

Re: Re-Assessing whether the situation in Tigray constitutes genocide in light of new information that details the specific ways in which brutal acts of rape and torture are intentionally being used to ‘ erase’ Tigrayan ethnicity and cause infertility

To the Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, Ms. Alice Wairimu Nderitu,

Dear Ms. Nderitu,

I write to you today to ask your office (Genocide Prevention & The Responsibility to Protect) for the following:

An honest assessment and a formal statement regarding the ongoing atrocities against the Tigrayan people in Ethiopia as of 22 March 2022 and whether this fulfills the specific criteria set forth to declare an event as genocide.

I am aware of your previous statement of concern regarding the possibilities of genocide in the Tigray region; however, that is insufficient at this point. The situation worsens by the day, and real recognition of what it is – a genocide – is the first step in securing international help.

WHY THIS SITUATION QUALIFIES AS A GENOCIDE

I have read the formal criterion provided in Article II on the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment on the Crime of Genocide. Here is how this applies in the Tigrayan situation - please pay special attention to the way rape is being used to sterilize and kill future generations in patterns that **have not been seen elsewhere** within the wider conflict - :

1. Killing members of the group

500,000 Tigrayans have died since the conflict began in November 2020. Three factors make these deaths extraordinary:

- they were caused by starvation as crops were burnt, and 7 million people were denied access to food and humanitarian aid

- Tigrayan women and girls in particular are raped in ways that will no longer allow them to reproduce in a healthy way or, render them infertile.

The psychological damage of being raped in front of, or by one's family (at guinpoint) – or next to their corpses is ... unfathomable.

The specific nature of sexual assault upon Tigrayan women and girls does not match previously observed patterns of conflict in the region and is the strongest factor in establishing the intent to commit genocide.

A de facto siege has shut off 7 million Tigrayans for 500 days from the outside world. Tigrayans abroad have had no word from their families for over a year¹. There is very little food, medicine, and aid entering the region. 3.5 million Tigrayans under siege will die in the next few months without assistance, many of whom are children.

Mulugeta Gebrehiwot, the founder of the Institute for Peace and Security Studies, has described this as ‘genocide by decree’ as the Ethiopian government has weaponized hunger². Forcibly burning crops and limiting access to aid, it uses starvation to wage war against a specific ethnicity, i.e., Tigrayan.

Tigrayans are being systematically targeted by groups such as the Amhara Fano, who call for ‘roasting’ and ‘eating’ their flesh, like goats. Tigrayans are also labeled as ‘weeds’, ‘termites’, ‘demons’, ‘Judas’ that must be ‘erased’ or ‘removed’.

Here is a compiled list of prominent Ethiopian figures who have used genocidal rhetoric with 30 recorded instances: <https://twitter.com/EgleGeek/status/1502710193578205184>

Here’s a few quotes (directly taken from attributed source):

1. Debebe Eshetu (Artist): Let us annihilate the day time hyenas and sanctify ourselves. We will be blessed if we exterminate the Tigrayans.
2. Werku Aytenuw, Amhara Businessman "You should not only kill the #Tigrayans, you should roast them alive, eat them and get the maximum pleasure from it; this will make you super heroes, telling to a group of Amhara Fano militia."
3. An Amhara high rank priest in a meeting: "All of the Tigrayans, both the intellectuals and ordinary people are our enemies. Therefore, if someone is an enemy, you should devour the hyena first and gain a blessing."

Please refer to the source for more, including video footage.

1 Davies, L. 17 March 2022. ‘ ‘Nowhere on earth are people more at risk than Tigray’ says WHO Chief’ , Guardian Online. [<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/mar/17/nowhere-on-earth-are-people-more-at-risk-than-tigray-says-who-chief>]

2 De Waal, A. & Gebrehiwot Berhe, M. 27 January 2021. ‘ Transcript – Call between Mulugeta Gebrehiwot and Alex de Waal’ . World Peace Foundation. [<https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/files/2021/01/Mulugeta-Call-27-Jan-Full-transcript1-1.pdf>]

At a casual level, reproduced by average citizens, here is an Amhara woman, using her platform on TikTok to call for the murder of 5 million people. As you can see, the discourse of ‘ erasing Tigrayans ‘ is being internalized by others, irrespective of their combatant or non-combatant status.

<https://twitter.com/i/status/1456094917013368837>

2. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group

Since the beginning of the conflict, 120,000 Tigrayan women have been brutally gang-raped. A scholar reports that whilst mass rapes are also perpetuated by the TPLF (the controversial Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front) in other regions like Amhara and Afar, the nature of the rapes upon Tigrayan women are very distinctive with a clear intent to erase ethnicity or prevent future births:

- (1) They are raped in front of their families, or the corpses of family members
- (2) Their family members are sometimes forced to rape their women (at gunpoint)
- (3) Foreign objects are inserted into the vagina (plastic bags, nails, stones, hot metal rods)
- (4) Their uterus/womb is sometimes burnt or cut with sharp objects

This was reported by Dr. Hagos Godify, head of Tigray Health Bureau, as part of a study of 5,000 Tigrayan females between the ages of 15-49³. I reference one case that summarizes the specific intent of these actions: to render women infertile so that they cannot have offspring of a particular ethnicity, i.e. Tigrayan:

“ The Amhara men separated Akberet from her children and brother and took her into an abandoned farmer’s house, just a few metres away. The four men took turns raping her. **After they were done, the militiamen inserted into her genitals a hot metal rod that burned her uterus.**

“I begged them to stop,” Akberet told Al Jazeera. “I asked them, crying, why they were doing that to me. What wrong have I done to you?”

“You did nothing bad to us,” she said they told her. “Our problem is with your womb. Your womb gives birth to Woyane [derogative term used to refer to the TPLF]. A Tigrayan womb should never give birth.”

... **“The sexual assault made her infertile,”** a doctor who treated her there confirmed to Al Jazeera. Her bleeding has now stopped but Akberet, currently recuperating at a relative’s house, cannot walk and has to keep her legs spread. Sleeping at night is hard⁴.

Many of these women are also being deliberately infected with AIDS, which has a significant repercussion on future generations of Tigrayans⁵.

3 DW International. 2022. Dr. Hagos Godify, head of Tigray Health Bureau describing the brutal gender violence & rape in Tigray by Eritrean & Ethiopian invaders. [<https://twitter.com/i/status/1505253623520976907>]

4 Kassa, L. 21 April 2021. A Tigrayan womb should never give birth: Rape in Tigray. Al-Jazeera. [<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/21/a-tigrayan-womb-should-never-give-birth-rape-in-ethiopia-tigray>]

Here is testimony from a 13-year old Tigrayan child who survived hunger, bullet fire – and witnessed her mother being killed by soldiers, who then raped her dead body. She also witnessed an 8-year old girl being gangraped.

<https://twitter.com/i/status/1505974478916009987>

In addition to this – what has shocked and galvanized so many is the circulated video of a man burnt alive with his eyes wide open, pleading to be left alone.

<https://twitter.com/i/status/1505465680518426631>

3. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;

As part of its siege, the Government has shut down access to food, medicine, basic amenities, banking (and therefore the ability to withdraw money) to all Tigrayans. According to one man I interviewed (a Tigrayan scholar living abroad), professors are starving with nothing to eat as they cannot access their own money.

The Ethiopian Government also has limited medical assistance offered to Tigrayans by closing the doors to organizations such as the Red Cross, the UN, and Doctors without Borders⁶. Three Doctors Without Borders volunteers were recently killed by governmental forces, 2 Ethiopian men, and 1 Spanish woman.

Deliberately infecting women with AIDS is corroborative of targeted genocidal intent.

4. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;

Already addressed above.

5. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group

Not present to the best of my knowledge. Children, especially males, are more likely to be killed than transported⁷.

5 Kassa, L. & Pujol-Mazzini, A. 27 March 2021. We're here to make you HIV positive: Hundreds of women rush to hospitals as soldier use rape as a weapon of war. Daily Telegraph.

[<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/women-and-girls/make-hiv-positive-hundreds-women-rush-tigray-hospitals-soldiers/>]

6 Schlein, L. 15 January 2021. UN Slams Ethiopian Government Blocking Aid to Conflict Ridden Tigray. VOA News. [https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_un-slams-ethiopian-government-blocking-aid-conflict-ridden-tigray/6200783.html]

7 Human Rights Watch. 5 March 2021. Ethiopia: Eritrean forces massacre Tigray civilians. [<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/05/ethiopia-eritrean-forces-massacre-tigray-civilians>]

In a related vein, the rapes upon Tigray women were, in some cases, an attempt to ‘cleanse’ them of their ethnic identity⁸.

Out of these five criteria, four are very visibly present. Nowhere is it stated that 4 out of 5 is insufficient to declare an extraordinary event such as this as a genocide.

THE NEED TO DIFFERENTIATE GENOCIDE FROM CIVIL WAR

I have only found walls of silence as ‘ conflict’ is normalized in Africa in the eyes of the West.

One article ignored the outlying extremes of violence, including mass rape, directed rhetoric to identify and murder individuals of a particular ethnicity – citing it instead to be part of ‘ patterns of mass violence from the past as people were prone to ‘ getting it wrong’⁹.

The extraordinary nature of this situation is not being recognized for what it is. Therefore it cannot elicit the appropriate response from the international community.

Seven million people were forcibly cut off from the rest of the world, shelled by their Government, and systematically denied resources. The systematic targeting of Tigrayan women and girls (as young as eight) to eradicate the race and cleanse does not fit older observed patterns of conflict.

The specific intention of erasure is remarkably clear, as members of the ruling Government continue to use language such as ‘ termites’ and ‘ weeds’, i.e., things that need removal.

This differentiation is critical in the way the situation is framed. Whilst unpopular, it will take an office with courage and honesty to portray the truth for what it is.

Seeing the Tigrayan atrocity as genocide in no way invalidates the suffering of Amhara, Afar, Oromo, and other peoples at the hands of the TPLF. It opens the door for many cases of abuse to be acknowledged so that perpetrators of genocide and racially-motivated rape, starvation, and murder can be held accountable, irrespective of ethnicity.

However, it is unacceptable to punish and abandon 7 million civilians who are victims of genocide because of a military faction that they are not in control of.

Nowhere in the criteria stated does it indicate that the presence of armed groups, supposedly acting in the interests of the affected party, invalidate the five points.

8 Patta, D. 25 March 2021. Reports of executions and mass-rape emerge from the obscured war in Ethiopia’s Tigray Region. CBS News. [<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ethiopia-tigray-news-executions-rape-war-atrocities-genocide/>]

9 Ibrek, R. & de Waal, A. 28 October 2021. ‘Introduction: Situating Ethiopia in Genocide Debates’. Forum: Mass Atrocities and Political Violence in Ethiopia. [<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14623528.2021.1992920>]

Innocent Tigrayan civilians should not be punished for the actions of the TPLF that are occurring outside of their region: both cases have to be taken separately.

POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In December 2021, the Biden administration chose to stop investigations on whether the situation in Tigray constitutes a genocide or not to allow ‘ diplomatic efforts to prevail. No such efforts have been made to date in any significant capacity¹⁰.

News coverage has described this as a ‘ war ‘, ‘ conflict, ‘ ethnic tension’, and a ‘ health crisis’, ignoring the singularly focused intent to eradicate a race perceived as ‘ demonic’.

The TPLF and its actions in neighbouring regions are described as atrocities, preventing an innocent population from receiving the assistance it requires.

The needs of the Tigrayan people are a humanitarian effort.

The justice that TPLF, Amhara Fano, Eritrean, and Ethiopian soldiers - and anyone else attacking civilians - must face is a legal necessity.

Please remember to differentiate the two.

WHAT I ASK OF YOU

I ask you to discharge the duty of the office that you hold and honestly assess, using the fullest extent of your resources, whether or not the atrocities perpetrated against the Tigrayan people constitute a genocide.

You have had an entire year to perform your role as all indicators of genocide were well established in early 2021. The most recent report detailing the specifically targeted intent of causing infertility and death via rape only adds to the mountain of evidence that supports the designation of genocide in this context.

The international community and international institutions have abandoned Tigray for more than a year, knowing the consequences of such actions.

The situation demands your immediate attention.

¹⁰ Harris, B. 2 December 2021. US halts Tigray genocide determination to pursue diplomacy in Ethiopia. The National News. [<https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/us-news/2021/12/01/us-halts-tigray-genocide-determination-to-pursue-ethiopia-diplomacy/>]

I urge your office to act humanity, lest it becomes guilty of negligence - or worse, complicity - in what will become the world's Second Holocaust.

ACT NOW.

Sincerely,

Dr. Bairavee Balasubramaniam, Ph.D. (Politics – University of Warwick, UK)

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Eritrea Hub. 30 January 2021. The horrors of the Tigray War: Eyewitness Accounts.

[<https://eritreahub.org/the-horrors-of-the-tigray-war-eyewitness-accounts>]

This a document from 2021 that compiles some of the worst atrocities on record (at that time), along with eyewitness accounts.

Girmay, M. 21 March 2022. Understanding a 21st Century Genocide: The Case of Tigray. TGHAT.

[<https://www.tghat.com/2022/03/21/understanding-a-21st-century-genocide-the-case-of-tigray/>]

This is a thorough analysis on why the situation in Tigray in terms of the eight stages of genocide as defined by Gregory H. Stanton in 1998: classification, symbolization, dehumanization, polarization, organization, preparation, extermination, and denial

There are far more sources of information available, especially on Twitter, as Tigrayans are forced to use non-traditional means of communication to share the previous few videos that emerge from the region. I suggest accessing these also and treating them as legitimate primary sources.