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**Conflict related sexual violence perpetrated by Eritrean forces against
Tigrayan women.**

RoundTable European Parliament

25 October 2023

I would like to thank MEP Langensiepen and the European External Programme with Africa for inviting me to speak here today.

All protocol observed.

It is truly an honor to be here and be a voice for Tigrayan women and girls as I share my understanding of the conflict related sexual violence perpetrated against the women and girls by Eritrean forces.

As we continue to witness the devastating effects of the war on Tigray, it is important to address one of the most heinous crimes being committed against the people, which is the use of rape as a weapon of war and genocide. Since November 2020, numerous reports have emerged with evidence of women describing the perpetrators to be from different groups. Some women reported that they were raped by Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF), some by Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) while others reported being rape by Amhara Special Forces or by the irregular armed group from the same region, the FANO. In other instances, survivors reported that multiple soldiers wearing different uniforms and speaking different languages performed acts of violence jointly.

It is heart-wrenching to know that no one has been spared - from young girls to elderly women, pregnant and lactating mothers - all have fallen victim to these brutal attacks without any discrimination.

It is unfortunate that there were delays by the international community in addressing the involvement of Eritrean soldiers and the violence they were committing in the region even with sufficient evidence being available and reported. Eritrea denied its presence in the war and its participation in the rape and sexual violence against Tigrayan women. Meanwhile our sisters, daughters, and mothers were and still are subjected to unimaginable horrors. The way we understand it is that for the Eritrean forces It was not a violence adjacent to a conflict, but it was primed by years of propaganda as well as the official narrative on the eve of the war and the subsequent months by their government. Women have been gang-raped, forced into sexual slavery, and brutally and sadistically abused by Eritrean soldiers. They were told, they should not carry Tigrayan babies. These atrocities are not only physically damaging

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but also leave deep emotional scars on survivors and their families. The trauma they endure not only affects them but also tears apart the fabric of our society.

Survivors who have sought medical help have come with bruises, stab wounds, burns, and other physical injuries. But it doesn't end there – they also suffer from psychological trauma and reproductive health issues such as fistula, intentionally spread HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, and miscarriages. This is not just a violation of their bodies but also an attack on their mental health and their identity as Tigrayan women.

The Eritrean perpetrators have gone beyond just physical violence; they have used ethnic slurs like “AGAME”, “KOMAL” to humiliate our women and girls. They have told them they are traitors, that they have been sent here to make sure no Tigrayan is left alive, that their wombs should never bare children ever again and unworthy because of their Tigrayan identity. This is not just rape; this is a deliberate attempt to destroy our entire ethnic group.

Multiple reports and research papers conclude that much of the sexual violence perpetrated in the Tigray context was by Eritrean forces a recent report by Physicians for human rights (PHR) specified that up to 66% from the reviewed sample of medical records in their report indicated that rape was perpetrated by Eritrean forces against women and girls in Tigray. However, identifying perpetrators became more challenging as they adapted their tactics. Initially, they were identified by their different dialect when speaking Tigrigna, wearing "Congo" shoes, some having marks on their faces, and wearing a different uniform. However, after facing international condemnation, they started wearing the uniforms of the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) while continuing to commit crimes, according to victims who identified cultural markers of Eritrean soldiers in speech and other features. This was part of the attempt to conceal the Eritrean perpetration of these crimes.

Additionally, the blockade and siege in the region had cut off any support that was coming in, making it even more difficult for survivors to access the help they urgently needed. The internet blockade meant there was no voice for the victims. Our sisters were being silenced and isolated from the rest of the world and suffering in silence.

Despite the cessation of hostilities deal signed in November 2022, which led people to believe that there would be a complete end to hostilities and enforcement of the

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agreed-upon terms, Tigrayan women continued to report incidents of sexual violence. This is because there are still areas occupied by Eritrean forces, and our women continued to experience violence until the present day.

As a clinician and researcher, I have first-hand witnessed the devastating impact of conflict-related sexual violence on survivors. The physical and psychological trauma inflicted upon the women is immense, and it is crucial that they receive appropriate support and justice for the crimes committed against them.

A survivor said: “three Eritrean soldiers raped me. But that was not all, they put hot metal on my skin and repeatedly hit me on the head. I have burn scars all over my back, my head and between my thighs and vagina. And then they poured some type of chemical on my head, I can’t explain to you what it was, but I’ve been bald ever since. My hair hasn’t been able to grow back that’s why I cover it this way.

Another survivors disclosed during our interview as she was fleeing her home and she was detained by Eritrean soldiers and one she described as “Ben Amir” started raping her but when she spoke his language, he immediately stopped and said I thought you were Tigrayan and got up.

This are just two of the many stories of our women.

The lack of access to essential services further exacerbates the suffering of survivors and hinders their ability to heal and recover from the trauma they have endured. It is crucial for the international community to prioritize the rebuilding and restoration of health facilities in the region, as well as the provision of specialized support services for survivors of sexual violence.

As the mandate of the international commission of human rights experts in Ethiopia (ICREE) ends the chances of our women getting the justice they so deserve has become uncertain. It is crucial that those responsible for these terrible crimes are held accountable. Justice for Tigrayan women and girls cannot be delayed or denied. The international community must support efforts to investigate and prosecute these perpetrators, ensuring that justice is served.

Thank you!