



Disinformation in Tigray: Manufacturing Consent For a Secessionist War

May 2021

Cover Photo: TPLF leader "Aboy" (father) Sebhat Nega captured by Ethiopian National Defense Forces on January 8, 2021. (Courtesy of Ethiopian News Agency)

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Executive Summary

The conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray state, one of Ethiopia's ten regional states, is an irredentist, ethnic secessionist war led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) against the multiethnic federal government. Although the conflict officially started on November 4, 2020 after TPLF attacked the federal government's Northern Command based in Tigray, this showdown had been brewing for many years – decades, actually.

Following the fall of the previous regime in 1991, TPLF assumed power and created a system of "ethnic federalism" in which newly delineated regional states were created on the basis of ethnicity. TPLF, which governed Ethiopia through corruption and ethnocentric policies with US support, fell from power in 2018 following mass protests that brought to power a new Prime Minister, Dr. Abiy Ahmed Ali. Though PM Abiy has inherited a poisoned chalice, he has worked to end Ethiopia's era of ethnicity-based politics.

The US and EU, which provided TPLF support during its 27-year reign, continued to lend support to TPLF after 2018 even as it was greatly weakened and forced to retreat from Addis Ababa to its regional capital, Mekelle. Emboldened by the Western media, NGOs and governments, TPLF, by its own admission, started the conflict in November with secessionist and irredentist aims. Federal forces quickly captured Tigray's capital city in little over three weeks and TPLF was forced to retreat.

Since the start of the conflict until the present moment, the majority of coverage on Tigray has been marked by massive levels disinformation. This report shows in detail why and how the disinformation is propagated – via print and social media – by predominantly Western sources.

Ultimately, the disinformation serves to manufacture consent for an unpopular irredentist, ethnic secessionist war that could not be justified in the eyes of the international public through honest reporting. This publication shows how a "communications blackout" is used as a justification by the media to accept and forward information of poor integrity.

With the fall of TPLF in late November came the consequent failure of US policy in the Horn of Africa. Since then, the Western media has, retroactively and proactively, forwarded a number of allegations of crimes against the people of Tigray perpetrated by the Ethiopian and Eritrean militaries. Eritrea has served as the primary scapegoat.

Alleged crimes include massacres, mass rape and sexual violence, looting, extrajudicial killings, genocide, ethnic cleansing and war crimes. Much of the reporting of these crimes, devoid of evidence and context, has proven sensational and racist with simplistic savage-like portrayals of Eritreans and Ethiopians that draw on old colonial tropes of Africans. This report looks beyond the gaudy headlines and provides sober, evidence-based analysis of the major allegations. Significant focus is given to social media as most disinformation about Tigray originates there.

Additionally, this report assesses the nature of and problems with Western media's overall coverage of the Tigray conflict. Lastly, it provides analysis of the actions by Western governments and likely consequences of those actions to encourage better policy decisions in the Horn of Africa moving forward.

New York/Asmara, May 9, 2021

Historical Context

The current region of Tigray is Ethiopia's northernmost region, bordering Eritrea and Sudan. Its people, who speak Tigrinya, a language shared with the Tigrinya people of Eritrea, trace their history back two millennia to the ancient Kingdom of Axum, whose capital was located in the modern-day city of Axum.

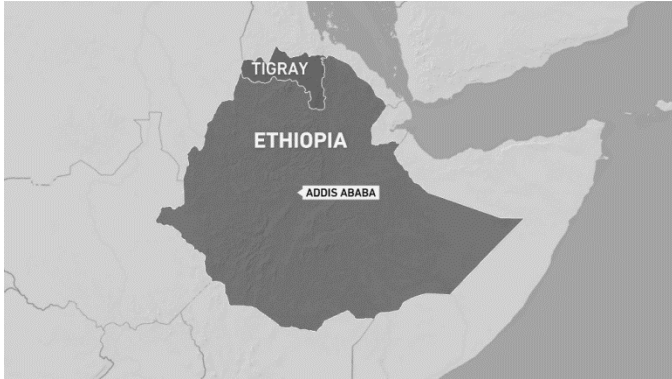


Figure 1. Tigray Regional State, Ethiopia. Courtesy: Al Jazeera.

During medieval times, the region was absorbed into the highland feudal state of Abyssinia, which shifted political power southward to the Amharic-speaking people, who are today based in the Amhara region that neighbors Tigray. The Tigrayan nobility shared political power in the new kingdom and coronation of the Abyssinian monarch took place at Axum, the religious center of the polity. Abyssinia's name was later changed to "Ethiopia" in the 19th century under Emperor Menelik II.

From the late 19th through much of the 20th centuries, imperial conquests by the then multiethnic ruling class of settler colonialists from the Shewa region – today, pejoratively referred to as *neftegnas*, meaning "riflemen" – expanded national boundaries and imposed Amhara cultural hegemony throughout the empire under a Shewan aristocracy. As part of this conquest, Eritrea, which had been successively colonized by the Ottomans, Italians and British, fell under Ethiopia's

colonial rule in 1952 and was illegally annexed in 1962, gaining for itself the second most industrialized state in Africa at that time (only second to South Africa). The 1974 military overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie ended the imperial monarchy and gave way to a burgeoning Ethiopian revolution, later hijacked by the quasi-communist *Derg* (Amharic for "committee") regime that continued to enforce Amharic cultural hegemony by masking it in Marxist rhetoric.

Following in the footsteps of revolutionary Eritrean liberation movements that had been at war with Ethiopia's government since 1961, most notably the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF; known locally as *Jebha*) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF; known locally as *Shaebia*), various oppressed ethnic nationalities organized armed liberation movements in their respective territories inside Ethiopia. Drawing inspiration, training and material support from EPLF,¹ a small group of Tigrayans formed the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF, known locally as *Weyane*):

The instrumentality of the EPLF in inspiring, training and arming the TPLF could not be disputed. It is now a matter of public knowledge that the first batch of TPLF fighters were trained and launched from Eritrea with EPLF commanders playing a prominent role in assuring the viability of the fledgling band of TPLF fighters. ... Almost all of the current TPLF leadership was among the group that was trained and organized in the Eritrean fields by the EPLF. The EPLF provided not only the first guns but also the commanders, including the now legendary Mussie and Jamaica, who led the group into Tigray and launched the armed struggle.²

Like EPLF, TPLF sought independence for its "nation." Unlike Eritrea, however, Tigray was not an independent nation or colony during either the

¹ "When Guerrillas Become Government: The Political Tradition in the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front and the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front and Its Connection With the Recent Ethio-Eritrean Conflict", *International Third World Studies Journal and Review*, Sishagne, Shumet; Volume XII, 2001, 53)

² Markakis, J. (1989). Nationalities and the State in Ethiopia. *Third World Quarterly*, 11(4), 118-130. Retrieved April 17, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3992334>

medieval Abyssinian era or the European colonialization of Africa as it was instead a central piece of the empire's feudal aristocracy. Despite this reality, a small group of Tigrayans formed TPLF in 1975 after receiving training from EPLF in 1974.³

In 1976, TPLF published in its founding manifesto plans to create an independent Tigrinya-speaking "Republic of Greater Tigray" by expanding "its" territory in northern Ethiopia to include the lands of neighboring ethnic groups, acquiring coastal lands within Eritrea and seceding from Ethiopia to form a new republic.⁴ According to EPLF's leadership, Tigray's initial manifesto did not include the Eritrean coast but would later be revised to include it.⁵ Aspirations for an independent expanded Tigray were first expressed in the 1940s by the meddling of British colonialists in Eritrea who proposed a union between Eritrea and northern Ethiopia, which they called "Greater Tigray" (Fig. 2).⁶

The *Derg* regime was toppled in 1991 by a coalition of liberation forces led primarily by EPLF and TPLF.⁷ Eritrea went on to become an independent country in 1993. Ascending to power in Ethiopia, TPLF steadily worked towards achieving the goals laid out in its manifesto by establishing Ethiopia's system of "ethnic federalism" mandated by a constitution ratified in 1994 that – through the controversial Article 39 – allowed for secession of ethnic states in the federation through unconditional self-determination.⁸

As an example of the application of this system elsewhere, had it been applied to the United States, each state would be designated for each ethnicity or race: California for Asian-Americans, Mississippi for African-Americans, Texas for Mexican-Americans, etc. Governing through repression in a newly created ethnicity-based ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), TPLF was able to maintain a dominant position in the coalition, expand its territorial boundaries and enrich the Tigray region, which comprises only six percent of the national population, to the detriment of other Ethiopian regions.⁹

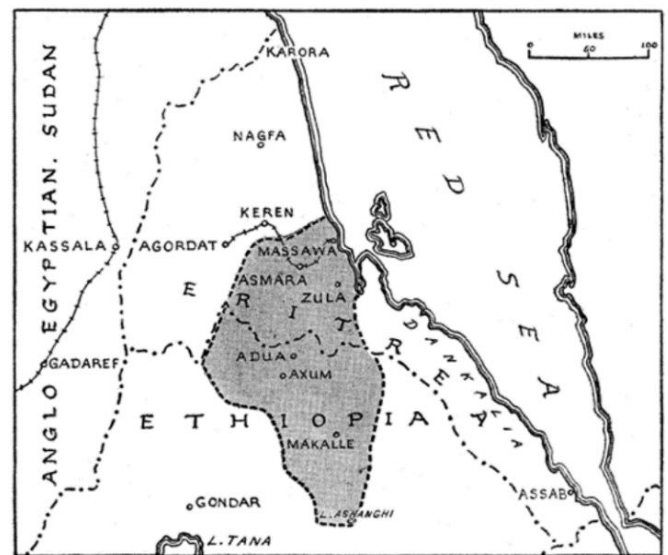


Figure 2. British map of proposed partitioning of "Greater Tigray." Source: *International Affairs*/ Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-], Vol. 21, No. 3 [Jul., 1945], pp. 363-369.

In May 1998, the TPLF-led EPRDF government drew Ethiopia into a two-and-a-half year deadly "border" war with Eritrea, which resulted in multiple offensives to capture coastal cities and

the final drive to capture Addis Ababa, EPLF sent EPRDF (i.e. TPLF, OLF and other Ethiopian rebel forces) 8 brigades and a mechanized unit, including tanks, to assist them. Without EPLF's participation – or merely the threat of it – the capture of Addis Ababa and the prior negotiations with the Derg to stand down and surrender would not have been possible.

⁸ McCracken, *Abusing Self-Determination*, 185. Article
⁹ Gedamu, Yohannes, "Ethnic Federalism and Authoritarian Survival in Ethiopia." Dissertation, Georgia State University, 2017. Accessed here: http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/political_science_diss/45

³ Aregawi Berhe, *The Origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front*, *African Affairs*, 139: 569-592, 2004, pg. 569.

⁴ Matthew J. McCracken, *Abusing Self-Determination and Democracy: How the TPLF Is Looting Ethiopia*, 36 *Case W. Res. J. Int'l L.* 183 (2004). Aregawi Berhe, *The Origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front*, *African Affairs*, 139: 569-592, 2004, pg. 569.

⁵ Email conversation with a veteran fighter and former leader of EPLF on January 24, 2021.

⁶ *International Affairs* [Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-], Vol. 21, No. 3 [Jul., 1945], pp. 368.

⁷ During the war, TPLF did not own a single tanks and relied heavily on EPLF mechanized armies in battle. In

the occupation of the border town of Badme – internationally recognized as Eritrea’s in 2002 by binding arbitration – followed by a 20 year-long unresolved war of attrition.¹⁰ During the hot stages of the war (1998 - 2000), more than 80,000 ethnic Eritreans were deported to Eritrea from Ethiopia – infamously for “the color of their eyes” – drawing condemnation by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.¹¹

Similar ethnic cleansing policies and wars for territorial expansion and resources were to be carried out by TPLF inside of Ethiopia itself, leading to genocide against Oromos, Annuaks, Somalis, Amharas and other ethnicities, all of which have been well-documented by Genocide Watch, US Congress and the US Justice Department.¹² Keeping true to its manifesto, Tigray’s boundaries expanded in all directions after 1991. Recent maps show how Tigray grew to include the Amhara regions of Welkait and Raya, the Eritrean town of Badme and other surrounding

areas (Fig. 3). In 2009, International Crisis Group (ICG) published “Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and its Discontents”, a report assessing TPLF’s ethnic federalist model and the future of Ethiopia. According to the report:

Critics decry worsening ethnic relations as a result of ethnic-based competition. In their view, the political system divides rather than unites people, by creating mutual suspicion and rancour and instituting tribal dynamics that could easily spiral out of control. The constitutional clause [Article 39] that gives nationalities the right to secede is touted as proof of the EPRDF’s anti-Ethiopian stance. Eritrea’s independence, which turned Ethiopia into a landlocked country, is viewed as further evidence of a desire to dismember it. A recurrent claim is that the EPRDF has unduly privileged its Tigray base and regional state to the national detriment.

¹⁰ Alemseged Tesfai, “The Cause of the Eritrean-Ethiopian Border Conflict”, paper presented at conference organized by Heinrich Boll Foundation, March 15-17, 1999. Accessed here:

<http://dehai.org/conflict/articles/alemsgshed.html>

¹¹ “The Uprooted: Case Material on Ethnic Eritrean Deportees from Ethiopia Concerning Human Rights Violations.” Asmarom Legesse, Eritrean Human Rights Task Force (USA), 1998.; Wendy P. Wilson, “The Deportation of Eritreans from Ethiopia: Human Rights Violations Tolerated by the International Community”, 24 *N.C.J. Int’l L. & Com. Reg.* 451 (1998). Available at: <http://scholarship.law.unc.edu/ncilj/vol24/iss2/7>

¹² “Genocide Alerts: Ethiopia”, Genocide Watch, accessed on February 13, 2021. ; “Democracy Under Threat in Ethiopia”, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations (Committee on Foreign Affairs), March 9, 2017. Transcript accessed here: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115hhrg24585/html/CHRG-115hhrg24585.htm> ; Armed Conflicts Report, “Ethiopia (2002 – first combat deaths)”, Update: January 2009. Accessed here: <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2014/02/25/Ethiopia.pdf>

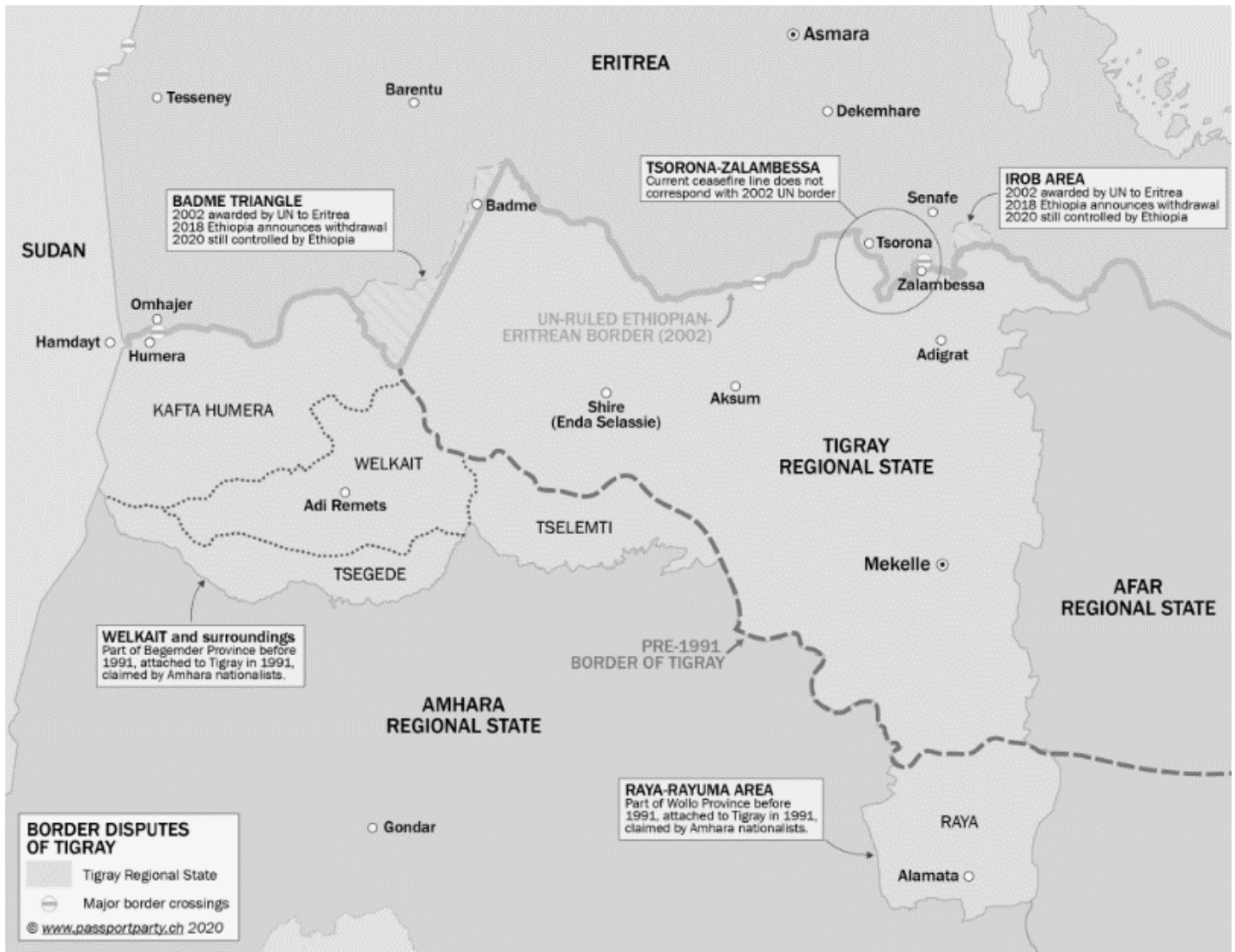


Figure 3. Map showing expanding territories captured by TPLF since 1991. Courtesy: Passport Party.

The claim that TPLF privileged Tigray at the expense of the nation is perhaps best corroborated by the fact that, according to a Global Financial Integrity report, TPLF looted Ethiopia of \$2.6 billion annually.¹³ However, it is worth noting that the average Tigrayan citizen likely did not see the benefits of these illicit funds since more than a million depended on annual humanitarian food assistance from foreign donors funneled into Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP).¹⁴

Although the ICG report did not cover these class issues in detail, it did conclude that TPLF's ethnicity-based system of governance "decisively transformed politics" whereby "relations between ethnic groups have become increasingly competitive, as they vie for control of administrative boundaries and government budgets in addition to land and natural resources."¹⁵ ICG cited as the system's principle problems, (1) the reality that "Ethiopia's ethnic dispersion is seldom homogenous" and (2) the

¹³ "Ethiopia's Cruel Con Game", David Steinman, *Forbes*, March 3, 2017.

¹⁴ "Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update" Situation Report No. 3, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, November 17, 2020.

¹⁵ "Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism And Its Discontents", Africa Report N°153. International Crisis Group. September 4, 2009.

right of “unconditional ‘self-determination’”. As a result, “ethnic federalism has sharpened differences among groups since 1991, and ethno-nationalist grievances with the nation-state, which the TPLF set out to end, remain.”

Thus, it was clear to the international community decades ago that as TPLF moved forward with its secessionist ethnic agenda as laid out in its 1976 manifesto – changing boundaries, fighting territorial wars and looting state resources – the Ethiopian federal system was becoming increasingly unstable. In spite of these concerns, TPLF forged ahead with its ethnic federal system, winning in elections in 2010 and 2015 by 99.6% and 100%, respectively.¹⁶

“Thus, it was clear to the international community decades ago that as TPLF moved forward with its secessionist ethnic agenda as laid out in its 1976 manifesto—changing boundaries, fighting territorial wars and looting state resources—the Ethiopian federal system was becoming increasingly unstable.”

While these results drew great concern worldwide, they hardly came as a surprise as the ruling party itself warned in 1993 that “if we lose in the elections even once, we will encounter a great danger”.¹⁷ In the mind of TPLF, which represents an ethnic minority, losing its supreme position is an impossible scenario. As long-time Ethiopia journalist Rene Lefort wrote in 2016, a more equitable share of federal power among all ethnic groups “would be an even more hazardous leap for the TPLF, abandoning its domination and

betting that a genuinely democratic federalism would emerge. In other words, that nations or a coalition of nations much more populous than the Tigreans would not impose majority rule, threatening the preservation of what for the Front is non-negotiable: Tigreans remaining in charge of Tigray.”¹⁸

After many years of religious, ethnic and popular protests, namely the Oromo protests, the ruling coalition elected Dr. Abiy Ahmed as the Prime Minister in April 2018, who quickly made peace with Eritrea, released political prisoners, introduced a series of liberal reforms, appointed a progressive cabinet and enacted anti-corruption efforts that led to the arrest of high-profile TPLF officials.¹⁹ TPLF was forced to retreat to its regional capital Mekelle. In contrast to TPLF’s ethno-nationalist agenda, Abiy articulated his philosophy of *medemer* (“synergy”) to de-ethnicize Ethiopia and promote national unity. In December 2019, Abiy merged EPRDF to form the non-ethnicity-based Prosperity Party (PP) with TPLF refusing to join despite Abiy imploring them to do so.²⁰ Between late 2019 and mid-2020, Abiy sent multiple delegations to Tigray to encourage dialogue and mediation between TPLF and PP, which failed to bear any fruit.²¹

TPLF media organs like Tigray Media House, began to increase their broadcasts about the nascent “Agazian” movement to create a new state exclusively for Tigrinya-speaking Orthodox Christians. Based on the xenophobic, anti-Muslim ideas of the Christian-Zionist, Eritrean-British Tesfazion Gerhelase, the Agazian ideology sought to provide the sociopolitical underpinnings for a Republic of Greater Tigray that could justify the erasure of a multi-religious Eritrean state in the name of returning to an mythical “Agazian” past that never existed.²²

¹⁶ “Unease over Extent of Ruling Party’s Landslide in Ethiopia.” Xan Rice, *The Guardian*, May 26, 2010; “Dispatches: Alarm Bells for Ethiopia’s 100% Election Victory”, Felix Horne, Human Rights Watch, June 23, 2015.

¹⁷ “Our revolutionary democratic goals and the next step”, EPRDF, Addis Ababa, June 1993. Extract from this document were published in the Ethiopian Register, June 1996, p. 7.

¹⁸ “The ‘Ethiopian Spring’: ‘Killing is not an answer to our grievances’”, René Lefort, *Open Democracy*, September 9, 2016.

¹⁹ “‘These changes are unprecedented’: how Abiy is upending Ethiopian politics”, Jason Burke, *The Guardian*, July 8, 2018.; “Ethiopia Military-Linked Group Seeks Asset Sales, Debt Write-Off”, By Nizar Manek, *Bloomberg*, October 25, 2019.

²⁰ “Why Abiy is more popular in Norway than Ethiopia”, David Pilling, *Financial Times*, February 26, 2020.

²¹ “Summary of Efforts Reconciliation with TPLF”, Ethiopian News Agency, November 23, 2020.

²² “ግጥን ቅስቀሳ አላት አግካሊያን 1ይ ክፋል/6/29/2020]....#tmh #SupporTMH #TegarMedia”. *Tigray Media House*.

On account of the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government announced in March 2020 that it would postpone national elections until at least 2021.²³ Observing that similar actions have been taken by democracies worldwide, *The Economist* magazine explained, “Just as delaying elections is not inherently authoritarian, ploughing ahead with a vote can be antithetical to democratic principles.”²⁴ In spite of global public health concerns, TPLF held military parades in Tigray in August followed by regional parliamentary elections in September, winning 98.2% of the vote (winning 100% of contested seats).²⁵ On October 24, TPLF blocked the federal appointment of a newly assigned brigadier general to the Northern Command stationed in Tigray on the grounds that the federal government was unelected and thus illegitimate.²⁶ This justification allowed TPLF to avoid allegations of sedition. It is worth noting, however, that even prior to claims of federal illegitimacy due to delayed elections, TPLF had already engaged in outright sedition by refusing to hand over TPLF’s spy chief Getachew Assefa, who was indicted by the federal attorney general.²⁷

On the same day when TPLF blocked the new brigadier general’s appointment, Tigray state officials complained that \$7.6 million was being withheld by the federal government, which in response said that money, moving forward, would be disbursed directly to local administrators rather than regional bodies (i.e. TPLF leadership itself).²⁸ Failing to recognize the federal government – perhaps a miscalculation by TPLF – Tigray would inevitably face issues with currency, trade, communications, banking and other sectors influenced by Addis Ababa.²⁹

Six days later, ICG issued a briefing warning of looming conflict in Tigray for which a willing and capable TPLF was preparing itself: “Tigray itself is prepared for a struggle. Its well-armed regional paramilitary force is led by former national army generals. It also boasts a large militia full of war veterans. TPLF leaders say that many officers in the units of the Northern Command, which still patrols the Eritrea border, would not be likely to support any federal intervention, and some could even break and join Tigray’s forces.”³⁰

TPLF’s belief in its own superiority in a wartime scenario with Ethiopia likely arises from the fact that it felt Ethiopia was diplomatically isolated in the international community. In an interview with Dimsti Weyane TV, ex-ambassador to Somalia and high-ranking TPLF member Wondimu Asaminew spoke with braggadocio about TPLF’s diplomatic prowess and explained that Abiy was isolated, weak and incapable of surviving the diplomatic “jungle”:

Now, at home we are not at peace with ourselves. ... In fact, now, due to our weakness, there are many countries emboldened to bully us around. So one of the reasons why our policy – foreign policy and diplomacy – is a problem is that the domestic foundation of a strong foreign policy is now deconstructed. Not only that. You are strong in foreign relations as strong as your allies. And, unfortunately, we have deconstructed, now, the foreign policy, diplomacy, security architecture we had carefully built in the last 27 years. Now, IGAD is rendered irrelevant. We have disregarded the African Union. ***We [Ethiopia] are alone. We are isolated. Perhaps the only friend we have, if we are going to call him a friend, is [Eritrean]***

Uploaded to YouTube on June 29, 2020. Access here: <https://youtu.be/WVtQ3GLEcA>

²³ “Ethiopian PM’s term extended as election delayed for virus”, Elias Meseret, *Associated Press*, June 10, 2020.

²⁴ “The pandemic is affecting elections around the world”, *The Economist*, August 17, 2020.

²⁵ “Tigray wins Tigray by-election”, *BBC Amharic*, September 11, 2020.

²⁶ “Ethiopia’s Tigray blocks general’s appointment in blow to Abiy”, Al Jazeera English, October 30, 2020.

²⁷ “Ethiopia arrest warrant for ex-spy chief, Getachew Assefa”, Abdur Rahman Alfa Shaban, *Africa News*,

March 1, 2019.; “Ethiopia: Not too late to stop Tigray conflict from unravelling country”, Dino Mahtani and William Davison, *The Africa Report*, November 10, 2020.

²⁸ “Tension rises as Tigray accuses Central gov’t of holding up funds”, Neamin Ashenafi, *The Ethiopian Reporter*, October 24, 2020.

²⁹ “Ethiopia is demonetizing its economy with new currency to tackle hoarding and illegal trade”, Samuel Getachew. *Quartz*, September 14, 2020.

³⁰ “Steering Ethiopia’s Tigray Crisis Away from Conflict”, Africa Briefing N°162, International Crisis Group, October 30, 2020.

president Isaias—the suspicious actor in the neighborhood. And you see, in foreign relations, if you are alone, it's like a jungle life. And in the jungle, when you are alone, you cannot survive. Now, I can say we are alone. We are separated from the herd and the reason why our foreign policy and diplomacy is weak is because we have, with a sense of vengeance, deconstructed the carefully constructed security architecture we [TPLF] had built. ... Diplomacy is concentrated in the palace – in the Prime Minister's Office – and diplomacy is run by amateurs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is led by people who may have not sufficient skills and knowledge about the complexity of diplomacy.³¹ [Emphasis added]

As a challenge to the federal government, Wondimu appears to have set up a de facto foreign ministry for Tigray through “the newly-formed Tigray Friendship Liaison Office, which helps Tigrayan officials communicate with other governments, trade councils and cultural bodies. ... The office represents an effort by Tigrayans ‘to explain ourselves to the world’, Wondimu said, and to distance themselves from a fraught democratic transition under Abiy that has been undermined by persistent ethnic violence. ... ‘While the whole country is in shambles, our institutions are working,’ Wondimu told AFP.”³²

In a November 1 tweet about his virtual meeting with EU officials, TPLF Spokesperson Getachew Reda made it clear that dialogue with Abiy and PP was impossible: “I did reiterate #TPLF’s position that an all inclusive political dialogue is the only way out and that @AbiyAhmedAli and #PP have neither the capabilities nor the legitimacy to lead such a dialogue. #TPLF has not and will not agree to bilateral negotiations with #PP or #Abiy.”³³

³¹ “DW English with Ambassador Wondimu Asaminew on current political affairs Part 1/2”. *Dimtsi Weyane Television*. Uploaded to YouTube on Jun 13, 2020. Access here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFoqAvO6JHo>

³² “Polls in Ethiopia’s Tigray set to escalate standoff with Abiy”, Robbie Corey Boulet, *Agence France-Presse*. September 8, 2020.

³³ Tweet by @reda_getachew posted on November 1, 2020. Access here:

After shunning all routes to dialogue, TPLF attacked the federal government’s Northern Command during the morning of November 4 (or the evening of November 3; exact time is unknown), effectively starting the conflict. TPLF did not hide this fact. Central committee member Sekoutoure Getachew admitted on a televised program of TPLF’s Dimtsi Weyane TV that TPLF forces had conducted a “preemptive strike” and made comparisons to similar actions taken by Israel against Arab nations.³⁴

In review, consider that TPLF:

- has pursued a secessionist trajectory in accordance with its 1976 manifesto;
- introduced the “ethnic federalist” system via a constitution that allowed for Tigray’s unilateral secession through Article 39;
- used EPRDF to expand Tigray’s regional boundaries and enrich TPLF leaders to strengthen its position upon eventual secession (possibly for an “Agazian” state);
- fought a war of attrition with Eritrea that sought to capture the necessary coastal cities outlined in the 1976 manifesto;
- refused to join the reformed, de-ethnicized ruling coalition (i.e. Prosperity Party) which served to isolate Tigray from Ethiopia politically and administratively;
- refused to recognize the legitimacy of PM Abiy Ahmed and the federal government, leading to disruptions in finance, currency, trade, communications and banking;
- held gratuitous military parades, held an illegal election and rejected multiple mediation efforts to deescalate tensions with the federal government;
- grew emboldened by the perceived isolation and diplomatic naivety of Abiy and PP;
- prepared itself for war with the federal government; and

https://twitter.com/reda_getachew/status/1322951891815452672

³⁴ “TPLF Spokesman Admits to Sparking the Conflict in Ethiopia and Plunging Tigray into Darkness”, Teodrose Fikremariam, *Ghion Journal*, November 14, 2020. ; Interview with Sekutoure Getachew. “እይታ፣የመጀመሪያው ምዕራፍ በድል መጠናቀቅ እንድምታ፣ ህዳር 04/2013 ዓ/ም”. *Dimtsi Weyane Television*. Uploaded to YouTube on November 13, 2020. Access here: <https://youtu.be/H1yThWjhYYo>

- initiated the war by attacking the Northern Command and bragged about it on television afterward.

Therefore, it is clear that TPLF, prior to armed conflict in November 2020, was on a route towards secession to expand its territory into both Ethiopia and Eritrea and sought to make war with those countries inevitable. Rather than wait passively for such a war to arrive, TPLF opted instead for brinkmanship and escalation of the possibility of war with Ethiopia and Eritrea. By TPLF's own rationale—faulty as it may have been—such a war was its only option because negotiating away concessions for a more equitable balance of power among all ethnic regions was a perceived impossibility since Tigrayans, an ethnic minority, would forever be marginalized in a majority-rule ethnic federal system that TPLF itself created. Thus, for TPLF an unjust, seemingly unwinnable war was a *fait accompli*.

“Therefore, it follows that TPLF and its supporters must—by logical necessity—create, adopt and disseminate disinformation about the Tigray crisis across all media in order to manufacture consent for an unjust war of aggression and territorial expansion. TPLF and its supporters, by default, rely on a false narrative to support their war effort.”

However, the justification for the start, continuation and resolution of any war in the modern era depends on legal, moral and logical considerations in the court of international public opinion. As such, TPLF's plan for a secessionist war of aggression and territorial expansion would be rejected by the international community because it could not be justified on legal, moral or logical grounds. Therefore, it follows that TPLF and its supporters must—by logical necessity—create, adopt and disseminate disinformation about the Tigray crisis across all media in order to manufacture consent for an unjust war of

aggression and territorial expansion. TPLF and its supporters, by default, rely on a false narrative to support their war effort. As such, TPLF cannot look like the aggressor but instead the victim. The conflict cannot be limited to a mere law enforcement operation against criminals but instead a “civil war” against the people of Tigray. The conflict cannot be limited to the Tigray region but must instead be expanded into neighboring regions and internationalized to include Eritrea and other nations. The conflict cannot be deescalated towards a negotiated peace based on equitable rule but instead be escalated towards war that ends in secession and territorial expansion—or, at the minimum, a return to a reconfigured coalition arrangement that gives TPLF unjust and inequitable ethnic rule (i.e. the *status quo ante*).

Lowering Evidentiary Standards

“Communications Blackout”

Although TPLF may depend on disinformation to manufacture consent for war, that disinformation would presumably be rejected by ethical journalists and media. However, information of low quality and integrity is willingly accepted. The media's justification is the presence of an information blackout. According to the Washington Post, the Ethiopian government is at fault: “By blocking communications and access to Tigray, the government helped create conditions where disinformation and misinformation can thrive.”³⁵ Rather than exercising patience and waiting for credible evidence to emerge in a cloud of disinformation, the media instead justified the immediate use of highly questionable witness testimony by alleging a deliberate blackout by the government.

As a case in point, in regards to allegations about an Eritrean troop presence, AP correspondent Cara Anna wrote, “With almost all journalists blocked from Tigray and humanitarian access and communications links limited, witness accounts give the clearest picture yet of the Eritreans' presence.”³⁶ How is it possible that anonymous hearsay—impossible to substantiate and prone to

³⁵ “In Ethiopia's digital battle over the Tigray region, facts are casualties”, Alex Drew and Clair Wilmot, *Washington Post*, February 5, 2021.

³⁶ “Witnesses: Eritrean soldiers loot, kill in Ethiopia's Tigray”, Cara Anna, Associated Press, January 26, 2021.

personal bias or error – gives the “clearest picture” in Tigray? Given the touchy nature of ethnic politics in modern day Ethiopia and the highly propagandized nature of Tigray under 30 years of TPLF, how can one simply accept at face value anonymous testimony by Tigrayan civilians about persons of other ethnicities and nationalities that they have been expressly propagandized against? Is hostile witness testimony not a consideration? Why does the AP ignore and discount the role of video, photo or hard evidence?

Quoting an “Addis Ababa-based foreign correspondent”, Simon Allison of Mail & Guardian wrote in a November 16 piece that “The only people who have access to communication are the Ethiopian [sic] troops and the militias” and therefore deemed this “censorship” and “a throwback to the dark days of Ethiopian journalism”.³⁷ However, this was simply false. AFP correspondent Robbie Corey-Boulet tweeted on November 9: “Separately, AFP and other outlets reached Dansha, in Tigray, earlier today. Federal forces controlled Northern Command 5th Division post (and police posed for pics in front of entrance). But we were soon made to leave town because of, we were told, fighting in the area.”³⁸

Reuters’ East Africa deputy bureau chief Maggie Fick also confirmed the presence of “Reuters reporters in the area this week” on November 10 in an article equipped with photos from Dansha.³⁹ Another article written by the Reuters staff on November 13, also included photos of Amhara militia forces in Dansha taken by Reuters photographer Tiksa Negeri.⁴⁰ Al Jazeera English also provided video from the region.⁴¹

How was such on-the-ground reporting possible if, as Allison alleged, there was a “province-wide communications blackout imposed by the national

government”? Large sections of the media are using a “communications blackout”, which is typically the case with conflict-stricken regions, as an excuse to lower the evidentiary standards such that disinformation is not only accepted but afforded mass dissemination.

“Large sections of the media are using a ‘communications blackout’...as an excuse to lower the evidentiary standards such that disinformation is not only accepted but afforded mass dissemination.”

Furthermore, they deem this blackout as a deliberate effort of the government, allowing for the wholesale rejection of all video, photo and hard evidence provided by Ethiopian government sources. Though it is true that communications were down in Tigray, as admitted by the government, it is not true that the federal government was responsible for its shutdown during the conflict.

On December 14, following the capture of Mekelle by federal forces, the government acquired and released CCTV from November 4 of Ethio Telecom’s Mekelle Core Center premises, showing that a group of individuals deliberately cut off communication lines.⁴² Mekelle, at that time, was still under the control of the TPLF, making it hard to argue that this was the work of federal operatives. However, this news garnered no attention in the international media, which instead chose to argue, moving forward, that “Internet blocks during times of conflict or unrest in Ethiopia aren’t new” to insinuate deliberate government censorship.⁴³ On January 27, Washington Post’s editorial board even went as

³⁷ “Blackout makes it hard to report on Ethiopia’s civil war,” Simon Allison, *Mail & Guardian*, November 16, 2020.

³⁸ Tweet by @rcoreyb posted on November 9, 2020. Access here: <https://twitter.com/rcoreyb/status/1325760812296843264?lang=en>

³⁹ “Battle-hardy Tigray back in spotlight as Ethiopia conflict flares”, Maggie Fick, *Reuters*, November 10, 2020.

⁴⁰ “Factbox: The forces fighting in Ethiopia’s Tigray conflict”, Maggie Fick, *Reuters*, November 13, 2020.

⁴¹ “Ethiopia: The forces fighting in Tigray in 500 words”, *Al Jazeera English*, November 18, 2020.

⁴² Tweet by @SOEFactCheck posted on December 14, 2020. Access here: <https://twitter.com/SOEFactCheck/status/1338484976124309505>

⁴³ “For Ethiopia’s Diaspora, Seeking News Amid Communication Blackout is a Challenge”, Salem Solomon, *Voice of America*, December 18, 2020.

far as saying that “journalists have been banned”, which clearly contradicts facts on the ground.⁴⁴

On December 17, VOA, citing the UN sources, confirmed that there was “restoration of some telecommunications this week.”⁴⁵ Ethio Telecom announced on February 8 the completion of maintenance repairs of telecommunications infrastructure destroyed by TPLF and reactivation of mobile service to Tigray covering 363 mobile sites that included major cities and towns like Mekelle, Adwa, Axum, Adigrat, Shire Endesellase, Dansha, Edaga Hamus, Humera, Maykadra and Alemata.⁴⁶ Additionally, banks were given priority and broadband internet was restored for banking in Mekele, Adigrat, Shire Endasellase, Axum and Adwa.

Strangely, however, the media ignored this news. Michelle Gavin wrote for the Council on Foreign Relations on February 10 of a supposed “communications blackout”, as did James Jeffrey for Al Jazeera on February 16.⁴⁷ AP’s Kelvin Chan shamed the federal government, writing in an article headlined “Internet cuts become favored tool of regimes” that “Another long-running internet shutdown is in Ethiopia’s Tigray region, which has been choked off since fighting started in early November—the latest in a series of outages with no sign of service returning anytime soon.”⁴⁸ Quoting Arnaud Froger of Reporters Without Borders, VOA journalist Salem Solomon wrote on February 12 that “Journalists have been prevented first from accessing the region. The Tigray region has been mostly in total internet shutdown since it all began in November. No access to information, no possibility to

communicate with your sources on the ground, and RSF has recorded at least seven arbitrary arrests of journalists.”⁴⁹ These reports not only ignored the restoration of internet by Ethio Telecom but—through pure speculation—suggested that the government was deliberately blocking access to prevent reporting from Tigray. In late February, the federal government granted the following new outlets access to Tigray: AFP, Al Jazeera, New York Times, France 24, Reuters, BBC and Financial Times.⁵⁰

“Restricted Humanitarian Access”

Alleged restrictions to humanitarian access to Tigray have also been used as a pretext to lower evidentiary standards since aid workers are capable of assessing the plight of civilians. While there were obvious disruptions at the start of the conflict, humanitarian access has steadily improved since the capture of Tigray’s capital city Mekelle on November 28. On December 2, the UN announced that an agreement was reached with the Ethiopian Government to allow “unimpeded, sustained and secure access” for humanitarian supplies to reach civilians in need in areas controlled by the government.⁵¹ That same day, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi appeared on CNN and said, “I don’t think there’s been a sealing off, a deliberate blockage but it’s very difficult to move through a war area.”⁵²

In a December 14 tweet, Norway’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, confirmed that humanitarian assistance had started to reach Tigray and expressed its encouragement.⁵³ On December 8 and 14, ICRC tweeted, with video evidence, that it

⁴⁴ “Ethiopia’s leader won the Nobel Peace Prize. Now he’s accused of war crimes”, Editorial Board, *Washington Post*, January 27, 2021.

⁴⁵ “UN Sends Millions in Humanitarian Aid to Ethiopia”, Voice of America, December 17, 2020.

⁴⁶ Tweet by @ethiotelecom posted on February 8, 2021. Access here: <https://twitter.com/ethiotelecom/status/1358847656198569993>

⁴⁷ “The Conflict in Ethiopia’s Tigray Region: What to Know”, Michelle Gavin, Council on Foreign Relations, February 10, 2021. ; “Ethiopia’s Tigray conflict and the battle to control information”, James Jeffrey, *Al Jazeera English*, February 16, 2021.

⁴⁸ “Digital siege: Internet cuts become favored tool of regimes”, *Associated Press*, February 11, 2021.

⁴⁹ “Ethiopian Journalist Attacked in Her Home, Questioned on Tigray Connections”, Salem Solomon, *Voice of America*, February 12, 2021.

⁵⁰ “Broadcasting authority urges int’l journalists in Tigray to respect law”, Fana Broadcasting Corporation, February 25, 2021.

⁵¹ “Ethiopian Government and UN strike deal for ‘unimpeded’ humanitarian access in Tigray”, UN News, December 2, 2020.

⁵² “Forces from Ethiopia’s Tigray region say Eritrean troops are part of the conflict and the war is far from over”, Nima Elbagir, Barbara Arvanitidis and Eoin McSweeney, *CNN*, December 4, 2020.

⁵³ Tweet by @NorwayMFA posted on December 14, 2020. Access here: <https://twitter.com/NorwayMFA/status/1338506105530540035>

started water distribution in Mekelle and commenced distribution of medical supplies throughout the region.⁵⁴ By January 25, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) explained in a situation report that “Movements of humanitarian cargo inside Tigray is improving substantially.”⁵⁵ On February 6, Executive Director of the World Food Programme, David Beasley, visited Tigray with Ethiopian government officials, commended their recent humanitarian efforts and struck a deal to immediately scale up emergency food distributions for 1 million civilians.⁵⁶ The next day, Beasley tweeted a video from a Mekelle warehouse as WFP was unloading 20,000 tons of food for distribution for 1.3 million civilians.⁵⁷ On February 11, the UN team based in Ethiopia tweeted, “There’s important progress b/w the #humanitarian community & #Ethiopian Gov’t (<https://cutt.ly/6kmBNlf>) & now: clearances for 44 international experts to help scale up the Gov’t-led response for the people of #Tigray. Thanks @WFPChief @UN @Refugees & @UNDSS @PMEthiopia”.⁵⁸

“... the EU alleged that PM Abiy’s government was limiting access and threatened to withhold hundreds of millions of euros of aid as ‘political leverage’. In response, PM Abiy warned, ‘Threatening Ethiopia for coins will not work.’”

In spite of all the evidence since December that Ethiopia’s government was increasing

⁵⁴ Tweet by @ICRC_Africa posted on December 8, 2020. Access here: https://twitter.com/icrc_africa/status/1336300267097235456?lang=en ; Tweet by @ICRC_Africa posted on December 14, 2020. Access here: https://twitter.com/icrc_africa/status/1336300267097235456?lang=en

⁵⁵ “Ethiopia – Tigray Humanitarian Update”, Situation Report, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, January 25, 2021.

⁵⁶ “Joint UN-Government Tigray mission highlights humanitarian needs and path forward”, World Food Programme, February 6, 2021.

⁵⁷ Tweet by @WFPChief posted on February 7, 2021. Access here: <https://twitter.com/WFPChief/status/1358510664822759436>

humanitarian access, the media continued to report that the government was deliberately blocking humanitarian corridors. In the lead up to a visit by the EU’s Crisis Management Commissioner Janez Lenarčič at the end of November, the EU alleged that PM Abiy’s government was limiting access and threatened to withhold hundreds of millions of euros of aid as “political leverage”.⁵⁹ In response, PM Abiy warned, “Threatening Ethiopia for coins will not work.”⁶⁰

On January 25, the EU suspended budget support for Ethiopia worth 88 million euros (\$107 million).⁶¹ Recalling that OCHA on that very same day claimed that humanitarian aid distribution was “improving substantially”, the EU’s top diplomat Josep Borrell confusingly said, “We are ready to help, but unless there is access for humanitarian aid operators, the EU cannot disburse the planned budget support to the Ethiopian government.” These claims came as a surprise since no major western power had withheld aid to Ethiopia under any previous friendly or hostile regime (i.e. Haile Sellasie, the communist Derg or TPLF) in times of hunger. On January 31, Amnesty International’s campaigner for the Horn of Africa, a newly appointed Eritrean regime change activist, appeared on Al Jazeera’s “The Stream” program claiming that all humanitarian aid was blocked, only to be fact-checked by the host live on air and forced to admit “there has been access to Tigray. It’s not a complete blackout we’re seeing.”⁶²

On the very same day that WFP brokered a deal to scale up food distribution, a VOA headline confusingly read, “Ethiopian Government Blocking

⁵⁸ Tweet by @UNEthiopia posted on February 7, 2021. Access here: <https://twitter.com/UNEthiopia/status/1359933602516107267>

⁵⁹ “EU considers aid cut to Ethiopia amid violence”, Simon Marks, *Politico*, November 30, 2020. ;

⁶⁰ Tweet by @PMEthiopia posted on November 30, 2020. Access here: <https://twitter.com/PMEthiopia/status/1333349156790951936>

⁶¹ “EU suspends Ethiopian budget support over Tigray crisis”, Reuters, January 15, 2021.

⁶² “Ethiopia: Why is starvation stalking Tigray? | The Stream”. *Al Jazeera English*. Uploaded to YouTube on January 31, 2021. Segment with Vanessa Tsehaye. Access here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGyUN4VGb7c>

Aid in Tigray, UN Says.”⁶³ Reading the actual text of the article reveals that the government “block” was instead OCHA awaiting clearances to enter non-government-controlled areas. It must be recalled that four humanitarian workers were killed in November (three from the Danish Refugee Council and one from the International Rescue Committee), and aid agencies told BBC December that “violence against staff” was a legitimate reason for concern for delayed aid deliveries.⁶⁴ Tigray Regional State official Abraha Desta told VOA Amharic that TPLF remnants were blocking humanitarian aid delivery and that “drivers are afraid” to deliver aid.⁶⁵ However, such concerns were not expressed in the English-language Western press.

Senior government official Redwan Hussein told the AP in December that “No entity, multilateral or unilateral, is supposed to supplant the government” and that humanitarian assistance must be escorted by defense forces.⁶⁶ This sentiment is shared with humanitarian agencies. During an interview on CNN on February 18, UNHCR chief Filippo Grandi said, “Access is difficult. This is still an insecure region so we have to deal with that as well. But we have also established a system of coordination between civilian organizations like ours, the military – the Ethiopian military in the Tigray region – that was also a request that we had made.” Is it not the federal government’s responsibility to ensure the safety of aid workers, especially after safety concerns were explicitly cited by aid agencies as a cause for delayed aid deliveries?

When media outlets like The Economist report that the federal government “restricts the movement of aid workers” it must be understood that they are merely stating the obvious: movement of aid workers is always “restricted” in all countries and conflict zones since aid workers must undergo standard government regulations.⁶⁷ Thus, choosing to explicitly mention this fact without citing details is merely propagandistic.

⁶³ “Ethiopian Government Blocking Aid in Tigray, UN Says”, Lisa Schlein, *Voice of America*, February 06, 2021.

⁶⁴ “Ethiopia’s Tigray crisis: Four aid workers killed”, *BBC*, December 11, 2020.

⁶⁵ “4.5 ሚሊዮን የትግራይ ሕዝብ እርዳታ እንደሚያስፈልገው ማኅበራዊ ጉዳይ ቢሮ አስታወቀ”, Mulugeta Atsbha, *Voice of America Amharic*, January 21, 2021.

On January 23, The Economist magazine went as far making the extraordinary claim that food was being used as a weapon in a sort of throwback to the 1983-85 famine under Ethiopia’s brutal Derg regime: “Things were supposed to be different under Abiy Ahmed, the Ethiopian prime minister who was hailed as a reformer when he took charge in 2018, and who won the Nobel peace prize the following year. Yet once again it looks as if hunger is being used as a weapon in Africa’s second-most-populous nation. And once again the scene of the horror is Tigray.”⁶⁸ In support of this argument, it claims that “there are credible reports of government forces or their allies killing livestock and burning crops. If true, both the perpetrators and those who gave the orders are guilty of war crimes.” Where are these “credible reports”? Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence yet none has been presented thus far.

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Additionally, Human Rights Watch’s Associate Director Gerry Simpson tweeted on February 3 that “Officials who #Ethiopia has put in charge of running #Tigray + the EU + some UN officials + some aid charities all agree that the government is obstructing aid flow to millions in need, triggering claims it’s ‘using hunger as a weapon to

⁶⁶ “Ethiopia’s forces shoot at, detain UN staffers in Tigray”, Cara Anna, *Associated Press*, December 8, 2020.

⁶⁷ “After two months of war, Tigray faces starvation”, *The Economist*, January 23, 2021.

⁶⁸ “Ethiopia’s government appears to be wielding hunger as a weapon”, *The Economist*, January 23, 2021.

subdue' the region".⁶⁹ Again, where is the evidence? AP journalist Cara Anna also made claims of starvation by citing "opposition parties" and the "minutes obtained by The Associated Press" of a "crisis meeting of government and aid workers".⁷⁰ Again, where is the evidence? What do these minutes say? The likely politicized and propagandized words of unnamed opposition parties hardly count as solid evidence. Yet these are the sources of such extraordinary claims of "starvation" that are used to make calls for intervention in Tigray through the Security Council.⁷¹

According to Ethiopia's National Disaster Risk Management Commission, no one has yet died of starvation and all 4.5 million Tigrayans in need of food aid have received assistance with 70 percent of the aid subsidized by the government.⁷² No evidence of starvation has yet been presented in spite of the international media's access to the region. Notably, hunger was already a major problem in Tigray before the conflict while TPLF governed the region. More than 1.5 million Tigrayans were already on some form of food assistance prior to the crisis.⁷³

Perhaps one of the more egregious misrepresentations about humanitarian aid access and delivery took place on February 10 when AFP misquoted the Ethiopian Red Cross Society's president Abera Tola, claiming that "80 percent of the conflict-hit Tigray region was cut off from humanitarian aid and warned tens of thousands could starve to death."⁷⁴ The Ethiopian Red Cross Society issued a press release rejecting AFP's claim and clarified its president

"was rather expressing lack of capacity and shortage of resources we are currently encountering to reach 80% the vulnerable community in Tigray. The fact that we have so far reached close to 400,000 beneficiaries in Tigray, close to 20% of the total beneficiaries in need of assistance is what our president alluded to."⁷⁵ The false claim was propagated widely in the international media while AFP has still failed to issue an apology, retract the article or delete the associated tweet.⁷⁶ How can such a grave mistake be so widely disseminated and disregarded by the originator?

Therefore, it is clear that the exaggerated restrictions on communications, journalists and humanitarian aid – claimed to be deliberately blocked by the government – have been used by the media and human rights groups as the basis of accepting allegations, many of which are hyperbolic in nature, about the Tigray crisis that cannot be substantiated by any evidence. While TPLF and its supporters depend on disinformation, it is the media that is chiefly responsible for its acceptance and spread by using the pretext of a government-driven blackout.

Assessing the Allegations

Presence of Eritrean Troops

On July 9, 2018, Eritrea and Ethiopia signed the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which states that "The two governments will endeavor to forge intimate political, economic, social, cultural and

⁶⁹ Tweet by @GerrySimpsonHRW posted on February 3, 2021. Access here: <https://twitter.com/GerrySimpsonHRW/status/1356875926668255234>

⁷⁰ "More than 50,000 Ethiopia civilians have been killed, Tigray opposition says", Cara Anna, *Associated Press*, February 2, 2021. ; "Extreme urgent need: Starvation haunts Ethiopia's Tigray", Cara Anna, *Associated Press*, January 17, 2021.

⁷¹ "The UN Must Intervene in Tigray", Mehari Taddele Maru, *Project Syndicate*, Feb 12, 2021.

⁷² "No One Dies from Hunger in Tigray: Commission", *Ethiopia News Agency*, April 16, 2021.

⁷³ "Ethiopia Situation – Tigray Emergency Response", Situation Description, Sudan, Operational Portal, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Access here: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/working-group/284?sv=0&geo=295>

⁷⁴ "Ethiopian Red Cross says 80 percent of Tigray cut off from aid", *Radio France Internationale*, February 10, 2021. ; Tweet by @AFPAfrica posted on February 10, 2021. Access here: <https://twitter.com/AFPAfrica/status/1359509175483645953>

⁷⁵ "Dear national and international media"; Aseged Woldemariam, *Ethiopian Red Cross Society*, February 11, 2021.

⁷⁶ Tweet by @AFPAfrica posted on February 10, 2021. Access here: <https://twitter.com/AFPAfrica/status/1359509175483645953>

security cooperation that serves and advances the vital interests of their people”; and that “Both countries will jointly endeavor to ensure regional peace, development and cooperation.”⁷⁷ After 27 years of hostilities between the two countries, this Declaration, which won Abiy the Nobel Peace Prize, set a new precedent for security cooperation in one of the most conflict-riddled regions in the world. Thus, upon the start of the Tigray conflict by TPLF via its “preemptive strike” on November 4, the terms of the Declaration would be in effect governing how Ethiopia and Eritrea would move forward from a security perspective.

PM Abiy told his parliament that, immediately in the wake of the attacks on the Northern Command, Ethiopian soldiers – disarmed and disrobed at gunpoint by mutinous TPLF-aligned officers – retreated into Eritrea where they were “fed, clothed and armed” such that they could return to battle in Tigray.⁷⁸ He went on to say that “The Eritrean people have shown us...they are a relative standing by us on a tough day.”

On November 10, TPLF’s leader Debretsion Gebremichael said in a statement aired on local station Tigray TV that “Since yesterday, the army of Isaias have crossed the country’s boundary and invaded. They were attacking via Humera using heavy arms.”⁷⁹ In response, Eritrea’s Foreign Minister Osman Saleh said, “This is an internal conflict. We are not part of the conflict.”⁸⁰ Similarly, Ethiopian officials also denied the allegations.⁸¹ Shortly after these denials, however,

TPLF fired missiles on civilian targets in Eritrea’s capital city Asmara and began shelling border towns.⁸² The missile attacks, 15 in total, were launched in two rounds on November 14 and 27, in violation of the Geneva Conventions that prohibit indiscriminate attacks.⁸³

As would later be revealed by PM Abiy in parliament on March 23, Eritrean troops, in response to TPLF attacks on Eritrea, took up exposed trench positions on the Ethiopian side of the border as federal forces left them empty to pursue TPLF, creating a security threat. The nature and rationale of Eritrea’s actions were explained by PM Abiy as follows:

One should know their friends and foes. The Ethiopian people, government and military were betrayed by one of their own. We are forever indebted to the Eritrean people and government who treated our fleeing troops and supported them to move freely wherever we sought. ... Now, there are some fools who expect us to reject, deny or badmouth [Eritrea]. We will not do that. We thank Eritrea’s people and government for everything they have done. That being said, the Eritrean military, after supporting us, crossed the border. What they have done while moving inside of Ethiopia cannot be called crimes against our people. We would not accept such actions from Eritrean troops nor our own. Our current campaign is against our clearly identified enemies, not our own people. To

⁷⁷ The Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia was signed in Asmara, Eritrea on July 9, 2018 between President Isaias Afwerki on behalf of the State of Eritrea and Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed Ali on behalf of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

⁷⁸ “Tigray crisis: Eritrea’s role in Ethiopian conflict”, *BBC*, December 28, 2020.

⁷⁹ “Ethiopia’s Tigray leader says Eritrea sending troops over border”, *Reuters*, November 10, 2020.

⁸⁰ “Eritrea denies troop incursion into Ethiopia’s Tigray”, *Reuters*, November 10, 2020.

⁸¹ “Ethiopia’s PM vows ‘final and crucial’ offensive in Tigray”, Cara Anna, *Associated Press*, November 17, 2020

⁸² “Rockets fired at Eritrean capital from Ethiopia, diplomats say”, Giulia Paravicini, *Reuters*, November 13, 2020. ; “Fresh rocket attack from Ethiopia’s Tigray region targets Eritrea, say diplomats”, Robbie Corey-

Boulet, *Agence France-Presse*, November 28, 2020. ; Tweet by @RAbdiAnalyst posted on November 14, 2020. Access here:

<https://twitter.com/RAbdiAnalyst/status/1327522632783237120> ; Facebook post uploaded by user “Radio Erena” on November 13, 2020. Access here: <https://www.facebook.com/radioerena/posts/3596366840419307>

⁸³ Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977. Protection of the civilian population, Article 51:4. Access here: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=4BEED9920AE0AEAEC12563CD0051DC9E> ; The number of missiles fired derives from a telephone conversation with an undisclosed Eritrean official.

this end, we have sent four or five delegations of high-ranking officials back-and-forth between here and Eritrea. ... The rationale by the Eritrean government for their troops' presence across the border area in Ethiopia says, "You vacated your trenches where Ethiopian troops were for the past 20 years. In addition to all the harm inflicted on us by TPLF over these last 20 years, they now fired rockets on us and provoked us to enter. Because you abandoned your trenches to pursue TPLF within the interior of Tigray, you have presented them with the opportunity to attack us from those positions, which is a national security threat. This is why we took up those border positions. If you take those positions back, we will vacate the next day because we don't want to be there."⁸⁴

Little fuss was made about Eritrea's actions in November as the US clearly understood that TPLF not only started the war but sought to escalate the conflict. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Assistant Secretary of State of African Affairs Tibor Nagy proceeded to condemn TPLF's actions, calling them an attempt to "internationalize the conflict".⁸⁵ Secretary Pompeo even went as far as thanking Eritrea: "We appreciate Eritrea's restraint, which has helped prevent further spreading of the conflict."⁸⁶

Eritrea's limited and self-contained actions—restricted to taking up exposed trench positions along the border in coordination with the Ethiopian government—were seen as self-defense, cooperative and falling within the framework of the 2018 Declaration. Following such actions, Eritrea's government, though cagey

on the matter, never officially denied a troop presence in Ethiopia.

“Eritrea’s limited and self-contained actions—restricted to taking up exposed trench positions along the border in coordination with the Ethiopian government—were seen as self-defense, cooperative and falling within the framework of the 2018 Declaration.”

After witnessing a federal victory as TPLF retreated from Mekelle on November 28, however, the US began to change its tune on Eritrea. Trump's administration claimed, in a December 8 "exclusive" Reuters piece, that Eritrean troops crossed into Tigray, citing as evidence "satellite images, intercepted communications and anecdotal reports from Tigray region, five diplomats and a security source all briefed on the U.S. assessment told Reuters."⁸⁷ The article proceeds to explain that Eritrean troops "entered Ethiopia in mid-November through three northern border towns: Zalambessa, Rama and Badme", which is consistent with Abiy's claim that they entered after TPLF's missile attacks (November 14). Given that Secretary Pompeo thanked Eritrea on November 17, the US clearly took no issue with Eritrean actions. Lastly, the Reuters article indicated, "The TPLF claims to have killed and captured large numbers of Eritrean troops in the last month, but has provided no evidence."

The Reuters piece is nuanced, citing a "divide" in the State Department, and carefully worded to include exit clauses, suggesting that Washington, at the time of publication, sought to take a cautious wait-and-see approach to determine

⁸⁴ "የኢ.ፌ.ዴ.ሪ ህዝብ ተወካዮች ምክር ቤት ስብሰባ - ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር ዐቢይ አህመድ (ዶር) ከአባላቱ ለተነሱላቸው ጥያቄዎች ማብራሪያ የሰጡበት (ክፍል 1)", *Fana Television*. Uploaded to YouTube on March 23, 2021. Access here: <https://youtu.be/vP-Xzpp1BNg>

⁸⁵ Tweet by @AsstSecStateAF posted on November 15, 2020. Access here: <https://twitter.com/AsstSecStateAF/status/1328015362999414786> ; Tweet by @SecPompeo posted on November 17, 2020. Access here:

<https://twitter.com/SecPompeo/status/1328721926643195907>

⁸⁶ "The United States Condemns the Attack on Eritrea by the Tigray People's Liberation Front", Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, Press Statement, US Department of State, November 17, 2020. Access here: <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-united-states-condemns-the-attack-on-eritrea-by-the-tigray-peoples-liberation-front/index.html>

⁸⁷ "Exclusive: U.S. thinks Eritrea has joined Ethiopian war, diplomats say", Phil Stewart and David Lewis, *Reuters*, December 8, 2020

appropriate engagement with Eritrea in a new Horn of Africa mired in uncertainty. The interesting question here, however, is this: If the US State Department knew Eritrean troops were in Tigray in mid-November and took no issue with it then, why did it feel the need to make this announcement on December 8?

The US position—and the Western media and NGO narrative buttressing it—was certainly influenced by battlefield outcomes in Tigray that saw an unexpected, early retreat from Mekelle by TPLF, which was previously said to have 250,000 “battle-hardened” troops equipped with commandos that would likely take control of the Northern Command’s heavy artillery and personnel and overpower Abiy’s untested 140,000-man force (see [Portrayals of TPLF as ‘Battle Hardened’](#) section). How could such a swift defeat be rationalized by the US and Western media after their nonstop prognostications of a TPLF victory—or at the minimum, a stalemate—versus PM Abiy’s supposedly weak federal forces? What excuse would be given for TPLF’s failure? As the ensuing days, weeks and months following November 28 would reveal, Eritrea became the chosen scapegoat (see [Scapegoating Eritrea](#) section).

Although TPLF claimed Eritrean military involvement and crimes since the start of the conflict, the Western media only took it seriously following a report by CNN on December 4, four days before the Reuters exclusive. CNN not only provided TPLF’s spokesman the platform to give the official excuse for a premature retreat (e.g. “we did not want to give [federal forces] the pretext to bombard [Mekelle] back to the stone age”) but also to turn international attention to Eritrea: “Some of these refugees described to CNN being beaten and tortured by Eritrean soldiers.”⁸⁸ CNN provided the world, for the first time since the start of the conflict, allegations against Eritrea’s military of crimes in Tigray made by non-combatants rather than TPLF. This may come as a surprise, since evidence now suggests that Eritrea, in addition to occupying trenches in

response to TPLF missile attacks, also took part in protecting Eritrean refugees under attack in refugees camps near the border (see [Abduction and Killing of Eritrean Refugees](#) section).

“How could such a swift defeat be rationalized by the US and Western media after their nonstop prognostications of a TPLF victory—or at the minimum, a stalemate—versus PM Abiy’s supposedly weak federal forces? What excuse would be given for TPLF’s failure? As the ensuing days, weeks and months following November 28 would reveal, Eritrea became the chosen scapegoat.”

With the CNN article bringing Eritrean military involvement to world attention and alleging its criminality against innocents in Tigray and the Reuters exclusive providing US confirmation of an Eritrean troop presence, the media would progressively increase the allegations and condemnation of crimes by Eritrea commensurate with TPLF’s battlefield failures.

With the capture, killing and jailing of TPLF’s founders and top brass by federal forces during the first two weeks of January 2021,⁸⁹ the Western media turned attention to “Eritrean troops in Tigray” that were supposedly committing wanton acts of sexual violence, theft and murder that constituted war crimes. Most of these allegations came retroactively, claiming to have occurred during November and being labelled “massacres”.

On January 27, an AP article reported a new US State Department statement demanding Eritrea to “immediately” leave Tigray.⁹⁰ However, the statement also went on to state, “It remains unclear how many Eritrean soldiers are in Tigray, or precisely where.” Such an assertion is absurd. If, according to the Reuters exclusive, the US had satellite imagery and intercepted communications

⁸⁸ “Forces from Ethiopia’s Tigray region say Eritrean troops are part of the conflict and the war is far from over”, Nima Elbagir, Barbara Arvanitidis and Eoin McSweeney, *CNN*, December 4, 2020.

⁸⁹ “Ethiopian military says it killed 15 members of rebellious Tigray forces, captured 8 others”, *Reuters*,

January 11, 2021. ; “Tigray: Ethiopian army kills ex-Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin”, *Al Jazeera English*, January 13, 2021.

⁹⁰ “US says Eritrean forces should leave Tigray immediately”, Cara Anna, Associated Press, January 27, 2021.

as evidence proving an Eritrean troop presence in Tigray, then how is it possible for them not to know where or how large the supposed Eritrean presence is?

The AP on February 4 reported, “Eritrean forces are almost everywhere in Tigray”.⁹¹ This echoes the claim from the December CNN piece by TPLF spokesperson Getachew Reda that “90% of the forces operating in Tigray are from Eritrea.”⁹² Even more shocking, was the allegation by TPLF’s Mulugeta Gebrehiwot, in a “recording of a phone call from somewhere in rural Tigray” that Eritrea sent “42 divisions” to Tigray.⁹³ Given that one division (known in Eritrea as a *kifleserawit*) comprises 5,000 troops, Mulugeta was claiming that there were approximately 210,000 troops in Tigray. Writer and historian Jeff Pearce highlights the absurdity of this allegation: “Mulugeta’s own assertions undermine his credibility. He mentions 42 divisions of Eritrean troops. Really? What, is Eritrea planning on storming Normandy? Military experts will tell you that even from 1998 to 2000, Eritrea had at most 28 divisions made up of four light brigades, and downsized in the years after that.”

AP reporter Cara Anna wrote, “Despite the denials, the Eritrean soldiers aren’t hiding. They have even attended meetings in which humanitarian workers negotiated access with Ethiopian authorities.” Note that Anna is not quoting or referencing any source but is making this claim herself. When one considers the parallel allegations that Eritrean troops are supposedly looting, kidnapping, murdering and raping throughout Tigray, one must ask the following: How can Eritrean troops who are supposedly busy looting, raping and murdering across Tigray – incapable of being captured in a single photo or video – somehow have the time and audacity to attend meetings with humanitarian

workers? How can such a narrative exist inside a world not entirely satirical?

On February 4, following months of similar allegations against Eritrean troops, VOA reported the US State Department claim that it “received credible reports of looting, sexual violence, assaults in refugee camps and other human rights abuses. It cited evidence that Eritrean soldiers are forcibly returning Eritrean refugees to their home country.”⁹⁴ The article also referred to the testimony of an Eritrean armed opposition leader and fugitive wanted for high treason, who claimed that Eritrean forces entered Tigray and were killing Eritreans in refugee camps. What the article fails to mention is that the opposition leader admitted on June 19, 2020 in a radio interview that he visited Tigray multiple times that year to form a “tactical alliance” with TPLF.⁹⁵ This would make him party to the conflict and thus a biased, hostile witness.

So far, all claims of Eritrean crimes in Tigray are based on hearsay or anecdotal evidence that is impossible to substantiate. Notably, the Ethiopian government has informed Tigrayan citizens that some of the alleged “Eritrean” crimes that they do indeed witness may be the result of TPLF deception. On November 12, Ethiopian General Mohammed Tessema explained that TPLF soldiers were dressing up in military uniforms produced at the Almeda Textile Factory to mimic those of the Eritrean Defense Forces in order to claim that Eritrea were present throughout Tigray.⁹⁶

Despite condemnation by the Western media, an Eritrean troop presence itself is not the problem given TPLF’s missile attacks and Eritrea’s bilateral security arrangement with Ethiopia. The alleged crimes by those troops being propagated in the

⁹¹ “US urges Ethiopia’s PM to allow ‘immediate’ help to Tigray”, Cara Anna and Edith M. Lederer, February 4, 2021.

⁹² “Forces from Ethiopia’s Tigray region say Eritrean troops are part of the conflict and the war is far from over”, Nima Elbagir, Barbara Arvanitidis and Eoin McSweeney, *CNN*, December 4, 2020.

⁹³ “‘They Have Destroyed Tigray, Literally’: Mulugeta Gebrehiwot speaks from the mountains of Tigray”, World Peace Foundation, January 29, 2021. The interview was conducted by Alex de Waal.

⁹⁴ “Diplomats Decry Violence, Call for Withdrawal of Eritrean Troops from Ethiopia”, Salem Solomon, *Voice of America*, February 04, 2021.

⁹⁵ “Thursday 18 June 2020. Interview with Ato Mesfin Hagos. ሓገሮስ 18 ሰነ 2020። ቃ/ሙ ምስ ኣቶ ሙስፍን ሓገስ”, *Radio Erena*. Uploaded to YouTube on June 18, 2020. Access here: <https://youtu.be/db40kWwtwJA>

⁹⁶ Tweet by @SOEFactCheck posted on November 12, 2020. Access here: <https://twitter.com/SOEFactCheck/status/1326781302092296193>

media, however, are indeed serious issues that must be assessed carefully.

Rape and Sexual Violence

On January 22, the UN's special representative on sexual violence in conflict, Pramila Patten, said that the UN had received "disturbing" reports about sexual violence taking place in Tigray but this was non-specific and did not allege who was behind the rapes.⁹⁷ Since the release of this statement, various questionable articles in the media suggested that Eritrean and Ethiopian troops were taking part in some sexual violence but it wasn't until Lucy Kassa's story for the Los Angeles Times on February 11 that the media narrative shifted to casting Eritrean troops as the primary perpetrators of rape in Tigray.

Gang rape, which is virtually unheard of in Eritrea, was supposedly unleashed on the Tigrayan population. According to the article, Eritrean troops raped a woman for two weeks until they broke her spine and left her paraplegic.⁹⁸ Kassa does not provide the victim's first name, photos nor medical records, making substantiation impossible. The primary reason for the prominence of Lucy's story in the Western media was due to her allegation that her home was raided by the federal government. Lucy sent the media a photo of her home after the alleged raid, which was included in a VOA article (Fig. 4).⁹⁹

Reminiscent of a Hollywood set, the photo appears to be staged. Nothing is broken but simply turned, angled and disordered as though the photographer did not want to go through the trouble of repurchasing destroyed items afterward: unbroken TV perfectly turned to its side, couch angled upwards at a 45 degree angle to suggest papers were hiding underneath and a ruffle of papers.



Figure 4. Photo of Lucy Kassa's home in Addis Ababa after it was supposedly raided by the government. (Courtesy VOA)

Lucy's argument following the said government raid, published in another piece for the LA Times, was essentially that she was an ethnic Tigrayan being targeted for reporting the truth about her people since the war was supposedly against Tigray and not just TPLF, as the government claimed.¹⁰⁰ She provided no evidence in support. Furthermore, she explained that the government confiscated her laptop and flash drive, which had all the photos and videos to prove that Eritreans were raping civilians in Adigrat, Tigray. Coincidentally, her laptop and flash drive, had they survived, would contain the only forms of proof in all of Ethiopia that Eritrean troops were not only deep in Tigray but also raping civilians.

Since Lucy's LA Times piece, the Western media has failed to contextualize the rapes in Tigray. Prior to the conflict, rape was already a serious problem in the region, which was known to have a pervasive rape culture. In an interview with TRT news, Ethiopian journalist Samuel Getachew stated, "even before, the region has been known for being unfriendly to women".¹⁰¹ Samuel explained that activists, prior to the conflict, had

⁹⁷ "United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Ms. Pramila Patten, urges all parties to prohibit the use of sexual violence and cease hostilities in the Tigray region of Ethiopia", *www.un.org*, January 21, 2021.

⁹⁸ "Eritrean troops accused of rape in Ethiopia's Tigray war", Lucy Kassa and Shashank Bengali, Los Angeles Times, February 11, 2021.

⁹⁹ "Ethiopian Journalist Attacked in Her Home, Questioned on Tigray Connections", Salem Solomon, *Voice of America*, February 12, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ "I Reported on Ethiopia's War. Then Came a Knock at My Door", Lucy Kassa, *Los Angeles Times*, February 11, 2021.

¹⁰¹ Tweet by @TRTWorldNow posted on February 13, 2021. Access here: <https://twitter.com/TRTWorldNow/status/1360510270716710919>

been pushing TPLF to take actions against rape. However, TPLF was well known to challenge these efforts.

In 2019, TPLF blocked an anti-rape rally in Mekelle.¹⁰² One of the leading activists Meaza Gidey, who has been described as “one of the leading faces of the #StopWarOnTigray, Ethiopia movement”, tweeted in 2019 that “rape culture is ubiquitous in Tigray oftentimes stigmatizing & shaming female rape survivors into marrying their rapist.”¹⁰³ Today, Meaza seems to ignore the possibility of endogenous sources of rape in Tigray and instead exclusively points the finger at Eritrean and Ethiopian troops.¹⁰⁴ Only a few months before the start of the Tigray conflict, BBC Tigrinya reported that 133 Tigrayan girls and women, aged between 3 and 25, reported being raped within the previous three months.¹⁰⁵ Many of the perpetrators were fathers, brothers, uncles and neighbors.

Widespread Criminality in Tigray

The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), led by Daniel Bekele, the former Africa Director at Human Rights Watch and senior adviser at Amnesty International, conducted a two-week human rights investigation of the Tigray region and reported on February 11 that all prisoners from ten prisons had been released following TPLF’s retreat.¹⁰⁶ All documentation of inmates was destroyed, which “made the task of tracking major offenders nearly impossible and that it is one of the causes for the substantial increase of looting, gender-based violence and other major crimes.” This alarming news, inexplicably, was not reported in the Western media.

So obvious to local Tigrayans was the sudden explosion of prisoners and crimes against civilians that even TPLF-mouthpiece Tigray Media House (TMH) was forced to admit, in a news broadcast that aired on February 18 and was later deleted from their YouTube page, that TPLF itself was responsible for the rise in crimes taking place in Tigray.¹⁰⁷ His shocking admission, translated from Tigrinya into English, reads as follows:

At this time there are a large number of criminal elements operating in the city of Mekelle. *When news broke out that the Ethiopian army was making its way to Mekelle, the Tigray regional police forces and the prison forces disbanded abandoning their posts. As a result of this, the prison doors were left open and all the hardcore criminals escaped into the community.* It is believed that these criminals are now operating in the city and, in particular, the rural areas, especially the remote ones. These criminals are known to harass the people, be involved in violent robberies and commit murder. *At this time the most shocking thing and sad thing is that in Tigray, Tigrayans are stealing from their fellow Tigrayans, Tigrayans are being killed by their fellow Tigrayans.* At the time when the entire world is against us, it is disheartening to see such things happen between us.

It’s extremely sad to see the Tigrayan youth engaged in large numbers in such activities. Everyone is sad at this situation and the entire community is disheartened. The information that is coming out of Mekelle is that when you want to catch a taxi, the safest thing to do is board at the

¹⁰² “TPLF bans anti rape protest rally in Tigray Mekele city, Ethiopia’s northern region”, *Brana Press*, October 18, 2019.

¹⁰³ “A women led movement: An introduction to Meaza.” OMNA Tigray, February 27, 2021. ; Tweet by @meazaG_ posted on October 19, 2019. Access here: https://twitter.com/meazaG_/status/1185749188715384833

¹⁰⁴ Tweet by @meazaG_ posted on March 8, 2021. Access here: https://twitter.com/meazaG_/status/1368801454941560834

¹⁰⁵ ““ቸግራይ፡ ኣብ ሰለስተ ወርሒ፡ ልዕሊ 133 ደቂ ኣንስትዮ ጾታዊ ዓመጽ ተፈጺሙዎን””, *BBC Tigrinya*, June 4, 2020.

¹⁰⁶ “Current Situation of Residents in Tigray Region - Brief Monitoring Report”, Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, February 11, 2021. Uploaded to Google Drive. Access here:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oqIUj-artYwDyAv4Z0I3Ox7C0ipk3RyG/view>

¹⁰⁷ “EmbassyMedia - TPLF mouth piece TMH admits, Stealing & Killing by Tigray Criminals in Mekele”, *Eritrea EmbassyMedia*. Uploaded to YouTube on February 21, 2021. Access here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6sz7FmtdtM>

taxi ranks. This is because the taxis or minibuses on the ranks are well known and their particulars are registered. Therefore, even if a crime is committed in these vehicles they can be traced. What is happening is that rogue taxis and minibuses are carrying gangs of criminals masquerading as passengers and when people stop them en route they think that they are passengers and board these vehicles. Once these innocent travelers are in the vehicle they are taken hostage by the gang and taken to a remote area, they are then robbed of all their possessions. They will have all their money taken, their mobile phone taken and anything of value taken from them before they are dumped somewhere. If the person is lucky his life will be spared. [Emphasis added]

The fact that the video was later deleted by TMH suggests TPLF's culpability.

The claims by both EHRC and TMH, were further corroborated by the Deputy Administrator of Tigray's Northern Zone, Muluberhan Haile. Speaking with the Ethiopian Press Agency, Muluberhan said, "Prior to the widespread looting of public and civilian property in Tigray State, the TPLF junta had intentionally set free over 10,000 prisoners who are accused of and convicted with serious crimes."¹⁰⁸ He also indicated that TPLF was propagandizing and conducting psychological operations on the Tigrayan population, citing the example of TPLF distributing condoms and telling locals to prepare themselves for invading Eritrean troops who would soon be raping them.

Unlike TPLF, Eritrea's PFDJ government, an erstwhile victim of UN sanctions, has every reason to act ethically and tread lightly in Tigray so as not to draw attention, much less hostility by Tigrayan

civilians and the international community. As such, it makes little sense that the Eritrean government would command its soldiers to engage in needless acts of wanton sexual violence and criminality. Therefore, this becomes a question of the discipline of the Eritrean military and the culture of Eritrean society. Is the Eritrean military undisciplined? Is rape, theft and murder normal and widespread in Eritrean culture?

“Therefore, this becomes a question of the discipline of the Eritrean military and the culture of Eritrean society. Is the Eritrean military undisciplined? Is rape, theft and murder normal and widespread in Eritrean culture?”

History shows that EPLF, the name of PFDJ during the liberation war, was renowned worldwide for its discipline and humanity. In 1996, the Christian Science Monitor called EPLF, “one of the most disciplined and cohesive rebel forces in modern history.”¹⁰⁹ The research division of the Library of Congress shared similar sentiments in a country study, stating that “In addition to its highly disciplined combatants, the EPLF benefited from its broad base of popular support and its political organization.”¹¹⁰ According to Horn of Africa scholar John Markakis, EPLF “laid heavy emphasis on political education and internal security, which made the EPLF the most disciplined and effective movement in the Horn of Africa.”¹¹¹ More recently GlobalSecurity.org indicates: “As the second largest army in Africa, Eritrea's Army is well staffed, well trained, and compared to the vast majority of African armies, well-funded. Indeed, during Eritrea's fight for independence from Ethiopia, the Eritrean military was once widely admired as one of the most effective fighting organizations in the world.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ “TPLF junta orchestrates public, civilian property looting: Admin.”, *Ethiopian Press Agency*, February 24, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ “Tiny Eritrea Says ‘No Thank You’ To Foreign Aid That Has Strings”, Judith Matloff, *Christian Science Monitor*, April 8, 1996.

¹¹⁰ Thomas P. Ofcansky and LaVerle Berry, editors. *Ethiopia: A Country Study*. “Eritrea and the Mengistu

Regime”. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1991.

¹¹¹ Markakis, J. (1988). *The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea*. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 26(1), 51-70. Retrieved April 16, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/160980>

¹¹² GlobalSecurity.org webpage entry for “Eritrea Army”. Access here: <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/eritrea/army.htm>

In 1985, during an Ethiopian famine deemed one of the worst in modern history, 60 Minutes visited an EPLF camp for Ethiopian prisoners of war for a documentary and found that EPLF soldiers were feeding the POWs “900 grams of food a day while Eritrea’s own starving people make due with 500 grams a day”.¹¹³ This highlights the humanity EPLF or, by the most cynical interpretation, its keen awareness of maintaining positive international publicity. The behavior shown towards POWs seems to have been reflective of EPLF’s leadership as well. Writing for The Baltimore Sun, Jane Perlez explains how Eritrea’s leader Isaias Afwerki took no pleasure in seeing the hardships of his recently defeated enemies: “Deeper inside Eritrea, between the towns of Teseney and Barentu, lay the bodies of Ethiopian soldiers, victims of the last battle for the province. For Mr. Isaias and those with him, the sights struck a sobering mood that proved difficult to lift with music from the – board tape deck.”¹¹⁴ He lamented, “When you see such destruction you forget about victory. It’s a very sad thing to see these innocent people put in this position, thirsty and hungry and even if they survive, no future to look forward to.”

Thus, Eritrea’s military and its leadership have a longstanding history demonstrative of high discipline. However, if one were to assume Eritrean soldiers broke discipline on a mass scale such that mass rape, looting and murder would be possible, then one would have expect an Eritrean culture marked by moral depravity and barbarism. The historical record suggests otherwise.

Congressman Dan Burton in testimony before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee had this to say about Eritreans: “The Eritreans have won

the love and respect of all who have come to know them. ... Their humility and perseverance are worthy of our awe. And the humane treatment which the Eritreans have meted out to their enemies is unfortunately all too rare in this world.”¹¹⁵ Former US Ambassador Robert Houdek

“The Western media’s unsubstantiated allegations of mass rape, theft and murder by the Eritrean military in Tigray, in spite of the history and data, is a referendum on the Western media’s perception of Eritrean culture, which ultimately sees the Eritrean people as undisciplined savages—as barbarians incapable of resisting carnal desire. This is fundamentally racist.”

said, “The incorruptibility and dedication of these people is extraordinary”.¹¹⁶

Robert D. Kaplan wrote in 2003 that Asmara “not only is one of the cleanest capital cities in Africa but also may be the only capital south of the Sahara where one can leave the car doors unlocked or prowl the back streets at all hours without fear of being robbed, even though the police are barely in evidence.”¹¹⁷ UN Resident Coordinator Christine Umutoni said in 2017 that the “Eritrean people are very honest, and are very accountable people.”¹¹⁸ In 2017, Carol Pineau, former reporter for CNN, BBC and NPR, said, “The Eritreans could be infuriating. They would often not tell you anything. The one thing I will say though – I never caught them in a lie. They always told the truth.”¹¹⁹

¹¹³ “1985-03-xx - George Galloway - 60 Minutes (Aus) [couchtripper].mp4”, *couchtripper*. Uploaded to YouTube on November 23, 2020. Access here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6mGleD3DJo>

¹¹⁴ “Eritrean leader gets sobering homecoming at end of 30-year war”, Jane Perlez, The Baltimore Sun, June 10, 1991.

¹¹⁵ *The Political Crisis in Ethiopia and the Role of the United States: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, One Hundred Second Congress, First Session, June 18, 1991, Volume 4, 15-16.*

¹¹⁶ “Back From the Ruins : Can this be an African nation that works?”, Joshua Hammer, *Newsweek International*, February 26, 1996, pg 40.

¹¹⁷ “A Tale of Two Colonies”, Robert D. Kaplan, *The Atlantic*, April 2003.

¹¹⁸ “Embassy Media - Christine N Umutoni, UN Resident Representative in Eritrea”, *Eritrea EmbassyMedia*. Uploaded to YouTube on March 15, 2017. Access here: <https://youtu.be/lytZQN4c8Rg>

¹¹⁹ Carol Pineau, Keynote Address, 2019 Conference of the National Council of Eritrean Americans. “NATIONAL COUNCIL OF ERITREAN AMERICAN I CONFERENCE 2019”. Uploaded to YouTube on August 8, 2019. Access here: <https://youtu.be/NuS5yBjsvXs>

Robert D. Kaplan wrote in *The Atlantic* in 2003 that Eritrea is “most civil of societies” and “has achieved a degree of non-coercive social discipline and efficiency enviable in the developing world.”¹²⁰ Kaplan would likely be shocked to hear about mass rape by Eritrean troops, the sons and daughters of liberation fighters whom he met in the 1980s and described as follows: “In the cramped, frontline quarters, although men and women sleep side by side, sex is said to be rare; and pregnancies are unusual despite the unavailability of any means of birth control. The EPLF evidently has a puritanical streak.”¹²¹

The aforementioned descriptions run counter to the sensationalized depictions of Eritrean soldiers in Tigray. The Western media’s unsubstantiated allegations of mass rape, theft and murder by the Eritrean military in Tigray, in spite of the history and data, is a referendum on the Western media’s perception of Eritrean culture, which ultimately sees the Eritrean people as undisciplined savages – as barbarians incapable of resisting carnal desire. This is fundamentally racist.

Mai Kadra Massacre

From November 9 to 10, a TPLF-backed militia known as the “Samri” and Tigrayan special police forces carried out the murder of 600+ ethnic Amhara day laborers in the village of Mai Kadra in retaliation for a recent battlefield defeat against Ethiopian federal forces. While in retreat, militia members went door-to-door hacking victims to death with machetes and knives and burning homes, in addition to many other gruesome crimes. These accounts were confirmed by Amnesty International in their November 12

publication that stated, “The organization’s Crisis Evidence Lab has examined and digitally verified gruesome photographs and videos of bodies strewn across the town or being carried away on stretchers. It confirmed the images were recent and using satellite imagery, geolocated them to Mai-Kadra in western Tigray state (14.071008, 36.564681).”¹²² The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) deployed a team to Mai Kadra to investigate and concluded in their November 24 preliminary report that “local security apparatus in charge helped and collaborated with the group known as Samri” and that their actions “strongly indicate the commission of grave human rights violations which may amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes.”¹²³ These findings were welcomed by the AU’s African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights.¹²⁴

According to the Ethiopian government, Samri militia members, made up of young men ideologically aligned with TPLF, fled to Sudanese refugee camps following the massacre and were providing false testimony to reporters there.¹²⁵ These claims were corroborated by both private local and international media. On November 23, Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) correspondent Fasil Yenealem reported from UNHCR’s Hamdayet refugee reception center in Sudan, explaining that Samri militia members who fled the scene of Mai Kadra were reorganizing themselves in the camps, recruiting new members, blocking aid disbursement to non-Tigrayan refugees and – most notably – misinforming international media and organizations.¹²⁶ AFP visited both the Sudanese refugee camps and Mai Kadra and revealed how

¹²⁰ “A Tale of Two Colonies,” *The Atlantic*, April 2003.

¹²¹ “Surrender Or Starve: Travels in Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea”, Robert D. Kaplan, Vintage, 2003.

¹²² “Ethiopia: Investigation reveals evidence that scores of civilians were killed in massacre in Tigray state”, Amnesty International, November 12, 2020.

Access here: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/ethiopia-investigation-reveals-evidence-that-scores-of-civilians-were-killed-in-massacre-in-tigray-state/>

¹²³ “Rapid Investigation into Grave Human Rights Violation in Maikadra - Preliminary Findings”, Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, November 24, 2020.

Retrieved from the Addis Standard website. Access

here: <https://addisstandard.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Maikadra-Preliminary-Findings-English-Final.pdf>

¹²⁴ Tweet by @achpr_cadhp posted on November 24, 2020. Access here: https://twitter.com/achpr_cadhp/status/1331326212677963780

¹²⁵ “The Mai Kadra Genocide: Perpetrators Acting as Victims February 25, 2021”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, February 25, 2021.

¹²⁶ “Ethiopia - ESAT DC Daily New Mon 23 Nov 2020”, *ESATtv Ethiopia*. Uploaded to YouTube on November 23, 2020. Access here: <https://youtu.be/PDFeng-lb6Q>

Tigrayan refugee testimony in Sudan blamed the federal government while Mai Kadra resident testimony blamed the TPLF-backed militias.¹²⁷ How could this be possible? Who should be believed: the actual residents of Mai Kadra with the bodies to corroborate their claims or refugees in Sudanese claiming to be from Mai Kadra? In a more recent investigative report published in the Italian weekly magazine *Panorama*, journalist Francesca Ronchin found that the Hamdayet camp was where “many militiamen of the now defeated TPLF have found refuge” and that they were “not impartial voices”.¹²⁸

Video footage from the camps aired on November 27 on the Amhara Mass Media Agency’s daily news program, which has Samri members on record saying in Amharic that they will “exterminate every Amhara”.¹²⁹ Rather than ring alarm bells, Reuters downplayed the threat of the genocidal TPLF-backed Samri militia, euphemistically labelling them a “Tigrayan youth group” in an article with the following misleading headline: “Tigrayans accused of massacre in Ethiopia war, both sides claim advances”.¹³⁰ TPLF or TPLF-backed militias do not equate to “Tigrayans”.

The Western media not only buried this story, which revealed the genocidal criminality of TPLF, but also went as far as providing exposés of other, unrelated alleged war crimes painting the opposite image: TPLF and Tigrayans as *victims* of Amhara militias and federal forces. For instance, the New York Times, which did not even report the massacre, published an article on December 9 highlighting the crimes by Amhara—not Tigrayan—militias known as “Fano.”¹³¹ Although such alleged crimes should be taken seriously and investigated, the reality is that the Times seems to have manufactured this story. The article focuses on the story of the Tigrayan victim Ashenafi Hailu, who was supposedly beaten and dragged by noose along a dirt road of an unnamed town in

Tigray. The article includes a photo of Ashenafi’s neck as proof of the event (Fig. 5)



Figure 5. Photo of Ashenafi Hailu’s cervical scars supposedly from being dragged in a noose. Courtesy: New York Times.

According to medical experts, this scar is more than three months old. However, the Times article was published only a month after the conflict began, meaning that Ashenafi’s account does not hold water.

HRW’s Horn of Africa Director Laetitia Bader, while acknowledging the “chilling” findings of the EHRC, stated on Twitter that “The lack of independent investigations & access to monitors make it difficult to corroborate and identify claims of who may be responsible for such abuses.” It is almost unfathomable that Bader questions EHRC and Amnesty’s independence given that the latter works closely with HRW and the former is led by her own colleague, HRW’s former Africa Director.

Will Brown, correspondent for The Daily Telegraph and senior associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, quote-tweeted EHRC’s November 24 tweet blaming Samri and instead placed the blame squarely on the government and Amhara forces (i.e. Fano): “I have interviewed more than 10 refugees from Maikadra in Eastern Sudan who claim the federal

¹²⁷ “Questions linger among the corpses of an Ethiopian massacre”, Robbie Corey-Boulet and Abdelmoneim Abu Idris Ali, *Agence France-Presse*, November 25, 2020.

¹²⁸ “Axum: il massacro denunciato dalle ong”, Francesca Ronchin, *Panorama*, March 25, 2021.

¹²⁹ “በማይካድራ የዘር ማጥፋት ወንጀል የፈጸሙት የሳምራና የትግራይ ልዩ ኃይል አባላት በረከት በምትባል ቀበሌና በሱዳን የስደተኞች ካምፕ ሌላ ጥቃት እያደረሱ ነው።”, *Amhara Media*

Corporation. Uploaded to YouTube on November 27, 2020. Access here: <https://youtu.be/kppoWmC7V40>

¹³⁰ “Tigrayans accused of massacre in Ethiopia war, both sides claim advances”, *Reuters*, November 24, 2020.

¹³¹ “Fleeing Ethiopians Tell of Ethnic Massacres in Tigray War”, Abdi Latif Dahir and Tyler Hicks, *New York Times*, December 9, 2020.

army / Amhara militias massacred people”.¹³² He later deleted this tweet, which has been saved to Google’s cache.¹³³ Again, this appears to be victim-blaming. Kenneth Roth, the executive director of HRW, went as far as blaming the entire atrocity at Mai Kaidra on “pro-government militias” in multiple tweets (Fig. 6 - 7)



2:10 PM · 30 Nov 20 · SocialFlow

Figure 6. Kenneth Roth’s first deleted tweet falsely blaming “a pro-government militia”. Courtesy: Twitter.

After the damage had already been done within the 24-hour news cycle, he then deleted the tweets the following day and tweeted a seemingly disingenuous apology, using the opportunity to demand more “access” from the government (Fig. 8).

¹³² Tweet by @_Will_Brown posted on November 24, 2020. Access here: https://twitter.com/_will_brown/status/1331264653771632656?lang=en

¹³³ Google cache link of quote tweet of @_Will_Brown by @endalk2006 from November 24, 2020:



Figure 7. Kenneth Roth’s second deleted tweet blaming “pro-government militiamen”. Courtesy: Twitter.

“... photo journalist Jemal Countess ... visited Mai Kadra in March and conducted 47 interviews with residents including their full names and photos. All testimonies blame TPLF and Samri youth. Thus, there is now no question as to who was responsible for the Mai Kadra massacre.”

<https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:uTdkb14RP-OJ:https://twitter.com/endalk2006/status/1331327947907747840+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=firefox-b-1-d>



Figure 8. Kenneth Roth's tweet apologizing for a previous tweet. Courtesy: Twitter.

How does one accidentally blame the wrong side in a massacre this serious and this large? According to Bronwyn Bruton of the Atlantic Council's Africa Center, Roth's tweet was "not an adequate apology for mistakenly accusing the wrong party of a genocidal act. I take note of @HRW reluctance to properly allocate responsibility for this atrocity to #TPLF, even in the correction."

Perhaps the clearest evidence that TPLF, rather than the federal government or Amhara militias, was behind the Mai Kadra massacre, comes from

the groundbreaking work of staff photographer for Getty Images and photo journalist Jemal Countess who visited Mai Kadra in March and conducted 47 interviews with residents including their full names and photos.¹³⁴ All testimonies blame TPLF and Samri youth. Thus, there is now no question as to who was responsible for the Mai Kadra massacre.

The testimonies also verify that Samri youth were posing as refugees in Sudanese camps and falsely testifying that Amhara victims were perpetrators. One of the survivors, 35-year old Tilahun Baye, stated, "But once I got to Sudan we saw those youths who killed our friends, claiming they are civilian refugees. When they recognized me they even accused me of being a killer and prohibited [sic] from getting medical treatment."¹³⁵ According to Countess, who was contacted by writer and historian Jeff Pearce for an investigative piece on the massacre, TPLF was not only infiltrating the Sudanese refugee camps but also key positions inside Tigray that could help forward the TPLF narrative to the international media. For instance, Countess explained that a "TPLF guy" was falsely translating for Reuters and had to be switched out upon discovery. "Even the witnesses and survivors talking to the Reuters reporter apparently realized that something was off, noticing how the translator began spinning tales of Fano coming along and committing war crimes," wrote Pearce.

Axum Massacre

On February 26, Amnesty international issued a report investigating an alleged massacre of "hundreds" that they claim took place on November 28 and 29 in the ancient town of Axum, home to the Maryam Tsion Church. The report concluded "that the indiscriminate shelling of Axum by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops may amount to war crimes, and that the mass execution of Axum civilians by Eritrean troops may amount to crimes against humanity."¹³⁶ The

¹³⁴ "ETH: Mai Kadra Attack Survivors Allege Premeditated Ethnic Cleansing", Jemal Countess, *Getty Images*, March 5, 2021. 62 photos with stories in captions. Access here: <https://www.gettyimages.com/photos/jemal-countess?editorialproducts=news&events=77563149>

[7&family=editorial&phrase=Jemal%20Countess&sort=newest#license](#)

¹³⁵ Countess, J, "ETH: Mai Kadra" Editorial number: 1305830453 (Tilahun Baye).

¹³⁶ "The Massacre in Axum", Amnesty International, February 26, 2021. Access here:

event was explained to have taken place on November 28 and 29. Remarkably, Amnesty did not visit Axum. Instead, it claims that it conducted 11 days of research and interviews from mid- to late January at the Hamdayet refugee reception center in eastern Sudan and via phone interviews from February 3 to 15 with witnesses in Axum. In all, Amnesty conducted 41 interviews with unnamed persons, making substantiation and evidence-based analysis impossible. In its totality, the non-peer-reviewed publication – devoid of a “methodologies” section – was found to be extremely problematic and rife with flagrant errors too numerous to list in this report. However, a review of the most egregious errors, contradictions and counter-evidence are more than sufficient to reject Amnesty’s conclusions.

Although the alleged massacre is said to have taken place on November 28 to 29, it was first reported in January. An organization calling itself the Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA), which had been publishing daily “Situation Reports” on the Tigray conflict since November 17, reported that “Maryam Tsiyon Church has been attacked (local people believe with the aim to take the Ark of Covenant to Addis Ababa). Hundreds of people hiding in the Maryam Tsiyon Church were brought out and shot on the square in front. The number of people killed is reported as 750.”¹³⁷ No date for the event is provided.

Ex-BBC Africa journalist Martin Plaut, republished the EEPA report verbatim on his “Eritrea Hub” blog and followed up with his own blog post providing additional details.¹³⁸ According to Plaut, approximately 1,000 churchgoers were met by advancing “Ethiopian federal troops and Amhara militia” who threatened to take the famed Ark of the Covenant stored inside, provoking church members to go outside in defense. “A confrontation ensued. Everyone in the compound was forced into the square outside the cathedral.

<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AFR2537302021ENGLISH.PDF>

¹³⁷ “Situation Report EEPA HORN No. 50 - 09 January 2021” Europe External Programme with Africa, January 9, 2021. Access here:

<https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-50-09-January-2021.pdf>

¹³⁸ “Massacre at Tigray’s Mariam of Zion cathedral in Aksum”, Martin Plaut, *Eritrea Hub*, January 11, 2021.

As the crowd milled around, there was further shouting and the troops opened fire on the protesting crowd. As many as 750 people are reported to have been killed,” Plaut wrote. He dated the event to December 15.

Jan Nyssen from Ghent University in Belgium repeated EEPA and Plaut’s claims but changed the perpetrators to Eritrean troops, citing “colleagues” and travelers to Mekelle – all anonymous.¹³⁹ Next, Fionn Shiner picked up the story for Aid to the Church in Need UK (ACN-UK) highlighting multiple attacks on churches and spinning the conflict in Tigray as an assault on Christianity.¹⁴⁰ A dubious blog going by Tghat, entirely dedicated to covering the Tigray conflict, published on February 13 a supposed eyewitness account by Getu Mak, who described himself as a lecturer at Adigrat University in Tigray.

Getu claimed for the first time that: (1) the event took place in late November and (2) the alleged massacre was not a church event targeting churchgoers but rather a city wide one targeting all civilians. This new narrative was then picked up by AP’s Cara Anna, who quoted Getu and anonymous sources, and claimed that bodies were buried in “mass graves.”¹⁴¹ This retelling of the story, largely as recounted by Getu and reported by Anna in mid-February, is ultimately what became Amnesty’s “Axum Massacre” report.

The progression of reporting by various sources on events at Mai Kadra can be visualized and compared in Table 1.

¹³⁹ Nyssen, J, 2021. The situation in Tigray at the beginning of 2021. Access here:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348296742_The_situation_in_Tigray_at_the_beginning_of_2021

¹⁴⁰ “ETHIOPIA: Surge in violence leads to up to 1,000 deaths”, Fionn Shiner, Aid to the Church in Need UK, January 22, 2021.

¹⁴¹ “‘Horrible’: Witnesses recall massacre in Ethiopian holy city”, Cara Anna, Associated Press, February 18, 2021.

Source	Date Reported	Date of Massacre	# Dead	Responsible	Source	Status of Bodies
EEPA	Jan 9	N/A	750	N/A	None	N/A
Plaut	Jan 11	Dec 15	750	Ethiopian, Amhara	EEPA Anonymous	N/A
Nyssen	Jan 11	Dec 17-20	750	Eritrean	“direct eye witnesses who travel to Mekelle” and “colleagues”	N/A
ACN-UK	Jan 23	Dec (indiscriminate)	1,000	Eritrean	“anonymous source”	N/A
Getu Mak	Feb 13	Nov 28-29	720	Eritrean	Self	“The number of corpses buried at the church of St. Mary of Zion was estimated to be around 720”
Cara Anna	Feb 18	Nov 28-29	800	Eritrean	Anonymous, Getu Mak	“He gathered victims’ identity cards and assisted with burials in mass graves.”
Amnesty	Feb 26	Nov 28-29	“hundreds”	Eritrean	Anonymous	“There were several small mass graves”

Table 1. Progression of reports about the alleged Axum massacre.

Axum was under federal control as of November 20.¹⁴² Although federal forces captured Mekelle on November 28 and declared the operation over, Reuters reported that TPLF retook Axum on November 29.¹⁴³ According to the Amnesty report, however, TPLF fighters in the city were routed by Eritreans on the morning of November 28 and “Eritrean soldiers carried out house-to-house raids in the afternoon of 28 November and the morning of 29 November.” Clearly, this is impossible if TPLF controlled Axum.

Even in spite of the “communications blackout”, why did it take so long to report the killings? It is unlikely that a November massacre of this magnitude, which would provide additional diplomatic support for TPLF, would go unmentioned and unnoticed until January, especially when TPLF’s leaders were tweeting and in communication with the international media by text and phone throughout December.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² “Ethiopia claims two key towns seized from Tigray fighters”, *Al Jazeera*, November 27, 2020.

¹⁴³ “Tigray forces claim to have taken back Ethiopian town after Government announces end to military offensive”, *ABC News* (Australia), November 29, 2020.

¹⁴⁴ Tweet by @reda_getachew posted on December 22, 2020. Access here: https://twitter.com/reda_getachew/status/1341291511

Furthermore, how is it possible for the massacre – that Amnesty reported left “smelly” corpses “in every corner” out “in the open for a day or two” whereby “the atmosphere is a sad one” – to take place one day before the world-renowned Maryam TSION festival? Celebrated annually on November 30, the festival once again took place in 2020 with event proceedings and interviews broadcast on Fana TV.¹⁴⁵ The seemingly unconcerned festivalgoers interviewed acknowledged a lower turn out because of the conflict but stated that the event went well, without any issues. How did the Axum civilians have time for a festival – including evening mass on November 29 while Eritrean troops were supposedly still out killing – but no time to properly bury bodies such that they had to be hurled into mass graves? This is absurd.

Additionally, Amnesty claimed it conducted phone interviews with witnesses in Axum as early as

[040913408](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=040913408); “Fighting flares in Ethiopia’s Tigray as army says closing in on rebellious force”, *Reuters*, December 5, 2020.

¹⁴⁵ “የአክሱም ፅድቅ ማርያም በሰላም መከበር”, *Fana Television*. Uploaded to YouTube on December 4, 2020. Access here: <https://youtu.be/flaBCMPuQ4U>

February 3 yet Ethio Telecom, as previously mentioned (see "Communications Blackout" section), did not restore phone lines until February 8, meaning those supposed phone interviews were impossible.

In a statement on February 27, US Secretary Antony Blinken said USAID would be deployed to Tigray.¹⁴⁶ On March 3, TPLF-mouthpiece Tigray Media House (TMH) reported that USAID representative named "Dr. Asmelash" had been sent to Axum to investigate the massacre.¹⁴⁷ He met with the Deputy Administrator of the Maryam Tsion Church and asked to see the bodies. According to TMH's host Stalin Gebreselassie, the church representative said, "We cannot show you the burial grounds, because they were buried in different places and churches around Axum, including the suburbs. We did not bury them in a single mass grave." When Dr. Asmelash asked to visit families of the dead, the church representative said, "The people do not want to meet with you since you came accompanied by the military. People are scared and it's inconvenient for families." According to Stalin, the investigator did not find a single body or talk to a single family member of the deceased. How then is it possible to take Amnesty's claims of a "massacre" seriously?

On March 5, HRW released its own report on the events of Axum in November and blamed the inability to identify bodies on hyenas.¹⁴⁸ This latest report, which provides no evidence outside of anonymous, unsubstantiated witness testimony from phone interviews with 28 supposed witnesses, indicates: "Hyenas had eaten the corpses on May Quho, so we didn't collect many

dead bodies from there,' said one man carrying the dead. 'I counted around 25 remains that could not be identified.' Another said: 'The hill was like a graveyard, a ghost hill.'" So critical was this new finding – missed by Amnesty and others – that HRW's Deputy Africa Director Ida Sawyer felt the need to tweet this exact quote in the marketing campaign of the report.¹⁴⁹ All excuses for failing to find corpses are now accounted for. The lack of bodies for evidence, however, still did not stop false photos of bodies from the alleged massacre from spreading on Facebook. An investigative report by Kenya's The Star newspaper showed how a photo from a burial of farmers massacred in Nigeria by Boko Haram was falsely used as evidence of a massacre in Axum.¹⁵⁰

A Tigrayan man from Axum, having recognized the growing concerns on the internet about the alleged massacre in his city, conducted an investigation of the matter and released a Facebook video of his findings. In the video, he concluded that the allegations were "totally a lie. Period."¹⁵¹ A priest from Maryam Tsion also came out and claimed that not one person was killed in the alleged massacre.¹⁵²

These findings by local Axumites hardly come as a surprise if one reads only a few testimonies from the Amnesty report, which prove so theatrical and absurd that no honest observer could take them seriously. Take for instance, this account from page 12:

"They [Eritrean soldiers] only shot twice for the six people ... They shot three people with one bullet. The first and second fell dead. The third one was injured, about to fall. They

¹⁴⁶ "Atrocities in Ethiopia's Tigray Region", Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, Press Statement, US Department of State, February 27, 2021. Access here: <https://www.state.gov/atrocities-in-ethiopia-tigray-region/>

¹⁴⁷ "ዳህሳስ ሚዲያ 03-03-2021 ንህዝብና ድምፂ ንኹኖ <https://gf.me/u/y7k68p>", *Tigray Media House*. Uploaded to YouTube on March 3, 2021. Access here: https://youtu.be/_OUGeuMNgJ8

¹⁴⁸ "Ethiopia: Eritrean Forces Massacre Tigray Civilians", Human Rights Watch, March 5, 2021, Access here: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/05/ethiopia-eritrean-forces-massacre-tigray-civilians>

¹⁴⁹ Tweet by @ida_sawyer posted on March 6, 2021. Access here: https://twitter.com/ida_sawyer/status/1368292801687875585

¹⁵⁰ "Facebook image doesn't show massacre victims in Ethiopia's Tigray", PESA CHECK Fact Checker, The Star (Kenya), March 14, 2021.

¹⁵¹ Facebook video uploaded by user "Hadnet Kiflemariam" on February 27, 2021. Access here: <https://www.facebook.com/helen.gebreamlak.54/videos/1902655983244043/>

¹⁵² Tweet by @NahomAbraham14 posted on March 13, 2021. Access here: <https://twitter.com/NahomAbraham14/status/1370872967970893827>

shot him a second time and killed the three others with the same bullet. They were lined up perfectly. “

Who could take such testimony seriously and call this report “credible”?

Therefore, the Amnesty report is not credible, its findings are premature and contradicted by USAID’s investigation. Getu Mak provides the only verifiable source but his account is purely anecdotal and is contradicted by counter-evidence (e.g. dates and bodies). Amnesty, alternatively, opted for purely anonymous testimony, with phone interviews being impossible based on dates provided. All in-person interviews were conducted at the Hamdayet refugee reception center where, as previously mentioned, was overrun with TPLF-backed Samri militias who were found to be providing misinformation.

The Amnesty report was rejected by both the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments.¹⁵³ On March 3, Ethiopia’s Prime Minister’s Office stated that it was looking into “credible allegations” of atrocities that would also be “including in Axum.”¹⁵⁴ AP correspondent Cara Anna used this announcement to misleadingly proclaim an official change of position by the PM’s Office whereby, as the article’s title stated, “Ethiopia now calls Axum massacre allegations ‘credible’”.¹⁵⁵ The Prime Minister’s Office said nothing of the “Axum massacre” alleged by Amnesty but was clearly referring to alleged atrocities in general.

Maryam Dengelat Massacre

On February 26, CNN ran its “Massacre in the Mountains” story about the alleged mass killing of 80 - 150 Tigrayan civilians by Eritrean troops on November 30, 2020 at Maryam Dengelat Church and the surrounding town of Dengelat.¹⁵⁶ Interestingly, reporting of the event mirrored—

almost exactly—the reporting of the “Axum Massacre.” First reports came from another EEPA “Situation Report” (12/19/20) with follow up reports on Plaut’s Eritrea Hub blog (12/25/20), Jan Nyssen’s paper (01/11/21) and Fionn Shiner for ACN-UK (01/11/21). How is it possible that, in the early months of the conflict, the exact same entities reported the two separate events in the exact same order? See Table 2 for the progression of reporting on the Maryam Dengelat massacre.

The CNN Dengelat story, like the Amnesty report on Axum, provided a megaphone and international attention to previously obscure reporting by the same cast of characters on the alleged mass killing. In fact, both publications of these alleged Eritrean massacres against Christians were published on the exact same day providing maximum impact for Western audiences in the lead up to the US assuming the presidency of the UN Security Council.

“Interestingly, reporting of the event mirrored—almost exactly—the reporting of the “Axum Massacre.” ... How is it possible that, in the early months of the conflict, the exact same entities reported the two separate events in the exact same order?”

Notably, the focus on massacres by Eritreans on Christian communities in Tigray, both taking place on one of Ethiopia’s holiest Christian holidays, plays into false historical depictions by Western scholars of Eritrea, despite the nation’s almost 50-50 split between Muslim and Christian believers, as an encroaching Muslim threat on Ethiopia, the supposed “island of Christianity in a sea of Islam.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ “Amnesty report describes Axum massacre in Ethiopia’s Tigray”, Cara Anna, *Associated Press*, February 27, 2021.

¹⁵⁴ Tweet by @PMEthiopia posted on March 3, 2021.

Access here:

<https://twitter.com/PMEthiopia/status/1367136074938597381>

¹⁵⁵ “Ethiopia now calls Axum massacre allegations ‘credible’”, Cara Anna, *Associated Press*, March 3, 2021.

¹⁵⁶ “Massacre in the mountains”, Nima Elbagir, Barbara Arvanitidis, Bethlehem Feleke, Eliza Mackintosh, Gianluca Mezzofiore and Katie Polglase, *CNN*, March 22, 2021.

¹⁵⁷ Woolbert, R. (1942). *The Future of Ethiopia*. *Foreign Affairs*, 20(3), 535-551.

Source	Date Reported	Date of Massacre	# Dead	Responsible	Source	Bodies
EEPA	Dec 19	N/A	37-150	Eritrean	None	N/A
Plaut	Dec 25	N/A	150	Ethiopian, Amhara	EEPA, Anonymous	N/A
Nyssen	Jan 11	Dec 17-20	80-150	Eritrean	“direct eye witnesses who travel to Mekelle” “colleagues”	N/A
ACN-UK	Jan 23	Dec (indiscriminate)	154	Eritrean	“anonymous source”	N/A
CNN	Feb 26	Nov 28-29	100+	Eritrean	Self	“Abraham said he buried more than 50 people that day” and “... most of them were eaten by vultures before they got buried”

Table 2. Progression of reports about the alleged Maryam Dengelat massacre.

The CNN article, embedded with an accompanying documentary film narrated by their international correspondent Nima Elbagir, is rife with errors and sensationalism. CNN did not visit Tigray. From the video, Elbagir indicates that video footage “was secretly taken and smuggled out to CNN to avoid Ethiopian and Eritrean troops” and that they used animation and actors’ voices to hide identities. “Through a network of activists and relatives, CNN tracked down eyewitnesses to the attack,” states CNN. Who exactly are these “activists” and why are they not named? Only pseudonyms are provided.

Upon review of the reportedly smuggled video footage, it becomes clear that these activists provided manipulated content to CNN. The day after the release of the CNN story, the original video “obtained by CNN” was released in its totality on Twitter.¹⁵⁸

In the video, the man recording the footage and a second man to the left of him are clearly seen and heard coaching an elderly man in the video on what to say. Speaking in Tigrinya, the man holding the camera whispers to the assistant that he’s going to ask the elderly Tigrayan villager (location unknown) how many people died and that the villager should reply with “265”. The assistant walks up to the villager and whispers in the villager’s ear, and cameraman then asks the

villager the question to which the villager responds with “around 200” and “maybe 220”. The frustrated assistant walks up and whispers in the villager’s ear once again, and the villager finally responds with “265”. The villager looks noticeably uncomfortable with long pauses between answers, suggesting he may have been coerced.

This video is absolutely damning for the CNN story and the activist intermediaries involved as it reveals clear manipulation by the activists of content from sites of alleged massacres in Tigray – creating facts on the ground for the TPLF version of events. Why has the Western press remained silent on this blunder by CNN? Is Elbagir being duped?

The CNN team seemed to overlook another equally damning fact: Maryam Dengelat church is currently closed. According to an Ethiopia Observer article from May 4, 2020:

The church, situated near Adigrat across the Agame Massif, was inaccessible for about 400 years since a section of the mountain collapsed, taking with it the entrance of the church. On 24 March 2019, for the first time in more than 400 years, priests were able to celebrate a mass in the church, after having climbed 30 meters. ... A lot of work remained before the troglodyte church could be

¹⁵⁸ Tweet by @SirakBahlbi posted on February 27, 2021. Access here:

<https://twitter.com/SirakBahlbi/status/1365676785313185793>

returned to the community. ... *Maryam Dengelat's door is closed again* but there is an ongoing project to set up a museum in an existing building located at the base. Since *the site itself will not be open to the public*, the museum would display photographs of the church's mural paintings and artifacts of the church.¹⁵⁹ [Emphasis added]

The church is carved into a mountainside. For the sake of argument, even if one were to assume that they didn't mean the church per se but perhaps another building within what CNN called a "monastery complex" it is clear that their story doesn't stack up. According to the CNN video footage and animation, the village is located in the valley while the church (or monastery complex) is located at the edge of a mountain (Fig. 9 - 11). No buildings or homes are at a higher elevation than the church. Despite this obvious fact, the article states, "Samuel, another eyewitness, said that he had eaten and drank with the soldiers before they came to his house, which is just behind the church." This is impossible since there are no homes behind the church, which is perched at the side of a mountain. "But, as congregants were celebrating mass around midday, shelling and gunfire erupted, sending people fleeing up mountain paths and into nearby homes," the article maintains. Again, this is impossible.



Figure 9. Maryam Dengelat church. Courtesy Olivier Grunewald.

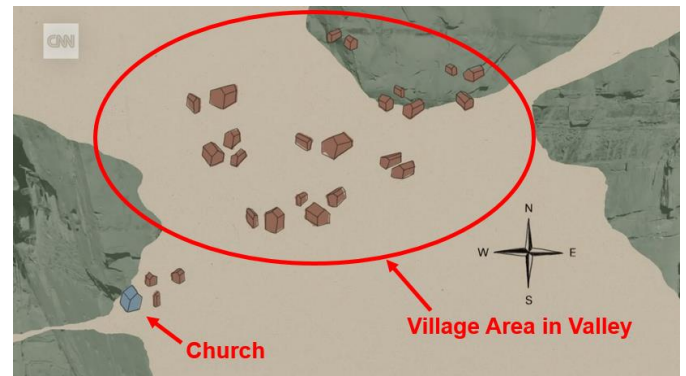


Figure 10. CNN's animation of the Maryam Dengelat area. Red text and art have been added to clearly delineate areas discussed in the corresponding CNN article. Courtesy: CNN.

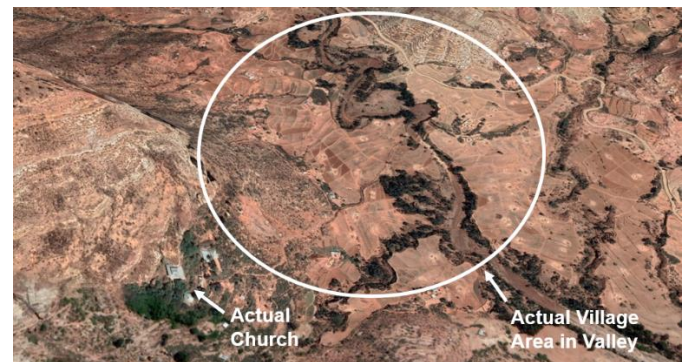


Figure 11. CNN's satellite imagery for the Maryam Dengelat area. White text and art have been added to clearly delineate areas discussed in the corresponding CNN article. Courtesy: CNN.

While members of the congregation were apparently running uphill away from the church, CNN explains that people were also running away from the village toward the church: "Marta, who was visiting Dengelat for the holiday, says she left the church with her husband Biniam after morning prayers. As the newlyweds walked back to their relative's home, a stream of people began sprinting up the hill, shouting that soldiers were rounding people up in the village." Why are people fleeing toward the gunfire coming from the church? Instead of fleeing with the other panicked villagers, Marta and Biniam continued on to their house only to be shot and killed. This makes no sense.

The article goes on:

After they killed them outside their houses, they were looting and taking all the property," Samuel said. As the violence

¹⁵⁹ "The reopening and re-consecration of a once inaccessible church", *Ethiopia Observer*, May 4, 2020.

raged, hundreds of people remained in the church hall. ... With nowhere to run to, Abraham sheltered inside Maryam Dengelat, lying on the floor as artillery pounded the tin roof. 'We lost hope and we decided to stay and die at the church. We didn't try to run,' he said.

The only way for artillery to pound on the church's roof is for the soldiers to be above the church firing downward, which is not possible given the church's elevation, or to use projectiles fired up into the sky from far away. In either scenario, the artillery would have totally destroyed the "tin" roof and the entire church. After the barrage of deadly artillery fire, witnesses somehow only "saw cracks in the church walls where artillery hit."

“Whether by hyenas or vultures or some other means, bodies in Tigray have a strange penchant for disappearing.”

Like the alleged Axum massacre, the burial and location of bodies in Dengelat appears problematic. After a few days “the soldiers allowed informal burials to take place, but threatened to kill anyone they saw mourning. Abraham volunteered. ... Abraham said he buried more than 50 people that day, but estimates more than 100 died in the assault.” How can one person bury 50 bodies in one day? Such a herculean effort seems unlikely, if not impossible.

Instead of hyenas eating bodies such that all would evidence disappear, in Dengelat “most of them were eaten by vultures before they got buried, it was horrible.” Whether by hyenas or vultures or some other means, bodies in Tigray have a strange penchant for disappearing.

The Shooting of Monalisa Abraha

On February 15, BBC reported that 18-year-old schoolgirl Monalisa Abraha lost her right hand defending herself from an Ethiopian soldier who

tried to rape her and force her grandfather to have sex with her. According to BBC:

On 3 December, the teenager said that a soldier, *dressed in an Ethiopian military uniform*, entered their house demanding to know where the Tigrayan fighters were. ... “He then ordered my grandfather to have sex with me. My grandfather got very angry and... they started fighting,” she says. ... “He said: ‘No-one can save you now. Get your clothes off.’ I begged him not to but he repeatedly punched me.” ... Their struggle continued for several minutes - though she felt disorientated from the blows - and in the end he became so angry that he turned the gun on her. ... “He shot my right hand three times. He shot my leg three times. He left when he heard a gunshot from outside.¹⁶⁰ [Emphasis added]

Eritrean soldiers who were “searching the area” found her grandfather and her two days later. The article explains that “They said the Eritreans had tended to their wounds - and handed them over to Ethiopian troops who took them to Mekelle as the hospital in Abiy Addi was shut.” At the hospital in Mekelle, she had her right hand amputated.

Oddly, the same story about Monalisa was reported, once again, by Al Jazeera English on March 1. This time, however, Monalisa had changed her story: “December 4 is a date that fills Mona Lisa Abraha with horror. It was then, the 18-year-old says, that *Eritrean soldiers* entered her village of Tembin in Ethiopia’s embattled region of Tigray.”¹⁶¹ [Emphasis added]

Why did Monalisa shift the blame to Eritreans, who apparently had rescued her? Recall that the US State Department began its campaign of scapegoating Eritrea on December 8 as TPLF’s prospects of victory in the battlefield looked increasingly impossible. It is also worth noting that the Al Jazeera’s March 1 article on Mona Lisa, which followed a week of articles tarnishing the Eritrean military’s image, was published the day that the US, which called for Eritrean troops to

¹⁶⁰ “Ethiopia’s Tigray crisis: ‘I lost my hand when a soldier tried to rape me’”, *BBC*, February 15, 2021.

¹⁶¹ “Trauma, anger as Tigrayans recount Eritrea troops’ ‘grave crimes’”, *Al Jazeera English*, March 1, 2021.

“leave” Tigray, would assume the presidency of the UN Security Council.

On March 3, the credibility of Monalisa’s story took another significant blow. Her father admitted the following on TPLF news outlet Dedebit Media: “My daughter told me she was in Mekelle. She told me not to worry. *She had to go to the hospital in Mekelle because she was shot on November 4.* However, when I first asked her if she was shot, she said she wasn’t.”¹⁶² He explains that he continued communicating with his daughter by audio and hadn’t seen a picture of her amputated hand until the Al Jazeera story broke.

The fact that Monalisa was shot on November 4 – the day of the start of the conflict – and in Mekelle means that Eritrean (or Ethiopian) troops could not have been involved since Mekelle was still fully under TPLF’s control at that time. Furthermore, Mekelle is the headquarter of the Northern Command, which was attacked that night. The fact that her father explicitly asked if she was shot and also explicitly mentioned “November 4” as a synecdoche for the start of the Tigray conflict – a date of infamy among all Ethiopians and Tigrayans – suggests that she may have been a combatant involved in TPLF’s surprise attacks on the Northern Command.

In December, Al Jazeera published a doctor’s account of events that transpired in Mekelle’s main hospital during the start of the war: “On the night of November 3 [or morning of November 4], I was in the hospital’s operating room. Suddenly, the lights went out. The emergency room was then flooded with severely wounded soldiers. They were at least 60 from both sides.”¹⁶³ Was Monalisa among the wounded soldiers? Either way, her allegation of rape by Eritrean soldiers does not stand up to scrutiny and evidence.

¹⁶² “ናይ ሞናሊያ ወላዲ አባ ዘመሓላለፎ ልቢ ዝነኸኸ መልእኽቲ፣ ህዝቢ ከተማ መቐለ በዓል ዓወት ዓድዎ ከኸብሮ ይሸባሸብ ንዝነበረ ዕሱብ ጉጅለ አብይ ኣሕመድ አዎራዲዎ”, *Dedebit Media ደደቢት ሚዲያ*. Uploaded to YouTube on March 3, 2021. Access here: https://youtu.be/SIF_QKtOIP8

¹⁶³ “Mekelle’s plight: A doctor’s account of Ethiopia’s Tigray war”, Lucy Kassa, *Al Jazeera English*, December 14, 2020.

Monalisa’s false testimony is oddly reminiscent of the false testimony by Nayirah al-Sabah, the Kuwaiti Ambassador, before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus on October 10, 1990, which led to US entering the Gulf War.

Abduction and Killing of Eritrean Refugees

On December 11, Filippo Grandi, the head of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said on Friday it had received an “overwhelming” number of reports of Eritrean refugees in Tigray had been killed, abducted or forcibly returned to Eritrea over the prior month.¹⁶⁴ Eritrea’s Foreign Minister rejected these allegations.¹⁶⁵ Without providing any evidence, TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael said in text messages to Reuters that Eritrean soldiers had raided Hitstats and Shimelba refugee camps in Tigray and abducted some residents.¹⁶⁶

In a January 17 article, the AP’s Africa correspondent Cara Anna wrote, “New satellite images of a refugee camp in Ethiopia’s embattled Tigray region show more than 400 structures have been badly damaged in what a research group believes is the latest ‘intentional attack’ by fighters.” Anna indicates that the images were from a recent report by U.K.-based DX Open Network that was shared with the AP.

Despite lacking any evidence to back her claims, Anna – herself – insinuates that Eritrea’s military was involved: “Neither the U.N. nor DX Open Network has blamed anyone for the attacks, but the presence of troops from Eritrea, a bitter enemy of the Tigray region’s now-fugitive leaders, has caused alarm. Grandi noted ‘many reliable reports and firsthand accounts’ of abuses including the forced return of refugees to Eritrea.” Note how the speculative statement that Eritrea, which Anna opines is the “bitter enemy of Tigray”,

¹⁶⁴ “Reports of killings, abductions of Eritrean refugees ‘overwhelming’ - U.N.”, *Reuters*, December 11, 2020

¹⁶⁵ “Exclusive: U.S. thinks Eritrea has joined Ethiopian war, diplomats say”, Phil Stewart and David Lewis, *Reuters*, December 8, 2020.

¹⁶⁶ “‘Overwhelming’ reports of killings of Eritreans in Tigray: UN”, *Al Jazeera English*, December 11, 2020.

has caused “alarm” is purely Anna’s own opinion, not Grandi’s. Is this an opinion piece?

Nevertheless, the satellite images from DX Open Network were later used by freelance journalist Zecharias Zelalem in an investigative piece for VICE News to level additional allegations against the Eritrean government of killing and abducting Eritrean refugees housed at the Hitsats and Shimelba camps and destroying the facilities of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC).¹⁶⁷

What is DX Open Network, exactly? According to the UK corporate registrar, the company has no physical address in UK and no officers – despite claiming otherwise on their website – save for a Malaysian 26-year old named Alexander Lee.¹⁶⁸ What credibility does Lee have to speak on issues in Tigray and advanced satellite imagery? Notably, DX Open Network registered for a Twitter account in May 2020 and had only 330 followers at the time of this publication. The company’s lack of credibility did not stop the AP, VOA, VICE, Bloomberg, Reuters and other major media outlets from using Lee’s analysis of satellite imagery.

Contrary to the claims made about Eritrean troops against Eritrean refugees, a video produced by an AFP team on February 1 from the Mai Aini refugee camp, where many Eritrean refugees had fled to after violence broke out at the Shimelba and Hitsats camps, reveals that Eritrean refugees were instead attacked by Tigrayan militias, not Eritrean troops.¹⁶⁹ According to Eritrean refugee “Girmay”:

There are ladies which are raped by the local people just due to this war because they believe that our soldiers, or our Eritrean soldiers, are [killing] their brothers. Just the soldiers, the Tigrayan soldiers, they believe that, so they are raping our sisters, mothers, and they are killing our brothers.

Even migrant anthropologist Natalia Paszkiewicz, who has worked with Eritrean refugees in Tigrayan refugee camps and is a vocal critic of the Eritrean government, admitted in a tweet on February 11 that Eritrean refugees were under attack at the Hitsats camp by the “Tigray militia”.¹⁷⁰ She included photos of injured migrants. In a follow up Twitter thread in March, she explained that 200 to 300 refugees had been killed on December 4 and 5 and that the refugees had the list of names but were not making it public.¹⁷¹ Eritrean migrants themselves have come forward with their identities and stories, which is now public knowledge.¹⁷² Sources in Asmara indicate that funerals have been held for the deceased throughout the last three months. Many of the refugees are in Addis Ababa or have made their way back to Eritrea with the support of the Eritrean government at the Ethiopian border.

Are attacks by TPLF against Eritrean refugees a one-off event? The truth is that TPLF has a long history of exploiting Eritrean migrants, and using violence against them, as part of its political strategy against Eritrea and Ethiopia. Paszkiewicz and journalist Nizar Manek wrote in the London Review of Books in May 2020:

In March, refugees in Hitsats told us, a group of Tigrayans in uniform and Eritrean opposition militants entered the camp with

¹⁶⁷ “Refugee Camps in Ethiopia Appear to Have Been Systematically Destroyed”, Zecharias Zelalem, *VICE News*, February 3, 2021.

¹⁶⁸ United Kingdom Company House file for DX Open Network, Company number 12031286. Access here: <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/12031286/officers>

¹⁶⁹ “Eritrean refugees caught in crossfire of Ethiopia’s Tigray war | AFP”, *AFP News Agency*. Uploaded to YouTube on February 1, 2021. Access here: https://youtu.be/dBL9iK_eeA4

¹⁷⁰ Tweet by @NataliaPasz posted on February 11, 2021. Access here: <https://twitter.com/NataliaPasz/status/1359818874557001729>

¹⁷¹ Tweet by @NataliaPasz posted on March 2, 2021. Access here: <https://twitter.com/NataliaPasz/status/1366767136773984267>

¹⁷² “ከሕብረ ገደላ ዘሎ በደል አብ ልዕሊ ኤርትራውያን ስደተኛታት ብምልሻ ወያነ።”, *Aregai Hagos Go Unity*. Uploaded to YouTube on March 5, 2021. Access here: <https://youtu.be/FdR2fpPtSEw>

pistols, trying to press-gang refugees into one of the armed Eritrean opposition groups in Tigray. They were told to chant: 'Down with Issayas! Down with Abiy!'

...

Before the peace deal, especially outspoken refugees were often forced to make false confessions and declare themselves 'Eritrean spies'. Several were imprisoned at the end of March but released after a few days. Some want to be relocated elsewhere in Ethiopia, as insecurity heightens, along with fear of deportations.¹⁷³

It is no surprise that both the Hitsats and Shimelba camps were slated to close in 2020. Some critics of this move saw this as political.¹⁷⁴ In reality, however, there were clear signs that the camps were fraught with serious issues that had gone unchecked for years until Abiy came to power. For instance, Shimelba is located only 20 kilometers from the border, which is a violation of UNHCR policy that requires all camps be at least 50 kilometers away from borders.¹⁷⁵ All of the camps were erected while Ethiopia's refugee agency, the Agency for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA), was under TPLF's control. Although ARRA is technically under federal control, it has little to no control of refugee camps in Tigray largely under TPLF militia control.¹⁷⁶

According to a May 2020 publication in *Africa Confidential*, TPLF was using the camps to recruit

and raise an Eritrean opposition force to use against the Eritrean government:

The TPLF is sending signals of its own to both Addis and Asmara by maintaining a clutch of anti-Issayas Eritrean exile organisations, some of them armed. A former deputy leader of Ethiopia's top intelligence organisation, the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), Issayas Woldegiorgis, has been seen near the Tigray-Eritrea border trying to recruit newly arrived Eritrean military defectors for the anti- President Issayas cause, according to an Eritrean source in Tigray.¹⁷⁷

These efforts are not new. TPLF has long used Eritrean migrants for economic and political reasons. According to a leaked 2008 US diplomatic cable, exposed by Wikileaks, the US Embassy in Addis Ababa felt that "a priority of ARRA's refugee program", which was then under TPLF's control, "was to address Ethiopia's national security concerns with Eritrea. Post cannot confirm complicity between ARRA and the opposition groups, but we do note that ARRA, as an organization, falls under the purview of the Ethiopian National Intelligence Security Service."¹⁷⁸

Under TPLF, refugee affairs have become a cash cow and an industry with both economic and political dimensions. TPLF has been exploiting Eritrean refugees for a long a time in its war against Eritrea. This was acknowledged in

¹⁷³ "'Down with Issayas! Down with Abiy!'", Nizar Manek and Natalia Paszkiewicz, *London Review of Books*, May 7, 2020.

¹⁷⁴ "Ethiopia plans to close Eritrean refugee camp despite concerns", Sara Creta, *Al Jazeera English*, April 19, 2020.

¹⁷⁵ Explained by Ethiopia's refugee agency in a tweet. Tweet by @EthRefugee posted on February 5, 2021. Access here: <https://twitter.com/EthRefugee/status/1357713360981282820>

¹⁷⁶ In October 2020, an ODI report stated, "There is currently no ARRA representation at regional level, which means there is no institutionalised coordination mechanism between ARRA and the regional government in Mekele." Tigray regional report: 2018–

2019 refugee and host community context analysis, Overseas Development Institute, October 2020.

Access here:

https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/tigray_regional_report_2018-2019_refugee_and_host_community_context_analysis.pdf

¹⁷⁷ "Refugees in crossfire", *Africa Confidential*, Vol 61 No 10, May 14, 2020.

¹⁷⁸ "THE VIEW FROM INSIDE ETHIOPIA'S ERITREAN REFUGEE CAMPS", Wikileaks. US diplomatic cable from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia sent on October 6, 2008. Canonical ID: 08ADDISABABA2749_a. Access here: https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08ADDISABABA2749_a.html

another US diplomatic cable published on WikiLeaks:

While it is commendable that the GOE [Government of Ethiopia] continues to be willing to host refugees, the GOE, particularly ARRA, has strong political and financial reasons for doing this. The GOE has long advocated for preferential treatment of Eritrean refugees as a part of its greater foreign policy towards Eritrea. In addition, ARRA is 100% funded by UNHCR and thus views the creation of new refugee camps as job security. UNHCR operates in Ethiopia at the invitation of GOE and ARRA and is very well aware that it is at the mercy of ARRA and cannot easily push back on such issues as the development of Adi-Harush if it wants any ability to effectively program activities in the other camps.¹⁷⁹

Given its history within ARRA, it comes as no surprise that, once again, TPLF has been caught exploiting and killing Eritrean refugees in the current Tigray conflict.

Evidence has now emerged that TPLF may be exploiting Eritrean migrants to stage events for international consumption. According to Paszkiewicz, “Tigrayan militia men” (i.e. TPLF forces) were “preparing to film a scene” forcing Eritrean refugees to put on Eritrean military uniforms to pose as *Shaebia* (Eritrean troops), providing them with knives to film them on mobile phones as they cut off the breasts of female Eritrean refugees.¹⁸⁰

Such grisly stories have received zero coverage in the international media. Given the now well-documented litany of TPLF crimes against Eritrean refugees, when will these crimes be reported? When will action be taken to protect the refugees?

¹⁷⁹ “UNHCR 2010 PLANS FOR NEW REFUGEE CAMPS AND SUDANESE REPATRIATION”, WikiLeaks. US diplomatic cable from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia sent on February 4, 2010. Canonical ID: 10ADDISABABA199_a. Access here:

Assessing Western Media Coverage

How can one justify the Western’s media coverage of the Tigray conflict? The repeated use of false information has had the effect of driving a false narrative about the realities of the conflict, which is now driving a dangerously misguided international response in Ethiopia and the broader Horn of Africa region.

The Western media has proven itself to be on TPLF’s side, emboldening the militant secessionist organization to carry out provocative criminal and genocidal actions in the Horn and engendering the destabilization of the strategically important Horn of Africa and Red Sea basin regions.

“Let the record be set straight: TPLF started the conflict. It even bragged about it. TPLF’s central committee member Sekoutoure Getachew appeared on TPLF’s Dimtsi Weyane television program on November 13, explaining that TPLF had carried out a "preemptive strike" on the Northern Command, comparing its actions to those taken by Israel against its enemies.”

TPLF Started and Internationalized the Conflict

Consider the *casus belli* of the conflict. Even months after the attack on the Northern Command, the Western media still failed to acknowledge who started the conflict when TPLF itself admitted to it. The lede of an NYT article from February 26 entitled “Ethiopia’s War Leads to Ethnic Cleansing in Tigray Region, U.S. Report Says” reads as follows: “An internal U.S. government report found that people in Tigray are being driven from their homes in a war begun by

https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10ADDISABABA199_a.html

¹⁸⁰ “Refugees in Tigray dressed up to stage ‘Eritreans cutting breasts’ – Report”, *Awasa Guardian*, April 10, 2021.

Ethiopia, an American ally – posing President Biden’s first major test in Africa.”¹⁸¹

The phrase “in a war begun by Ethiopia” leaves no room for ambiguity as to who is guilty: PM Abiy’s government. Other articles, like the CNN report on the “Dengelat Massacre”, attempt to create confusion by watering the issue down to a he-said-she-said: “He accused the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), which ruled Ethiopia for nearly three decades before Abiy took office in 2018, of attacking a government military base and trying to steal weapons. The TPLF denies the claim.”¹⁸² Similarly, AFP on November 27 stated that “Wondimu Asamnew, told AFP, ‘There was no attack.’ Instead, the TPLF says, the story was concocted as a pretext to turn on them.”¹⁸³

Let the record be set straight: TPLF started the conflict. It even bragged about it. As mentioned above, TPLF’s central committee member Sekoutoure Getachew appeared on TPLF’s Dimtsi Weyane TV program on November 13, explaining that TPLF had carried out a “preemptive strike” on the Northern Command, comparing its actions to those taken by Israel against its enemies.¹⁸⁴ Reuters and the AP confirmed this account, citing Sekoutoure’s comments.¹⁸⁵

Alula Solomon, a TPLF media activist and CEO of TPLF-mouthpiece Tigray Media House, appeared on a televised program of Kush Media Network on

February 14 and bragged, “Whether you call it the Eritrean military or some other entity, none of them started the war by their own will. All forces were dragged into the war by TPLF, who started the war by their own will.”¹⁸⁶

US Secretary of State Pompeo tweeted on the day of the attacks “We are deeply concerned by reports that the Tigray People’s Liberation Front carried out attacks on Ethiopian National Defense Force bases in Ethiopia’s Tigray region. We urge immediate action to restore the peace and de-escalate tensions.”¹⁸⁷ Steven Feldstein of Carnegie Endowment had the following to say about TPLF’s role in starting the conflict:

There is little question that the TPLF leadership has carried out a strategy of provocation meant to undermine and weaken Abiy. Their disdain for him and their corresponding resentment of their diminished political stature is well known. The TPLF’s armed attack against the Ethiopian army’s northern command headquarters in early November forced Abiy’s hand. If Abiy had not responded forcefully to the TPLF’s latest incursion, not only would he have risked emboldening a key rival, but it would have signaled weakness to other groups desiring further autonomy.¹⁸⁸

More importantly and above all else, TPLF’s actions were illegal on the grounds that it

¹⁸¹ “Ethiopia’s War Leads to Ethnic Cleansing in Tigray Region, U.S. Report Says”, Declan Walsh, *New York Times*, February 26, 2021.

¹⁸² “Massacre in the mountains”, Nima Elbagir, Barbara Arvanitidis, Bethlehem Feleke, Eliza Mackintosh, Gianluca Mezzofiore and Katie Polglase, *CNN*, March 22, 2021.

¹⁸³ “The midnight confrontation that helped unleash Ethiopia’s conflict”, *France 24*, November 27, 2020.

¹⁸⁴ “TPLF Spokesman Admits to Sparking the Conflict in Ethiopia and Plunging Tigray into Darkness”, Teodrose Fikremariam, *Ghion Journal*, November 14, 2020. ; Interview with Sekutoure Getachew.

“እይታ፣የመጀመሪያው ምዕራፍ በድል መጠናቀቅ እንደምታ፣ ህዳር 04/2013 ዓ/ም”. *Dimtsi Weyane Television*. Uploaded to YouTube on November 13, 2020. Access here: <https://youtu.be/H1yThWjhYYo>

¹⁸⁵ “Ethiopia’s regional Tigray forces name conditions for peace with government”, *Reuters*, February 19,

2021. ; “Diplomats: Rockets fired at Eritrea amid Ethiopian conflict”, Cara Anna, *Associated Press*, November 14, 2020.

¹⁸⁶ “የትግራይ የቤት መቀመጥ አድማ እና ጦርነት” *KMN*.

Uploaded to YouTube on February 14, 2021. Access here: <https://youtu.be/45TvVKMyJiw>

¹⁸⁷ Tweet by @SecPompeo posted on November 4, 2020. Access here: <https://twitter.com/SecPompeo/status/1324121664108580875>

¹⁸⁸ “Ethiopia’s Conflict in Tigray Presents Hard Decisions”, Steven Feldstein, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 01, 2020, Access here: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/12/01/ethiopia-s-conflict-in-tigray-presents-hard-decisions-pub-83369>

organized and carried out a treasonous insurrection against the sovereign federal government. Legal arguments trump moral arguments of a so called “just war” by TPLF against a supposedly unjust legal system since the legal system in Ethiopia was entirely created, codified and designed by TPLF itself, from drafting the constitution in 1994 to commanding the federal legal system over the following 27 years.

The inability of the Western media to plainly lay blame on TPLF for the start of the war, seems to be part of the larger agenda to make the belligerent front appear as the victim in this conflict. TPLF, after obstructing every avenue for mediation and de-escalation with the federal government, opted instead for dangerous brinkmanship and began planning for war many months before the conflict started. Robbie Corey-Boulet of AFP wrote the following in November:

In retrospect, Bisober residents say, the first sign of the conflict came seven months ago, when members of the Tigray Special Forces took over the village’s elementary school, which had been emptied because of the coronavirus pandemic.

By early November, when the first shots were fired, some 250 pro-TPLF troops were encamped there, digging trenches behind classrooms and storing weapons in what was once the principal’s office.

The Tigrayan fighters’ decision to base themselves in the centre of Bisober helps explain the carnage that ensued, said Getachew Nega, the village administrator.

“The TPLF lost hope and they came and put heavy weapons and other weapons in this village. They shouldn’t have done this,” Getachew said.

Once the fighting started, Tigrayan combatants broke into abandoned homes from which they fired on Ethiopian soldiers, witnesses said, inviting massive damage.¹⁸⁹

Clearly, TPLF prepared for the war far in advance of November and used civilians and civilian infrastructure – against the explicitly expressed wishes of local civilians – with the intent of escalating the confrontation with the federal government into internecine war. Civilians appear to be cannon fodder to TPLF.

According to the US Institute for Peace (USIP), American officials felt that, in spite of the outbreak of conflict, most of Ethiopia was peaceful and that the TPLF attacks united the country behind PM Abiy:

For their part, American officials have asserted that the conflict in Tigray has served to unite Ethiopians. Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Tibor Nagy told journalists on November 19 that “it seems like [the conflict in Tigray] has brought the Ethiopian nation together, at least for the time being, in support of the prime minister ...” Ambassador Raynor added that “the rest of the country actually remains quite calm at present, no indications of anyone taking up comparable actions elsewhere, and in fact the opposite. Seemingly both regional governments, federal governments, and large swaths of the people galvanizing around the [federal] government.”¹⁹⁰

Rather than deescalate, however, the Western media choose to embolden and intensify conflict to the point of internationalizing it. An opinion piece in *The Africa Report*, a magazine subsidiary of the French firm Jeune Afrique edited by Englishman Patrick Smith of Africa Confidential, explained that “This is arguably, Africa’s hidden world war.”¹⁹¹ In order to support this view, the article alleged the involvement of Somali forces on

¹⁸⁹ “‘Terrified’ survivors recount attacks on civilians in Tigray”, Robbie Corey-Boulet, *Agence France-Presse*, December 14, 2020.

¹⁹⁰ “Ethiopia’s Problems Will Not End with a Military Victory”, Aly Verjee, United States Institute for Peace, November 24, 2020. Access here:

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/11/ethiopia-problems-will-not-end-military-victory>

¹⁹¹ “Tigray: The AU failed Ethiopia, while US calls the shots”, V P Selassie, *The Africa Report*, November 25, 2020.

behalf of Eritrea in Tigray, which quickly proved itself to be absurd and was debunked on February 16 on Twitter by an investigation by VOA's Harun Maruf.¹⁹² Rather than publishing articles to clear up the confusion about Somali involvement, the media has remained silent on the issue ever since.

Under the cover of relatively silent international media coverage, TPLF began attacking Eritrea in mid-November. TPLF fired two rounds of missile attacks on civilian targets in Eritrea on November 14 and 27 – in violation of the Geneva Conventions, which prohibit indiscriminate attacks.¹⁹³ According to sources that include even Eritrea's most ardent critics, TPLF began shelling Eritrean border towns.¹⁹⁴ US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Assistant Secretary of State of African Affairs Tibor Nagy condemned TPLF's actions and called them an attempt to "internationalize the conflict".¹⁹⁵ Note that the US, with all its satellite and surveillance technology, said nothing of Eritrean involvement in Tigray but opted instead shows its gratitude to Eritrea: "We appreciate Eritrea's restraint, which has helped prevent further spreading of the conflict."¹⁹⁶ Although there was some initial condemnation of TPLF's belligerence under the Trump administration, no such bold and forthright action against TPLF has been taken under the Biden administration thus far.

Portrayals of TPLF as "Battle Hardened"

On November 14, Nizar Manek authored a piece in Foreign Policy entitled "In Ethiopia's Civil War, Sudan Will Decide the Outcome", arguing in patronizing fashion that Ethiopia's military had virtually no agency and that—as the title suggests—Sudan was the ultimate arbiter of Ethiopia's fate in the conflict.¹⁹⁷ In doing so, the article argued, that TPLF, which it said had captured half of Ethiopia's military hardware based in the Northern Command, would use its military prowess to make an Ethiopian federal victory unlikely:

Although Tigray is small, it is well armed, and its forces are battle-hardened. Tigray's regional special forces, which a senior Ethiopian diplomat estimates have grown to at least 20,000 commandos – led by senior Tigrayan officers forced into retirement by Abiy, plus a standing body of reserve special forces made up of military-trained militia and armed farmers – together have an estimated total of up to 250,000 armed fighters. Until recently, however, it lacked the heavy weaponry required to directly confront a fully-equipped division.

¹⁹² Tweet by @HarunMaruf posted on February 16, 2021. Access here: <https://twitter.com/HarunMaruf/status/1361894913189756929>

¹⁹³ "Rockets fired at Eritrean capital from Ethiopia, diplomats say", Giulia Paravicini, *Reuters*, November 13, 2020. ; "Fresh rocket attack from Ethiopia's Tigray region targets Eritrea, say diplomats ", Robbie Corey-Boulet, *Agence France-Presse*, November 28, 2020. ; Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977. Protection of the civilian population, Article 51:4. Access here: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=4BEBD9920AE0AEAEC12563CD0051DC9E>

¹⁹⁴ Tweet by @RAbdiAnalyst posted on November 14, 2020. Access here: <https://twitter.com/RAbdiAnalyst/status/1327522632783237120> ; Facebook post uploaded by user "Radio

Erena" on November 13, 2020. Access here: <https://www.facebook.com/radioerena/posts/3596366840419307>

¹⁹⁵ Tweet by @AsstSecStateAF posted on November 15, 2020. Access here: <https://twitter.com/AsstSecStateAF/status/1328015362999414786> ; Tweet by @SecPompeo posted on November 17, 2020. Access here: <https://twitter.com/SecPompeo/status/1328721926643195907>

¹⁹⁶ "The United States Condemns the Attack on Eritrea by the Tigray People's Liberation Front", Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, Press Statement, US Department of State, November 17, 2020. Access here: <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-united-states-condemns-the-attack-on-eritrea-by-the-tigray-peoples-liberation-front/index.html>

¹⁹⁷ "Sudan Will Decide the Outcome of the Ethiopian Civil War", Nizar Manek and Mohamed Kheir Omer, *Foreign Policy*, November 14, 2020.

The romantic and fawning portrayal of TPLF as “battle-hardened” was seemingly ubiquitous in the Western media, violating journalistic ethics of neutrality and non-bias and endangering the lives of millions of Ethiopian civilians.

“The romantic and fawning portrayal of TPLF as ‘battle-hardened’ was seemingly ubiquitous in the Western media, violating journalistic ethics of neutrality and non-bias and endangering the lives of millions of Ethiopian civilians.”

Al Jazeera English indicated on November 24 that TPLF had “a generation of battle-hardened tacticians”¹⁹⁸ while Reuters on November 10 held that “Tigrayan forces and militia are battle-hardened, have large stocks of military hardware and number up to 250,000 men, experts say.”¹⁹⁹ Another Reuters piece, explicitly pointed out, in contrast, that federal forces were only 140,000.²⁰⁰

Herman Cohen, the former US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs under George H.W. Bush, tweeted, “Ethiopian P.M. Abiy is fooling himself if he believes his inexperienced army can defeat the battle hardened TPLF military, even with Eritrean support.”²⁰¹ Reuters East Africa deputy bureau chief Maggie Fick wrote, “Ethiopia expert Alex de Waal said Abiy may have underestimated the Tigray leaders’ skills at both politics and war. The Tufts University academic recalled the words of Tsadkan Gebretensae, a Tigrayan who once commanded Ethiopia’s army against Eritrea, in a conversation with him: ‘War is primarily an intellectual activity.’”²⁰² Is this not bragging, instigating and emboldening TPLF?

¹⁹⁸ “Ethiopian army castaways may expand TPLF’s fight past Mekelle”, Zecharias Zelalem, *Al Jazeera English*, November 24, 2020.

¹⁹⁹ “Battle-hardy Tigray back in spotlight as Ethiopia conflict flares”, Maggie Fick, *Reuters*, November 10, 2020.

²⁰⁰ “Factbox: The forces fighting in Ethiopia’s Tigray conflict”, *Reuters*, November 13, 2020.

²⁰¹ Tweet by @CohenOnAfrica posted on November 5, 2020. Access here:

Expert analysis by Crisis Group in the lead up to the conflict, as previously mentioned, played a critical role in driving the world to believe that TPLF had the upper hand in any ensuing conflict:

Tigray itself is prepared for a struggle. Its well-armed regional paramilitary force is led by former national army generals. It also boasts a large militia full of war veterans. TPLF leaders say that many officers in the units of the Northern Command, which still patrols the Eritrea border, would not be likely to support any federal intervention, and some could even break and join Tigray’s forces.²⁰³

Despite the Western media’s incessant assuring and reassuring of the international audience that TPLF would come out victorious in the conflict, TPLF instead lost control of Tigray’s capital city Mekelle in a little over three weeks, officially falling to federal forces on November 28.²⁰⁴ In fact, Mekelle’s fall would have likely come sooner had PM Abiy not given TPLF a 72-hour ultimatum to “surrender peacefully” in order to prevent harm to civilians.²⁰⁵ The Western media took PM Abiy’s 3-day armistice and his government’s consideration for civilian life as an opportunity to flip the narrative and make TPLF look like the victim under Abiy’s aggression. In a November 25 tweet, BBC Monitoring’s Twitter account falsely reported Abiy saying that his forces “will not stop, no matter who dies” in the impending siege of Mekelle.

<https://twitter.com/cohenonafrika/status/1324445096381657093>

²⁰² Fick M., *Reuters*, “Battle-hardy”.

²⁰³ “Steering Ethiopia’s Tigray Crisis Away from Conflict”, Africa Briefing N°162, International Crisis Group, October 30, 2020.

²⁰⁴ “Ethiopia’s Tigray crisis: PM claims capture of regional capital Mekelle”, *BBC*, November 29, 2020.

²⁰⁵ “Ethiopia PM gives Tigray forces 72 hours to surrender regional capital”, *Reuters*, November 22, 2020.



Figure 12. A falsely translated tweet that was later deleted by BBC Monitoring. Courtesy: Twitter.

BBC Monitoring later deleted the tweet and issued an apology after the damage had already been done.²⁰⁶ The AP, BBC and Reuters also misreported Ethiopian Colonel Dejene Tsegaye as saying that his forces would have “no mercy” on Mekelle’s Tigrayan civilians and that they should “save themselves” when he was, in actual fact, referring to TPLF’s leadership who had been using human shield tactics.²⁰⁷

While BBC and AP issued no correction, Reuters later quietly – and with no apology – updated their article to include a correction issued by Ethiopian spokeswoman Billene Seyoum (i.e. no explicit mention of what error or update was made). Again, the damage had already been done at that point. Perhaps even worse than Reuters and BBC’s initial misreporting was HRW’s misuse of

that misreporting. HRW’s Horn of Africa director Laetitia Bader tweeted a link to the yet updated Reuters article and wrote, “Treating a whole city as a military target would not only unlawful [sic], it could also be considered a form of collective punishment”.²⁰⁸

Former National Security Adviser and current Director of the United States Domestic Policy Council Susan Rice quote-tweeted Bader’s tweet and wrote, “In other words, war crimes.”²⁰⁹ Thus, misreporting by primary sources turned into war crimes allegations by American leaders in a sub-24-hour social media news cycle in spite of late half-hearted apologies by the misreporting sources. This small example, a microcosm of broader reporting on the conflict, is one of many similar examples leading to a warped image of realities in Tigray.

“Civil War” as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

While the federal government dubbed its efforts in Tigray as a “law enforcement operation” and provided its reasoning for this phrasing,²¹⁰ the Western media opted instead to call it a “war” from the very outset of the conflict. In fact, they initially posed the idea that it was an imminent “civil war.” Take for example these headlines during the first week of the conflict:

1. National Public Radio: “Ethiopia Edges Toward **Civil War** As Federal Government Orders Attack On Tigray Region”, Eyder Peralta, 11/4/20
2. Quartz Africa: “Ethiopia is on the brink of **civil war** after the government orders attacks on a key region”, Samuel Getachew, 11/4/20

²⁰⁶ Tweet by @EthioEmbassyUK posted on November 25, 2020. Access here: <https://twitter.com/EthioEmbassyUK/status/1331611737200660480>

²⁰⁷ “Ethiopia PM gives Tigray forces 72 hours to surrender regional capital”, *Reuters*, November 22, 2020. ; “Ethiopia’s Tigray crisis: UN warns of war crimes as deadline looms”, *BBC*, November 25, 2020. ; “Ethiopia warns civilians of ‘no mercy’ in Tigray offensive”, Cara Anna, *Associated Press*, November 22, 2020.

²⁰⁸ Tweet by @LaetitiaBader posted on November 22, 2020. Access here: <https://twitter.com/laetitiabader/status/1330508431522926595?lang=en>

²⁰⁹ Tweet by @AmbassadorRice posted on November 22, 2020. Access here: <https://twitter.com/ambassadorrice/status/1330537213373927425?lang=en>

²¹⁰ “The Ongoing Law Enforcement Operations in Tigray: Causes and Objectives”, *Ethiopian News Agency*, January 26, 2021.

3. Agence France-Presse: “The last red line’: Ethiopia nears **civil war** as PM orders military into restive Tigray region”, 11/4/20
4. CNN: “Why are there fears of **civil war** in Ethiopia?”, Brent Swails and David McKenzie 11/5/20
5. Associated Press: “Explains: Why Ethiopia is suddenly on brink of **civil war**”, Anna Cara, 11/6/20
6. Al Jazeera English: “Eritrea, Tigray and Ethiopia’s brewing **civil war**”, 11/8/20
7. Foreign Policy: “How Ethiopia Reached the Brink of **Civil War**”, Amy Mackinnon, 11/9/20

During the second week of the conflict, the headlines evolved from merely toying with the possibility of civil war to outright declaring it to be one:

1. Foreign Policy: “Sudan Will Decide the Outcome of the Ethiopian **Civil War**”, Nizar Manek and Mohamed Kheir Omer, 11/14/20
2. The Telegraph: “Ethiopia’s **civil war** becomes regional as missiles strike Eritrea’s capital”, Will Brown and Zecharias Zelalem, 11/14/20
3. The Guardian: “Fears of **regional conflict** in Horn of Africa after rocket attacks on Eritrea”, Jason Burke, 11/15/20
4. LA Times: “As Ethiopia descends into **civil war**, civilians by the thousands begin to stream out”, Jacob Kushner, 11/16/20
5. The Economist: “Ethiopia’s **civil war** is spreading outside its borders”, 11/16/20

Manek’s article in FP was the first among Western media to call the conflict a civil war. During the third week of the conflict, as a disillusioned TPLF retreated from every city in Tigray to be surrounded from all sides in Mekelle, the media amplified the civil war narrative with increasingly sensational headlines:

1. The Telegraph: “Ethiopia’s **civil war**: ‘We left them to die in their hospital beds. I don’t know how I will face God’”, Will Brown, 11/21/20
2. Sky News: “Ethiopia’s Tigray crisis: Thousands flee **civil war** fought in the shadows that could tear country apart”, John Sparks, 11/23/20

3. Bloomberg: “Ethiopia’s prime minister trades his Nobel Peace Prize for **civil war**”, Bobby Ghosh, 11/23/20
4. The Globe and Mail: “Ethiopia’s **civil war** in Tigray: What you need to know about who’s fighting whom and the toll it’s taken so far”, Alex Nguyen, 11/23/20
5. VICE: “‘We’re Ready to Die’ – Ethiopian **Civil War** Reaches Crucial Stage”, Samuel Gebre, 11/24/20
6. Associated Press: “Ethiopia calls global concern over **civil war** ‘unwelcome’”, 11/25/20
7. Al Jazeera English: “How Abiy Ahmed’s Ethiopia-first nationalism led to **civil war**”, Awol K Allo, 11/25/20

With the writing on the wall during the twilight days of the operation to capture Mekelle and after Mekelle’s capture on November 28, the media started to shift the narrative to a “guerilla war” that was “protracted” and “hidden” in nature:

1. BBC: “Ethiopia’s Tigray crisis: Fears of a march into **guerrilla warfare**”, 11/27/20
2. ABC News: “Ethiopia declares victory in fight over Tigray region, but **guerrilla warfare** likely to continue”, Dragana Jovanovic, 11/28/20
3. Toronto Star: “Ethiopian civil war likely to end up as a **prolonged guerrilla conflict**”, Gwynne Dyer, 12/1/20
4. Reuters: “Ethiopia war may turn into **guerrilla insurgency**, experts say”, Reuters Staff, 12/1/20
5. ABC News: “Ethiopia’s **hidden war** in Tigray threatens return to ethnic violence and instability”, Morgan Winsor, Guy Davies, and Bruno Roerber, 12/4/20
6. Reuters: “Ethiopia’s Abiy Denies **Guerrilla War** Emerging in Tigray”, 12/7/20

The Western media seemed to ignore the critical fact that all of TPLF’s supply lines had been cut off from all sides, as it was hemmed in from four directions with Tigray’s borders closed off with Sudan, Eritrea, the Amhara region and the Afar region. This obvious reality was only later acknowledged in late January after TPLF had been decimated and most its leaders apprehended. NYT’s Declan Walsh and Simon

Marks wrote on January 22: “Although analysts initially estimated the T.P.L.F. had 250,000 men under arms, it quickly became clear that its force was much smaller. Government soldiers and allied ethnic militias surrounded the T.P.L.F.’s forces by sealing Ethiopia’s borders with Eritrea and Sudan, effectively severing the rebels’ supply lines.”²¹¹

International Crisis Group’s Pro-TPLF Bias

The “analysts” that Walsh and Marks referred to were most notably those from ICG. Nairobi-based ICG analyst Rashid Abdi was so bold to go as far as suggesting divine intervention in his analysis: “God gave me the gift of prognosis. I have never gone wrong on Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia. It is in your best self-interest to take me very serious. Again, I say to PM Abiy, the odds are not in your favour in this conflict. You still have time to end it.”²¹² Such a fanatical belief in a TPLF victory, imbued with dangerous levels of hubris, can only serve to cloud judgement and prevent sober analysis.

“If one were to have applied Davison’s logic to 1930’s Germany, he would have opposed global anti-Nazi mobilization, not on the basis of morality and justice but on the grounds that the Nazis—much like TPLF—had party support, control of their territory and were relatively popular on core issues among their people, thus making opposition to them too “dangerous” to pursue.”

Ethiopia-based ICG analyst William Davison proved equally problematic, given his longstanding alignment with TPLF. Davison is on the record in a 2015 tweet openly coaching the then TPLF central committee member and foreign

minister Tedros Adhanom – now director-general of the World Health Organization – on how to use the international media to gain “positive publicity” for TPLF.²¹³ Rather than holding TPLF’s feet to the fire, Davison has served as their publicist and sycophant.

On November 12, Davison tweeted, “While it’s legit for fed govt to hold TPLF leaders responsible, they have party support, party controls region, and many Tigrayans back region on core disputes. So, anti-TPLF mobilisation is - in effect - against Tigray, and its people. That’s v dangerous - to say the least.”²¹⁴ If one were to have applied Davison’s logic to 1930’s Germany, he would have opposed global anti-Nazi mobilization, not on the basis of morality and justice but on the grounds that the Nazis – much like TPLF – had party support, control of their territory and were relatively popular on core issues among their people, thus making opposition to them too “dangerous” to pursue. Like the Nazi’s expansionist *Lebensraum* program posed a dangerous threat to Europe and the world, TPLF’s Greater Tigray program poses a similar threat to the Horn of Africa and African continent yet this danger is ignored by Davison. In an interview with ESAT on March 10, Davison went as far as denying that TPLF started the conflict and made his case to legitimize TPLF’s “preemptive strike”:

That’s why the call for negotiations was there and also that’s where there was this understanding of the build up to war where, yes, the takeover the Northern Command gave the federal government no option, but there does seem to be some fairly strong evidence that the federal military was preparing to intervene in Tigray to remove Tigray’s government. Therefore, arguably,

²¹¹ “On ‘Rooftop of Africa,’ Ethiopia’s Troops Hunt Fugitive Former Rulers”, Simon Marks and Declan Walsh, *New York Times*, January 22, 2021.

²¹² Tweet by @RAbdiAnalyst posted on November 10, 2020. Access here: <https://twitter.com/rabdianalyst/status/1326037476927025152?lang=en>

²¹³ Tweet by @wdavison10 posted on February 1, 2015. Access here:

<https://twitter.com/wdavison10/status/561778061688188929>

²¹⁴ Tweet by @wdavison10 posted on November 12,

2020. Access here:

<https://twitter.com/wdavison10/status/1326792840375099392>

you're legitimizing this preemptive claim from the Tigrayan side.²¹⁵

He promoted false reports from questionable websites, like the highly-checked "Somali Guardian", suggesting that Eritrea was using Somali troops in Tigray as cannon fodder.²¹⁶ Again, this claim was debunked by VOA's Somalia correspondent Harun Maruf.²¹⁷ On November 18, a leaked email revealed that Davison was forwarding TPLF talking points from Wondimu Asaminew of the "Tigray Friendship Liaison Office" to the international media correspondents on the ground in Addis Ababa.²¹⁸ Four days later, Davison was deported by the Ethiopian government.²¹⁹ Following Davison's expulsion and the capture of Mekelle only a few days later, ICG's president Robert Malley issued an introspective statement on ICG's position on Ethiopia that essentially admitted the organization's failure to properly calculate events in Tigray and requested that Ethiopian authorities lay blame on ICG rather than Davison.²²⁰ Malley also admitted, "the humanitarian catastrophe we feared has not occurred and must acknowledge that we described a potential outcome that thankfully did not materialise."

In spite of failure, miscalculation and bias, however, Davison continues to persist with Western media still eagerly seeking his expert insight. On March 26, he told France 24 that "With regards to the conflict dynamics, if there is a

complete withdrawal of Eritrean troops, it would reduce the pressure on the TPLF, and the Ethiopian military may well not be able to defeat Tigray's resistance without Eritrean support."²²¹ Given that Davison and ICG have called for the alleged Eritrean troops to leave Tigray, one can naturally draw the conclusion that they seek to "reduce the pressure on TPLF" and prevent the defeat of TPLF.²²² Is this not interference and taking sides in a conflict?

Also on ICG's staff is Dinesh "Dino" Mahtani, a known advocate of regime change in Eritrea. In October 2014, Mahtani found himself embroiled in a UN scandal. While serving as a member of the Somalia Eritrea Monitoring Group, mandated to monitor UN sanctions on Eritrea, he was caught using his position at the UN to influence and organize regime change operations in Eritrea, and met with projected transitional leaders.²²³ As proof of the veracity of this allegation, Mahtani resigned – under UN pressure – only one day after this news came to light via groundbreaking reporting by Matthew Russell Lee of Inner City Press, who published a leaked letter written by Mahtani revealing his plans to organize travel for a coup plotter during an ensuing "uncertain period in [Eritrea's] history". Today, Mahtani is vocal in his advocacy for TPLF in the Tigray conflict. In a November 10 article for The Africa Report, co-authored by his ICG colleague Davison, Mahtani held that "the confrontation is likely to be fierce and prolonged", would draw in Eritrea and Sudan

²¹⁵ "Ethiopia - ESAT Insight Crisis' Group current Analysis of Ethiopia with William Davidson 9 Mar 2021" *ESAT tv Ethiopia*. Uploaded to YouTube on March 10, 2021. Access here:

<https://youtu.be/GglbKWrbWqk>

²¹⁶ Tweet by @wdavison10 posted on January 18, 2020. Access here:

<https://twitter.com/wdavison10/status/1351078123312459776>

²¹⁷ Tweet by @HarunMaruf posted on February 16, 2021. Access here:

<https://twitter.com/HarunMaruf/status/1361894913189756929>

²¹⁸ Tweet by @wdavison10 posted on November 18, 2020. Access here:

<https://twitter.com/wdavison10/status/1329198468456456194>

²¹⁹ "Ethiopia Expels Crisis Group Senior Analyst", International Crisis Group, Media Release, November

22, 2020. Access here:

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/ethiopia-expels-crisis-group-senior-analyst>

²²⁰ "Why Crisis Group Calls for Inclusive Dialogue in Ethiopia", Robert Malley, International Crisis Group, The President's Take, December 3, 2020. Access here: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/why-crisis-group-calls-inclusive-dialogue-ethiopia>

²²¹ "Ethiopian PM's week of dramatic disclosures evades root of Tigray crisis", Leela Jacinto, *France 24*, March 26, 2021.

²²² "Q&A: Tigray – the Fighting will Continue & Exacerbate Civilian Suffering", Nalisha Adams, *Inter Press Service*, Feb 19 2021.

²²³ "In Somalia, UNICEF Has "Intelligence Contract" With UNSOM to Follow, SEMG Scoop Advanced By New Report", Matthew Russell Lee, *Inner City Press*, October 29, 2014.

and create a “nightmare scenario” that would be “reminiscent of the scenes of misery during Ethiopia’s civil war of the 1980s”.²²⁴ With the swift defeat of TPLF, no such nightmare has yet materialized.

Ignoring TPLF’s Unpopularity in Tigray

Rather than presenting one-sided views in support of TPLF, why not instead listen to Tigrayan critiques of TPLF? Talking to Anadolu Agency, TPLF co-founder Aregawi Berhe makes it clear that TPLF failed in the recent conflict because it had no popular support: “They [TPLF] overestimated their military strength and underestimated the federal army,” he said. They also thought that the people of Tigray would support them. The whole assumption went wrong, consequently, resulting in the TPLF to lose the war, Berhe added.”²²⁵

Even before the war started, it was well known among Tigrayans that TPLF would not have the support of its population in Tigray. Last July, investigative journalist Araya Tesfamariam, who is of Tigrayan descent, explained to Meron Fufa on the *Mosob Fana* program broadcast on Fana TV that TPLF was preparing the Tigrayan people for war, creating many enemies and asking poor Tigrayans to send their children to fight in the war while, at the same time, sending their own children to Western capitals to live lavish lifestyles using money stolen from Ethiopians.²²⁶ He explained that TPLF leaders looted billions, with TPLF co-founder Sebhat Nega and the Seyoum Mesfin being the worst among them all. According to Araya, Seyoum purchased a \$2 million dollar Persian rug while his son Mebrahtu was known to drive a \$100,000 car in Maryland. Sebhat’s son Haki bought a massive home in a Mekelle

neighborhood so vastly unequal and detached from the average local Tigrayan that it is known among the locals as the “Apartheid” district. “TPLF leaders sent their sons and daughters to US and Europe, and they want the sons of daughters of poor Tigrayans to die in a war,” explained Araya.

How could a geriatric, criminal leadership so detached from the suffering of its largely peasant population be expected to draw popular support when already unpopular in Tigray? An essential feature of any guerilla force that seeks to turn a conflict into a protracted “people’s war” – necessitating it to embed itself within the civilian population – is that guerilla force’s material commitment to “serve the people.”²²⁷ Instead of serving or protecting the people, however, TPLF has clearly demonstrated, throughout the conflict, a penchant for deceiving and exploiting Tigrayan civilians and worsening their material conditions.

Ignoring TPLF’s Assault on Tigrayan Civilians

In a November 8 address aired on Dimtsi Weyane TV, TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael told Tigrayan civilians that “children will participate in the war.”²²⁸ As shocking as this claim may be, potentially drawing critiques that Debretsion may have been quoted out of context, the reality is that BBC also reiterated these same claims on November 18: “As fighting raged on Wednesday, Mr Gebremichael said his forces were inflicting ‘heavy defeats on all fronts against the forces that came to attack us’. He called on all Tigrayans including children to mobilise and join the ‘struggle’.”²²⁹ Again, in a January 10 speech aired on Dimtsi Weyane radio and rebroadcast on Tigray Media House, he spoke in past tense about Tigrayan farmers providing their children to the

²²⁴ “Ethiopia: Not too late to stop Tigray conflict from unravelling country”, Dino Mahtani and William Davison, *The Africa Report*, November 10, 2020.

²²⁵ “Ethiopia: Autocracy, ill-conceived war end TPLF journey”, Seleshi Tessema, *Anadolu Agency*, December 21, 2020.

²²⁶ “ምስክርነት እቲ ጋዜጠኛ (ቀዳማይ ክፍል)” *FBC Tigrigna*. Uploaded to YouTube on July 30, 2020. Access here: <https://youtu.be/aRQWeYEEyps>

²²⁷ “Serve the People”, Mao Tse-Tung, September 8, 1944. This speech was delivered at the memorial

meeting Chang Szu-teh, held by departments directly under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China.

²²⁸ “መግለጻ ርእሰ ምምሕዳር ክልል ትግራይ ዶ/ር ደብረፅዮን ገ/ሚካኤል ኣብ እዋናዊ ጉዳይ፣ ጥቅምት 26/2013 ዓ/ም” *Dimtsi Weyane Television*. Uploaded to YouTube on November 8, 2020. Access here: <https://youtu.be/X2UtcgbMw64>

²²⁹ “Ethiopia crisis: Tigray leader vows to keep fighting as government advances”, *BBC*, November 18, 2020.

war effort and “sending your children to the battlefields to fight against the enemy.”²³⁰ TPLF’s use of child soldiers is a violation of international law since Ethiopia is signatory to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (General Assembly resolution A/RES/54/263 of 25 May 2000).²³¹

As the seemingly inexperienced federal forces somehow managed to close in on TPLF, who ICG said had a battle-hardened army of 250,000 fighters and also had the advantage of pre-planning for its pre-emptive strike, the beleaguered TPLF forces began to retreat from major cities in the final week of the conflict and opted to carry out scorched earth tactics, laying waste to critical infrastructure in their own regional homeland.²³² On November 23, state-owned Fana Broadcasting Corporation posted pictures on Twitter of a destroyed Axum airport tarmac with the linked article stating, “TPLF junta which could not care about the people and the country, has plowed and destroyed the airport which was [sic] contributed a lot for the economy and the people of Axum.”²³³ Amidst claims of misinformation by TPLF supporters, BBC confirmed the airport’s destruction.²³⁴

²³⁰ “NEWS 01-30-2021 ንህዝብና ድምፂ ንኹኖ <https://gf.me/u/y7k68p>”, *Tigray Media House*. Uploaded to YouTube on January 30, 2021. Access here: <https://youtu.be/w3drd32IEZw> ;

²³¹ Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict. General Assembly Resolution A/RES/54/263. Adopted on May 25, 2000. Entered into force February 12, 2002. Access here:

<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/tools-for-action/optional-protocol/>

²³² “Tigray crisis: How the Ethiopian army and TPLF clashed over an airport”, Peter Mwai and Christopher Giles, *BBC*, November 26, 2020.

²³³ Tweet by @fanatelevision posted on November 23, 2020. Access here: <https://twitter.com/fanatelevision/status/1330770042879959041>

²³⁴ Mwai P and Giles C, “Tigray crisis”, *BBC*, November 26, 2020.

A December video report on Belgian public news network VRT showed how retreating TPLF forces destroyed bridges behind them such that federal forces, in pursuit, could not pass.²³⁵ In the documentary, VRT’s foreign correspondent Stijn Vercruyssen pointed across a destroyed bridge and explained, “The Tigray region’s forces have cut through the road, so no one can pass. We can’t either. That’s where all journalists and aid organizations want to go, as no one knows what’s going on there.” Thus, Vercruyssen blamed “Tigray region’s forces” (i.e. TPLF), rather than federal forces, for destroying transport infrastructure that consequently blocked media and humanitarian access in Tigray.

TPLF used civilians as human shields in violation of the Geneva Conventions.²³⁶ As previously mentioned, TPLF, according to civilians in Bisober talking to AFP, had been “digging trenches behind classrooms and storing weapons in what was once the principal’s office.”²³⁷ TPLF also hid weapons at religious sites. Following the capture of Mekelle, Fana Broadcasting Corporation aired footage of TPLF’s heavy artillery hidden in churches that had been abandoned upon retreat.²³⁸ Although the footage came from a state

²³⁵ “Looted hospitals and empty towns, an exclusive look inside Tigray | English subtitles”, *Terzake*. Uploaded to YouTube on December 21, 2020. Access here: <https://youtu.be/QkvOfC9q-n8>

²³⁶ Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977. Protection of the civilian population, Article 51:4. Access here: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=4BEBD9920AE0AEAEC12563CD0051DC9E> ; Commentary of 1987

Protection of the civilian population. Access here: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/1a13044f3bbb5b8ec12563fb0066f226/5e5142b6ba102b45c12563cd00434741>

²³⁷ “‘Terrified’ survivors recount attacks on civilians in Tigray”, Robbie Corey-Boulet, *Agence France-Presse*, December 14, 2020.

²³⁸ “Ethiopian state media alleges #TPLF is hiding heavy weaponry in churches. #Ethiopia #Tigray (ETV)” *Zola Media*. Uploaded to YouTube on November 28, 2020. Access here: <https://youtu.be/mrbDL1DLI8I>

channel, Tigrayan locals, including church clergy, were on record confirming that TPLF hid weapons in churches and vehemently lambasting the “junta” for its actions. Thus, it comes as little surprise that TPLF, instigating and thus expecting bombardment and destruction of religious monuments, would prematurely point fingers at religious sites like Axum Tsion and Maryam Dengelat for presumed “massacres.” They were merely projecting and revealing their own hand. This tactic of offenders blaming victims of crimes of which offenders themselves are guilty is known as “accusations in the mirror” and was a tactic used by the Interahamwe.²³⁹

Coordinated Disinformation Campaign?

From the outbreak of the conflict to the fall of Mekelle to the ongoing pursuit of TPLF leaders, the Western media has coddled and protected TPLF, taking its side in the conflict and delaying resolution of hostilities. Likewise, Western governments have interfered in Ethiopia’s internal affairs, endangering the Ethiopian people – including Tigrayan civilians – and causing them needless suffering.

Why does the US continue to provide such strong support for a greatly weakened – if not largely destroyed – TPLF against its own interests? Why is Washington willing to ignore growing anti-US sentiment and potential widespread hatred in a nation considered a close ally and historic “anchor state” in Africa?

TPLF Disinformation Network

Unilateral Secession Requires Disinformation

Washington and Western capitals might be the victims of their own Frankenstein’s monster developed over the last three decades: a US-supported, pro-TPLF disinformation network comprised of TPLF members, media personnel, academics, NGO personnel and state officials.

This network may have served the West well in the past but its continued existence is likely putting long term US and EU interests at risk.

Does such a network exist? In reviewing the overall reporting on Tigray since early November, patterns and nodes of disinformation emerge. As highlighted by Tables 1 and 2, which track the progression of emerging reports on the herein discredited Axum and Maryam Dengelat “massacres”, the same entities reported on the two events in the same pattern. Note how “unconfirmed reports” devoid of evidence evolve into official reports and high-level human rights publications that ultimately manufacture the consent for Western governments to intervene in Tigray – actions that would have otherwise been unjustifiable.

As the disinformation progresses from its origin supposedly in Tigray – or manufactured in the diaspora – to its endpoint residing in Western state capitals, one can identify six distinct stages with clear signs of coordination between TPLF and Western actors (summarized on pg. 52).

Stage 1: Briefing Western Contacts

TPLF leaders serve as a primary starting point of disinformation. Although disinformation can emanate from many sources, *disinformation of consequence* mostly originates from “unconfirmed reports” first propagated by those in communication with TPLF’s leadership. Take for example, Wondimu Asaminew’s leaked email to William Davison on behalf of the Tigray Friendship Liaison Office briefing him on talking points regarding the situation in Tigray. Recall, Mulugeta Gebrehiwot briefing Alex de Waal on battlefield conditions. TPLF’s leadership feeds its Western contacts, which it has developed over the last three decades as a close ally of the US and EU.

²³⁹ “Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda”, Alison Des Forges, Human Rights Watch, March 1999, pg. 66.

TPLF Disinformation Network

1. Briefing Western Contacts

- TPLF leadership send their Western contacts updates on battlefield conditions and express their propaganda needs.
- **Example:** Wondimu Asaminew emailing William Davison and Addis-based correspondents talking points through the Tigray Friendship Liaison Office); Mulugeta Gebrehiwot briefing Alex de Waal.

3. Creating Facts on the Ground

- TPLF activists in Tigray and the diaspora use deceptive tactics to create facts on the ground that become “evidence” in primary source reporting in the Western media, thus confirming initial reports and serving as footnotes in future reporting.
- **Example:** Coaching civilians (Maryam Dengelat video for CNN; Sky News witness), providing false testimony (Samri youth masquerading as Mai Kadra survivors for NYT), soliciting false testimony (Alula Solomon soliciting testimony on Twitter for AP’s Cara Anna and AFP’s Maggie Fick), mistranslating civilians (as witnessed by Jemal Countess), doctor photos, etc.

5. Producing High-Level Reports

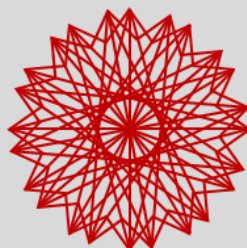
- Conduct an investigation of an alleged crime on the basis of growing reports in the media and publish a high-level report that is impossible to substantiate.
- **Example:** Amnesty report on Axum “massacre”, ICG briefs, Bellingcat investigations, etc.

TPLF Leadership

Western Contacts

TPLF Activists

Media



Human Rights NGOs

Academic Experts

Exclusive Media

International Bodies

2. Developing a Pro-TPLF Narrative

- Western contacts publish TPLF’s version of events in “unconfirmed” reports on their social media accounts and blogs that cite anonymous sources.
- **Example:** Mirjam van Reisen publishing EEPA “Situation Reports”; Martin Plaut posting Eritrea Hub articles; Alex de Waal writing pieces on World Peace Foundation website.

4. Amplifying Primary Sources

- TPLF activists in the diaspora spread primary sources on social media in a coordinated campaign with human rights NGOs and journalists.
- **Example:** Alula Solomon, OMNA Tigray, #StopWarInTigray and TPLF diaspora activists retweeting pro-TPLF primary sources (articles, videos, etc.) with HRW, Amnesty and others.

6. Demanding International Action

- Western governments use high-level reports to guide new policy and force action in support of TPLF.
- **Example:** Pressure on Ethiopia, EU sanctions on Eritrea.

As previously mentioned, Davison, a supposed neutral journalist, openly displayed on Twitter his efforts to coach TPLF central committee members like Tedros Adhanom on creating positive publicity for his regime. De Waal eulogized the late TPLF leaders Meles Zenawi and, more recently, Seyoum Mesfin, speaking of his close relationship to them and displaying an extreme affection for the party.²⁴⁰ The CEO of the Oslo Freedom Forum went as far as calling de Waal's eulogy for Meles in the New York Times "the most unspeakably sycophantic eulogy".²⁴¹

“Washington and Western capitals might be the victims of their own Frankenstein’s monster developed over the last three decades: a US-supported, pro-TPLF disinformation network comprised of TPLF members, media personnel, academics, NGO personnel and state officials.”

These friendly Western contacts of TPLF do not speak Tigrinya nor Amharic; nor do they have an advanced understanding of local geography and culture. They must trust wholly in the integrity of the information as it is given to them by TPLF, a party to the war. There is no longer any question as to whether or not TPLF is merely erring in the spread of misinformation or knowingly propagating disinformation. According to Alexi Drew and Claire Wilmot writing in a Washington Post article, TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael's "false claim" that Ethiopian forces bombed the Tekeze Dam were "intentional".²⁴² TPLF's leaders cannot be taken at their word and cannot be expected to provide accurate briefings on the situation in Tigray, which supports the earlier claim that TPLF must—by logical necessity—produce disinformation in order to

manufacture consent for an unjust war (see [Historical Context](#) section).

Stage 2: Developing a Pro-TPLF Narrative

TPLF's small coterie of friends in the West, once briefed, proceed to publish TPLF's version of events in "unconfirmed" reports via their social media accounts, blogs and non-mainstream platforms. Evidence is not provided and sources are anonymous such that substantiation is impossible. The end result is the creation of an updated conflict narrative that suits TPLF efforts in the battlefield. For example, if supply lines are cut off, as is inevitably the case for the encircled TPLF, a narrative of Eritrean troops "blocking humanitarian aid" emerges with fresh allegations.

The main sources of this type of reporting that seed the media with TPLF's narrative are the following three entities:

1. Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA);
2. Eritrea Hub; and
3. World Peace Foundation (WPF).

EEPA, which calls itself an organization, is essentially an online blog created by Belgian activist Mirjam van Reisen, which up until the start of the Tigrayan conflict in November, was almost exclusively focused on reporting and commenting on Eritrea in promotion of regime change. Her precipitous switch to covering the conflict suggests her politics towards Tigray and TPLF are an extension of her regime-change politics toward Eritrea. In 2012, she penned an article calling for an "Arab Spring 2.0" in Eritrea.²⁴³ She gloated in her cruel efforts to stop EU developmental aid—non-military in nature—from reaching the Eritrean people: "The EU had reserved dozens of millions of euros for Eritrea, but – I am happy to note – that this money was

²⁴⁰ "In Memoriam: Seyoum Mesfin", World Peace Foundation, Ethiopian Peacemaker and Patriot, Alex De Waal, January 14, 2021. ; "Meles Zenawi and Ethiopia's Grand Experiment", Abdul Mohammed and Alex De Waal, August 22, 2012.

²⁴¹ "Requiem for a Reprobate: Ethiopian Tyrant Should Not Be Lionized", Thor Halvorssen and Alex Gladstein, *Forbes*, August 22, 2012.

²⁴² "In Ethiopia's digital battle over the Tigray region, facts are casualties", Alexi Drew and Claire Wilmot, *Washington Post*, February 5, 2021.

²⁴³ "Wanted Arab Spring 2.0 in Eritrea", Mirjam van Reisen, Social Watch., January 18, 2012.

never paid out. I had written to EU Development Cooperation Commissioner Andris Piebalgs in October 2011 to pledge him not to transfer the funds to the dictator. The West shouldn't support dictatorships, I implored."

Aside from her hostility towards Eritrea's leadership and people, she appears to hold contempt for Eritrea's sovereignty on the whole as she called the Eritrean-Ethiopian border "very artificial" and likened the two countries to one nation divided by a Berlin Wall.²⁴⁴ On the eve of Eritrean Independence Day in 2014, she demanded the Dutch government close the Eritrean embassy.²⁴⁵

Van Reisen's hostility toward Eritrea cannot be overlooked. The EEPA blog has been publishing daily "Situation Reports" on Tigray since November 17 and much of the reporting entails alleged crimes by Eritrean troops and exudes an air of deep animosity towards Eritrea.

Eritrea Hub is another key source of unconfirmed reports in support of TPLF. The blog is maintained by Ex-BBC Africa journalist Martin Plaut, who makes no effort to hide his admiration for TPLF and deep-seated contempt for Eritrea's government. On April 25, he attended a TPLF anti-government rally in London, posing in photos with a raised fist alongside TPLF activists.²⁴⁶ In a 2015 interview on The Foreign Desk program on the London-based Monocle 24 radio station, Plaut had the following to say:

Eritrea is one bullet away from fundamental change. If Isaias was eliminated, it would be the end of repression or at least there will be a great hope. One shouldn't forget, I'm never in favor of assassination normally but if you

look at what happened when Admiral Carrero Blanco was blown over the church in Madrid, the death of one man was the end of the Franco era in Spain.

Speaking at the "Building Democracy in Eritrea Conference" in April 2019, he advised Eritreans about "manufacturing the news" and recommended that they "Do not demonstrate in front of Eritrean embassy unless you are going to burn it down."²⁴⁷ By his own admission, Plaut has had an axe to grind against the Eritrean government following actions in the 1997 against his friend Ermias Debessai, the first Eritrean high official arrested on corruption charges. Aside from his militant animosity, he has demonstrated a propensity to employ deception about Eritrea.²⁴⁸ He was caught falsely reporting that Eritrea voted against Palestine obtaining "Non-Member

"The main sources of this type of reporting that seed the media with TPLF's narrative are the following three entities: 1. Europe External Programme with Africa (EPA); 2. Eritrea Hub; and 3. World Peace Foundation (WPF)."

Observer State" status in the UN in 2012 (hours before the vote had even taken place), and he misleadingly used a photo from a massive Albanian Eid al Adha prayer gathering to claim that Eritreans were protesting against their government in 2015.²⁴⁹

Like van Reisen, Plaut holds extremes views of TPLF and Eritrea and has a history of fraudulent reporting, making him unfit to report on Tigray and Eritrea, especially when he provides no substantive evidence and expects the media to

²⁴⁴ "Q & A with Dr Mirjam van Reisen", Meron Estefanos, Asmarino, Deember 31, 2009.

²⁴⁵ "Close the Eritrean Embassies Not The Borders", Mirjam van Reisen, May 23, 2014.

²⁴⁶ Twitter thread by @rayuma_raya posted on April 25, 2021. Access here: https://twitter.com/rayuma_raya/status/1386388565144309764

²⁴⁷ "Martin Plaut speaks at Building Democracy in Eritrea Conference - London April 2019", *Eritrea*

Focus. Uploaded to YouTube on April June 29, 2020. Access here: https://youtu.be/c-AF9_dpo_A

²⁴⁸ "Africa's bright future," Martin Plaut, *Martin Plaut*, July 2, 2014. Access here: <https://martinplaut.com/2014/02/07/africas-bright-future/>

²⁴⁹ "Martin Plaut caught using Albanian religious gathering picture as anti-Eritrean government demonstrators", *Madote*, June 26, 2016.

take him at his word. He now claims Eritrean troops are in Oromia, citing nothing other than the Eritrean regime-change activists.²⁵⁰ How can anyone take him and his reporting seriously?

WPF, the third critical source of unconfirmed reports from Tigray, is an outfit managed by Alex de Waal. As previously mentioned, de Waal is extremely close to TPLF's leadership and strongly averse to Eritrea's government. Like van Reisen and Plaut, he seeks regime change in Eritrea and uses his reporting to bring about this end. De Waal is one of the leading propagators of the claim of starvation in Tigray, implicating the Eritrean and Ethiopian militaries in deliberately destroying civilian food supplies.²⁵¹ He likens these supposed efforts to those of Mengistu Hailemariam during the 1984 famine.

Ironically, de Waal published an article in the *New York Times* in 2016 entitled "Is the Era of Great Famines Over?" while TPLF oversaw one of the worst bouts of hunger that decade.²⁵² Shockingly, he declared that "20 million Ethiopians – one-fifth of the population – desperately short of food...aren't starving to death" to suggest that the democratic governance of TPLF, which won 100 percent of the vote the prior year, was mainly responsible for "success in averting another disaster" since "there is no record of people dying of famine in a democracy." To de Waal, it was very much the case then, as it is today, that his official declaration or disregard of famine was largely a cynical exercise in public relations for a given government.

Van Reisen, Plaut and de Waal account for the majority of initial, unconfirmed reports before their stories get picked up by major Western news outlets. In order for the outlets to publish their work, however, facts on the ground must be created.

Stage 3: Creating Facts on the Ground

²⁵⁰ "Report: 'Eritrean troops despatched to Oromia'", Martin Plaut, *Eritrea Hub*, March 22, 2021.

²⁵¹ "Tigray Is Being Deliberately Starved to Death", Alex de Waal, *World Politics Review*, April 6, 2021.

²⁵² "Is the Era of Great Famines Over?", Alex De Waal, *New York Times*, May 8, 2016.

The next stage of the TPLF disinformation propagation network requires that TPLF create "facts on the ground" in Tigray or in cyberspace in order for their desired evolving narrative to make the news. TPLF activists are integral to this stage.

Recall the CNN video of the Dengelat villager being coached on what to say for video cameras. Africa correspondent Nima Elbagir said, "Through a network of activists and relatives, CNN tracked down eyewitnesses to the attack." Notice that reporters like Elbagir, who do not speak Tigrinya, depend on this "network of activists" to liaise with civilians. The activists in this case were caught on camera telling the villager to change his words and lie. CNN used the video in spite of the clear deception and has yet to issue an apology or retraction. This fact serves as clear proof that TPLF activists' efforts to manufacture evidence in Tigray ex post facto is effective in turning unconfirmed reports into "credible" evidence cited in the Western media.

Similar examples of "civilian coaching" abound. In another case, a Sky News video report on March 20 from a Sudanese refugee camp – where TPLF activists are known to dwell in heavy numbers – captures a Tigrayan woman being told exactly what to say in response to an interviewer.²⁵³ After the interviewer asks her a question, she begins answering, only to be interrupted by a man to her right, outside the video camera's field of view. In a loud whisper, he instructs her to say, "We came because of the war. We've been robbed of our belongings, money and animals." She repeats his words. Tearful and distressed, one must consider the possibility that she may have been providing testimony under duress and coercion as refugees are among the most vulnerable and insecure populations.

Facts on the ground are also produced through activists providing mistranslations favorable to TPLF. Recalling the work of Jemal Countess and Jeff Pearce who interviewed him, TPLF members

²⁵³ "Ethiopia's Tigray conflict: 'Everything has been taken'",

Sky News. Uploaded to YouTube on March 20, 2021. Access here: <https://youtu.be/wRyUZLwDvDg>

not only infiltrated Sudanese refugee camps where they would provide reporters with false testimony, but also served as translators of civilians for visiting reporters. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that the Ethiopian government would eventually take some sort of actions to rein in false translators. After announcing on February 24 its invitation of seven international media outlets to visit and report on Tigray, a government official issued a follow up warning that actions would be taken against persons that “are trying to supply wrong information to media crew that has set feet in Tigray.”²⁵⁴ Unsurprisingly, translators for the Financial Times, BBC and AFP were arrested, investigated and released shortly after.²⁵⁵ TPLF, through its network of media fixers, translators and minders developed over 27 years of repressive ethnic rule, works to insulate honest reporters in Tigray from unfiltered civilian testimony.

“TPLF, through its network of media fixers, translators and minders developed over 27 years of repressive ethnic rule, works to insulate honest reporters in Tigray from unfiltered civilian testimony. In addition to coaching, posing as civilians, mistranslating and insulating, TPLF members also instruct their supporters to provide manufactured atrocities using visual media.”

In addition to coaching, posing as civilians, mistranslating and insulating, TPLF members also instruct their supporters to provide manufactured atrocities using visual media. A Facebook Live video of TPLF activist Tesfay Nigus, who has more

than 21,000 followers, instructed TPLF supporters to "systematically" post fake videos in order to deceive "ferenjjs" (corruption of the word "French" to connote all Caucasians) to promote TPLF's narrative. The video had more than 33,000 views and 4,000 comments. Speaking in Tigrinya, he continues:

When we report about the situation in Tigray, we need to do so using vivid images. It does not matter if the images are of Tigray or even true, what matters is that it is through images that we can capture the attention of people. For instance, if we use the image of a young girl and say she was raped in Adigrat in Tigray, and if those who want to investigate the atrocities go there to verify our account of events, for sure they will find something much worse than what we reported so they will not bother to remember to check if the initial report was accurate or not. We simply have to flood the media with gruesome stories, regardless of whether they are true or not, because what we write will all be documented and become the standard narrative.²⁵⁶

Unsurprisingly, the video has since been deleted from Facebook but copies have been reposted on Twitter.²⁵⁷ Social media is littered with similar calls by diaspora TPLF activists to get Tigrayans to openly lie to visiting foreigners to cast a false image of genocide. In one case, one activists called on all diaspora Tigrayans to call their family members in Tigray to tell women to wear black dresses as though mourning, to cover clothes in red as though covered in blood and wail loudly in distress as though a massacre had just taken place.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁴ “Government, State have zero tolerance to those who misguide international media”, *Ethiopian Press Agency*, February 26, 2021. ; “Ethiopia releases media workers detained in Tigray”, *Al Jazeera English*, march 3, 2021.

²⁵⁵ “Ethiopian military detains BBC reporter, translators for AFP and FT”, *Committee to Protect Journalists*, March 1, 2021.

²⁵⁶ Facebook post uploaded by user “Tefay.Nigus” on January 31, 2021. Access here:

<https://www.facebook.com/tesfay.nigus.92/videos/1663890627127563/>

²⁵⁷ Twitter thread by @HermonE_J posted on April 25, 2021. Access here: https://twitter.com/HermonE_J/status/1356938145145757698

²⁵⁸ Twitter thread by @TPLF_Lies posted on M, 2021. Access here: https://twitter.com/TPLF_Lies/status/1370571385249038336

Founder and CEO of Tigray Media House, Alula Solomon, is a staunch TPLF member and the most prominent among diaspora activists. TMH's YouTube videos are the most viewed by TPLF supporters. Alula regularly manufactures "facts" about Tigray in cyberspace, often deleting his posts shortly after. On March 23, for example, he tweeted a photo of the identification card of a supposed Eritrean soldier killed in action in Oromia, located in West Ethiopia (see Fig. 13). It was soon discovered that the ID was actually that of an elder Eritrean man living Sweden named Mehari Tesfay.²⁵⁹ Alula or an intermediary (perhaps KMN media) acquired the photo after a nostalgic Mehari posted a photo of his ID from his younger years in Eritrea on Facebook on March 13.

Note that Alula posted this tweet only one day after Plaut published a blog post about Eritrean soldiers fighting in Oromia, highlighting once again the coordinated nature in which TPLF activists are manufacturing evidence after Western contacts, in cooperation with TPLF leaders, publish the initial unconfirmed reports.

Alula Solomon @Alula_Solomon · 4h ...
Identification Card of Eritrean soldier who was killed fighting alongside Amhara forces against Wollo #Oromo. The mercenary Eritrean soldiers are wearing Amhara special force uniform, according to KMN.

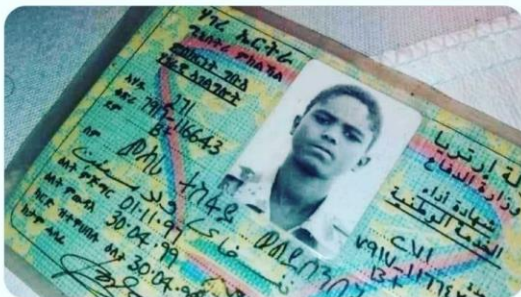


Figure 13. Alula Solomon's deleted tweet from March 23, 2021. Courtesy: Twitter.

It is important to understand that Alula did not merely make a mistake but is knowingly deceiving

²⁵⁹ Twitter thread by @TPLF_Lies posted on March 23, 2021. Access here: https://twitter.com/TPLF_Lies/status/1374563220417957891

international audiences. There are many examples of similar deleted, deceptive tweets. Capturing every lie is beyond the scope of this report. However, a simple Twitter search of the terms "Alula Solomon deleted" will easily return countless results.

Alula's behavior is common culture within the TPLF activist community on social media. On New Year's Day, activist Henock Yebyo, an epidemiologist at the University of Zurich, tweeted a picture of young girl and explained that Eritrean troops raided her family's house, told her mom "you hurt us to cry blood tears, now is your turn" and then proceed to shoot the girl, killing her in revenge (Fig. 14). The very next day, a video of the girl, who actually was an Eritrean-American living in California, was posted online.²⁶⁰ "I did not die. I'm still here. Happy New Year," she told her viewers.

Henock Yebyo, PhD @HenockYe... · 1d ...
Shire
#Eritrea|n troops raided a house. Found a mom with a 2-wk-old baby & a girl in the pic. Snatched money+gold available

One stared at the girl & said "you hurt us to cry blood tears, now is your turn", then shot to kill her. The message was to the mom

A revenge mission!
@UN



79 348 269

Figure 14. Henock Yebyo's deleted tweet from January 1, 2021.

The above examples demonstrate that TPLF activists create facts on the ground to be used by

²⁶⁰ Twitter thread by @Adulis_Kiloma posted on January 2, 2021. Access here: https://twitter.com/Adulis_Kiloma/status/1345377893053067273

Western correspondents. However, some of those correspondents do not passively wait for TPLF's disinformation to come to them—they actively seek it.

On February 13, Alula tweeted, “The great journalist from AP, Cara Anna, wants to speak with eyewitnesses of the Axum massacre in order to write about it. Those of you who have the phone numbers of eyewitnesses, direct message me” (translated from Tigrinya).²⁶¹ Five days later, Anna officially broke the story on the “Axum Massacre”, the first article in the mainstream media officially confirming an atrocity in Tigray since the conflict started in November.

Notice the coordination ranging from the TPLF leadership's calls for international action against Eritrea to van Reisen and Plaut's timely “unconfirmed” reports about Axum to TPLF activists like Alula providing evidence to a willing and enthusiastic Anna. The synchronization is clear and overt.

Notably, Anna co-publishes and works closely with fellow AP correspondent Elias Meseret, an ethnic Tigrayan who for many years published articles highly favorable to TPLF and antagonistic to Eritrea. Anna's reporting appears to be an extension of Elias's efforts to buttress TPLF. Aside from bias, Anna has displayed an alarming lack of basic literacy on Africa. In 2016, she wrote about “Kenya's Mount Kilimanjaro”.²⁶² How does an Africa correspondent, let alone one based in Kenya, not know that Africa's highest mountain is in Tanzania? Given the history of colonial reporting on Africa, Anna's brazen disregard for elementary African facts taught to even school children, suggest a racist level of willful ignorance. This may explain why she felt emboldened enough to push African atrocity propaganda through racist trope-like characterizations of Eritrean troops in Axum.

²⁶¹ Twitter thread by @Alula_Solomon posted on February 13, 2021. Access here: https://twitter.com/Alula_Solomon/status/1360745657070477315

²⁶² “South African athlete dies while climbing Kilimanjaro”, Cara Anna, *Associated Press*, July 18, 2016.

Anna is one among a coterie similar Africa-based Western journalists reporting on Tigray. Maggie Fick, Reuters East Africa Bureau Chief, has also openly wooed Alula Solomon, tweeting on December 14: “@Alula_Solomon please could you follow me for a DM? I'm a Reuters journalist. Thank you.”²⁶³ Her tweet drew widespread anger and consternation from Ethiopians and Eritreans on Twitter.

“Notice the coordination ranging from the TPLF leadership's calls for international action against Eritrea to van Reisen and Plaut's timely “unconfirmed” reports about Axum to TPLF activists like Alula providing evidence to a willing and enthusiastic Anna. The synchronization is clear and overt.”

Stage 4: Amplifying Primary Sources

The next stage of disinformation propagation is amplification of newly published primary sources as was displayed in the wake Anna's article on the “Axum Massacre”. Anna's article, and similar articles from wire services reporting in Tigray, are republished worldwide by newspapers, providing mass dissemination of TPLF narratives around the world. With the production of new mainstream content, the discussion instantly moves to social media where TPLF activists play another crucial amplifying role in disinformation propagation.

Two articles from the Washington Post published in November and February highlight how TPLF activists are mobilizing on social media to wage a digital war. In the November piece, Wilmot analyzed “90,000 tweets” on the Tigray conflict suggests that “anti-government” entities (i.e. TPLF) were organizing on Twitter:

²⁶³ Twitter thread by @MaggieFick posted on December 14, 2020. Access here: <https://twitter.com/MaggieFick/status/1338375276036808709>

Twitter data collected from Nov. 1 to 10 showed that 30 percent of tweets about Tigray and Abiy were from accounts created this year. Nearly half (47 percent) of these tweets were from accounts created in late October and early November. After Nov. 4, the number of new accounts created per day grew from an average of 21 to 245. *Their tweets are overwhelmingly (although not exclusively) anti-government.*

Despite their single-issue focus and clustered creation dates, most of these accounts do not behave like bots. *But they do seem coordinated.*

"It is an organized movement," a Tigrayan community organizer in Canada noted during an interview. "Documents, even an online webinar, taught people how to share materials on Twitter," he said. Like others in this article, *he spoke on the condition of anonymity because of fear of reprisal.* He described a loose networks of activists using WhatsApp to teach people how to set up accounts and promote hashtags like #StopTheWarOnTigray. Users are told to tweet in English, when possible.²⁶⁴ [Emphasis added]

There is nothing inherently wrong with coordinating and organizing a campaign on social media assuming that it is based on truth and justice. Herein lies the problem: TPLF propagates disinformation and ethnic hatred for an unjust ethnic secessionist war using manufactured evidence that – by the time it reaches the Tigrayan community in the diaspora – cannot be forwarded in good conscience. Those who knowingly forward disinformation are not merely members of the "Tigrayan community" but rather TPLF activists – a key distinction overlooked by Wilmot.

²⁶⁴ "Ethiopia's cracking down in Tigray. But activists are spreading the news.", Claire Wilmott, Washington Post, November 17, 2020.

²⁶⁵ "Human Trafficking and the Human Rights Agenda Against Eritrea", Simon Tesfamariam, *Black Agenda*

One also cannot ignore the "fear of reprisal" mentioned by the anonymous community organizer interviewed by Wilmot. Who is this person fearing? If the intentions of this campaign are indeed good, why the secrecy and anonymity? One reason may be that diaspora relatives of TPLF, many of whom are known to use false Eritrean identities to resettle in the west (due to UNHCR's favorable Eritrean migration policies), may be them reluctant to use their names publically.²⁶⁵ There is also some emerging evidence that members of the "Tigrayan community" in the diaspora – representing an elite, culturally distinct from the common Tigrayan peasant – may be facing intimidation or threats of ostracization from powerful TPLF activists in their community for failing go along with TPLF's disinformation (Fig. 15).



Figure 15. Tweet by @mulubrhan on March 5, 2021.

Wilmot co-published a follow-up piece with Alexi Drew several months after the capture of Mekelle. In their analysis of "500,000 tweets" on Tigray, they observe the following about "Pro-Tigray activism online":

#StandWithTigray is a central source of activism for pro-Tigray campaigns. Its website shares instructions for using Twitter, along with pre-written content for followers to share. ...

Report, March 20, 2013. Access here: <https://www.blackagenda.com/content/human-trafficking-and-human-rights-agenda-against-eritrea>

...

“New” activist accounts were created throughout the conflict. We found over 3,000 such accounts between November and the end of January. These accounts demonstrate a low level of digital literacy, few followers and short-term engagement.

Accounts with opaque credentials claim expertise or positions aimed at boosting their credibility. They claim to be academics or aid workers but have little or no online presence beyond Twitter, making their credentials difficult to verify. These accounts may be problematic because they can obtain significant “reach” based on unsubstantiated claims.²⁶⁶

In addition to #StandWithTigray, there are also the #StopWarOnTigray and OMNA Tigray campaigns. The campaigns work closely with one another and promote the hashtag #TigrayGenocide as can be shown by their cache of Google Drive documents instructing them to do so.²⁶⁷ Additionally, the Stand With Tigray website contains preformed tweets and forms prepopulated with disinformation to be used by campaign adherents to share with their respective followers.²⁶⁸ As an example of the dishonesty and ethnic hatred displayed by this website, the wording of one petition to be signed denies TPLF culpability in the Mai Kadra massacre on the grounds of Tigrayan ethnic superiority:

We were shocked and dismayed by the suggestion that forces loyal to the Tigray Regional State were responsible for the massacre of their own people. It defies logic to indicate that the highly disciplined, well-trained, and well-armed forces of the regional state, which had been administering the area for more than 30 years, would be used to commit such

horrific crimes using rudimentary weapons. The sudden outburst of such ghastly ethnic-based attacks also runs contrary to the fact that Tigray was Ethiopia’s most peaceful regional state prior to the war, with no reports of ethnic-based violence among its diverse population. Conversely, the Amhara and Oromo regions have become the hotbeds of ethnic strife and mass killings since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s rise to power.

Notice how this petition argues, not from evidence or data, but from the tribalist belief that TPLF forces could not possibly be behind the Mai Kadra massacres because they were essentially too good to use “rudimentary” weapons like machetes and that such behavior was more akin to Oromos and Amharas.²⁶⁹

Notably, Wilmot and Drew, ignoring evidence to the contrary, excuse TPLF activists’ questionable tactics on the grounds that they do not have resources comparable with that of the government:

The #StandwithTigray campaign is organized similarly [sic] to many other social justice campaigns on social media. Pre-written tweets build momentum around hashtags and connect to potential influencers like foreign officials, U.N. agencies or foreign ministries. This is a standard approach for activists, who usually don’t have the resources to employ the kinds of PR firms that many governments rely on to manage information (and disinformation) strategies.

Campaigners have raised significant sums of money by deceptive means. For example, Alula Solomon is on record in January telling TPLF activists to use funds from the Tigray

²⁶⁶ Drew A, Wilmot C, "In Ethiopia’s", *Washington Post*, February 5, 2021.

²⁶⁷ StandWithTigray Google Drive archive. Access here: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1BxVC1_SHzY_aT5xajxvuc_TQ0hZvljijn

²⁶⁸ “Stand With Tigray” website. Access here: <https://www.standwithtigray.com/>

²⁶⁹ “Petition to Amnesty International to protest their biased and unfair report regarding Mai-Kadra, Tigray massacre.” Access here: <https://www.standwithtigray.com/amnesty-complaint-letter>

Development Association (TDA), a humanitarian and developmental organization, to engage in digital activism (translated from Tigrinya):

Yes, TDA, is good at collecting money. The diaspora efforts have gone in the wrong direction. The direction of our people's struggle has changed. Our support for building schools and other similar efforts by TDA are no longer applicable. TDA must outsource for things that it isn't capable of doing. For media, for advocacy work like SJT, we must outsource it. We give them the money, and they speak on our behalf. We can learn from the Houston experience. They took out money and paid for it! Nothing comes free. Therefore, drawing from experiences of external [lobbying] groups, working together with them, learning from them, spending the necessary money on them, working with savvy diaspora youth fighters to produce the best media, diplomacy, advocacy and lobbying work. But we have to pay for it!

TDA is not a political or lobby organization. TDA's chapter in North America (TDA-NA), where Alula is located and where most donated money emanates from, states the following as its mission statement: "Support in Education, Health, and Capacity building in Tigray, Ethiopia." It's registered with an S99 IRS Activity Code (NTEE Code) meaning that its purpose is "Community Improvement & Capacity Building". This clearly is not the case since it is involved in international political work and lobbying on behalf of a rebel force, which requires a Q01 designation, at the very minimum.

TDA-NA created a GoFundMe page entitled "I am with the People of Tigray" to specifically meet Alula's aim.²⁷⁰ However, the GoFundMe page, misleadingly classified under "Humanitarian Assistance", states a different cause: "Therefore, Tigray Development Association is calling on all Tegararu and our peace-loving allies to donate. This

donation will be used for medical, food, and various humanitarian supplies." At the time of this report's publication, a little over \$3.6 of \$4 million has been raised to support political activism and lobbying for TPLF. Fundraising is split up in "Teams" that list the amount of money raised by different Tigrayan community centers around the country. Thus, under the cover of "Tigrayan Community Centers" and under false pretenses of humanitarianism, TPLF activists in the diaspora are raising funds to support TPLF in the battlefield. Proof that TDA-NA is withholding donated money from the people of Tigray, as instructed by Alula, is provided by the fact that TDA-NA's treasurer Mebrahtu Teferi told Tigray Media House on January 16 that the \$2.5 million raised thus far (at that time) would not be sent to Tigray because there was no longer a government in the region.²⁷¹ However, this fact has not stopped collection of money which has now reached \$3.5 million.

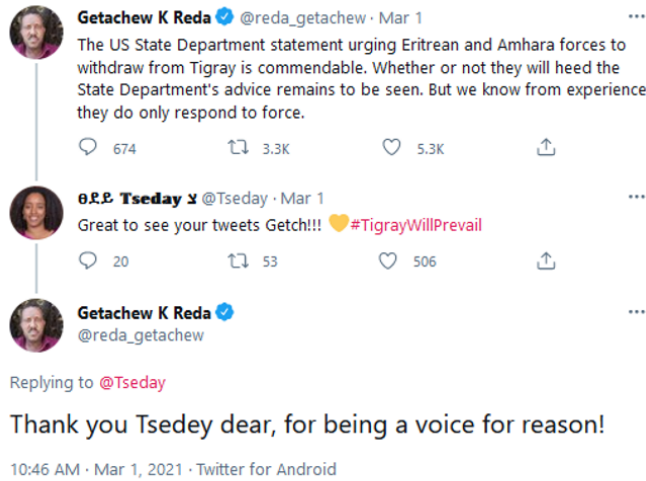
“The direction of our people’s struggle has changed. Our support for building schools and other similar efforts by TDA are no longer applicable. TDA must outsource for things that it isn’t capable of doing. For media, for advocacy work like SJT, we must outsource it. We give them the money, and they speak on our behalf.” – Alula Solomon

Therefore, social media activists in the diaspora who retweet primary sources containing disinformation generated by TPLF are taking part in a dishonest campaign that promotes ethnic hatred and supports TPLF's aims in the battlefield. Furthermore, these activists are knowingly working in cooperation with TPLF leadership rather than merely supporting the people of Tigray. For instance, TPLF spokesperson Getachew Reda is on record – while actively engage in combat in Tigray – thanking TPLF

²⁷⁰ "I am with the People of Tigray", GoFundMe. Access here: <https://charity.gofundme.com/o/en/campaign/i-am-with-the-people-of-tigray>

²⁷¹ “ምንቅስቃስ ማል ት ሰሜን ኣሜሪካ 01-16-2021 ንህዝብና ድምዳሜ ንኹና <https://gf.me/u/y7k68p>”, *Tigray Media House*. Uploaded to YouTube on January 16, 2021. Access here: <https://youtu.be/csFFiYWIZkc>

digital activist Tseday Mekbib, a digital marketing expert leading the #StopWarOnTigray campaign (Fig. 16).



168 Retweets 16 Quote Tweets 1,167 Likes
Figure 16. Twitter exchange between Getachew Reda and Tseday Mekbib on March 1, 2021.

Tseday, like TPLF leaders, is also on record calling for the assassination of Eritrea's president and calling for military action against Eritrea, highlighting a militant anti-peace stance that mirrors TPLF's battlefield aims (Fig. 17).

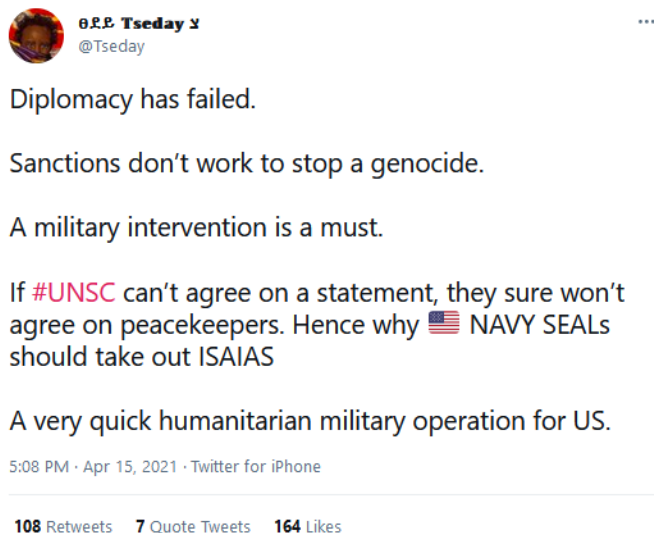


Figure 17. Tweet by Tseday Mekbib on April 15, 2021.

Returning to Cara Anna's article breaking the story about the now debunked Axum Massacre, one can see how militant TPLF activists on Twitter worked cooperatively on the platform to bring the article to prominence. Most of the likes and retweets for AP Africa's initial tweet of the article on February 18 are by TPLF activists using the #TigrayGenocide logo (Fig. 18).²⁷²

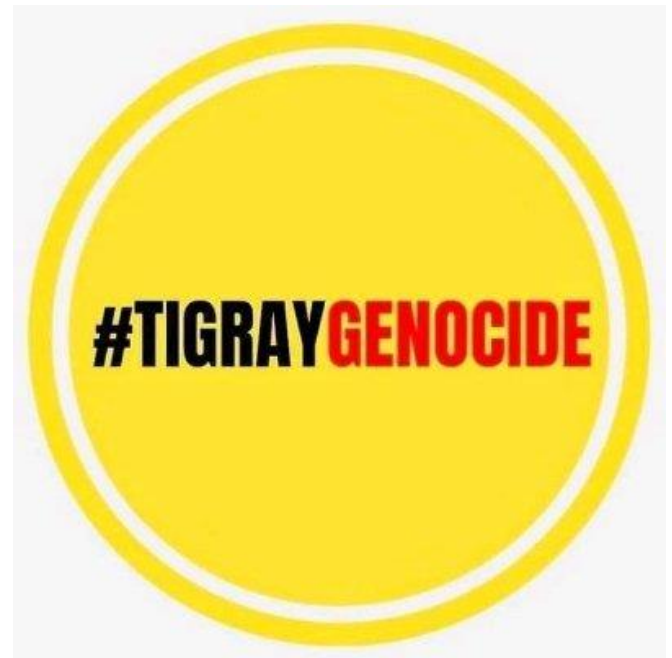


Figure 18. #TigrayGenocide logo.

With this and many other similar examples, it becomes clear that TPLF activists are central to promoting disinformation about the Tigray conflict in cooperation with TPLF's leadership and Western intermediaries.

Stage 5: Producing High-Level Reports

With enough social media buzz and mainstream republications of a breaking story on Tigray, expert groups and human rights investigators begin making plans to investigate the matter further and release high-level reports of their findings. In a quote tweet of AP Africa's tweet about Anna's "Axum Massacre" article, the Deputy Director for Amnesty, Conner Fortune, tweeted, "Bombshell report from Cara Anna at @AP_Africa on a massacre perpetrated by Eritrean forces in #Axum, in Ethiopia's Tigray region. @amnesty will

²⁷² Twitter thread by @AP_Africa posted on February 18, 2021. Access here:

https://twitter.com/AP_Africa/status/1362303937542565889

soon release more detailed reporting on the massacre & its aftermath". A few days later, Amnesty Director of Crisis Response Joanne Mariner tweeted her organization "will be releasing a detailed, blow-by-blow account of the massacre in #Axum - what happened and how it happened - which I think will make an important contribution to the public understanding of the #Tigray conflict." Soon after, Amnesty published its report which would be fraught with the issues mentioned earlier in this report.

“These tweets highlights how TPLF disinformation is taken yet another step further: from social media promotion of a breaking news story of an alleged atrocity to an official investigation accompanied with a propagandistic ‘blow-by-blow’ high-level Amnesty report.”

These tweets highlights how TPLF disinformation is taken yet another step further: from social media promotion of a breaking news story of an alleged atrocity to an official investigation accompanied with a propagandistic “blow-by-blow” high-level Amnesty report. Other human rights NGOs (e.g. HRW, etc.) or academic expert entities (e.g. ICG, etc.) may investigate and produce their own reports. Large collaborative investigative media teams may also produce similar high-level reports dubbed “exclusive” as recently exhibited with the “Mahbere Dego Massacre” that included personnel from CNN, BBC, Bellingcat and Newsy and was reported across all their respective media platforms.²⁷³ As was the case with the alleged Axum and Maryam Dengelat massacres, of course, no substantive evidence is presented.

²⁷³ "Mahbere Dego: Clues to a Clifftop Massacre in Ethiopia", *Bellingcat*, April 1, 2021. ; "Evidence suggests Ethiopian military carried out massacre in Tigray," Africa Eye, *BBC*, April 1, 2021. ; "'Two bullets is enough' Analysis of Tigray massacre video raises questions for Ethiopian Army", Bethlehem Feleke, Eliza Mackintosh, Gianluca Mezzofiore, Katie Polglase and Nima Elbagir, *CNN*, April 2, 2021. ; "Shedding Light

Stage 6: Demanding International Action

Ultimately, high-level reports manufacture consent for intervention in Tigray. Ignoring the lack of evidence and use of disinformation from TPLF-associated entities, Western governments, particularly that of the US, use the vacuous high-level reports to claim “credible reports” of atrocities in Tigray, feign “concern” and demand international intervention in the name of humanitarianism. As an example, consider the AP’s article on February 28 that makes clear the source of the US Secretary of State’s concern:

The U.S. is “gravely concerned by reported atrocities and the overall deteriorating situation” in Ethiopia’s Tigray region, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in the toughest statement yet from the U.S. on Ethiopia’s ongoing conflict.

Accounts of atrocities by Ethiopian forces against residents of the country’s northwestern region of Tigray were detailed in reports by The Associated Press and by Amnesty International.²⁷⁴

Another AP article from March 11 also cites the Amnesty report and Anna’s article as the basis for Secretary Blinken’s demand that Eritrean troops “Need to come out”.²⁷⁵ The article even goes a step further and cites TPLF leaders themselves endorsing Secretary Blinken’s demands: “But the fugitive leaders of Tigray seized on Blinken’s comments, issuing a statement on Thursday condemning what they called ‘the genocidal campaign’ targeting their people.” Hence, the disinformation is brought full circle, from TPLF leaders to Western governments and back to TPLF leaders again.

State actors in Washington are critical to TPLF’s disinformation network. Without them, TPLF

On A Clifftop Massacre In Ethiopia", Jake Godin, *Newsy*. April 1, 2021.

²⁷⁴ "U.S. is ‘gravely concerned’ by reports of abuses in Ethiopia", *Associated Press*, February 28, 2021.

²⁷⁵ "Ethiopia’s leader faces intense pressure to end Tigray war", Rodney Muhumuza, *Associated Press*, March 11, 2021.

would have little incentive to peddle disinformation. Thus, who are the entities in Washington that incentivize TPLF to propagate disinformation?

Supporting TPLF At All Costs

Powerful Friends in Washington

On the basis of the latest “credible reports”, Biden’s administration has recently appointed veteran US diplomat Jeffrey Feltman as a special envoy for the Horn of Africa.²⁷⁶ Feltman is well-known to many Ethiopians for his obsequious eulogy of the late TPLF leader Meles Zenawi in 2012.²⁷⁷ His appointment is unsurprising given Susan Rice’s role in Biden’s administration. The influence of Rice, Obama’s former National Security Adviser, cannot be overstated.

President Biden initially sought Rice for Secretary of State but opted for Blinken, a close friend and protégé of Rice who served as her Deputy National Security Adviser,²⁷⁸ after realizing the Senate would oppose her confirmation.²⁷⁹ Rice is considered to be the brains behind President Biden’s foreign policy. Former US Ambassador to Germany Ric Grenell told Newsmax TV in March that Susan was “literally behind the scenes, just pulling all the strings” and it was “a joke that we think that she’s not running foreign policy”.²⁸⁰

Rice is also known to be extremely close to TPLF and hold strong personal animosity towards Eritrea’s leadership. In a 2002 issue of *Current History*, Columbia University’s Peter Rosenblum wrote about Susan Rice’s diplomatic failures in engaging Eritrea and Ethiopia as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs for the Clinton Administration.²⁸¹ Rosenbaum calls to

account the “personalized politics of the Rice team”, citing the criticisms of her State Department colleague Steve Morrison. Described as “brash” and “peremptory”, Rice, along with Gayle Smith who was “known to be close to Meles” and a “booster for Meles”, were dispatched back to Washington for botching mediation between Eritrea and Ethiopia and sparking a return to hostilities:

According to one, Rice was essentially “put on probation,” kept in Washington where the secretary [Albright] could keep an eye on her. “Susan had misread the situation completely,” according to one State Department insider who observed the conflict with Albright. “She came in like a scoutmaster, lecturing them on how to behave and having a public tantrum when they didn’t act the way she wanted.” Apparently, Rice provoked a belligerent response from the Eritreans by disclosing the terms of the agreement. Some speculate that she did it to prove that she was making progress. But the effect was to make the Ethiopian counterattack “inevitable,” according to another high-level State Department official.

Rice and Smith were partial mediators that stoked conflict. As mentioned in the first section of this report, the secessionist TPLF sought access to the Red Sea through waging its 1998 - 2000 “border” war against Eritrea, which means Rice and Smith’s actions – that ultimately led to a return to war – could be seen as benefitting their TPLF allies (see Historical Context section). In response to criticisms of Rice’s failed brand of personalized politics that drew unusually intimate connections with African leaders, Rosenbaum

²⁷⁶ “Veteran diplomat Jeffrey Feltman named U.S. special envoy for Horn of Africa”, Michelle Nichols and Simon Lewis, *Reuters*, April 24, 2021.

²⁷⁷ “UN Rep. Jeffrey D. Feltman Speaks at Funeral Service for Ethiopian PM Meles Zenawi”, *Ethiopian TV*. Uploaded to YouTube on September 3, 2012. Access here:

²⁷⁸ “Statement by National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice on the Nomination of Tony Blinken as Deputy Secretary of State”, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, November 07, 2014.

²⁷⁹ “Biden expected to nominate Blinken as secretary of state”, Matthew Lee, *Associated Press*, November 22, 2021.

²⁸⁰ “Ric Grenell to Newsmax TV: ‘President Susan Rice’ in Charge”, Eric Mack, *Newsmax*, March 6, 2021.

²⁸¹ Irrational Exuberance: The Clinton Administration in Africa, Peter Rosenblum, *Current History* 101:195-202, 2002.

quoted – of all people – Alex de Waal who said, “It could just have well have succeeded, in which case we would be celebrating the brilliant use of intimate personal contacts in diplomacy.” De Waal’s defense for Rice reveals how Washington – then and now – is rife with TPLF apologists who protect and shill for each other on behalf of TPLF against America’s own interests.

Given Rice’s failures in the Horn, imperious nature, personalized politics and indelible bond to TPLF, her quiet leadership of the Biden administration’s foreign policy will likely lead her to vengefully ram through initiatives to resuscitate TPLF at grave expense to America’s long term interests. As Rosenbaum observed, Rice “burned bridges liberally, alienating and often antagonizing many potential allies.” Such is the case currently with Eritrea and Ethiopia.

“Given Rice’s failures in the Horn, imperious nature, personalized politics and indelible bond to TPLF, her quiet leadership of the Biden administration’s foreign policy will likely lead her to vengefully ram through initiatives to resuscitate TPLF at grave expense to America’s long term interests.”

Feltman, likely appointed through Rice’s recent backdoor efforts, has already antagonized Ethiopia, Eritrea and the Horn of Africa even before taking office as he expressed, in a February Zoom call, desires to undermine all possible African initiatives to address the conflict in Tigray:

Ethiopia has brushed aside African Union mediation efforts and sub-regional organizations that cover the Horn of Africa, the IGAD, the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development as authoritarian leaders in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia draw closer at the expense of the wider collective. So I conclude that US

coordination with African partners is important but insufficient to prevent a crisis in the heart of Africa. We need to look East: the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey all exercise extensive influence in the Horn.²⁸²

At a time when Africa seeks “African solutions for African problems”, Feltman seemingly demotes African efforts and instead calls for Gulf powers to intervene on behalf of America on the grounds that Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia are “authoritarian.” The irony is not lost on anyone.

When the Biden administration could send anyone as an emissary to Ethiopia to help address the conflict in Tigray, why would it send a person who has demonstrated partiality for TPLF and is largely seen by Ethiopians as a political hack shilling for TPLF? Was someone neutral, even if only on the surface, not available for this diplomatic initiative?

Negotiations to Rescue TPLF

Western governments had 27 years to rein in TPLF for its crimes and genocidal actions against innocent peoples in Ethiopia and throughout the Horn of Africa. Again, they had the opportunity to call TPLF to account once it retreated to Mekelle in 2018, challenged Abiy’s rule through sedition, belligerence and highly provocative criminal behavior. The West failed to push the rogue entity to negotiate with the federal government and to pursue peaceful dialogue. Instead, the West remained dangerously silent and provided TPLF with diplomatic cover for its belligerence and criminality, leading TPLF’s Wondimu Asaminew to make his comments about PM Abiy being unable to survive in the “jungle.” After TPLF’s November 4 attacks on the Northern Command, however, the Western media, NGOs and governments finally broke their deafening silence, not to condemn TPLF aggression but rather to condemn the federal government’s defense of its national sovereignty; and when TPLF failed to achieve its aims, they demanded negotiations.

²⁸² “State Department names veteran diplomat Jeffrey Feltman as U.S. Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa”,

The FI Station. Uploaded to YouTube on April 24, 2021. Access here: <https://youtu.be/btY2eWBYouY>

Only when TPLF had its back to the wall – failing to capture most of the Northern Command’s heavy artillery, firing missiles on Gondar, Bahir Dar and Asmara and facing battlefield losses that forced its retreat—did Western governments finally begin calling for negotiations. The EU’s foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said in late November, when federal forces were closing in on Mekelle, that mediation was the “only way forward.” Where were such calls for negotiation before and at the start of the conflict? Rather than calls for meditation, Western governments merely urged for “restraint” by both parties.²⁸³

On November 7, The Guardian’s Africa correspondent Jason Burke wrote, “A statement posted on the Facebook page of the Tigray government said it would win the ‘justified’ war, and added that ‘a fighter will not negotiate with their enemies’. ‘Tigray’s people are now armed with modern weaponry that could reach the seat of the infidels,’ it added, an apparent reference to Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa.”²⁸⁴ Does this sound like a party willing to negotiate? Where was the international outcry when TPLF’s confidence in their military prowess was high?

To prevent TPLF from acquiring federal artillery, federal forces quickly proceeded to destroy their own weapons depots – reserved for the Northern Command—via airstrikes and sealed off the border with Sudan.²⁸⁵ On November 9, Sudanese intelligence claimed to have captured 95,000 rounds of ammunition loaded on donkey carts headed toward Ethiopia.²⁸⁶ With supply lines completely cut off and much of its ammunition destroyed or seized by federal forces, TPLF changed its tune and sought for negotiations led by the African Union on November 9.²⁸⁷

Recall that TPLF has already demonstrated a penchant for flouting the terms of negotiated peace deals as was clearly witnessed with TPLF’s 16-year illegal occupation of Badme, Eritrea following a 2002 “final and binding” border delimitation decision that was stipulated in the internationally brokered 2000 Algiers Peace Agreement.²⁸⁸ The international community not only turned the other way but sought to “pin down and punish Eritrea” calling the international community to hold TPLF to account. Negotiations were thus not an initiative to promote peace but an extension of TPLF’s war strategy—a US-led international effort to rescue TPLF during its darkest hours. In light of this history, what makes PM Abiy think TPLF—and the international guarantors that ignored TPLF’s flagrant violations of the peace deal with Eritrea—will not do to Ethiopia what was done to Eritrea?

“Negotiations were thus not an initiative to promote peace but an extension of TPLF’s war strategy—a US-led international effort to rescue TPLF during its darkest hours. In light of this history, what makes PM Abiy think TPLF—and the international guarantors that ignored TPLF’s flagrant violations of the peace deal with Eritrea—will not do to Ethiopia what was done to Eritrea?”

Therefore, it came as no surprise when PM Abiy’s government rejected TPLF’s November 9 request for negotiations, explaining in a tweet that the time for negotiations had passed and that dialogue would only commence after the “the criminal junta is disarmed, legitimate administration in the region

²⁸³ "Ethiopia’s PM seeks to regain control over restive Tigray region", Giulia Paravicini and Dawit Endeshaw, *Reuters*, November 7, 2020.

²⁸⁴ "Ethiopian government moves to replace leadership of Tigray region", Jason Burke, *The Guardian*, November 7, 2020.

²⁸⁵ "Ethiopian PM announces airstrikes in country’s Tigray region", Cara Anna and Elias Meseret, *Associated Press*, November 6, 2020. ; “Ethiopia Prime Minister says Tigray military ops ‘limited’ as

Sudan closes border", Bethlehem Feleke and Eoin McSweeney, CNN, November 6, 2020.

²⁸⁶ “Sudanese army seizes smuggled ammunition near Ethiopian border”, *Sudan Tribune*, November 8, 2020.

²⁸⁷ "Tigray officials appeal to African Union as hundreds killed in deadly Ethiopian clashes", Steve Sweeney, *Morning Star*, November 9, 2020.

²⁸⁸ "Eritrea-Ethiopia Peace: Seismic Shifts Throughout a Strategic Zone", Carol Pineau, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 25, 2018.

restored, and fugitives apprehended & brought to justice - all of them rapidly coming within reach.”²⁸⁹

An AU Envoy visited Ethiopia on November 27, appearing to endorse the federal government position.²⁹⁰ The chairperson of the African Union Commission later declared the federal government’s actions in Tigray as “legitimate” military action as it sought to preserve the country’s unity and stability.²⁹¹ The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a regional trade bloc, stated in a communique of a December 10 emergency meeting on the Tigray conflict that it “reaffirmed the primacy of constitutional order, stability and unity of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.”²⁹² Despite the AU and IGAD siding with the federal government, President Biden’s Secretary of State Anthony Blinken continued to push the AU and “other international partners” to apply pressure on Ethiopia and “work with us to address the crisis in Tigray, including through action at the U.N. and other relevant bodies.”²⁹³

TPLF: Beyond Accountability

One has to wonder why all the focus and pressure is on the federal government. As Bronwyn Bruton of the Atlantic Council observed in November: “And yet, at no point has any Western or African power called for the TPLF to lay down its arms. At no point have Western powers discussed leveling sanctions on the TPLF officials who authorized the attack. In fact, pointed op-editorials in premier publications have actually blamed the Prime Minister for ‘marginalizing’ the TPLF from power, and held him equally responsible for the escalating tensions.”²⁹⁴

“And yet, at no point has any Western or African power called for the TPLF to lay down its arms. At no point have Western powers discussed leveling sanctions on the TPLF officials who authorized the attack.” – Bronwyn Bruton

There is no longer any question regarding who started the conflict, who was behind the Mai Kadra massacre and who has been behind other serious war crimes: TPLF. By giving the perception that “both” parties in the conflict may be responsible for any given crime or by exclusively highlighting supposed federal crimes that are impossible to substantiate, the West effectively provides TPLF diplomatic cover and hides their crimes. Whether intentional or not, Western media, NGOs and governments have engaged in, what former Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn has called “bothsidesism”:

The key problem ... is the assumption of moral equivalence, which leads foreign governments to adopt an attitude of false balance and bothsidesism. Facts and details regarding the true nature of conflicts and the forces igniting and driving them are frequently lost in international efforts to broker peace deals that often crumble as soon as they have been signed.

... After being forced to give up the reins of power due to popular protests against our economic and political mismanagement – which I was a part of – the TPLF leadership

²⁸⁹ Tweet by @AbiyAhmedAli posted on November 10, 2020. Access here:

<https://twitter.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1326069599994056705> ; “Tigray crisis: Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed rejects peace talks”, *BBC*, November 11, 2020.

²⁹⁰ Communiqué on the Visit of the African Union Envoys To Ethiopia, African Union, November 27, 2020. Access here:

<https://allafrica.com/stories/202011280379.html>

²⁹¹ “African Union says Ethiopia acted legitimately in Tigray”, Andrew Meldrum, *Associated Press*, December 21, 2020.

²⁹² Communiqué of the 38th Extraordinary Assembly of IGAD Heads of State and Government”, Djibouti, Republic of Djibouti. December 20, 2020. Access here: <https://www.igad.int/communique/2598-communique-of-the-38th-extraordinary-assembly-of-igad-heads-of-state-and-government>

²⁹³ “U.S. calls on African Union to exert pressure over worsening crisis in Ethiopia’s Tigray”, Phil Stewart, *Reuters*, March 1, 2021.

²⁹⁴ “Calls for negotiation are driving Ethiopia deeper into war”, Bronwyn Bruton, Africa Center, Atlantic Council, November 13, 2020.

designed and is now executing a strategy meant to capitalize on the propensity of the international community to fall into its default mode of bothsidesism and calls for a negotiated settlement. The TPLF's leaders are savvy operators who know how susceptible the international community is to such manipulation.²⁹⁵

Instead of blaming TPLF, the West has opted instead to scapegoat Eritrea for the Tigray conflict. Citing the aforementioned highly-questionable reports of alleged "massacres" and war crimes – notably the Axum massacre and mass rapes – the US sought to take up multilateral action through the UN Security Council. However, the US efforts – in perhaps a sign of its waning international authority – were thwarted in early March "after objections from India, Russia and especially China."²⁹⁶ Failing to convince the world to intervene in a sovereign nation's internal affairs, the US then turned to its EU partners for unilateral efforts.

Scapegoating Eritrea

The EU sanctioned Eritrea on March 22 for "serious human rights violations in Eritrea".²⁹⁷ Notably, nothing was said of Eritrean crimes inside Tigray, suggesting that the EU was unable to come up with any evidentiary support for allegations of those crimes. The measure came after the EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell mandated the Finnish Minister for Foreign Affairs Pekka Haavisto to travel to the Horn of Africa to assess the situation in Ethiopia and neighboring countries in order find a peaceful solution to the

Tigray conflict.²⁹⁸ During his travels, Haavisto failed to visit Eritrea, which is odd given the EU's allegations of Eritrean involvement in the Tigray conflict.

In addition to Eritrea, the West also applied direct pressure on Ethiopia to change course in its Tigray operations. On February 28, NYT's Declan Walsh claimed that an internal US government report documented a "systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing".²⁹⁹ The report was not made public, and no evidence has yet been presented to support these claims. Coming on the heels of the report was US Secretary Blinken's calls for the "immediate withdrawal of Eritrean forces and Amhara regional forces" and "unilateral declarations of cessation of hostilities by all parties to the conflict".³⁰⁰

“While Russia, China and other great powers engage Ethiopia and Eritrea under the diplomatic principles of mutual respect and non-interference, the US and EU actively interfere in the Tigray conflict, taking sides with TPLF and failing to condemn the rebel force’s actions in starting and prolonging the conflict.”

Rather than give in to these demands, Ethiopia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a press release rejecting Blinken's statement and indicated, "An attempt by the US to make pronouncements on Ethiopia's internal affairs and specifically, the reference to the Amhara regional forces

²⁹⁵ "Ethiopia's Government and the TPLF Leadership Are Not Morally Equivalent", Hailemariam Desalegn, *Foreign Policy*, November 24, 2020.

²⁹⁶ "Diplomats: UN fails to approve call to end Tigray violence", Edith M. Lederer, *Associated Press*, March 6, 2021.

²⁹⁷ "EU imposes further sanctions over serious violations of human rights around the world", Council of the European Union, Press Release, March 22, 2021. Access here: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/03/22/eu-imposes-further-sanctions-over-serious-violations-of-human-rights-around-the-world/>

²⁹⁸ "Minister for Foreign Affairs Haavisto to visit Ethiopia as the EU representative", Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Press Release, January 26, 2021.

Access here: https://um.fi/current-affairs/-/asset_publisher/gc654PySnjTX/content/ulkoministeri-haavisto-matkustaa-eu-n-edustajana-etiopiaan

²⁹⁹ "Ethiopia's War Leads to Ethnic Cleansing in Tigray Region, U.S. Report Says", Declan Walsh, *New York Times*, February 26, 2021.

³⁰⁰ "Atrocities in Ethiopia's Tigray Region", Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, US State Department, Press Release, February 27, 2021. Access here: <https://www.state.gov/atrocities-in-ethiopia-tigray-region/>

redeployment in the press statement, is regrettable.”³⁰¹ Even after US President Joe Biden sent his close ally Senator Chris Coons to visit Ethiopia to persuade PM Abiy to change course, PM Abiy, shortly after Senator Coons departed, told his parliament that “no one could tell Ethiopia, a sovereign nation, where to send its own security forces” and that Ethiopia was “forever indebted” to Eritrea.³⁰² PM Abiy then visited Eritrea only a few days later, adding emphasis to his latter point.³⁰³ Thus, Washington’s efforts to scapegoat Eritrea have not worked.

Failure of US Policy in the Horn

The US and its Western allies’ efforts to force change in Ethiopia and Eritrea on the issue of Tigray has not proven successful thus far, particularly at a time when America is engaged in so-called “great power competition” in an increasingly multipolar world. While Russia, China and other great powers engage Ethiopia and Eritrea under the diplomatic principles of mutual respect and non-interference, the US and EU actively interfere in the Tigray conflict, taking sides with TPLF and failing to condemn the rebel force’s actions in starting and prolonging the conflict.

On November 13, Ethiopia’s government issued arrest warrants for TPLF’s leadership, which it considered terrorist and treasonous.³⁰⁴ On May 1, the Ethiopian Council of Ministers declared the entire organization terrorist.³⁰⁵ Ethiopia is not alone in this designation. According to the Global

Terrorism Database, which is financed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, TPLF is considered a terrorist organization that has registered multiple acts of terror spanning from 1976 to 2018.³⁰⁶ However, AFP’s fact check division (“AFP Fact Check”), in response to a popular Facebook post, appeared to go out of its way to counter these terrorist allegations and declare that “US has not assigned terrorist status to dissident group in Ethiopia’s Tigray region”.³⁰⁷ Though AFP is correct in that TPLF is no longer classified as a “Tier III Terrorist Organization” by the US State Department per se, it is indeed still considered terrorist by a US state-sponsored database. AFP opted to make a strawman argument by attacking a random, poorly-argued Facebook post, obscuring the spirit of the allegation that TPLF is a terrorist organization with a long history of terrorism.

“If we are not in Arat Kilo [the seat of federal government], we will turn Ethiopia into another Libya, Syria or Yemen. I guarantee it.” – Seyoum Mesfin

In an interview with Dimtsi Weyane TV a few days before the attack on the Northern Command, the late Seyoum Mesfin, co-founder of TPLF and former Ethiopian foreign minister, vowed that “If we are not in Arat Kilo [the seat of federal government], we will turn Ethiopia into another Libya, Syria or Yemen. I guarantee it.”³⁰⁸ He gave

³⁰¹ "US attempt to make pronouncements on Ethiopia’s internal affairs regrettable: MoFA", Fana Broadcasting Corporation, February 28, 2021.

³⁰² “5ኛው የኢ.ፌ.ዴ.ሪ ህዝብ ተወካዮች ምክር ቤት 6ኛ ዓመት የስራ ዘመን 11ኛ መደበኛ ስብሰባ #4ና” *Fana Television*. Uploaded to YouTube on March 23, 2021. Access here: <https://youtu.be/tMOIOPxnP9g>

³⁰³ “Ethiopian Prime Minister winds visit to Asmara”, Eritrean Ministry of Information, Press Release, March 26, 2021.

³⁰⁴ "Arrest warrant issued for TPLF Junta members", *Fana Broadcasting Corporation*, November 13, 2020. ; "Attorney General, Police release results of investigation into TPLF’s armed attack against defence force", *Fana Broadcasting Corporation*, January 29, 2021.

³⁰⁵ "Ethiopia to designate TPLF, OLF-Shene as ‘terror’ groups", *Al Jazeera*, May 1, 2021.

³⁰⁶ Global Terrorism Database, University of Maryland. Search criteria: “Tigray Peoples Liberation Front”, 12 incident reports. Access here: <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?perpetrator=2127>

³⁰⁷ "US has not assigned terrorist status to dissident group in Ethiopia’s Tigray region", Segun Olakoyenikan, AFP Fact Check, *Agence France-Presse*, December 8, 2020.

³⁰⁸ “ወቅታዊ ጉዳይ፣ የኢትዮጵያ ውቅታዊ ሁኔታና የኢጋድ እና አፍሪካ ህብረት መዳከመ ከአምባሳደር ስይም መስፍን ክፍል ሁለት፣ ጥቅምት 21/2013 ዓ/ም”, *Dimtsi Weyane Television*. Uploaded to YouTube on October 31, 2020. Access here: <https://youtu.be/qzwKFBz508c>

the interview in Amharic rather than Tigrinya, suggesting that his comments were a threat directed at the Ethiopian people. Of even greater concern, Jeffrey Feltman, the new US envoy to the Horn of Africa, echoed Seyoum's threats in his comments to *Foreign Policy* on April 26: "Ethiopia has 110 million people,' he said. 'If the tensions in Ethiopia would result in a widespread civil conflict that goes beyond Tigray, Syria will look like child's play by comparison.'"³⁰⁹ The missiles fired by TPLF upon civilian sites in Ethiopia and Eritrea seem to make good on Seyoum's threat and reveal the international character of TPLF's terrorism. Feltman's comments suggest America's endorsement of that international terrorist threat and the regional lurch to terrorism.

Despite TPLF's terrorist history, criminality and dangerous ethnic politics in a country comprised of more than 80 ethnic groups, the Biden Administration has opted to back TPLF in its war against the federal government, which is led by a Nobel prize-winning prime minister. Washington seems to ignore the damaging optics of this problematic position, which is not lost on the Ethiopian people and serious international observers.

Bronwyn Bruton of the Atlantic Council noted the growing resentment and hatred towards the US, tweeting that "#China and #Russia are now both being lionized by the Ethiopian public as protectors of African sovereignty. This is a mantle that will serve Russian and Chinese interests well, and will provide the foundation for ever-greater cooperation. This outcome is sadly inevitable because the United States has proven itself incapable of imaging the world from an African perspective."³¹⁰

Jamal Osman, Africa correspondent for Channel 4 News, visited Tigray and four regions of Ethiopia in February and March, travelling extensively throughout the country. After his trip, he took to Twitter to express his thoughts about TPLF vis-à-vis Ethiopia: "Three years ago, today,

@AbiyAhmedAli became leader of #Ethiopia. The nation is going through uncertain times. And the war in Tigray has damaged Abiy's image in the west. But it's made him popular in many parts of #Ethiopia. Reason? Hatred against TPLF is helping him." He adds that the "People hate the TPLF so much that they feel they have to support @AbiyAhmedAli and his Govt's war in Tigray."

If it is indeed true that hatred of TPLF is great and widespread throughout Ethiopia, what will be the long-term consequences for Washington for having backed TPLF against the wishes of the Ethiopian people? Why does the US continue to provide such strong support for a greatly weakened – if not largely destroyed – TPLF against its own interests? Why is Washington willing to ignore growing anti-US sentiment and potential widespread hatred in a nation considered a close ally and historic "anchor state" in Africa?

Conclusion

This report has shown in careful detail that TPLF, by its own admission, started the Tigray conflict by attacking the Northern Command on November 4, 2020 with the goal of triggering a irredentist, ethnic secessionist war or – at the minimum – returning to power in Addis Ababa through military means. Given the unpopular, immoral, irrational and unjustifiable nature of unilateral secession of an ethnic state in a multiethnic Ethiopia, TPLF requires the use of disinformation to manufacture consent for its secessionist war against the Ethiopian people.

During the 27 years prior to the rise of PM Abiy Ahmed in April 2018, TPLF allied itself with elements of the US State Department, putting the interests of Washington and TPLF's own leaders before those of the Tigrayan and Ethiopian masses, which consequently earned TPLF ardent support within the West and Western media. TPLF's strong relationship with the US government and Western media, long-known for

³⁰⁹ "New Biden Envoy for Horn of Africa Warns Tigray Conflict Could Worsen", Robbie Gramer, *Foreign Policy*, April 26, 2021.

³¹⁰ Twitter thread by @BronwynBruton posted on April 23, 2021. Access here: <https://twitter.com/BronwynBruton/status/1385581090522415113>

lavishing praise over TPLF while hiding its crimes, persists today during the ongoing Tigray conflict to such a degree that it forms a coordinated network in support of TPLF and its secessionist aims.

Given TPLF's dependence on disinformation and the presence of a network of Western media and state entities supporting TPLF, there exists a "TPLF disinformation network" that is actively deceiving the international community about the realities of the Tigray conflict in order to sell TPLF's secessionist war rebranded as a defensive war against ethnic genocide by the Ethiopian and Eritrean states.

This report has shown, through ample evidence, how consent for TPLF's war is manufactured in a stepwise fashion. First, TPLF briefs its contacts in the West, who create a favorable narrative to support TPLF objectives in the Tigrayan battlefield. Evidence to support this narrative is manufactured either by TPLF members in Tigray – largely through coached, hostile or false witness testimony potentially mistranslated or given under duress – or by social media activists in the diaspora that use deceptive or altered digital media. Next, Western correspondents and journalists use this manufactured evidence to publish articles about alleged atrocities supposedly exacted by TPLF's enemies – virtually without critique or question – which provides new content for social media campaigns by dishonest TPLF activists. Dissemination of disinformation-laden articles and TPLF social media activism gives rise to high-level reports by human rights NGOs, expert entities and teams of investigative journalists. Finally, Western governments use these reports to promote a pro-TPLF narrative and demand some form of intervention to support TPLF in the Tigray conflict.

In support of the largely defeated TPLF, which was forced to retreat from its capital Mekelle on November 28, 2020, Western governments have opted to scapegoat Eritrea and allege "ethnic cleansing" by Amhara regional forces and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who – ironically – seeks to undo TPLF's system of "ethnic federalism" (i.e. state-sanctioned ethnocentrism).

While regional and continental organizations like IGAD and the AU are largely in support of Ethiopia's efforts in the Tigray conflict, the US has sought to take the matter to the UN Security Council to impose its will upon Ethiopia. Washington's failure to convince Council members to multilaterally intervene in the conflict, relegated it to pressuring the EU to legislate unilateral sanctions against Eritrea despite no evidence of crimes by Eritrea in Tigray. After a reconvening of the UN Security Council in April to readdress the Tigray conflict – under US pressure – the Council's official press statement not only failed to mention Eritrea but also stated on behalf of its members that it "reaffirmed their strong commitment to the sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity and unity of Ethiopia." This is generally seen as an embarrassment of the US.

The Western media's orchestrated chorus of allegations of crimes by Eritrea's military, without citing any substantive evidence but instead relying on sensationalist colonialist depictions that caricature them as brute savages, are inherently racist in nature and an assault on Eritrean culture. Pixelated, decontextualized videos of supposed atrocities and hostile witness testimony do not suffice as substantive evidence. Human rights reports without methodology sections or any form of peer-review, similarly, do not suffice as substantive evidence. This report has shown with painstaking detail how the most serious, high-profile allegations of massacres, rape, theft and war crimes by Eritrean and Ethiopian troops do not stand up to any honest, evidence-based analysis. Politicizing and exploiting fictional atrocities, easily debunked by common sense and science, may have the unintended effect in eroding trust in the Western media.

Western political interventions have failed thus far. The Biden administration's team on Horn of Africa policy is composed of holdovers from the Clinton and Obama years who saw limited successes by forcing unsustainable, short-sighted policies upon the region with TPLF at the helm in Ethiopia, ultimately leading to TPLF's fall from power and the failure of US policy in the region. These same entities are now using the same outdated strategies, seeking to resuscitate

TPLF in a markedly different Horn expecting the same results. As the saying goes, “generals always fight the last war.” Washington’s stubborn commitment to personnel who lack the political imagination to adapt to a new Horn of Africa that has moved on from TPLF will further hurt the interests of the US and its Western partners.

As the US continues to force TPLF and other ethnic extremist entities upon Ethiopia – as the US once forced the Shah upon Iran – the Ethiopian people may explode in an outburst of widespread, irreversible hatred of the US. The US could permanently lose a key anchor state in Africa, limiting its overall influence on the continent. The Western media’s persistence in pushing obvious TPLF disinformation and forwarding simplistic, racist caricatures of the Ethiopian and Eritrean people has the net effect of pushing the peoples in the region to lose whatever remains of their faith in the Western media; in the US and EU as friends, role models and moral forces.

Meanwhile, great powers like China and Russia will capitalize on the US and EU’s failure, gaining for themselves one of the most strategic regions in the world. Washington’s attempt to destabilize Ethiopia, the only African country that was never colonized and home of the AU, by stoking ethnic warfare – a scorched earth strategy denying regional access to other powers – will likely fail and deliver the *coup de grâce* to American credibility and influence on the African continent. Therefore, it is in Washington’s long term interest to quickly decouple itself from TPLF and ethnic extremism before it is too late.

Recommendations

1. **Stop spreading disinformation.** Stop uncritically accepting and disseminating disinformation about the Tigray conflict. All claims forwarded in the media should be challenged, questioned and – most importantly – supported by substantive evidence.
2. **Stop supporting TPLF.** TPLF is a terrorist organization with an ethnic secessionist agenda that started the Tigray conflict. Promoting TPLF encourages the

destabilization of Ethiopia and Africa. TPLF should be brought to justice for crimes against humanity committed over the last three decades.

3. **Stop scapegoating Eritrea.** PM Abiy has clearly stated that “our national interests are inseparably linked to those of our neighbors.” Eritrea is a key actor in stabilizing Ethiopia. Attempting to pry Ethiopia away from Eritrea for narrow, short-sighted geopolitical aims will not bode well for Washington, Brussels and the region.
4. **Stop supporting sectarian politics.** Ethiopia, which has more than 80 ethnic groups any many religions, is plagued by sectarian hostilities from 27 years of TPLF’s ethnic federalist system, religious meddling and divide-and-rule tactics. Western media coverage since 2018 has instigated ethnic and religious conflict. Patience and sensitivity are needed by all actors in order to prevent mass death and suffering. Supporting sectarian politics is supporting destabilization.
5. **Promote peace and reconciliation.** Ethiopia’s primary priority is peace and stability. It requires reconciliation to address historical grievances from 27 years of TPLF rule. The alternative is ethnic violence and destabilization, which could lead to mass migration to Europe, piracy and the spread of terrorism from groups like Al-Shabaab. Africa would be destabilized and the world economy would suffer.