



HUMAN-INDUCED FAMINE IN TIGRAY: A POTENTIAL ACT OF GENOCIDE

Dr. Deborah Mayersen

Since the fighting erupted in Tigray in November 2020, there have been serious concerns regarding the commission of mass atrocities. The UN Human Rights Office, senior UN officials and NGOs such as Amnesty International have identified that war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing may have occurred or be underway. There have been credible arguments that the situation may comprise genocide. In late June, the US State Department advised that an assessment as to the appropriate term/s to describe the atrocities was well advanced, but no determination has yet been made public. Since then, however, the crisis has taken a dramatic and deadly turn. The Ethiopian government's blockade of Tigray has prevented most humanitarian aid from reaching the region. Tigray was already experiencing famine as a direct result of the conflict, and it is now estimated that one person is dying of starvation every two minutes there. Calls by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and other senior UN officials to allow humanitarian access have been disregarded. There is a strong prima facie case that this blockade constitutes an act of genocide. The UN, AU, US and other relevant stakeholders should intensely focus on ensuring the Ethiopian government ends the blockade and allows immediate and unfettered humanitarian access to Tigray, in accordance with international humanitarian law and independent of any other developments with respect to the conflict.

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Conflict and Famine in Tigray

Conflict in Tigray, northern Ethiopia, erupted in November 2020 as a result of an escalating power struggle between central and regional authorities. Fighting between the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), the Tigrayan Defence Force (TDF), the Eritrean Defence Force (EDF) and Amharan militia has had a devastating impact on civilians. There have been many reports of atrocities associated with the conflict. Amnesty International and the UN have reported widespread sexual violence committed by the ENDF, EDF and other forces aligned to the Ethiopian government. Hundreds of massacres and summary executions have been documented, predominantly committed by forces associated with the Ethiopian government, although it is recognized that all sides have committed atrocities.¹ Additionally, hundreds of thousands of people have been internally displaced, in what US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has described as ethnic cleansing. Others have gone further, suggesting the possibility of genocide. US House Foreign Affairs Lead Republican Michael McCaul, for example, stated in June in a Foreign Affairs Committee hearing that he believed genocide was being committed against the Tigrayan people.²

The conflict has led to a devastating famine in Tigray. ENDF and EDF soldiers have deliberately targeted farming infrastructure, livestock and water points, and obstructed humanitarian relief efforts.³ Farmers have lost access to their farmland, had their livestock killed or confiscated, and been unable to obtain seeds and vital equipment. In early July, the UN estimated 400,000 people in Tigray were experiencing famine. USAID has gone further, estimating that 700,000 to 900,000 people in Tigray are currently experiencing catastrophic famine conditions, with a further 1.5 to 2 million people experiencing emergency conditions, according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) system.

In late June, following the success of the TDF in capturing territory in Tigray, Ethiopian forces withdrew from much of the region, at the same time imposing a blockade. Since then, the government has been deliberately preventing almost all humanitarian assistance from reaching Tigray. Vital food, medicines and other critical supplies are unable to reach the region, with less than 10% of required aid getting through. Basic services, such as communications, banking and trade have also been blocked. Aid workers have been killed and UN officials expelled. The lack of access to the region has prevented updated data as to the extent of the famine from being collected. From the indicators available, however, it is clear that the situation is rapidly worsening. Conservative estimates suggest between 425 and 1201 deaths per day in Tigray; that being one person dying of starvation there every two minutes.⁴ Senior UN officials, including UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs chief Martin Griffiths have recognized the role of the government in preventing humanitarian access to Tigray, and called on Ethiopian authorities to allow aid to get through.

Human-induced Famine as an Act of Genocide

There is a compelling argument for considering the famine in Tigray as genocide. Article II of the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (1948) identifies genocide as ‘any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.’

There is no doubt the famine has killed many thousands of Tigrayans, although exact figures are yet to be determined. Similarly, the famine has caused serious bodily and mental harm to Tigrayans and deliberately inflicted conditions of life calculated to bring about their physical destruction. Clear evidence suggests that these outcomes are a direct result of the malign intent of the Ethiopian government, demonstrated through acts of commission and omission. The government has resisted all calls to allow unfettered humanitarian access, including those from UN officials and humanitarian aid organizations. The blockade has also occurred in conjunction with other forms of targeted violence perpetrated by Ethiopian authorities and allied forces, including massacres, bombing of civilians and widespread sexual violence. Collectively they comprise a pattern of activity clearly targeting Tigrayans as an ethnic group. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s inflammatory comments, including a threat to ‘bury this enemy with our blood’ provide further evidence of genocidal intent.⁵

Recommendations

- All international actors should recognize the severe and immediate impacts of the famine and prioritize a response accordingly.
- The UN, US, AU and other relevant stakeholders should intensely focus on ensuring the Ethiopian government ends the blockade and allows immediate and unfettered humanitarian access to Tigray, in accordance with international humanitarian law and independent of any other developments with respect to the conflict.
- The UN Security Council should issue a resolution calling on the Ethiopian government to allow immediate and unfettered humanitarian access to Tigray.
- The US government should communicate to Prime Minister Abiy that unless unfettered humanitarian access is immediately granted, it will declare the situation to be genocide and seek an international response commensurate with that declaration.
- The UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide should issue a strong statement condemning the Ethiopian government's blockade of Tigray, recognizing it as an atrocity crime and potential act of genocide.
- The African Union should increase pressure on the Ethiopian government to allow humanitarian access to Tigray, recognizing that it is inimical to African Union values for its headquarters to be located in a country perpetrating atrocity crimes.

About the Author

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Notes:

¹ Sophie Annys et al., "Tigray: Atlas of the Humanitarian Situation," Ghent University, October 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349824181_Tigray_Atlas_of_the_humanitarian_situation.

² See <https://gop-foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/the-conflict-in-ethiopia/#>.

³ Statement of Acting Assistant Secretary Robert F. Godec, US Department of State, House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing "The Ethiopian Conflict," June 29, 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/117/meeting/house/112851/witnesses/HHRG-117-FA00-Wstate-GodecR-20210629.pdf>.

⁴ Annys et al., "Tigray: Atlas of the Humanitarian Situation," p. 67.

⁵ "Ethiopian Leader, Marking Year of War, Says He Will Bury Foes 'With our Blood,'" *Reuters*, November 4, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopian-leader-marking-year-war-says-he-will-bury-his-foes-with-our-blood-2021-11-03/>.