



Jubilee Campaign Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

Regarding his Call for Input for his report on the rights of persons belonging to religious or belief minorities in situations of conflict

ETHIOPIA: TIGRAY

I. The Overall Situation in Tigray After the Military Offensive

One year ago in November 2020, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed – who ironically had been awarded a Nobel Peace Prize the year prior¹ – authorized a military offensive into the region of Tigray against the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), a nationalist paramilitary group and now political party.² PM Ahmed had iterated on multiple occasions his goal to unify the whole of Ethiopia by simultaneously bolstering government authority and diminishing regional authority.³ PM Ahmed had accused the TPLF of attacking a federal military base and sent Ethiopian soldiers into Tigray to wage combat with and overpower the TPLF. When Eritrean troops entered the region to team up with Ethiopian soldiers, however, they began to expand their activities to commit human rights violations possibly amounting to war crimes – extrajudicial killings, physical torture, rape and sexual violence, looting – against innocent civilians.

II. The Plight of Christians During the Military Onslaught

It is important to note firstly that Tigray - where the entirety of human rights atrocities at the hand of Ethiopian troops, Eritrean troops, and even TPLF troops is taking place – is a region in which 96% of inhabitants are Christian; in fact, the thriving faith population in Tigray gives Ethiopia the moniker of one of the oldest Christian countries in the world.⁴ Therefore, the overwhelming majority of victims and survivors of the aforementioned war crimes are Christians; and though their relation to the conflict as victims is more so on account of their habitation of a particular

¹ BBC News, [“Ethiopia’s Abiy Ahmed: The Nobel Prize winner who went to war”](#), 11 October 2021.

² Eliza Mackintosh, [“Ethiopia is at war with itself. Here’s what you need to know about the conflict”](#), *CNN World*, 5 November 2021.

³ Declan Walsh & Abdi Latif Dahir, [“Why is Ethiopia at War With Itself?”](#), *The New York Times*, 7 April 2021.

⁴ *Supra* note 2.

geographical location (Tigray) and less about their status as faith minorities, it is nevertheless important to note that they bear the brunt of the atrocities.

In fact, Ethiopia's 'holiest city' Axum endured perhaps the worst of the military offensive and human rights abuses. It is usually tradition for Ethiopian Christians outside of Tigray to pilgrim to Axum's Church of St. Mary of Zion in the final weeks of November to celebrate the Ark of the Covenant; this year, however, Ethiopian Christians did not travel into Tigray due to its instability and military presence. The only people in the Church of St. Mary of Zion were Axum residents seeking refuge following Eritrean and Ethiopian troops' descent onto the Christian town. One of the church's deacons reported that soldiers did not spare the church and instead entered the building and shot indiscriminately at those inside. In just that first weekend of the military incursion, the deacon estimates, approximately 800 civilians were "massacred".⁵ In the days directly following the attack on the church, troops began to go from home to home to drag civilians out into the street and shoot them. The deacon did reveal that, regrettably, the true number of deaths is likely higher as he was only able to count the bodies that had not been dragged into the forests by hyenas; he also said that there were likely thousands of residents of Axum's neighboring cities that had been slaughtered as well.⁶

Regrettably, much of the international news regarding the onslaught of military violence in Tigray, specifically Axum, does not emphasize the religious element of the violence. An April 2021 news article by *The New York Times* told the story of an 18-year-old Ethiopian girl, Mona Lisa, from Tigray who survived an attempted rape; she explained that "this is ethnic cleansing. Soldiers are targeting Tigrayan women to stop them giving birth to more Tigrayans." Not only is sexual violence and rape in Tigray aimed at population control of the ethnic group, but it is secondarily impacting the growth rate of Christianity in the region by stemming births among Christian women as a result of lasting rape-related injuries to reproductive organs⁷, such as vesicovaginal and rectovaginal fistulae, severe tears, and miscarriage of pregnant victims.⁸ Patriarch Mathias of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church further revealed that soldiers have disproportionately targeted pregnant women, young girls, and Christian nuns for sexual violence and rape.⁹

Churches and houses of worship have not only been the location of massacres in Tigray, but soldiers have also looted and desecrated these holy places. For example, the Catholic Eparchy of Addigrat in Tigray reported that many of its churches, private buildings, priests' residences, clinics and pharmacies, and even the St. Mary's Agricultural University were nearly completely emptied of benches, pews, medicines, computers, and personal belongings.¹⁰ The Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA) reported that Eritrean troops stole holy objects and texts not only from churches but also monasteries in Tigray, "another strategy aimed at tearing up Tigray's social fabric; designed to humiliate, demoralize and dispirit the Tigrayan people".¹¹ The 6th century Debre Damo Monastery and Zalambesa's Cherkos Church were both ambushed, looted, and damaged by troops. Members of the Mekelle Diocese in February 2021 reported that almost every church, monastery, and religious school had fallen under attack by bombs, and that "a lot of clergymen,

⁵ Mariz Tadros, "[Tigray: Why are soldiers attacking religious heritage sites?](#)", *African Arguments*, 12 March 2021.

⁶ ABC News, "[Horrible: Witnesses recall massacre in Ethiopian holy city](#)", 18 February 2021.

⁷ Anglican Way Magazine, "[The Overlooked Genocide: the fate of Christians in Ethiopia's Tigray Region](#)", 28 May 2021.

⁸ Ahuka Ona Longombe, Kasereka Masumboko Claude, & Joseph Ruminjo, "[Fistula and Traumatic Genital Injury from Sexual Violence in a Conflict Setting in Eastern Congo: Case Studies](#)", *Reproductive Health Matters*, 2008.

⁹ *Supra* note 7.

¹⁰ Philippe Pellet, [Background, Causes and Consequences of the Tigray Conflict in Ethiopia that Started on November 4, 2020](#), Research Institute for Religion and Society, July 2021.

¹¹ Omna Tigray, [Situation Report](#), July 2021.

deacons, congregation members of Sunday schools, religious students, and children, especially those clergymen who were on religious service, were massacred like animals”.¹²

Meanwhile, many victims of the deadly massacres throughout Tigray, predominantly Christian, have not even had the opportunity to be buried according to their religious custom. Groups of brave survivors collecting bodies and attempting to transport them to the churches for proper burial were shelled at by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops. One woman Tsigereda (pseudonym) reported that soldiers shot and killed her 29-year-old and 14-year-old nephews while they were collecting bodies. Another 27-year-old man stated that “the people who had collected the bodies put them on carts and took them to the church. Me and my sister followed the cart. Immediately the soldiers started shooting on us from afar”. Another young man stated that “we collected the dead using horse/donkey carts. They [soldiers] didn’t allow the priests to conduct funeral requiem for the dead or to clean and prepare the bodies as per the custom. We buried them at the Arba’etu Ensisia Church. While the families of the deceased buried them in separate graves, unclaimed bodies were buried in mass graves”.¹³

Even to this day a year on from the start of the military offensive, Eritrean, Ethiopian, and TPLF troops continue to target Christian priests and sites. One former prisoner of conscience, Helen Berhane, explains, “Eritrean troops are killing a lot of priests and raping their wives. Some of the priests stand holding their crosses, so they cut their hands. And when the soldiers ask the priests to remove their hats, when they say no, they shoot them. Hundreds of priests are dying in this conflict at the hands of Eritrean soldiers”.¹⁴ As recently as August 2021, TPLF forces seized the historic town and UNESCO site of Lalibela, home to eleven rock-hewn churches and the destination for yearly pilgrimages by Orthodox Christians; civilians fear that the churches may soon be destroyed similarly to other incidents throughout the past year.¹⁵

For the most part, however, the violence against civilians has dwindled down and massacres have ceased, though it is unpredictable whether future attacks will occur. Regrettably, the region of Tigray is currently in a dire humanitarian state of widespread famine and the UN reports that no aid trucks have been able to enter the region since 18 October 2021; it is believed that Ethiopian forces have been restricting this necessary assistance by erecting road blockades.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the threat of an all-out civil war is looming as TPLF troops have ignored the Ethiopian administration’s unilateral ceasefire and continued to capture more towns.¹⁷ Approximately a few million Tigrayan civilians are internally and externally displaced, are starving and eating leaves for sustenance, and are unable to seek medical treatment as infrastructure in the region is annihilated.

III. Conclusion & Recommendations

Jubilee Campaign urges members and observer states of the Human Rights Council to call upon the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front, and the State of Eritrea, to:

¹² Christian Solidarity Worldwide, [Ethiopia: Violence in Tigray](#), September 2021.

¹³ Amnesty International, [Ethiopia: The Massacre in Axum](#), 26 February 2021.

¹⁴ Release International, [“Christian Priests Targeted in Tigray”](#), 1 November 2021.

¹⁵ DW News, [“Ethiopia: Tigray forces seize UNESCO site Lalibela”](#), 5 August 2021.

¹⁶ Peter Mwai, [“Ethiopia’s Tigray crisis: What’s stopping aid getting in?”](#), BBC News, 5 November 2021.

¹⁷ Hardin Lang & David Del Conte, [“The Tigray Conflict at One Year: Ethiopia’s Descent into Famine and Civil War”](#), *Just Security*, 4 November 2021.

1. At minimum, agree upon a temporary cessation of hostilities and a platform for dialogue and diplomatic negotiation.
2. Cease the practice of arbitrarily killing innocent civilians, as is prohibited by both domestic legislation (The Criminal Code of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2004 Article 270 On War Crimes Against the Civilian Population¹⁸; 2015 Penal Code of the State of Eritrea Articles 107, 108, and 109 on Genocide, Crimes Against Humanity, and War Crimes Against the Civilian Population, respectively¹⁹) and international humanitarian law such as the Fourth Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilians in Time of War²⁰ Article 3 (ratified by Eritrea (2000), Ethiopia (1969)).²¹

Jubilee Campaign urges members and observer states of the Human Rights Council to call upon the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia to:

3. Repair key infrastructure (roads, telecommunication, hospitals, schools, churches, etc.) and resume all necessary services.
4. Prosecute perpetrators of violence and war crimes against civilians and make reparations to survivors and families of victims; ensure the proper burial of civilian victims.
5. Lift the blockade and other restrictive elements preventing essential humanitarian assistance and food aid from reaching Tigrayan civilians. Ethiopia is pursuant to Geneva Convention IV Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, which states in Article 55 states that “To the fullest extent of the means available to it, the Occupying Power has the duty of ensuring the good and medical supplies of the population; it should, in particular, bring in the necessary foodstuffs, medical stores and other articles if the resources of the occupied territory are inadequate.” Moreover, Article 56 iterates that “To the fullest extent of the means available to it, the Occupying Power has the duty of ensuring and maintaining, with the co-operation of national and local authorities, the medical and hospital establishments and services, public health and hygiene in the occupied territory...”²²
6. “Commit to resume the provision of federal subsidies to the Tigray regional government”.²³

Jubilee Campaign urges members and observer states of the Human Rights Council to call upon the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front and Tigrayan Defense Forces (TDF) to:

1. Withdraw from Afar and Amhara states and cease its planned offensive into the capital, Addis Ababa in Oromia State.²⁴

¹⁸ [Ethiopia: Criminal Code \[Ethiopia\]](#), Proclamation No. 414/2004, 9 May 2005.

¹⁹ [Eritrea: Penal Code \[Eritrea\]](#), 15 May 2015.

²⁰ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), [Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War \(Fourth Geneva Convention\)](#), 12 August 1949, 75 UNTS 287.

²¹ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), [Treaties, States Parties and Commentaries, Convention \(IV\) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. Geneva, 12 August 1949.](#)

²² International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), [Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War \(Fourth Geneva Convention\)](#), 12 August 1949, 75 UNTS 287.

²³ Adem K. Abebe, [“A Blueprint for Peace in Ethiopia”](#), *Foreign Policy*, 12 November 2021.

²⁴ Adem K. Abebe, [“A Blueprint for Peace in Ethiopia”](#), *Foreign Policy*, 12 November 2021. ; Hardin Lang & David Del Conte, [“The Tigray Conflict at One Year: Ethiopia’s Descent into Famine and Civil War”](#), *Just Security*, 4 November 2021.

2. Protect humanitarian aid storage warehouses located in the recently-captured Dessie and Kombolcha, in Amhara, and allow access by United Nations humanitarian workers and NGOs for distribution to civilians in need.

Jubilee Campaign urges members and observers of the Human Rights Council to call upon the State of Eritrea to:

1. Fulfill Ethiopian Prime Minister Ahmed's May 2021 assurance that Eritrea will withdraw all of its troops from the Tigray region.²⁵
2. Prosecute perpetrators of violence and war crimes against civilians, and make reparations to survivors and families of victims; ensure the proper burial of civilian victims.

²⁵ Agence France-Presse, "[Ethiopia's PM says Eritrea will withdraw troops from Tigray](#)", *The Guardian*, 26 March 2021.