



Tigray Region Update

As of 10 February 2021

Dear friend,

Before entering into the details of eyewitness reports, please read this [Joint-Statement by High-Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell, Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen and Commissioner Janez Lenarčič](#) (8 February 2021). In my view the international community should really stop talking about “concerns”. Severe **sanctions** are needed...

We are hundreds of people all over the world that contribute to the solidarity initiatives, in different ways. Again, thank you all! Sometimes, people ask **what motivates us** to do all these efforts for the people in Tigray? Well, in my case, this is related to longstanding witnessing of the dynamism of a society that is currently been broken by war and genocidal actions. Just out, [Patrick Augenstein’s film \(26 minutes\) summarises our monitoring of the environmental changes that have occurred in Tigray](#) over the last 30 years – the film was realised just before the war started, and still expresses the positive mood of that moment. That’s the time when people told me: “look, Tigray is the only region in Ethiopia with peace...” For sure, as soon as we can, we will return to the 400 monitored landscapes in Tigray to record the physical damage inflicted by the war.

Further, this circular addresses:

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1. **Destructions and mass killings**

- Ethiopia Insight (8 February) published this report of somebody who crossed Tigray on foot: [“The sadism is very disturbing”: Two months on the run in Tigray](#)
- Photos of destroyed rural settlements, in the Raya highlands, west of Korem: <https://twitter.com/HailuKe84/status/1357411474369622016>
- One of the numerous mass killings by ENDF, in Debre Abay, some 50 km SW of Shire, has been documented in an extremely graphic way by Map Ethiopia: <https://twitter.com/MapEthiopia/status/1358650959505809408> . A massacre filmed by the ENDF perpetrators themselves! So sad...

An eyewitness from a village near Hagere Selam mentions the names of several killed farmers whom I know from previous fieldwork. When fighting started in the area, the people moved from the village to the mountains; after a time they thought that fighting was finished and they came back to their homesteads. The eyewitness' father ran into the soldiers who were slaughtering his cattle. The dog which had been with them to the mountains started barking at the soldiers and they shot it. Afterwards they started hitting his father and he quickly became unconscious. They hit him very badly but he did not feel it. They left him for dead. After that, the villagers found him and they cured him using local medicine. "The soldiers were asking very basic information: where is this village, where is that village? They have shot other people in the mountains, between rock outcrops, some in a gully, and they left them dead over there. They wanted them to be eaten by hyenas."

An eyewitness near Hagere Selam states that the soldiers are searching [after the Tigray leaders] in every cave and every enclosure. They moved to Inda Abba Hadera and the gorges around there. Another eyewitness states that the killing of innocent persons continues, on a daily base. "A few days ago, there was fighting in [Inda Abba Hadera](#)". The Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers warn the people: "for each soldier that is killed by *woyane* (a generic name for TPLF, the Tigray Defence Forces TDF and any Tigrayan resistance), we will kill 5 or 10 villagers".

2. Putting salt on the wounds

On 7 February, **Ethiopian President Sahlework** visited Mekelle. One of our contacts in Mekelle mentioned that she was not welcome in Mekelle. Solicited members of the civil society did not show up during the visit. The president then insisted to meet raped women in the hospital. When she went there, the women were terrified, as if Satan suddenly appeared to catch them. Very few photos or footage has been made public about this visit, because the atmosphere was really hostile. The [Ethiopian News Agency published one photo](#) of Sahlework, who is trying to interact with internally displaced people. The sad face of the woman on the photo, and also those of all the people sitting behind her, says it all.

Yet, the official propaganda is that all people in Tigray are happy after Abiy restored law and order! It seems that a propaganda film is being shot in Mekelle, these days, aiming to demonstrate the peoples' happiness...

A video recording of a meeting between commanders of the **Ethiopian army** and the local community in the town of Agula'i has also been leaked. See: <https://www.facebook.com/dimtsiweyane/videos/240480084276166/> (starting at 2'48"). Local people express their anger. For those who do not understand Tigrinya and Amharic, this is the summary of their sayings: "We have known the Ethiopian army for so many years. The soldiers were disciplined. What's happening now is unprecedented. They are now behaving in the same

way as the Eritrean army. They rape, they loot, they steal jewelry and mobile phones. They go from house to house and we have to hide our daughters. They are drunkards and they shoot on civilians.”

Such films that are smuggled out of Tigray remain a major source of information, in **absence** of access by independent **journalists**. According to [Bistandsaktuelt](#), three armed men (presumably pertaining to Ethiopia’s secret services) attacked and brutalised journalist Lucy Kassa (Al Jazeera, Bistandsaktuelt) in her home in Addis Ababa on 9 February 2021. They took her laptop and threatened her with death if she continued to write about the situation in Tigray region. Norwegian authorities and the International Federation of Journalists have been alerted.

3. Internally displaced people

- The NGO World Vision has posted an interview with a woman from Humera who is now refugee in Mekelle:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6g4eCCatvTU&feature=youtu.be>
- Based on inside information, we have prepared and distributed a report on the more than [44,000 IDPs in the Shire campus of Aksum University](#).
- Health centres in Shire also are in dire condition. Reuters, 8 February: ['People die at home': Tigray medical services struggle after turmoil of war](#)
- At the southwestern outskirts of Mekelle, about 700 refugees from Irob are hosted in a school. Authorities do not help them; the nearby church has asked the inhabitants to help with food and clothes. An eyewitness also mentions that photo-operations about food distribution continue to be held: lorries come – photos are made – lorries go...

4. Destruction of refugee camps

- VICE, 3 February: [Refugee Camps in Ethiopia Appear to Have Been Systematically Destroyed](#).
- UCAnews, 5 Februari: [Eritrean Priest says thousands of refugees in Tigray deported to Eritrea](#)

5. Universities in Tigray

At Mekelle University, the staff tries to restart courses. The students have to register, starting from 6 February. As Adigrat and Aksum Universities have largely been destroyed, the students of those universities also have to register at Mekelle University, which is also hosting the academic staff of these universities, so that they can continue their courses. One mother of a student says however: “my son will not be going to the University - how could ...” Contacted, MU staff also wonder whether students will accept to travel from far away to Mekelle in these difficult times.

Some weeks ago, there has been a meeting of MU staff with the new Prosperity Party head of the Tigray administration, Dr. Mulu. It was a very chaotic meeting, where staff raised all the issues on famine and extreme human rights abuses. See this recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rV113JcoY8w&feature=emb_logo . Participants in the meeting confirm that, by the end of the discussion, Dr. Mulu literally said: “if you don't agree with me, you can just go and join the fighters in the ቤረክ [berekha] (remote and rugged areas)!”

Separately, two colleagues from Mekelle University have mentioned that the content of our newsletters is circulating among the staff – people talk about it on the phone. They are happy that so much information on what is really going reaches the outside world. “This solidarity is so important for us, thanks a lot!”

MU aims to start rehabilitation activities; a colleague mentions that it is very important to link with the international community for this.

Also in the academic world, there is the story and the plight of Mulugeta Gebregziabher, a professor of Tigrayan origin at the Medical University of South California, which [is worth reading](#).

6. Cultural heritage and the Aksum massacres

- Apollo, the international art magazine, 3 February: [Tigray's people and their heritage urgently need protecting](#)
- The Global Society of Tigray Scholars writes to the UNESCO President, Audrey Azoulay, referring to the 1972 World Heritage Convention and the Convention of the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. The scholars state that “there exist widespread and evidence-based reports of genocidal ethnic cleansing and killings, starvation through a deliberate isolation of the region, vandalization of public and private properties and destruction and looting of cultural and sacred sites.”
- A French-German initiative of scholars has started, in cooperation with Tigrayan scholars in exile, documenting any damage to cultural and historical heritage in Tigray, as a basis for international action and future efforts of rehabilitation.

With the restoration of telephone lines to **Aksum**, we managed to talk with a church servant about the killings in November. At first he could simply not speak; he is a strong man but is totally traumatised. In a second call, a few days later, he says the reported number of 750 is not true, as the truth would be in thousands. "People (mostly men but also women) were killed in mass within the church compound. They raped women from the church. Killings and rape didn't stop in the church, it continued throughout the town and to the rural areas. They do whatever they want... they destroy things, loot, rape and slaughter." According to him, there was shelling towards the church from a distant location, but none of the church structures was hit.

He mentioned that there is still active fighting in the vicinity and that civilians are still being slaughtered (as he says it: ደህረዱ) both by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers. He says "Eritreans are not only slaughtering people. They rape women, kill, loot people's houses, they cut legs and remove eyes and leave people to die". He adds: "Just killing would have been fine."

Despite all that, he mentioned that no 'kahin' (collective name for deacons and priests) was killed at Tsion church, unlike in other churches. He believes the ark is still there. "As there is a fear for looting the church including the ark, residents take turn to protect it, they sleep there".

Refugees coming from Aksum are telling their experiences to family members. Also here, the reports are about people being killed in the streets and in their houses, in some cases all the male inhabitants of a house, sometimes everyone. Aksum is as the heart of Tigrayan religious identity, which may explain why it had been especially targeted. By now the situation is described as calm, but people are terrified by their experience. Still basic services such as banks have not resumed.

In solidarity with Aksum, please listen to this Ge'ez gospel song recorded at Aksum last year: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7kiCAYnd7U&feature=youtu.be>

7. Genocide

On 5 February, the U.N. [special adviser on genocide prevention warned that without urgent measures the risk of atrocity crimes “remains high and likely to get worse.”](#)

In an interview with the Hoover Institute, [Rwandan president Paul Kagame suggests](#) that the situation in Tigray should be addressed internationally. "The situation is too worrying and the toll too high to be left only to Ethiopia or AU". With such a statement pronounced by the president of Rwanda, the implicit link to "genocide" is unavoidable.

8. Humanitarian aid

- AFP, 7 February: [UN boosts food aid to Ethiopia's Tigray over starvation fears](#)
- FEWS NET report [maps half of Tigray as “Emergency”](#) status with regard to famine as of February 2021
- Norwegian Refugee Council, 1 February: [Statement by Secretary General Jan Egeland: Aid still not reaching Tigray](#). A disabused Tigrayan writes: "Thank you for being candid. The truth is that humanitarian aid is the last card the invading forces want to use in the project of Tigray genocide. The first part was to destroy the livelihood of the people. The international community has failed to read the intention and act."
(<https://twitter.com/GebrekirstosG/status/1356234165293821953>)

On 6 February, WFP chief David Beasley writes: Important breakthroughs in Ethiopia today! WFP and the Government of Ethiopia have agreed on concrete steps to expand access for humanitarians across Tigray, and WFP will scale up its operations. Nearly 3 million people need our help NOW and we have no time to waste.

(<https://twitter.com/WFPChief/status/1358131700929331203>). This is but the implementation of an agreement signed on 2 December 2020 already. Beasley travelled then to Kwiha and visited the warehouses with supply stock (https://twitter.com/MoP_Ethiopia/status/1358315581477429250).

Many questions remain. Will the WFP directly oversee the distribution? Where's it going to be handed out? Do people really get the number of kilograms they sign for? Are there going to be political conditions like "formally submitting to PP"? [OCHA official Jens Laerke states that](#) it was "less of a problem" to deliver food aid which is being warehoused in Mekelle. "The problem is access both to get into Tigray in the first place and also getting from Mekelle into the countryside where most of the people in need are."

On 8 February, the Ethiopian government officially dissolved the boards of the two largest local NGOs in Tigray, which are largely trusted by people in the region. The Tigray Development Association (TDA) and the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) will now formally be governed by 'a caretaker administrative board', and hence *de facto* may become inactive. Their assets also may be spoiled, just like what happened to the Tigray economic trust EFFORT. This happens at the very moment when the Tigrayan aid agencies are more needed than ever before.

On [8 February, the EU has stated](#) that it "remains very concerned by the tragic humanitarian crisis unfolding in Tigray and its regional implications. Three months into the conflict, despite small openings, the limitations to humanitarian access to Tigray continue to prevent the provision of humanitarian assistance to address the immensity of needs, avert the risk of famine and prevent further loss of life." In response to this statement, on 9 February, the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (<https://twitter.com/fanatelevision/status/1359205642989404160>), basically replies that all is going well. Remarkably, they do not deny the presence of Eritrean troops, and as expected there is no invite to international journalists to visit Tigray.

9. Situation in Mekelle and other major towns

Mekelle is now considered safer than other towns and rural areas because of the uncontrolled presence of soldiers in those places. Hence, people in Mekelle try to host their relatives; and in turn, the richer people from Mekelle try to temporarily move to Addis Ababa.

An eyewitness from Mekelle mentioned that it is so obvious that Eritrean soldiers are present, as they are even dominant among the occupying soldiers. They are now wearing

uniforms of the Ethiopian army, and of the Tigray Defence Forces, to hide their belonging to the Eritrean army. They can be easily recognised by their Eritrean accent, when they speak Tigrinya, and their incapacity to communicate in Amharic. “We are all wondering how the Eritrean soldiers can be so brutal. Of course, during their training in the Sawa camp, they are indoctrinated with a lot of hatred against Tigrayans.” Indeed, Tigrayans have been declared responsible for twenty years of isolation of Eritrea and poverty, with which the Eritrean dictator had managed to externalise all problems of his government. Our witness continues: “Another aspect is that a large number of the Eritrean soldiers are not Tigrinya speakers. They are from other ethnic groups. Many of the young Tigrinya speakers from Eritrea have migrated to Europe. It is especially the Tigrinya speakers who migrate out of Eritrea. Of course the bosses in the Eritrean army mainly are Tigrinya speakers. There are many speculations about the deeper reasons. Some people think that it is about religion, that the Eritrean soldiers would be Muslims in majority [Note: this is not confirmed by our scarce witness reports]. That does not appear to be the main thing. The main thing may rather be that they speak other languages and hence feel less compassion for the Tigrayans. In any case, the way in which they behave in this war is not normal, even in the framework of a war.”

A witness from Mekelle also mentions the importance of information. “We have a lot of information from television. For instance we hear about Somalia, that mothers are demonstrating. In Amhara the mothers do not demonstrate. Those mothers also know that many of their boys are killed in Tigray but they hope still, for instance that their son will get a land in Western Tigray.”

Another person from Mekelle says that: “outside Mekelle there is war in every *woreda* (district), but the TDF soldiers are becoming better. Every day they are winning a battle. A lot of youth is joining the Tigray fighters, they see no other option. Nowadays, we have a lot of information from the media. Particularly, we are listening to the news of Tigray Media House (TMH). They tell us everything about the battles. And also what is happening internationally, for instance the claims for humanitarian aid that are issued from Belgium and from Europe. We know our friends. Dimtsi Weyane radio has started emitting also”. People watch this chain which transmits through satellite; it is the only chain that gives the Tigray viewpoint. The other Ethiopian chains’ information does not at all correspond with what the people observe around them. So, the people watch Tigray Media House especially the news at 9:00 o'clock in the evening, or they watch music programmes. Of course there is only television in Mekelle and a few other towns with electricity.

Early February, there were reports by telephone about heavy fighting again near Samre southwest of Mekelle, now the seventh time that heavy battles were fought there. On 8 February the army killed five civilians in Addi Awuso nearby. When the soldiers entered Samre, one person was shot. There are reports of Eritrean troops entering to many places

deep inside Tigray, but also of preparations for a TDF counter-offensive. There have been armed confrontations with the Eritrean army in the area between Aksum and Shire.

On 9 February, there was active **protest** in Mekelle the whole day. It started when people were forced to go to a meeting with a delegation of elders and religious leaders that came from Addis Ababa for a planned three days stay. According to insiders, a particular reason for the protests was that the visiting delegation included [Daniel Kibret](#), the main right wing extremist of the Ethiopian Orthodox church and one of the closest advisors of PM Abiy Ahmed. Most businesses were closed; the youth blocked roads and faced the soldiers. At least one of them was killed and many injured were left in the streets. Mekelle's elders and religious leaders refused to meet the delegation that came from Addis – they left in a hurry after a day.

10. Solidarity

- The international appeal launched by scientists remains at the core of our network: “*Tigray (Ethiopia) - In absence of major international diplomacy and rescue, towards a repeat of the great famine of 1984-1985*”; please forward this link to colleagues: <https://forms.gle/NLXtbGxjPkbXujt49> .
- The [Avaaz petition](#) has obtained 5500 signatures on 10/2/2021; please continue sharing it through Facebook and Twitter.
- New **initiative towards parliamentarians**. Colleagues have prepared a template letter to MPs, asking for their biggest effort to increase international pressure in favour of immediate and full humanitarian access to the region. The template letter can be downloaded here: <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/bo5zcu9c513b96g/AACGAgP26ZuhYAH8g-SBKlwCa?dl=0> . Please customise it and send it to parliamentarians in your country, region or state. We will centrally send it out to all MEPs of the European Parliament.

11. In the media, in addition to the articles mentioned in the previous sections

- Financial Times, 31 January: [Ethiopia accused of using ethnic profiling to target Tigrayans](#)
- BBC, 1 February: [Ethiopia's Tigray crisis: What a blind man's death reveals](#)
- New African, 2 February: [Ethiopia's civil conflict is over – or is it?](#)
- Associated Press, 3 February: [Ex-Peace Corps volunteers plead with US for help on Tigray](#)
- VoA, 4 February: [Diplomats Decry Violence, Call for Withdrawal of Eritrean Troops from Ethiopia](#)
- Washington Post, 4 February: [US urges Ethiopia's PM to allow 'immediate' help to Tigray](#)
- Associated Press, 5 February: [UN: Situation in Ethiopia's Tigray now 'extremely alarming'](#)
- Church Times (UK), 5 February: [Thousands of refugees missing in Tigray](#)

- Bloomberg, 5 February: [First there was a war, now Ethiopia faces a debt crisis.](#)
- Der Spiegel, 6 February: [Sudan fordert im Streit um Nil-Staudamm internationale Vermittlung](#) [in German]
- Eritrea Hub, 7 February: Tigray: [The position of displaced people in the town Shire](#)

La Libre Belgique, 9 February: [L'Onu pourra accéder au Tigré](#) [in French]

- Associated Press, 9 February: [Ethiopia gives UN green light to deploy 25 staff to Tigray](#)
- AFP, 9 February: [Mekelle – Clashes and death as protest erupts](#)

12. Opinion pieces

- Saba of Axsum: [Don't call me Woyane. I don't deserve it.](#)
 - Kjetil Tronvoll: [Ethiopia at risk of another long-term war](#)
 - Goitom Tsegay: [For years I opposed the TPLF, but I also oppose this war on Tigray.](#)
 - Bruck Kebede: [My Response to PM Abiy's Op-Ed on Project Syndicate](#)
 - Hardin Lang and David Del Conte: [Five Steps the Biden Administration Needs to Take on the Crisis in Tigray](#)
- Alex de Waal: [From Ethiopia's Tigray region to Yemen, the dilemma of declaring a famine](#)

HEADING 2

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