



# Eritrean Involvement in the Conflict in Tigray

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## EEPA Special Briefing

### Introduction

Since the start of the conflict in Tigray, Eritrea has been accused of being involved in the conflict. It took five months for Eritrea and Ethiopia to acknowledge the Eritrean presence in Tigray. When they did, they declared that Eritrean troops would be withdrawing immediately. It has been three months since that declaration, and the continued presence of Eritrean troops in Tigray is well documented.

Since the start of the conflict, Eritrean troops have been accused of committing atrocities, War Crimes, and Crimes against Humanity. These human rights violations are built on the system of repression that already exists in Eritrea. For two decades, President Isaias Afwerki has used the National Service to maintain control over Eritrea and to stifle any opposition. Eritrea has used the education system to push all high schoolers into the military. It has created a system of systematic repression to maintain control of the country. This heavy repression has given them the unfavourable nickname of the “North-Korea of Africa”.

Ever since their independence in 1991, Eritrea has considered the TPLF as one of their major rivals in the Horn. Whilst the TPLF played a key role in Addis Abeba, the conflict of Eritrea with Ethiopia isolated Eritrea from regional and global politics, whereas Ethiopia played a major role. However after the TPLF was removed from power, the TPLF leadership retreated into Tigray. The subsequent 2018 Peace Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia provided the Eritrean government with an opportunity to break the isolation, with an intention to increase their influence in the Horn. The conflict in Tigray has provided Eritrea with an attempt to get rid of its historic rivals and to attempt to further reinforce its position in the region.

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## The Human Rights in Eritrea

The Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Eritrea, appointed by the UN has noted his concern regarding the Human Rights situation in Eritrea.

*“the circumstances under which the Eritrean population is forced to work under national service was documented by the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea, which found that systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations had been and were being committed by the Government of Eritrea and that a large proportion of the population were subjected to forced labour.”<sup>1</sup>*

In a new report, the Special rapporteur found that Eritrea is continuing many of the practices and human rights violations that rapporteurs have found in previous years. Eritrea is still missing many of the critical institutions important for the protection of minimal Human Rights or democratic society. It has yet to put into force the constitution signed in 1997 and has not published a path forwards to doing so. The country also lacks an independent judicial system, a national assembly to pass new laws, and any mechanisms to ensure the separation of powers. Eritrea, despite being independent since 1993, has never held an election. The country lacks the basic tenants important for the Rule of Law<sup>2</sup>.

The Special Rapporteur’s report has also found that arbitrary detention and unlawful arrests are also continuing. Eritrea regularly arrests political opponents, and prisoners of faiths not sanctioned by the state. The report states that “He is concerned about the practice of arbitrary and incommunicado detention in Eritrea, which has a serious impact on the life of many Eritreans.”<sup>3</sup> These detainees are not charged with any crimes and remain imprisoned indefinitely. Many are also arrested without any arrest warrants. No judicial administration exists in Eritrea, neither do any other avenues exist to appeal, or otherwise address imprisonment. Among the prisoners are minors, who are being detained with adults.

Prisoners are also detained in very questionable circumstances. The special rapporteur found that they are often imprisoned in overcrowded prisons, shipping containers, and secret detention places. Footage of these overcrowded prisons was obtained by PBS Frontline. It showed the conditions inside Adi Abyeto prison where according to a witness “as many as 2,000” inmates were detained<sup>4</sup>. An Amnesty report says that Adi Abyeto was designed for 800 prisoners but currently holds 2.500<sup>5</sup>. The footage showed hundreds of people sleeping on top of each other. Many have been detained there for years and have “lost their minds” due to the bad conditions<sup>6</sup>. Interviews with Eritreans who have fled the country support the images of the inhumane detention conditions. Testimonies have also described how Eritreans have been detained in metal shipping containers, in extreme heat outside<sup>7</sup>. Temperatures can rise to 50 degrees in parts of Eritrea making this form of incarceration excruciating. These containers hold up to 20 prisoners in cramped conditions.

The conditions of prisoners in Eritrean prisons are further worsened by the lack of health services, poor quality of food, and lack of toilets. According to several reports, Eritrean prisons are prone to

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Council. (2021). Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babike. A/HRC/47/21. p10.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p7-8.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p9.

<sup>4</sup> PBS Frontline. (2021). Escaping Eritrea. Accessed 6 May 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Amnesty International. (2020, 21 May). Eritrea: Detainees in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions defenceless against COVID-19. Accessed on: 29 June 2021. Accessed from: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/05/eritrea-detainees-in-overcrowded-and-unsanitary-conditions-defenceless-against-covid19/>

<sup>6</sup> PBS Frontline. (2021). Escaping Eritrea. Accessed 6 May 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

respiratory diseases, diarrhea, body lice, and other skin diseases. Amnesty International also found that tuberculosis is also a serious problem in several Eritrean prisons<sup>8</sup>. The lack of health facilities, and healthcare personnel, exacerbates the problem. Most personnel have only had first aid training.

### **“Conscription” of Youth in the National Service**

The National Service also remains in place in Eritrea. The institution that has been described as “slavery” by the United Nations continues to play a large role in Eritrean life and society and no improvement or change has taken place in recent years<sup>9</sup>. Conscription into the National Service remains indefinite. Once conscripted into the National Service, there is no indication when one will be released. Some conscripts have been in the ‘service’ for more than 20 years. The Special rapporteur has stated that the indefinite nature of the National Service “remains one of the main causes for the departure of Eritreans from their country.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, conscripts that are caught deserting, face heavy punishment, indefinite detention in overcrowded prisons, and torture.

Conscripts forced into the National Service are not always used as combat troops. Many of them are used as forced labour, for infrastructure projects, or to work in fields. Several conscripts who escaped from the National Service have testified that conscripts are extensively used to work on the fields of High-Ranking Eritrean officials or Generals<sup>11</sup>. Conscripts are not paid, or paid a very low salary, insufficient to support a family. Conscripts are also subject to regular beatings, sexual violence, and other forms of inhuman treatment and punishment. Many women in the National Service have been forced to sell sexual favours to receive basic necessities such as food or sanitary products<sup>12</sup>.

Increasingly the National service is also being extended to the youth as well. Even before the conflict in Tigray started, the Eritrean Government made it mandatory for the final year at secondary school to be taken at Warsay Yikealo school. This school is located in Sawa military camp, where National Service conscripts are sent for military service. The final year of secondary school is therefore conducted under the command of the military. Students have to follow military training and complete other military chores in addition to their studies. Reportedly 60 to 65 % of students do not receive the necessary results and are sent directly conscripted into the National Service<sup>13</sup>. While in Sawa, students are subjected to harsh punishment, including corporal punishment, and have to carry out forced labour.

Increasingly however, there have been reports that not only students in their last year of secondary school are being conscripted, but also children aged 16. The government is reportedly aggressively rounding up and conscripting grade 10 students (16-year-olds)<sup>14</sup>. In January 2021, the Eritrean government carried out house to house ‘razzias’, looking for listed youths<sup>15</sup>. If the youths were not found, the families were punished instead. Other Youths picked up from the streets. Human Rights Concern Eritrea (HRCE) reports that Eritrean youth who avoid conscription are “press-ganged” or

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Council. (2016). Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea. A/HRC/29/42. p14.

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Council. (2021). Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babike. A/HRC/47/21. p9.

<sup>11</sup> PBS Frontline. (2021). Escaping Eritrea. Accessed 6 May 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Council. (2016). Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea. A/HRC/29/42. p13.

<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2019). “They Are Making Us into Slaves, Not Educating Us”. Accessed on: 29 June 2021. Accessed from:

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/08/08/they-are-making-us-slaves-not-educating-us/how-indefinite-conscription-restricts>

<sup>14</sup> EEPA (2021). Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 118 - 2 April 2021

<sup>15</sup> EEPA (2021). Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 114 - 29 March 2021

abducted from the streets, regardless of age, and directly sent to military units without informing their parents. There have even been reports of 15-year-olds being forcibly enlisted into the National Service. The increasing numbers of youths in the National Service has also been visible in the conflict in Tigray. A witness told EEPA that:

*The soldiers that entered Shemelba refugee camp with the 33rd round were mainly minors between the age of 16 and 20 years, most of them filed for the matriculation exam [...] I met with one of the minors and he was 16 years old. Some of the Eritrean youth who came were taking additional training in Shemelba and some refugees from Hitsats camp were also joined the gun shooting training.*<sup>16</sup>

Since the start of the conflict in Tigray, Eritrean forces have suffered appallingly high casualties. As a result the government has been forcing an increasing number of Eritreans into the National Service to serve as frontline soldiers. In addition to the increased conscription of youths, the army has also been taking men out of prisons and detention centres and sending them to the National Service. This also applies to refugees that were forced back to Eritrea. Reportedly refugees from Hitsats and Shemelba, that were found to have deserted the National Service, were detained for a month, before being conscripted again.

Reportedly the increase in conscription also started before the conflict in Tigray started. One Eritrean soldier who deserted in Tigray said that he had been in prison but was taken out and put into the National Service on October 30<sup>th</sup>.<sup>17</sup> He was then sent to Badme on November 2nd, and when the conflict started, to Sheraro in Ethiopia.

### **Violations by Eritrean soldiers in Tigray**

Eritrean soldiers have been widely implicated, and continue to be implicated, in severe human rights violations in Tigray, including widespread looting, destruction of the region's heritage and the livelihood of its people, as well as killing civilians. Eritrean soldiers have perpetrated several well documented massacres, including Aksum and Humera. Eritrean soldiers have also been accused of widespread sexual violence against women, summary and extrajudicial killings of civilians, and the forced deportation of refugees.

Eritrean soldiers have been involved in the Tigray conflict since it began. Although it is hard to establish the exact moment Eritrean soldiers started fighting in Tigray, there have been indications that Eritrea has been involved since the first day. Eritrean deserters have described how they were brought to the front in the days prior to the start of the conflict, and Eritrea helped the Ethiopian army extensively with logistical support. Ethiopia has said that several Ethiopian army units stationed in Tigray fled into Eritrea when the fighting began. At the start of the conflict, many Ethiopian soldiers were also flown to Eritrea to fight in Tigray. There have also been reports that Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrea President Isaias Afwerki met prior to the start of the conflict. While prime minister Abiy has promised that Eritrean soldiers are withdrawing from Tigray, he also told the BBC on 21 June that he is not "pushing them out" and that he is working with them to "finalise our issue, peacefully."<sup>18</sup>

Eritrean soldiers have made heavy use of artillery during the conflict. Many towns and other sites were bombarded by Eritrean forces before their capture. The UN Special Rapporteur said that Tigrayan forces "systematically withdrew from urban areas" as Eritrean and Ethiopian forces

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<sup>16</sup> EEPA (2021). Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 110/111 - 24-25 March 2021

<sup>17</sup> EEPA (2021). Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 173 - 23 June 2021

<sup>18</sup> EEPA (2021). Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 171 - 21 June 2021

advanced<sup>19</sup>. Consequently, many of the towns bombarded probably had few combatants at the time they were attacked. The Town of Humera, on the Ethiopian - Eritrean border was shelled by Eritrean forces in early November. At least 46 people were killed and 200 wounded in the process. The towns of Mekele, Shiraro, Aksum, Adigrat, and Hawzen are among other cities that have been shelled, often with civilian casualties. Eritrean soldiers have also been accused of shelling religious sites. The mosque of Al Negash, one of the oldest mosques in Africa, was shelled by Eritrean troops in December 2020<sup>20</sup>. Eritreans have also been accused of shelling Debre Damo, a 6<sup>th</sup> century monastery, on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Eritrean soldiers looted the monastery, and a monk was killed in the process<sup>21</sup>.

The looting has not only focussed on religious sites: all of Tigray has been looted. The looting by Eritrean forces has been so systematic, that the Eritrean government must have been involved. According to many accounts, Eritrean forces thoroughly looted many universities, hospitals, factories, and other buildings. They reportedly took out machinery, research equipment, vehicles, and other valuable items. Items that could not be taken away were destroyed. Pictures and videos have been released of entire hospital departments being ransacked, including Covid-19 wards. In the reports published by Amnesty, HRW<sup>22</sup>, and the Ethiopian Human Rights Council<sup>23</sup>, it is clear that Eritrean soldiers committed widespread looting when they occupied the city on 19/20 November<sup>24</sup>. The looting went on for several days and the Hospital was looted multiple times over the course of the ten days that followed. Similarly many tigrayans have reported that the Eritrean army has not only looted large institutions, but also emptied houses. They say that they have taken everything, including cooking pans, and other utensils. During the house to house looting, killings have also been common, with children, young men, and resisting family members being killed. The widespread looting is also evident from the large amount of evidence that shows loot being shipped to Eritrea. Many pictures and videos have surfaced of Eritrean trucks, filled with loot leaving Tigray for Eritrea. Those images show trucks carrying all forms of looted objects, from machinery to beds, furniture, and smaller kitchen cutlery<sup>25</sup>. These trucks are then sent to Asmara, where the machinery has been reportedly openly sold<sup>26</sup>.

There has also been extensive looting of food and nutritional supplies. Many farmers have reported that all their cattle, and all their grain have been taken away by Eritrean and Amhara soldiers. Crops have also been burned. A UN visit to Ziban Gedena, in northwestern Tigray, reported that 90% of the livestock had been killed and “burnt and stolen harvests and set fire to animal fodder”<sup>27</sup>. Humanitarian aid organisations are increasingly warning that widespread famine is about to hit the region if nothing is done immediately. On June 25th, USAID estimated that 900 thousand Tigrayans are facing famine conditions<sup>28</sup>. Farmers have reported that they feared planting crops as Eritrean

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<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Council. (2021). Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Mohamed Abdelsalam Babike. A/HRC/47/21. p5.

<sup>20</sup> EEPA (2020). Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 28 - 17 December 2021

<sup>21</sup> EEPA (2021). Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 84 - 15 February 2021

<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2021). Ethiopia: Eritrean Forces Massacre Tigray Civilians. Accessed on 29 June 2021. Accessed from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/05/ethiopia-eritrean-forces-massacre-tigray-civilians>

<sup>23</sup> Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. (2021). Investigation into Grave Human Rights Violations in Aksum City Report on Preliminary Findings. Accessed from:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1i20a7K4BNnJsoSE89q1Q7xEW5oGhatGX/view>

<sup>24</sup> Amnesty International. (2021). Ethiopia: The Massacre in Axum. AFR 25/3730/2021.

<sup>25</sup> EEPA (2020). Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 28 - 17 December 2021

<sup>26</sup> EEPA (2020). Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 19 - 07 December 2021

<sup>27</sup> Reuters. (2021, 14 June). UN official accuses Eritrean forces of deliberately starving Tigray. Accessed on 29 June 2021. Accessed from:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/ozatp-us-ethiopia-conflict-famine-idAFKCN2DQ0HN-OZATP>

<sup>28</sup> Power, S. (2021, 25 June). “Brand new—and terrifying—@USAID findings on #Tigray: we now believe up to 900,000 people are facing famine conditions, with millions more at risk. PM Abiy said this week “there is no

soldiers have attacked and killed farmers they encountered planting crops. Two senior Tigrayan interim Administration officials confirmed this to Reuters<sup>29</sup>. Both said that Eritrean soldiers were actively chasing farmers from their fields. Simultaneously, there has been widespread reporting by UN officials and other international organisations, that Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers have been stopping aid convoys. Mark Lowcock, the UN top humanitarian official, said that “Food is definitely being used as a weapon of war.”<sup>30</sup> Both the looting and indiscriminate shelling of civilian populations have been established as war crimes and are prohibited by International law. As such, Amnesty International said in its investigation of the Axum massacre that the shelling and subsequent looting of the city by Eritrean soldiers may amount to war crimes<sup>31</sup>.

Eritrean soldiers have also been increasingly spotted wearing Ethiopian army uniforms (ENDF). Many well regarded sources, including USAID<sup>32</sup>, the Belgian VRT<sup>33</sup>, and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Mark Lowcock, have all reported instances of Eritrean soldiers wearing ENDF uniforms<sup>34</sup>. This has had the effect of confusing observers and civilians alike and disguising the actions by Eritrean soldiers.

Eritrean soldiers have also been involved in many massacres, notably the one that took place in Aksum in late November 2020 that killed 800 people, although some sources have put the casualties as high as a thousand. However, it is not the only one. There have been widespread accusations that Eritrean soldiers have threatened to commit massacres in smaller towns and villages in rural areas in retaliation for continued Tigrayan resistance. Other times, the massacres have been unprovoked. The University of Ghent has compiled a list of at least 230 massacres that have been carried out during the conflict in Tigray<sup>35</sup>. Within the context of that list, a massacre has been defined as “a conflict incident in which at least 5 civilians were killed on the same day at the same location”. Not all 230 massacres have been carried out by Eritrean soldiers, however they were involved in many and this work does show the scale on which atrocities are being committed.

Tanks and other heavy weaponry when committing these massacres. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, have all reported in their investigations that the Eritrean army deployed tanks during the massacre. These tanks then shelled residential neighbourhoods and destroyed several buildings. Machine gun fire from those tanks also targeted civilians indiscriminately. The deployment of tanks shooting indiscriminately at civilians has also been reported in Adigrat on 17 November 2020.

The list by the University of Ghent is also not exhaustive, as accessing information in Tigray has not been simple. Due to the lack of communication channels, there are likely many more massacres that have not been reported. Similarly, the list does not account for the many killings involving fewer than 5 deaths. Of 2562 deaths, the University of Ghent found that Eritreans were responsible for

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hunger in Tigray.” This is false: critical aid is being blocked & prevented from saving lives”. Twitter. Accessed on 29 June 2021. Accessed from: <https://twitter.com/PowerUSAID/status/1408479282784047109?s=20>

<sup>29</sup> Reuters. (2021, 14 June). UN official accuses Eritrean forces of deliberately starving Tigray. Accessed on 29 June 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Amnesty International. (2021). Ethiopia: The Massacre in Axum. AFR 25/3730/2021.

<sup>32</sup> USAID. (2021, 28 April). USG Tigray Factsheet #7. Accessed from: [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/04.28.2021\\_-\\_USG\\_Tigray\\_Fact\\_Sheet\\_7.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/04.28.2021_-_USG_Tigray_Fact_Sheet_7.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> VRT. (2021). VRT NWS als eerste in noorden van Tigray in Ethiopië: "Dit is een humanitaire ramp in ontwikkeling". Accessed on 29 June 2021. Accessed from: <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/12/20/vrtnws-als-eerste-in-oosten-van-tigray-in-ethiopie-het-geweld/>

<sup>34</sup> AP news. (2021, 15 April). UN: Tigray’s humanitarian crisis worsens, no Eritrean exit. Accessed on 29 June 2021. Accessed from: <https://apnews.com/article/ethiopia-violence-united-nations-66549db53c5617ea52464a2c3934b095>

<sup>35</sup> Anys, Sofie & VandenBempt, Tim & Negash, Emnet & De Sloover, Lars & Nyssen, Jan. (2021). Tigray: Atlas of the humanitarian situation.

47% of them<sup>36</sup>. Thirty percent of them came in the form of executions, while 66% were direct killings. Aid and humanitarian workers have also been targeted. Three MSF staff were killed on Thursday 24 June, while a USAID worker was killed in late April by Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers after he identified himself as an aid worker. Since the start of the conflict 12 aid workers have been killed. Killings have often also been accompanied by rapes and sexual assault. There have been numerous testimonies of women seeing their children shot dead in front of them before being raped, or civilians being killed on the road.

### **Eritrean soldiers and sexual violence**

Eritrean soldiers have also been involved in large scale sexual violence in Tigray. In a speech to the House of Commons, the British MP Helen Hayes said that an estimated 10 thousand people had been raped in Tigray by Eritrean, Ethiopian, and other soldiers. The head of the Tigray interim Health Bureau has said on 15 April that since the start of the conflict 829 cases of rape have been reported in the 5 main Tigrayan hospitals. In May OCHA reported that it had counted 550 cases of GBV, including rape. 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 after the conflict as they did during the height of the crisis but that the evidence suggested that instances of GBV were increasing.<sup>37</sup> Save the Children reported that within the past two months more than 950 girls and women have told medical professionals that they have been raped.<sup>38</sup> The count will likely be much higher, as many incidents of rape and Sexual Violence go unreported due to social and cultural pressure as well as a general lack of healthcare accessibility in the region. Statistics released by USAID show that 33% of the perpetrators involved in 36 instances of rape were Eritrean. 76% of those same rapes were perpetrated by multiple men<sup>39</sup>. Mark Lowcock, the UN Humanitarian chief, has also stated that Sexual violence was being weaponised in Tigray, saying that “Rape is being used systematically to terrorize and brutalize women and girls.”<sup>40</sup>

This 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 people, 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.<sup>41</sup> On 29 March a woman recounted being gang raped by a group of five Eritrean soldiers over the course of multiple days.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> On 1 April 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.<sup>44</sup> On 15 April a young mother was reported to

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<sup>36</sup> Anny, Sofie & VandenBempt, Tim & Negash, Emnet & De Sloover, Lars & Nyssen, Jan. (2021). Tigray: Atlas of the humanitarian situation.

<sup>37</sup> International Rescue Committee. (2021). *Gender Analysis Key Findings: Women's Exploitation and Gender-based Violence Across Ethiopia's Tigray Crisis*.

<sup>38</sup> EEPA (2021). Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 141 - 05 May 2021

<sup>39</sup>Insecurity Insight. (2021). Sexual Violence in Ethiopia's Tigray Region. Accessed from: <http://insecurityinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Sexual-Violence-in-Ethiopia-Tigray-Region-30-March-2021.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Reuters. (2021, 15 April). Sexual violence being used as weapon of war in Ethiopia's Tigray, U.N. says.

Accessed on 29 June 2021. Accessed from:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sexual-violence-being-used-weapon-war-ethiopia-tigray-un-says-2021-04-15/>

<sup>41</sup> EEPA. (2021). Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 108 - 22 March 2021

<sup>42</sup> EEPA. (2021). Situation Report EEPA Horn No. 115, 30 March 2021

<sup>43</sup> EEPA. (2021). Situation Report EEPA Horn No. 115, 30 March 2021

<sup>44</sup> EEPA. (2021). Situation Report EEPA Horn No. 118, 2 April 2021

have been repeatedly raped by 23 soldiers who forced nails, a rock and other items into her vagina, and threatened her with a knife.<sup>45</sup> Doctors said that was “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.”<sup>46</sup>

### **Lack of progress**

President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea has long held that the National Service has been necessary because of the longstanding conflict with Ethiopia. Despite the 2018 peace process resolving this conflict, there has been no signs of internal improvement in Eritrea. In fact the situation only looks to be getting worse. The conflict in Tigray, has been used by the Eritrean President to further the crackdown in Eritrea, and expand it to Tigray. For decades, Tigray and the TPLF had been Eritrea's biggest opposition. When they were removed from power in Ethiopia, Eritrea seized the opportunity to exploit the conflict taking place between the TPLF and the Ethiopian central government. When the war started it exported its model of harsh repression to Tigray. It has tried to remove Tigrayan centres of wealth and power. The Eritrean government has used the opportunity to gain an influx of wealth needed by systematically looting the region. Eritrean soldiers have committed widespread human rights violations. There have been many accusations of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including suggestions by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas, the large-scale looting, and the many killings are all examples of this. Moreover, the implication by Mark Lowcock that sexual violence is being used as a weapon of war in Tigray can also be interpreted as an accusation of a war crime committed by both the Eritreans and Ethiopians. Organised use of sexual violence during times of conflict is prohibited under International Law.

Unless the circumstances in Ethiopia change dramatically, it is unlikely that the Ethiopian Federal government will do anything about the Eritrean presence in Tigray. The Eritreans have been vital for the Ethiopian war effort. Many observers have pointed out that Eritrean military support has allowed the Ethiopian army to maintain control. They have provided the manpower and power necessary for Ethiopia to take over Tigray. According to some reports Eritrea initially used at least twelve divisions to invade Tigray, and supplemented those with more as the conflict went on. Moreover, despite mounting evidence of Eritrean involvement in the conflict, it took Ethiopia and Eritrea over five months to acknowledge the Eritrean presence. Instead they accused neutral observers of misinformation and spread the practices of human rights violation, sexual violence, and repression to Tigray. Eritrean purposefully commits Crimes against Humanity in Eritrea, in order to control the population and maintain power. It has instituted the National Service to provide forced labour to the country, and to repress any opposition. It has now exported this system to Tigray. In an attempt to maintain control of the country, to weaken its biggest regional opposition, and improve the Eritrean power in the Horn, the Eritrean government has engaged in a brutal war in Tigray. It is perpetrating the most egregious crimes, and it is purposefully creating the conditions for widespread famine and hunger.

The international community has to act and hold Eritrea accountable for the crimes it has and continues to commit in Tigray and Eritrea. These crimes include the Crimes against Humanity through its deployment of National Service in Eritrea, and War Crimes through its indiscriminate targeting of civilians, the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, the targeting of religious and heritage monuments, and the use of famine as a weapon of war. It is also violating humanitarian law by the abduction of refugees from camps under international protection, the military take-over of those camps, and the targeting of humanitarian workers and IDPs.

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<sup>45</sup> EEPA. (2021). Situation Report EEPA Horn No. 128, 16 April 2021

<sup>46</sup> EEPA. (2021). Situation Report EEPA Horn No. 128, 16 April 2021

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