Like many of the raids undertaken by the Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers in her small town, this too would quickly turn into a horror show for its residents. This time, Eritrean soldiers had started shooting at civilians and three came into her house and locked her inside.

Noticing that her husband wasn't present they asked her if her husband is fighting against them along with 'Weyane'/TPLF. Lemlem's husband and father of her children had to run to the mountains to avoid military raids as they often turn into murder scene for men. They could not have quite imagined what might unfold.

She said he was not. One of the soldiers then asked that she take off her clothes. Lemlem lied and said she was pregnant, assuming they'd have mercy on her.

Without a second thought, the soldiers said "that's good, let's remove the 'junta' inside you, and replace it with our own race." Two of them opened her legs forcefully and the other brought a rough stick and inserted it into her vaginal canal and stirred it with the intention of aborting her pregnancy.

After the Eritrean men removed the stick, they took their turn raping her, as she screamed in pain. She doesn't really know for how long this was taking place. It may have been minutes, or may be hours - but it felt like it had been forever.

They finally left, she ran off to the bushes to avoid ever having to see them again. For two months, Lemlem couldn't control her urine, continuous abdominal pain & vaginal discharge, she is unable to fully communicate even with her family members, she cries most of the day. The health facility in her town has been destroyed by the Eritrean troops.

It may have been minutes, may be hours - it couldn't have been days - but it's also a lifetime, in a way.

Case Three

Zemam is a 70 years old nun with mental illness. She had lived all her life in the monastery .one day she was wandering in her church, as she always does, when the Ethiopian soldiers arrived.

Kidnapped her and kept her for 3 days in one room. On the 4th day they brought her back and left her near the monastery. She was confused, disturbed, suspicious and silently cried. She only talks to one nun otherwise kept to herself. since then she avoids going to churches and prayers saying "I am not allowed to go in there anymore." When she came to the hospital she was told that she has STD.

Case Four

One of the survivors was 22 years old she used to live in Humera. in November when the war started she was separated from her husband whom she married 5 months earlier to the war. They found her while she was running for her life and she was pregnant of 2 months and was raped by 3 Eritrean soldiers. The next day she started bleeding and she had a miscarriage but still it took her 3 days to go to hospital to get medical help. She then came to Mekelle. She has developed PTSD. After 3 months of waiting she was told that her husband was killed by the Amhara force and she went back to her home town for his funeral and then again Eritrean soldiers took her and other 3 women from the bus and kept her for 4 days.

Case Five

Two survivors from around Wuqiro aged 67 and 75. they have been neighbours for 25 years. On March 1 evening two Eritrean soldiers came to Weyzero Teberah house and forcefully started taking her clothes at this time she started to shout and ask for help. After hearing the loud shout Weyzero Medhin came to provide help thinking what has happened to her neighbour, she went there she was pulled inside the house and both of them was raped at the same time. When they came to the hospital both of them were ashamed and worried about the social stigma they have to face for the rest of their life.

Case Six

Genet is a 39 years old woman from Tigray, who was fleeing her home town with two other women and her three children to escape the war. They were then stopped by 5 Eritrean soldiers and taken to their camps and questioned to the whereabouts of their husbands. The husbands of the two women including Genet are part of the Tigray Defence Force. The third woman exposed them to the soldiers in hopes they would leave her. But the Eritrean soldiers took turns raping the three women for hours, after that one of the soldiers pulled out a metal from his Kalashnikov and put it on fire and then inserted it into her uterus, he then said now you will never give birth to a baby of the 'junta'. She then passed out and as she would find out later they put small pieces of metals inside of her. They were held there for 24 hours and released on to the streets, she then joined IDP shelter and there she started to have complications, she couldn't walk, sit or control her urine. It was at this time she decided to give her children up and commit suicide. She talked to one of the aid workers there and they brought her to the hospital, they did an ultrasound and could see the metals lodged inside her uterus. She then had surgery and the metals were extracted. She still hasn't healed fully, she limps and is unable to sit. She still lives in fear that they will come to take her, a while ago she heard that some of the soldiers are coming

towards where she is and she ran into the bushes limping with pain with her kids but came back later when they left the place. She said she doesn't want to cry in front of people, she wants to be strong and when the time comes be an example and advocate for women's rights. She then asked will I ever be able to live without my past holding me back? Without people seeing me as a victim.

Conclusion

What is happening in Tigray is devastating; public service - telecommunication, electricity, water, banks, health facilities, schools - essential service providers that can reduce the plight of women have been the primary targets of occupying forces.

Police, justice systems, health facilities cannot investigate perpetrators of sexual violence.

The number we have of GBV victims is clearly the tip of the ice-berg, the number of women that report rape looking to terminate a pregnancy are much higher and above those that report rape because it is a crime.

Weaponized rape and sexual slavery have made Tigray a living hell for women.

Not only are women and girls being sexually abused, these abuses are followed by other acts of cruelty. It has become common to hear about hospitals being occupied with women that have foreign bodies like stones, sand, metals, inside their uterus in hopes of making women of Tigray infertile. These acts and verbal confirmation of the intention of the acts by perpetrators are signs of genocide.

A total war has been launched on the people of Tigray; unarmed men have been taken out of their homes shot and killed, women raped with intention to 'purify their blood', hospitals looted and destroyed. Occupying forces have demonstrated once again that words like 'never again' mean nothing and actions have no consequences.

Testimonies 4 – “End Impunity of Eritrean Troops in Tigray” by Selam Kidane

Presentation by Selam Kidane at the Webinar ‘Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Women in Tigray’, Voices from Tigray. EEPA (25 May 2021).

My name is Selam Kidane, I am an Eritrean psychotherapist, born and mostly raised in Ethiopia. I have spent many years worrying and advocating for the right of Eritreans inside the countries and fellow refugees too.

As a researcher into traumatic stress and collective trauma, I spent several years travelling back and forth to Tigray and this gave me an opportunity to get to know the region and understand the people of Tigray really well. A refined people who try hard not to offend you, while they are not afraid to tell you what they think. I have received the blessings of many elders, found kindred spirit in many women in the villages, as well as had the opportunity of in-depth discussions with academics and politicians.

It really makes me sad to hear what we have just been hearing; it is harrowing to hear it happened to the people of Tigray who accommodated Eritrean refugees and treated us as their own despite the political standoff for two decades.

It is particularly gut-wrenching to realise that it is happening at the hands of Eritrean Soldiers, who to all intents and purposes, are victims of the very regime that is deploying them.

Many would have been captured from the streets of their towns and villages and forcefully drafted into the national service army, which has effectively become an indefinite bondage of slavery.

In the Eritrean National Service, the men and women are kept for years, with no education, no access to credible information, and under a constant bombardment of hateful propaganda and indoctrination into the hateful policies that we have been witnessing in Tigray, for the last six months. The result is devastating sadism.

"I don't feel safe in Tigray anymore. Even the sight of the military uniform frightens me very much," Tirhas, (not her real name) told AFP during a tearful interview in March. She is one of thousands, who have had to face heinous sadistic experiences of gang rapes, rapes in front of members of family, incestuous sexual violence forced at gun points and nails and other objects being inserted into women. It makes me shudder, even listening to this, I hear that Tirhas is clearly traumatised and so are many of the rest of us upon hearing this.

During my research among Eritrean refugees I had come across Eritrean women who were violated in similar ways in Sinai, where they were trafficked for ransom. Eritrean women were captured, relatives or other Eritreans forced to rape them, their genitals burned, many things we also hear happening in Tigray.

Eritrean women face constant sexual harassment at the Military training centres in Eritrea too. The extent might not be comparable, but the devastating effect of this barbarity, to the women and their communities will not be different.

I have witnessed what the situation inside Eritrea and the experiences of Eritreans along the human trafficking routes has done to Eritreans across the globe. And in Tigray it is the same and a thousand times worse.

Here we have sadistic and systematic violations, under war condition, as a way to subjugate the entire population and possibly across generations too. To make matters worse the responses so far are deaf ears, for six relentless months; if this situation is an indictment against the criminals committing these crimes is certainly is also an indictment against the leaders who have created a situation in which this can happen without impunity and a world that is still slow to hear the plight of survivors and even slower to protect them.

The root of much of the plight in Tigray is inside Eritrea, where the government perpetrates heinous crimes against humanity that were investigated by a UN Human Rights Commission in 2016. It qualified the indefinite National Service that affects all Eritreans as a Crime against Humanity. National Service is slavery. It is now deployed outside the borders, in foreign land committing heinous crimes.

Similarly to the silence now, in Tigray, by 2018 the world completely bypassed the plight of Eritreans and let Isayas Afewerki totally off the hook; by 2021 he scaled up the sadism of his crimes and doubled his victims to include the entire people of Tigray in addition to the people of Eritrea.

The crimes against humanity, that Isayas Afworki is responsible for, should no longer be ignored or overlooked. We have international mechanisms devised for just this, and it is imperative that they are used to contain evil and protect victims.

Isayas Afewerki should be referred to the ICC without delay, to account for his crimes against humanity committed against Tigrayans and Eritreans.

Only ending the circle of impunity will stop the cycle of devastation across the Horn of Africa.

Presentation “Rape as a weapon of war” by Malgorzata Tarasiewicz – East-West Women Network

Presentation by Malgorzata Tarasiewicz at the Webinar ‘Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Women in Tigray’, Voices from Tigray. EEPA (25 May 2021).

Surprisingly, rape was formally recognized as a war crime relatively recently i.e. in the second half of the 20th century. At that time cases of rape were documented in more than 20 conflicts.

The most discussed cases initially included rape committed on a mass scale in the 1990s, when rape was used as an instrument of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia and as a means of genocide in Rwanda. In the former case, women belonging to the „enemy nation” were intentionally impregnated through rape by soldiers; rape was an instrument to humiliate and terrorize, and make people leave their homes. In the latter case, women belonging to the Tutsi ethnic group were systematically raped by HIV-infected men recruited and organized by the Hutu-led government.

Due to the massive scale of rape in the Balkan and Rwandan conflicts, the international institutions and community began to recognize rape as a weapon and strategy of war. The existing laws were used to prosecute those cases of rape. A clear need for new legislation emerged.

Article 27 of the Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (1949), included language protecting women “against any attack on their honor, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault”; this protection was later extended in an additional protocol adopted in 1977.

In 1993 the United Nations Commission on Human Rights declared systematic rape and military sexual slavery to be crimes against humanity punishable as violations of women’s human rights.

In 1995 the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing explicitly declared that rape by armed groups during wartime is a war crime.

The jurisdiction of the international tribunals established to prosecute crimes committed in the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda included rape as a war crime. Hence these tribunals were the first international bodies to prosecute sexual violence as a war crime. In 1998, the Rwandan tribunal ruled that: “rape and sexual violence constitute genocide.”

The statute of the International Criminal Court, established in 1998, declared rape and forced pregnancy as war crimes.

In a resolution adopted in 2008 the UN Security Council affirmed that

rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide.

The International Criminal Court first ruling and conviction for rape as war crime was made in the case of former Congolese vice-president Jean-Pierre Bemba in 2018. The case was the first before the ICC to focus on ‘sexual violence as a weapon of war, as well as on a senior military official whose forces carried out the atrocities’ – even if he himself not directly order them to do so. The ICC found him guilty on five charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes, including rape, committed in 2002-2003 in Central African Republic. More than 5,000 survivors participated in the proceedings.

It is important to look for support and knowledge in coalitions like Women’s Initiatives for Gender Justice, an international women’s human rights organisation that advocates for gender justice through the International Criminal Court (ICC) and through domestic mechanisms, including peace negotiations and justice processes. At the moment it is supporting victims in Uganda, Libya, Congo, Central African Republic and Darfur.

Background Briefing

Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Tigray

25 May 2021 – Webinar Voices of Tigray

Introduction

Since the conflict in Tigray started on November 4th, 2020, reports of Rape and Sexual Violence against Women, perpetrated by armed forces and invading and/or occupying troops, are prevalent throughout the entire region. In a report released on 17 May 2021, the United Nations Population Fund said in a situation report (15 March - 1 April 2021) that at least 22,500 survivors of sexual violence were expected to seek clinical support in relation to sexual violence:

Although gender-based violence is largely underreported, at least 22,500 survivors of sexual violence are estimated to seek clinical management of rape services. (UNFPA, 2021)

The number of cases is likely to be underreported, and it might only be the “tip of the iceberg”, with thousands more expected to remain silent due to isolation, fear, cultural stigma and lack of healthcare.

UN Under Secretary-General of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Mark Lowcock, and UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict Pramilla Patten, have said that Sexual Violence in Tigray is being “weaponised” and that 6 months after the conflict has started “rapes had not stopped.” Reports of Gender-Based Violence in Tigray included individuals “forced to rape members of their own family, under threats of imminent violence”, women “forced by military elements to have sex in exchange for basic commodities” and “sexual violence against women and girls in a number of refugee camps”.

Gender Based Violence (GBV) is further exacerbated by largescale looting and destruction of hospitals which has left the region with a strongly reduced capacity to provide emergency and basic healthcare and mental health support to those survivors that do report their assaults and go to hospitals to seek help.

Reports of rape and sexual violence perpetrated by Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers towards women in the Tigray region have been prevalent throughout the conflict and is well documented. As of 12 March 2021, the Emergency Coordination Centre (ECC) has recorded over 500 self-reported cases of GBV in Tigray.

The size and scope of GBV cases are not the only concerning factors; the violence, injury, pain and torment of the reported cases has been particularly disconcerting. Violent and ‘brutal’ cases of rape described in Tigray have involved foreign Eritrean soldiers involved in the war as perpetrators. There have been a number of cases of GBV where the survivors have been severely harmed and left without the ability to walk and with foreign objects in their bodies and the violence has involved other sadistic rape acts, including that rape is conducted in public, in front of husbands, in front of children and family members are forced to rape family members (Al Jazeera, 25 March 2021).

Number of Incidents and Scale of Rape and GBV in Tigray

The scale of GBV in Tigray is difficult to determine. On 6 February 2021, The UN special adviser on the prevention of genocide, Alice Wairimu Nderitu, stated that she has received reports of “serious human rights violations and abuses, committed by the parties to the conflict in the Tigray region and their allies.” The reports included sexual violence, alongside looting of property, mass executions and impeded humanitarian access.

Many different factors, including the war situation and the related fear, and isolation as well as cultural obstacles prevent an accurate reporting. Many areas remain inaccessible to international organisations providing relief, the healthcare system has collapsed due to the war, together with any other reporting services. However, while no precise count can be provided, organisations have released estimates.

In early March 2021, EEPA published a conservative estimate of the number of victims of rape in Tigray being at least 10.000 women at that moment. An inventory of the number of confirmed cases from only a few health clinics in Tigray totalled 108 women (Ethiopia Commission on Human Rights, 11 February 2021)¹. In Adigrat alone, the public hospital had received over 174 rape survivors since the beginning of the war (Deutsche Welle, 2021). According to Dedebit media, 750 women were raped and admitted to Ayder hospital in Mekelle alone (Dedebit, 29 January 2021). There had been multiple reports of gang rapes involving over ten soldiers in one incident. There had also been reports of Eritrean refugees being at high risk. According to Reuters, medical centers in the area were under high pressure for emergency contraception and tests for sexually-transmitted diseases.

In mid-April, Lowcock stated that 30% of all incidents against civilians involved some sort of sexual violence. Figures released by OCHA on the 12th of March stated that there had been 516 self-reported cases of rape since the start of the conflict.

In April, the interim head of the Tigray Health Bureau, Dr Fasika Amdeselassie, said that 829 cases of Sexual Violence had been reported in the 5 main hospitals in Tigray. Two weeks later, at the beginning of May, the Ethiopian Bureau of Health counted 950 women and Children who had been raped over the previous two months. Commenting on the release of this figure the organisation Save the Children stated:

But, in reality, this figure is likely to be much higher. Women who have spoken with Save the Children's Emergency Health Unit say that many survivors are too scared to report the sexual assault or to seek treatment, due to stigma and fear of reprisal (Save the Children, 4 May 2021)

Doctors at Ayder Referral Hospital in Mekelle also released numbers and noted a stark increase over the course of a single week. On April 1st the doctors counted 272 reported cases of rape since the start of the conflict. A week later, that number had climbed to 330 (Aljazeera, 21 April 2021). In Axum doctors report a spike in sexual assault reports in the first two weeks of May A gender-based violence coordinator told CNN that since the conflict started, 22 women and girls were seeking treatment every day (CNN, 22 March 2021). Doctors at hospitals said that on average, every woman that reports a rape, says that there were 20 more women unable to reach a hospital (Telegraph, 27 March 2021).

The assaults against children are not singular events either. There have been numerous reports of them, with some girls being as young as 8. First reported by doctors that four ten-year old girls had been raped, reported on 16 February 2021 (EEPA Situation Report, 85). It was reported that some parents were shaving the hair of young girls to protect them.

The rate in cases of gang rape happening towards Tigrayan women have steadily continued since the conflict started. In fact, a report published by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) showed that not only had incidents of mass rape and GBV occurred at the same rates as it did during the height of the crisis, but that the evidence suggested that instances of GBV were actually increasing.

Modus Operandi: Large Scale Gang Rape carried out in public

Since the start of the conflict, there have been many different testimonies of rape that have taken place. Many survivors have been interviewed and provided their story. This GBV has been described as 'brutal', 'horrific' and 'disturbing'. International organisations, the UN, USAID, humanitarian organisations and international media have published on Conflict-related Sexual Violence against Women in Tigray from which a disconcerting picture is emerging.

¹ The Commission received reports of 52 instances of rape in Mekelle, 22 in Adigrat, 7 in Wukro and 27 in Ayder (a total of 108) (Ethiopian Commission on Human Rights, 11 February 2021).

Since the start of the Tigray war in November 2020 reports of gang rape and gender-based violence (GBV) towards Tigrayan women have been documented:

Women are being gang-raped, drugged and held hostage, according to medical records and testimonies from survivors shared with CNN. In one case a woman's vagina was stuffed with stones, nails and plastic, according to a video seen by CNN and testimony from one of the doctors who treated her. (CNN, 22 March 2021)

Africanews reports one particular testimony, speaking to gang rape carried out publicly:

Once a day, she says, Ethiopian soldiers would line up outside her cell in a military camp, sometimes as many as 10 men waiting their turn to rape her.

According to Tirhas, the group assaults lasted for two weeks -- from the afternoon soldiers picked her up off a street in Mekele, the capital of Ethiopia's conflict-hit Tigray region, until the day they drove her home.

But her nightmare was not over.

Two nights later, a soldier barged in during the evening curfew and raped her as her three children -- ages 11, 7 and 3 -- cowered in terror in an adjacent room, she said. (Africanews, 9 March 2021)

The systematic use of sexual violence by soldiers towards Tigrayan women is frequently expressed in the form of gang rape. Tigrayan women are frequently drugged, held hostage and raped by multiple perpetrators, with some cases lasting for weeks. On 21 March one survivor told Channel 4 News that she and five other women were gang-raped by 30 Eritrean soldiers who were joking and taking photos throughout the attack. On 29 March a woman recounted being gang raped by a group of five Eritrean soldiers over the course of multiple days. The same woman witnessed a heavily pregnant woman being gang raped and who later gave birth during their time of captivity. After the child was born Eritrean soldiers killed the newborn and her older child (Testimony 1, also reported in EEPA Situation Report 115, 30 March 2021 and reported by Lowcock in the UN SC on 15 April 2021, Clark, H. & Kyte, R. 27 April FP, 2021). Family members are reported to have been killed when they try to avert the situation:

Melat, 20, was at home in Wukro with her elder brother Danayi* when Ethiopian federal soldiers came in, she said. "When five Ethiopian soldiers came to our house to rape me, Danayi tried to defend me from them. 'I cannot let you rape my sister,' he said to them. The soldiers shot my brother in the head and took turns raping me," Melat recalled, still in shock. "They raped me beside the corpse of my brother." Like many Tigrayan women, she is now pregnant from the attack. (Telegraph, 27 March 2021)*

Children who have witnessed the situation may be, according to various reports, killed. For instance, on 1 April 2021, a 29 year old woman reported that she had been tied to a tree for 10 days and been gang raped repeatedly by soldiers who then shot and killed her 12 year old son (New York Times, 1 April 2021). On 15 April a young mother was reported to have been repeatedly raped by 23 soldiers who forced nails, a rock and other items into her vagina, and threatened her with a knife (Reuters, 16 April 2021). Genitals have also reportedly been burned; a doctor reported:

The report was that Eritrean soldiers had burned her external and internal genital parts using a match and hot metal rod. We could not send an ambulance immediately because of security issues. Later, the communication was lost. Perhaps the girl has died. (Al Jazeera, 21 April, 2021)

Gang-rape combined with burning of the genitals and inserting of foreign elements is also reported:

The four men took turns raping her. After they were done, the militiamen inserted into her genitals a hot metal rod that burned her uterus. (Al Jazeera, 21 April, 2021)

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) facilitates publication of Insecurity Insight which released a report on sexual violence in Tigray that - based on the witness accounts of 106 women and girls, showed that 39% of victims were raped inside their homes, 21% were kidnapped and raped in military camps, and 18% alongside the road with a further 11% who were also raped while in a hospital. Insecurity Insight also found that 76% of attacks were committed by multiple men (Insecurity Insight, 30 March 2021). Lowcock has said that a quarter of rapes reported, have been incidents of gang rape.

Insecurity Insight found that when the violence is reported, it may leave the victims exposed to further threats:

In early January 2021 a displaced 27-year-old mother of two and her 24-year-old sister returned to their village to collect crops and check on their house. While walking back Eritrean soldiers stopped the sisters, forced them into a pickup truck and took them to a military camp. The 27-year-old woman reports seeing at least eight other Tigrayan women at the camp, and more women were brought in daily. She recalls being repeatedly gang raped by the soldiers – one day she counted 15 soldiers who took turns at raping her over an eight-hour period. Her spine and pelvis were fractured, and her perpetrators laughed while assaulting her.

One day her sister was brought into the room and she was forced to watch her being raped. While in captivity she was given almost nothing to eat, and her injuries left her unable to walk. Eventually she was able to crawl out of the camp. She was found on the main road and was taken to Mekelle for medical treatment. Due to her spinal and pelvis injuries the woman is now in a wheelchair. The whereabouts of her sister are still unknown. The woman and her therapist have received threats for reporting the attack. (Insecurity Insight, 30 March 2021)

Gang-rapes often take place over the course of multiple days. The kidnapping of women is taking place all over Tigray, with reports of incidents and kidnappings in Western Tigray, Adigrat, Abiy Addi, Mekelle and many other places. Women are taken to camps, locked up, and then raped during multiple days. They are then subsequently killed, drugged, and released, or manage to flee.

Rape of nuns has also been reported (The Guardian, 14 May 2021); reports from nuns being raped in a monastery in Wukro, allegedly by Eritrean troops, were reported on 3 May 2021 (EEPA Situation Report, 99).

The French Newspaper Libération published accounts of rapes from people in Adigrat and Mekelle. It reported many women were raped multiple times, some for extended periods of time. In one case, a husband had to pay a ransom to Eritrean soldiers to get his wife back:

She knew they were Eritrean troops because of their dialect and uniforms. She was able to return home, only to be raped again,” she said. “When she tried to escape, she recalled being captured, injected with a drug, tied to a rock, stripped, stabbed and raped by soldiers for 10 days. (Libération, 21 March 2021)

Soldiers using sexual violence and gang rape against Tigrayan women appears to be omnipresent and ongoing in Tigray.

Perpetrators

Acts of Sexual violence are being committed by all parties to the conflict in Tigray:

among hundreds who have reported that they were subjected to horrific sexual violence by Ethiopian and allied Eritrean troops since the war began in Tigray. (Reuters, 16 April 2021)

While precise statistics on perpetrators are not available, many survivors have described being attacked by Eritrean soldiers, Ethiopian soldiers and Amhara militia. In January, Eritrean soldiers raped, killed, and kidnapped refugees in Hitsats refugee camps. In Western Tigray, rapes and sexual violence perpetrated by Amhara Militias is also regularly reported. The only statistic that has been released on identity of perpetrators has been released by Insecurity Insight, identified ENDF soldiers as 44% of the “at least” 144 perpetrators of a sexual assaults on 106 women. A further 33% were Eritrean soldiers and 6% both. The remaining percentage are either ‘unknown’ or ‘Amhara militia men’ (Insecurity Insight, 30 March 2021).²

To a degree, identification of perpetrators is being complicated by Eritrean soldiers increasingly wearing ENDF uniforms. The UN, USAID, and other organisations have all reported sighting Eritrean soldiers wearing Ethiopian uniforms. The continued presence of Eritrean soldiers was confirmed by CNN reporters who met a roadblock of Eritrean soldiers on the way to the city of Aksum. The identity of the Eritrean troops was identified by Ethiopian soldiers and the troops were dressed in traditional Eritrean uniforms, and the CNN-crew was forced to return despite having permits (CNN, 23 May 2021). Many survivors identify their attackers through language, accent, typical shoe ware, tattoos and body marks and other cultural traits. As a result, identification of perpetrators is not based on uniforms alone.

It appears that the Conflict-related Sexual Violence against Women is being perpetrated by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers in increasingly well documented incidents.

Destruction of Health Facilities to provide Care

The conflict has decimated healthcare facilities in Tigray. MSF has described how, prior to the conflict, Tigray had a well-established and functioning system of health clinics and hospitals that was amongst the best in Ethiopia. Many well-equipped smaller rural clinics were able to provide quality health care to the entire region. This system completely collapsed by the end of December. MSF has said that between mid-December and March 2021, 70% of the healthcare facilities they visited had been looted and only 13% were functioning normally. According to UNFPA (UNFPA Situation Report, 15 March – 1 April) only 1% of health facilities could provide comprehensive services, including treatment of the impact of sexual violence.

² Insecurity Insight has interviewed 106 survivors, who related to 36 incidents and at least 144 perpetrators. Four people died were killed in relation tot he incidents.

The head of the newly installed Tigray Interim government similarly said in April that most of the healthcare facilities in the region were not functioning anymore. This has strained the capacity to provide sexual healthcare to women who need it and help survivors of GBV. Due to the severe looting, and lack of supplies, hospitals, and medical centres are unable to provide adequate treatment to women. Treatments for sexual transmitted diseases such as HIV are missing, and hospitals are unable to provide support with preventable childbirth complications. In Mekelle, doctors reported that women are dying in childbirth because of post-partum haemorrhage (PPH) and hypertension that the hospital cannot treat. Demand for emergency contraception has also risen sharply since the start of the conflict. There have also been reports, including from MSF that pregnant women have died trying to reach camps or hospitals. A doctor in Mekelle said that he had been receiving an average of three women a day, mostly from IDP camps, seeking help.

A complete lack of supplies and food further endangers pregnant women and young mothers. Malnutrition is severely impacting Tigray. OCHA found that of the 605 women screened in early March, over half had moderate or acute malnutrition. This increases the chance of stillbirths, miscarriages, and maternal and neonatal mortality. Since March, the food security has worsened. Many crops have gone unplanted. Five million people are estimated to require emergency food supplies. MSF has found that 26% of children screened suffered of malnutrition and between 6 and 12 percent (depending on the area) of severe malnutrition. The interim administration of Tigray also announced that several people had reportedly died due to hunger. The World Peace Foundation also estimated an elevated mortality over the last two months “*due to the effects of hunger, acute malnutrition and disease.*” Eritrean and ENDF troops have also been observed and recorded holding back food and other supplies from refugees and IDPs that need it.

Rape as a Weapon of War

There is increasingly more evidence, suggesting that Ethiopian, Eritrean, and other combatants fighting in Tigray, are using rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war in the conflict. Journalist Will Brown concludes:

Humanitarian reports, grainy mobile phone videos, refugees accounts and journalistic dispatches all point the same way: dozens if not hundreds of mass killings, a systematic campaign of rape, ethnic cleansing and starvation being used as a weapon of war. (The Telegraph, 15 May 2021)

Earlier, Letay Tesfay of the Tigray Women’s Association, running a safe house for women in Mekelle, had drawn the same conclusion:

Rape is being used as a weapon of war. What’s happening is unimaginable. (New York Times, 1 April 2021)

Weyni Abraha, from the Human rights group Yikono, says that rape is part of a strategy to break the people of Tigray. It is a weapon of war:

Many women were raped in Mekelle. This is being done purposely to break the morale of the people, threaten them and make them give up the fight. (EPA Situation Report 85, 16 February 2021)

Many organisations and countries have described the GBV as being used as a weapon of war to suppress and subdue the Tigrayan population.

Lowcock told the UN Security Council in April that:

there is no doubt that sexual violence is being used in this conflict as a weapon of war, as a means to humiliate, terrorize and traumatize an entire population today and into the next generation.

Joseph Borell, the EU High Representative, said that the conflict cannot be described as a “law and order operation” anymore. There are too many consistent reports of rape and violence taking place. A US government internal report obtained by the New York Times, described a “*systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing*” in Western Tigray, involving the deportation, killing, and rape of ethnic Tigrayans in the region. On 2 March 2021, the G7 has also condemned the gender based sexual violence in Tigray asking for unconditional and verifiable withdrawal of Eritrean forces.

One incident has been reported suggesting that women are *deliberately* made HIV positive by some Eritrean troops:

Selam, a 26-year-old coffee seller in Edaga Hamus, 100km away from Tigray’s capital of Mekelle, said she was abducted by Eritrean soldiers with 17 other women in January.

“They took us into the forest. When we arrived there, there were around 100 soldiers who were waiting for us. They tied the hands and feet of each one of us. And then they raped us without mercy,” she told the Telegraph as she fought through tears.

“We stayed that way for three days. After three days the soldiers killed five girls who had been tied with us. They poured [alcohol] over our wounds. They danced standing over us.”

By the time she was taken into the forest, she had already been raped several times by men she recognised as Eritrean soldiers. After the first attack, her abusers were waiting for her as she returned to her house from the hospital with contraceptives and post-exposure HIV drugs.

“Why the hell did you want this? We want you to be sick. That is what we are here for. We are here to make you HIV-positive,” Selam recalled one of the men as saying. (The Telegraph, 27 March 2021)

Doctors told the NYT that HIV/AIDS infections had increased due to the sexual violence:

The epidemic of sexual assault is exacerbated by a collapsing health system. Many victims have contracted sexually transmitted diseases, including H.I.V. (NYT, 2 April 2021)

An investigation conducted by CNN and published on 19 March concluded that rape was being used as a weapon of war in the region. The organisation interviewed rape survivors and doctors, which provided detailed accounts of soldiers behaving with near total impunity in the region, and a worsening situation for women in Tigray. One doctor, who was interviewed by CNN in Sudan, said that Amhara militiamen had specifically told the women that they were intent on ethnically cleansing Tigray and that they needed to “cleanse the blood line”.

Another doctor told CNN that the situation in Tigray was highly polarised, “It is a catalyst for war, and rape has been used as a weapon to fight it”. Following the publishing of the CNN investigation, Ethiopian soldiers raided Aksum hospital in retaliation twice. Such search operations increase the fear for retaliation for reporting of incidents. Soldiers searched for people they accused of “tarnishing the country's image” and demanded a

"list of the names of doctors who will not cooperate with the military's investigation into the hospital." (CNN, 19 May 2021)

The investigation and interviews conducted by CNN are complemented by interviews carried out by other organisations such as the Guardian, Channel4, the NYT, and others.

In one recent Guardian interview, a religious sister who is helping many displaced people in Mekelle said that:

[Rape is happening] wherever there are Eritrean or Ethiopian troops. Tragic. Every single woman. Not only once. It is intentional; it is deliberate.

The examples of violence, rape, and sexual assault mentioned in the last section of this document are not random nor are they unconnected but rather they are evidence of a larger pattern.

According to Weyni Abraha, a Tigrayan women's rights activist, rape

is being done purposely to break the morale of the [Tigray] people, threaten them and make them give up the fight.

Dr Fasika Amdeselassie, the top public health official appointed by the federal Ethiopian government in the newly appointed interim administration in Tigray has also spoken to the issue. She reported Tigrayan women being held captive by troops for extended periods:

Women are being kept in sexual slavery. The perpetrators have to be investigated.

In new testimony, a victim recounts that Eritrean soldiers raped her to provoke an abortion and to make her pregnant with 'non-Tigrayan blood':

She said he was not. One of the soldiers then asked that she take off her clothes. Kisanet lied and said she was pregnant, assuming they'd have mercy on her.

Without a second thought, the soldiers said "that's good, let's remove the 'junta' inside you, and replace it with our own race." Two of them opened her legs forcefully and the other brought a rough stick and inserted it into her vaginal canal and stirred it with the intention of aborting her pregnancy.

After the Eritrean men removed the stick, they took their turn raping her, as she screamed in pain. She doesn't really know for how long this was taking place. It may have been minutes, or may be hours - but it felt like it had been forever (Testimony 2, Annexed).

Tigrayan rape survivors have mentioned Eritrean soldiers being instructed to use rape as a war tactic. One woman from Adigrat reported that after she had been gangraped by a group of Eritrean soldiers the soldiers said that they had been "ordered to come after the women" (Insecurity Insight, 30 March 2021). Insecurity Insight report cited a victim recalling:

Eritrean soldiers saying that their actions were revenge against Tigray (Insecurity Insight, 30 March 2021).

AFP published a report by a 40-year old lady from Adigrat:

The Eritrean soldiers who gang-raped 40-year-old Eyerusalem after abducting her from the Tigray town of Adigrat told her they had been ordered "to come after the women," she recalled.

'This is our time. It is time for the Tigrayans to weep,' she quoted her assailants as saying, adding she knows there are many more victims who have not been able to reach Mekele. (AFP, 9 March 2021)

Such intentional behaviour against the population at large, with apparent instruction from higher layers, may suggest that Eritrean forces have been using GBV and rape as a weapon of war against the civilian population in the Tigray conflict.

Saba Gebremedhin, a Tigrayan women's rights activist, argues that rape is used "as a weapon to humiliate and dehumanise not only the women but the Tigrayan people" (Africanews, 9 march 2021). She finds this is resulting in the Tigray people becoming alienated from the wider national sense of unity. Saba Gebremedhin mentions that:

the war has already managed to create that breach between the Tigrayan people and the rest of the country. People say they don't feel Ethiopian anymore. (Africanews, 9 march 2021)

The inverse is also true; the use of GBV as an instrument of war is causing larger communities to no longer perceive Tigrayans as Ethiopian. The rape of Tigrayan women is way of:

dishonouring Tigrayans, discriminating or showing that Tigrayans don't have any dignity, that they are lower (AFP, 9 March 2021).

When six young Tigrayan girls were raped by soldiers of the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), one asked

"why they are raping us, we are all Ethiopians and brothers and sisters", the ENDF soldier replied "your father is Dr. Debretsion and ours is Dr. Abiy. We are not all the same." [Situation Report 1767]

The majority of GBV is being perpetrated by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers as a part of a campaign to systematically cleanse the Tigrayan population. One Amhara soldier said to a Tigrayan woman that if she:

"claim[ed] to be Amhara and we will give back your house and find you a husband. But if you claim to be Tigrayan, we will come and rape you again." (AP, 7 April 2021)

Another Amhara soldier reportedly told a Tigrayan woman after he had raped her:

You did nothing bad to us," she said they told her. "Our problem is with your womb. Your womb gives birth to Woyane [derogative term used to refer to the TPLF]. A Tigrayan womb should never give birth. (Al Jazeera, 21 April 2021)

These testimonies indicate that the use of GBV by soldiers are not isolated incidents but evidence of a systematic effort. Eritrean soldiers indicated to their victims that officers had ordered troops to rape Tigrayan women. HIV-infected Eritrean soldiers were reported to have been ordered to rape Tigrayan women and make them HIV positive. Tigrayan women have said that Ethiopian and Eritrean troops were on a self-proclaimed mission of retribution and were operating with near-total impunity in the Tigray region. One soldier reportedly said that:

Tigrayans have no history, you have no culture. I can do what I want to you and no one cares. (CNN, 22 March 2021)

Many members of the international community have argued that GBV is being used as a weapon of war in the Tigray crisis. Professor Mukesh Kapila, a professor in Global Health and Humanitarian Affairs at University of Manchester, has stated that the use of GBV against Tigrayan women was, in his opinion, becoming the distinctive “signature” of the genocidal acts occurring in Tigray. In a webinar, Kapila argued that the number of mass rapes being committed combined with the intentional and systematic obstruction of rape victims receiving medical care after the attack qualified as an act of genocide (Genocide Response, 17 March 2021).

Denial by the Ethiopian and Eritrean Government

There have also been numerous attempts by Ethiopian and Eritrean officials to discredit and minimize atrocities, including rape, taking place in Tigray. Accusations of rape and killings were suppressed and dismissed. Until the end of March, the presence of Eritrean troops was denied by the government, which was suggesting that there were only a few Eritrean deserters present, who were committing the reported crimes. In other cases, Ethiopian officials blamed the TPLF for releasing thousands of criminals which then committed crimes. It took Prime Minister Abiy of Ethiopia 5 months to acknowledge that atrocities, including rape and violence against women, were being committed in Tigray, only doing so on March 23rd at the same time as he public acknowledged that Eritrean troops are in Tigray. The Ethiopian Prime Minister has also minimised the sexual violence taking place in Tigray. In a speech to the Ethiopian Parliament, comparing the concern about the Violence against women “complaining”, and comparing the rape of women to the TPLF attacking the Ethiopian’s military Northern Command, suggesting these were equal acts of war:

those who are complaining about the rights of raped women in Tigray, they should know that those women (Tigrayan women) were raped by men but our soldiers in the Northern command were attacked by daggers and nobody talks about them (the soldiers). Northern Command was not only attacked but also humiliated.

While for months Eritrean and Ethiopian leaders, denied that Eritrean soldiers were in Tigray, and were perpetrators of rape as a weapon in a war situation, the government has been actively silencing criticism and reporting on the issue. For months journalists were not permitted in the region. The few journalists living in Ethiopia who had contact with rape victims are intimidated and silenced. Similarly, in several instances, victims of atrocities described ENDF soldiers and Ethiopian police standing by as Eritrean soldiers committed atrocities against the Tigrayan population.

On 23 March President Abiy admitted atrocities were taking place and stating the conduct of Eritrean soldiers, who committed sexual violence or other war crimes would be held responsible:

We don’t accept it because it is the Eritrean army, and we would not accept it if it were our soldiers. The military campaign was against our clearly targeted enemies, not against the people. We have discussed this four or five times with the Eritrean government. (Al Jazeera, 23 March 2021)

Three Ethiopian soldiers have been tried with rape in Tigray and one with killing and twenty-eight more soldiers are on trial for killing civilians and twenty-five for acts of sexual violence and rape, according to the statement by the Office of the Attorney Generals of the Ethiopian government, on 21 May 2021.

Meanwhile, it is unclear how this responsibility is carried out with Eritrean troops still being present in Tigray and troops controlling parts of Tigray (CNN, 23 May 2021) and allowed to act under impunity in Tigray.

The Eritrean Minister of Information, Yemane G. Meskel, has identified the accusations as ‘disinformation’ (Twitter, 9 May 2021; 11 May 2021; 14 May 2021).

Annex 1: UNFPA - Statement on Gender-Based Violence in Tigray region of Ethiopia - 22 March 2021

<https://www.unfpa.org/press/statement-gender-based-violence-tigray-region-ethiopia>

NEW YORK/GENEVA/WASHINGTON D.C., 22 March 2021 –

Amid a worsening humanitarian situation in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, reports of indiscriminate and targeted attacks against civilians, including rape and other horrific forms of sexual violence, continue to surface. This must stop.

We call on all State and non-State parties to the conflict to fulfil their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law; ensure their forces respect and protect civilian populations, particularly women and children, from all human rights abuses; explicitly condemn all sexual violence; and take action to bring perpetrators to justice where abuses do occur.

Women and children in affected areas are reporting significant challenges in accessing health, social welfare and justice services. Facility assessments undertaken in some health facilities in the region, including Mekelle, Adigrat and Shire, show gaps in premises' security, as well as in staffing, services and supplies. Initial assessments of 106 facilities in Tigray between December 2020 and March 2021 show that nearly 70 per cent of facilities were looted, 30 per cent damaged, and only 13 per cent in Tigray were functional. Health services have also been rendered less functional by the displacement of many health-care workers, in addition to non-payment of salaries. Further health service availability assessments of over two-thirds of the total 264 facilities in the region report large and widespread disruptions of services. Childhood vaccination services were observed in only 28 per cent of facilities and comprehensive nutrition services available in approximately 29 per cent of functioning facilities.

"Only one facility provides the full range of services for clinical management of rape survivors, and emergency contraception is fully available in less than half of the facilities assessed. The lack of direct access to health care also creates an environment of fear accessing health care, especially for women and children, who are already facing frequent and severe security threats and displacement. Moreover, many displaced civilians are sheltering in unfinished or damaged buildings, and most collective centres do not include separate spaces or latrines for women and men, girls and boys, thus increasing risks of gender-based violence (GBV) and the spread of certain infectious diseases.

Preventing and responding to the grave human suffering resulting from this conflict will require a concerted effort at all levels.

First, it is essential that an independent investigation into conflict-related sexual violence in Tigray be initiated, with the involvement of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Humanitarian access is essential. Humanitarian staff need to be able to reach all regions of Ethiopia affected by conflict and violence. This includes major towns and rural areas in Tigray, as well as Benishangul Gumuz, Oromia, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples (SNNP) and Amhara, and in the regions hosting thousands of internally displaced people.

When it comes to getting aid staff and supplies into Tigray, notwithstanding recent developments, much more remains to be done. If they are given the access and resources they need, aid agencies will be able to make the desperately needed prevention and response interventions that will save and transform lives, including health services and supplies, GBV case management, dignity kits, post-rape treatment, and safe spaces for women and children. Given the deep trauma many have experienced, support for mental health and psychosocial needs is also required.

It is only with a concerted and comprehensive effort, fully grounded in respect for human rights and international humanitarian law, that the humanitarian response in Tigray will match the scale of humanitarian need, especially for women and children.

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Signatories

Mr. Ignacio Packer, Executive Director, International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA)

Mr. Samuel Worthington, Chief Executive Officer, InterAction

Mr. António Vitorino, Director General, International Organization for Migration (IOM)

Mr. Mark Lowcock, Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

Ms. Michelle Bachelet, High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

Mr. Achim Steiner, Administrator, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

Dr. Natalia Kanem, Executive Director, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

Mr. Filippo Grandi, High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Ms. Maimunah Mohammed Sharif, Executive Director, United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

Ms. Henrietta Fore, Executive Director, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

Ms. Cecilia Jimenez-Damary, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons (IDPs)

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General, World Health Organization (WHO) 22 March 2021

Annex 2: Statement by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Tigray

(New York, 21 January 2021)

I am greatly concerned by serious allegations of sexual violence in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, including a high number of alleged rapes in the capital, Mekelle. There are also disturbing reports of individuals allegedly forced to rape members of their own family, under threats of imminent violence. Some women have also reportedly been forced by military elements to have sex in exchange for basic commodities, while medical centres have indicated an increase in the demand for emergency contraception and testing for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) which is often an indicator of sexual violence in conflict. In addition, there are increasing reports of sexual violence against women and girls in a number of refugee camps.

While noting the volatile security situation in the Tigray region, the hampered physical access in many parts of Tigray, and the dire situation of civilians especially refugees, it remains critical that humanitarian actors and independent human rights monitors be granted immediate, unconditional and sustained access to the entirety of the Tigray region, including IDP and refugee camps where new arrivals have allegedly reported cases of sexual violence. Immediate medical and psychosocial assistance must be accompanied by protection measures, to ensure that those who have been forced from their homes due to violence are not placed at further risk of sexual violence within the camps. This includes the more than 5,000 Eritrean refugees in and around the area of Shire living in dire conditions, many of them reportedly sleeping in an open field with no water or food, as well as the more than 59,000 Ethiopians who have fled the country into neighbouring Sudan. The United Nations estimates that of these refugees, more than 25 percent are women and girls of reproductive age.

Constrained humanitarian access and limited resources for service providers have reduced the availability of essential health care and assistance for survivors of sexual violence, including sexual and reproductive health care. Access to lifesaving assistance, such as dignity kits, post-rape kits, treatment to prevent HIV and STI transmission and psychosocial support is also critical. Accordingly, enhanced funding and support is urgently required to scale-up the provision and coverage of essential services.

I call on all parties involved in the hostilities in the Tigray region to commit to a zero-tolerance policy for crimes of sexual violence, in line with their respective obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law. While taking note of the monitoring and investigation missions recently conducted by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in Western Tigray and the Amhara region, I call on the Government of Ethiopia to further exercise its due diligence obligations to protect all civilians from sexual and other violence, regardless of their ethnic origin and those displaced by conflict, and to promptly allow for an independent inquiry into all allegations of sexual and other forms of violence, to establish the facts and hold perpetrators accountable, provide redress to victims, and prevent further grave violations. My Office and the United Nations system stand ready to support national authorities to put in place rigorous measures to prevent and respond to possible violations.

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict serves as the Chair of United Nations Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict (UN Action) which is a network of 15 UN entities established in 2008 with the goal of eradicating sexual violence during and in the wake of conflict including by addressing the root causes of such crimes. UN Action implements projects in a number of priority situations supporting the response of national authorities. For further information visit www.stoprapenow.org

For media inquiries, please contact:

Ms. Géraldine Boezio, Office of the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, New York

Tel: +1 917 367-3306 Email: geraldine.boezio@un.org, Thursday, 21 January 2021

Annex 3: G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement on the situation in Tigray, Ethiopia

02.04.2021 - Press release

We, the G7 Foreign Ministers of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States of America and the High Representative of the European Union are strongly concerned about recent reports on human rights violations and abuses, and violations of international humanitarian law in Tigray.

We condemn the killing of civilians, sexual and gender based violence, indiscriminate shelling and the forced displacement of residents of Tigray and Eritrean refugees. All parties must exercise utmost restraint, ensure the protection of civilians and respect human rights and international law.

We recognize recent commitments made by the Government of Ethiopia to hold accountable those responsible for such abuses and look forward to seeing these commitments implemented. We note that the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) have agreed to conduct a joint investigation into the human rights abuses committed by all parties in the context of the Tigray conflict. It is essential that there is an independent, transparent and impartial investigation into the crimes reported and that those responsible for these human rights abuses are held to account.

We urge parties to the conflict to provide immediate, unhindered humanitarian access. We are concerned about worsening food insecurity, with emergency conditions prevailing across extensive areas of central and eastern Tigray.

We welcome the recent announcement from Prime Minister Abiy that Eritrean forces will withdraw from Tigray. This process must be swift, unconditional and verifiable.

We call for the end of violence and the establishment of a clear inclusive political process that is acceptable to all Ethiopians, including those in Tigray and which leads to credible elections and a wider national reconciliation process.

We the G7 members stand ready to support humanitarian efforts and investigations into human rights abuses.

African Women for Peace in the Horn of Africa Initiative

We, women of Africa, call on leaders to act in the tragic situation of hostilities amongst all of our people in the Horn.

On November 4, violence erupted in the Horn region. This is affecting all of us: mothers, sisters and grandmothers on the continent. We know the suffering of weapons turning brothers and sisters against each other and this must stop.

As women, we recognise the pain of our sisters.

Mothers, waiting to hear from their children, who are fighting in battles they did not choose, required to put on uniforms which are not theirs, forced to kill their own in a war, that they did not desire. We demand peace.

Mothers, looking for their children, lost in a sudden flight with no safe heaven to turn to, abducted and moved to places where they are not safe, hungry and fighting for food and survival, wounded on foreign fields, alone. We want our children back.

Mothers, crying for their children, who have dreams of their own and require support, who need school and work to support themselves and all of us. Their resilience is our resilience. Their future is our future. We need the children of our great continent. All violence must stop.

The Horn is the birthplace of humanity. Its treasures are our common heritage. It is the pride of Africa. We need its peace for prosperity and for the future of our great continent.

Therefore, we announce today that we are launching:

the African Women for Peace in the Horn Africa Initiative

We, African women, stand in solidarity with the mothers, sisters and grandmothers in the Horn, and we ask:

- All leaders in the Horn to stop the violence;
- All churches and faith communities to call on our leaders to stop the violence;
- IGAD and the AU to support a women's led peace force to monitor the peace;
- The international community to support a women's led peace force to enforce the peace;
- The UN to establish a humanitarian corridor to impartially reach all affected areas;
- An immediate opening of all communications to the affected areas;
- The international community to ensure the safety of all PoWs, refugees and IDPs and these to be placed under international protection.

Signed,

Julia Duncan Cassell, former Minister of Gender and Social Protection, Liberia

Zaminah Malole, Commissioner for Equal Opportunities, Uganda

Reem Abbas, Researcher at Andariya, Sudan

Ebunola Shoda, Esq. Principal Partner Shoda & Shoda, Sagamu Nigeria, Member Committee on the Law and Status of Women, National Council for Women Societies, Nigeria

Suzanne Monkasa, Membre du Réseau Parlementaire sur les Politiques des Diasporas du Conseil de l'Europe; Présidente/Plateforme des Femmes de la Diaspora Congolaise de Belgique

Selam Balehey Gebremicale, University of Antwerp, Ethiopia

Okudu Caroline Lobo Yong, Lecturer, South Sudan

Samantha Hargreaves, WoMin African Alliance
Organisation Mahber Selam Ethiopia-Eritrea
Ilham Osman Ibrahim, Executive Director, Sudanese Organization for Research and Development (SORD), Sudan
Organisation, Wefri Selam
Dzodzi Tsikata, Professor of Development Sociology, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana and member, Network for Women's Rights in Ghana
Blanche Sonon, Juriste Consultante en Genre et Développement, Présidente du Réseau Social Watch Bénin, Bénin
Organisation, Congo Espoir
Tantoh Neh Sheila, University of Antwerp, Cameroon
Organisation, Human Rights for Eritreans
Rose Mugweni, Associate Professor in Early Childhood Education, Zimbabwe
Nazareth Amlesom Kifle, Associate Professor, Norway, Eritrea
Prof Dr Francisca Oladipo, Professor of Computer Science, Federal University Lokoja, Nigeria
Asma Abdel Halim, Associate Professor, University of Toledo, Ohio, USA and Sudan
Mme Justine M'Poyo Kasa-Vubu, Ministre Résident Ambassadeur Honoraire- Présidente de la Diaspora Congolaise
Mehret Haile, Food and Nutrition scientist with the focus on Food Security, Germany, Ethiopia
Primrose Nakazibwe, Lecturer, Mbarara University, Uganda
Organisation, Young Women Mediators, South Sudan
Nike Adegoke, CEO, BlingItOn, Association of Women Entrepreneurs in Nigeria, Ibadan, Nigeria
Maureen N. Eke, Professor Central Michigan University, Nigeria
Doryn Uwera, Student, Rwanda
Louise Madungwe, Mathematics Education Specialist, Zimbabwe
Asia Abdulkader, Researcher, Kenya
Organisation, Status of Women Initiative (SOWI), South Sudan
Vanessa Jemwa, Entrepreneur, Zimbabwe
Organisation, Mariam
Belinda Nyakinya, Environmental Safeguards Officer, County Government of Kisumu, Kenya
Organisation, Bright Future for Eritrea
Halima Salisu Mohammed, Interpreter, Niger
Sakinat Folorunso, Professor, Computer Science lecturer and machine learning researcher Olabisi Onabanjo University, Nigeria
Organisation, 4 Adi Belesa
Rebecca Oswago, Medicos del Mundo (MDM), Mental Health Psychosocial Coordinator, Kenya
Cimonon Warren, student, South Africa

Organisation, Women Unlimited
Dr. Cythia Dzimiri, Sociology Specialist, Zimbabwe
Organisation Mother and Child Society, South Sudan
Mariam Basajja, PhD Student, Uganda
Norah Ochiel, Deputy Chief of Party Communications, Kenya
Colletta Musara, Lecturer International Relations, Zimbabwe
Jaja Rose Asonganyi, Student, Cameroon
Ashaba Tinah, student, Kenya
Charity Natukunda, Student, Uganda
Jamyler Nagujja, Entrepreneur, Uganda
Kafayat Iyanda-Aminu, Managing Director, Kaffy's Place, Association of Women Entrepreneurs, Lagos, Nigeria
Deqa Ibrahim, Student, Somalia
Sasha Kirabo Sheila, Sasha entrepreneur, Uganda
Memunat Ajoke Ibrahim, Federal University Lokoja, Masters Student, Australian National University, Nigeria
Esther Nampala, Student, Uganda
Joyce Ouna, Social Behaviour Change Advisor, Experiential Momentum Agency, Nairobi Kenya
Maria Mwagale, Student, Uganda
Joyce Akhayeke Mukoma, University of Antwerp, Kenya
Organisation Eritrea Free Media
Deebee Akinrinwale, CEO, Mummy Pinky's Kitchen, Women's Association of Entrepreneurs, Ogun, Nigeria
Kelly Ochieng, Student, Kenya
Grace Kwinjeh, Human Rights Activist and writer, Zimbabwe
Caroline Kisia, Executive Director, Action Africa Help International, Kenya
Jamira Nabaggala, Entrepreneur, Uganda
Fatuma Roba, Humanitarian Aid practitioner, Dadaab, Kenya
Shakira Nabaggala, Student, Uganda
Elizabeth Abiola Adegoke, student, Nigeria
Shamim Basajja, PhD student, Uganda
Dorine Oluoch, Child Protection Officer, KUAP, Kisumu Kenya
Esther Ngulwa, University of Antwerp, Tanzania
Quinta Onditi, Student, Uganda
Rita Ayebare, Student, Uganda
Charity Kola, Humanitarian Aid practitioner, Kenya
Nadia Nsayi, author, Belgium, DRC

Mrs Plaxcedes, Sociology Specialist, Zimbabwe
Organisation, Charity and Development Group, South Sudan
Amina Khalef, Student, Kenya
Elizabeth Gwaro, Community Mobilizer, Manyatta Development is Power, Kisumu Kenya
Rhemiel Rhemiels, Student, Uganda
Organisation, Mahber Kesese mlash senafe kebabian
Anishah Senna, Entrepreneur, Uganda
Organisation, Women Action for Peace, South Sudan
Latifah Nalubyayi, Student, Uganda
Edith Embolokonye, Livelihoods Officer, UNHCR Kakuma, Kenya
Organisation, Mahber Akran
Nusula Naluzze, student, Uganda
Organisation, Women Action for Peace, South Sudan
Minsa Nankunja, Student, Uganda
Mercy Mwanzia, Media Trainer, Kakuma Kenya
Organisation Bet Belessa
Organisation, Young Women Christian Association, South Sudan
Zohra Touati, lecturer computer science, University of Sousse, Tunisia
Sandrine Ekofo, lawyer, refugee organisation and founder of youth organisation Kilalo, Belgium - DRC
Lynet Basajja Entrepreneur Uganda
Lilian Mulwa, Entrepreneur Kenya
Keji Ojelade, Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), Texas, Nigeria
Sheila Basajja, Student, Uganda
Istar Ahmed, Gender Policy Advisor, Horn of Africa Program, Somalia/US
Mervat Hamadelneil Osman Bakheit, The Sudanese Initiative for Peace in the Horn of Africa, Sudan
Kemi Ojoye, Principal, Great Scholars International School, Ogun State, Nigeria
Beatrice Odera, Gender Officer, Ministry of Gender and Culture, Machakos Kenya
Mariem Ghardallou, Associate professor in preventive medicine, University of Sousse, Tunisia
Nancy Yienya, Adolescent programme advisor, Catholic Relief Services, Kisumu Kenya
Fatima Sadiqi فاطمة صديقي, Professor of Linguistics and Gender Studies President, Association for Middle East Women's Studies – AMEWS, Morocco
Contacts: africanwomenforpeaceappeal@gmail.com

Spokespersons:

Julia Duncan Cassell, Zaminah Malole, Reem Abbas

Website:

<https://africanwomenforpeace.business.site>

Instagram:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CivEpGXFHtW/?igshid=yfzcuqynkjmm>

Background

On 4th of November 2020 hostilities broke out in the Northern Ethiopia Horn region, bordering Somalia, Sudan and Eritrea, with severe consequences. The current situation is:

- One million out of six million people in the North have fled their homes
- Over two million people need assistance for food, which is not available
- Thousands of people have been killed in the violence
- Massacres have been committed
- 100.000 refugees in camps under international protection have been abandoned
- 50.000 refugees have arrived in neighbouring country, Sudan
- Properties have been looted
- Violence has erupted in other regions
- Ethnic profiling
- All communication channels to certain regions are closed

International leaders, church leaders and others have called for an immediate ceasefire and end to all hostilities, access to all areas to humanitarian organisations, stop to all ethnic profiling and restoration of peace.

These demands have not been realised.

The hostilities follow the 2018 peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Women of the region long for peace.

The AU President Cyril Ramaphosa has appointed three envoys to mediate in the conflict and these have the full support of the international community. Regrettably, today the envoys have not been able to meet with all parties. A perspective on inclusive peace-talks is still lacking.

Recognising the important mission of the AU envoys, African women ask for an immediate dialogue involving all parties. Such a dialogue can be led by female leaders. Such a dialogue will require that conditions are available for peaceful talks.

Therefore, a women-led peace force should be installed in the region, under auspices of the AU and IGAD with support of the international community.

This appeal was launched on the 10th of December 2020

The appeal was issued on the 14th of December 2020

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