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# POLITICAL AND MEDIA ANALYSIS ON THE TIGRAY CONFLICT IN ETHIOPIA

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## Table of Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Executive Summary .....</b>  | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>Introduction .....</b>   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Methodological Note.....</b>   | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Origin of the Political Crisis and War in Tigray.....</b>            | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>The first phase of the conflict .....</b>                            | <b>11</b> |
| Prominent media reporting during the first phase of the conflict.....   | 12        |
| Disinformation and misinformation during the first phase .....          | 17        |
| <b>The second phase of the conflict.....</b>                            | <b>20</b> |
| Prominent media reporting during the second phase of the conflict ..... | 21        |
| <b>Third phase of the conflict .....</b>                                | <b>27</b> |
| Prominent media reporting during the third phase of the conflict .....  | 27        |
| <b>The fourth phase of the conflict.....</b>                            | <b>33</b> |
| <b>Conclusion.....</b>  | <b>36</b> |
| <b>Recommendations.....</b>   | <b>36</b> |

## Executive Summary

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This study reviews patterns of domestic and international media reporting and the role of disinformation, misinformation, and media bias in the Tigray conflict, which has been raging since November 2020. Since its outbreak, the conflict has evolved through four broad phases. Throughout these phases, the conflict was characterised by egregious violations of international human rights law, international humanitarian law and international refugee law. To analyse the role of the media in the conflict, this study reviewed local and international media, conducted interviews with local and international journalists and analysts, and consulted secondary literature. Patterns of reporting by international and local media exhibited fairly significant levels of divergence in the issues that were selected for reporting and how they were reported during these four phases of the conflict.

The study found significant levels of disinformation, misinformation, and biased reporting that clouded accounts of the conflict and encouraged debates over highly contested issues. International media largely disregarded the role that the TPLF played in provoking the federal government to take military action, at times neglecting to mention the TPLF attack on the Ethiopian Northern Command and occasionally even accusing Prime Minister Ahmed Abiy of ordering a wanton attack on Tigray. International journalists either partially or completely ignored the historical context of the conflict. On the other hand, domestic Ethiopian media largely disregarded the violations that were committed by the federal government and were overly focussed on debunking the claims that were made by the TPLF. Overall, the study found a systematic pattern of local media biased towards the narrative of the federal government, whereas the international media were generally biased towards the narrative of the TPLF. As a result, the voice of the people who suffered the brunt of the fighting became the “casualty” of misinformation, disinformation and biased reporting.

## Introduction

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The Tigray war was highly dynamic, passing through four phases within a year. A distinctive feature of the conflict has been the level of cyberwarfare or competition over information and narratives.<sup>1</sup> Media reporting on the conflict was affected by a number of factors that, from the outset, limited the prospects for accurate reporting on the conflict. First, when the conflict started in November 2020, internet and telecommunications were disrupted across the Tigray region, creating a huge information vacuum. Journalists, aid groups, and researchers struggled to gain access to the region. The war was fought in near-total darkness, making it extremely difficult to verify claims of widespread atrocities committed by all sides.

Second, the warring parties deliberately embarked on a campaign to seize control of the flow of information and blindly discredit any sources that countered their narrative of the conflict. As part of the effort to control the narratives, the Ethiopian government arrested Ethiopians working in Tigray for international news outlets<sup>2</sup> and local affiliates of international media;<sup>3</sup> sent warning letters to international media;<sup>4</sup> detained and revoked the accreditation of journalists; and denied visas to prominent international journalists, forcing media to rely on less experienced journalists.<sup>5</sup> Generally, the federal government consistently viewed those who opposed the official narrative, regardless of the reason, as sympathetic to the TPLF.

Third, media weaknesses undermined accurate reporting. Though government-owned media have the resources to report from the field, they are not sufficiently independent to air views that contravene the government's position. Local private media, on the other hand, have been affected by financial constraints and ever-changing government regulations. It is

<sup>1</sup> See for example the brief by Claire Wilmot, Ellen Tveteraas, and Alexi Drew Wilmot which focused on reviewing mainstream media reporting and patterns of disinformation, misinformation and media bias. C., Tveteraas, E. & Drew, A. (2021). "Dueling Information Campaigns: The War Over the Narrative in Tigray," *The Media Manipulation Case Book*, September 14, 2021. Available: [https://mediamanipulation.org/case-studies/dueling-information-campaigns-war-over-narrative-tigray?fbclid=IwAR3Lv9XNh-ufXCqEaQoldbtV\\_nc3RHJ4cLpT32S0kPy3CPreXcYzkainLOY](https://mediamanipulation.org/case-studies/dueling-information-campaigns-war-over-narrative-tigray?fbclid=IwAR3Lv9XNh-ufXCqEaQoldbtV_nc3RHJ4cLpT32S0kPy3CPreXcYzkainLOY).

<sup>2</sup> Kitimo, A. (20 November 2021). *Ethiopia: Govt Puts on Notice 4 International Media Over Their Reporting on Tigray Conflict*. Available: <https://allafrica.com/stories/202111220525.html>; see also Kassa, L. (11 February 2021). I reported on Ethiopia's Secretive War: Then Came a Knock on my door. Available: <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-02-11/i-reported-on-ethiopias-secretive-war-then-came-a-knock-at-my-door>

<sup>3</sup> Kitimo, A. (20 November 2021). *Ethiopia: Govt Puts on Notice 4 International Media Over Their Reporting on Tigray Conflict*.

<sup>4</sup> Reporters Without Borders (18 May 2021). Ethiopia arbitrarily suspends New York Times reporter's accreditation. Available: <https://rsf.org/en/news/ethiopia-arbitrarily-suspends-new-york-times-reporters-accreditation>.

<sup>5</sup> Dahir, A.L. & Walsh, D. (29 June 2021). *As Ethiopia Fights in Tigray Region, a Crackdown on Journalists*. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/13/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-journalists.html>.

probable that due to limited field-based reporting, media relied on few (elite) sources, making it difficult for the voice of the community to be heard.

Finally, asymmetry in media power influenced the narrative that would be dominant at different stages of the conflict. Generally, the TPLF was unable to deploy the same media power as the federal government, even when it was making military gains. The international media initially relied on the government for information about the conflict, mainly because of the total media and communication blackout. However, when the Tigrayan diaspora started reporting atrocities they claimed were mainly committed by the Amhara and Eritrean forces, the international media changed its approach, especially after the government allowed them to visit Tigray in March 2021.

These challenges not only limited the possibility for balanced reporting, but also made it difficult to differentiate accurate reporting from disinformation and misinformation. This study contributes to the debate by describing the four phases the Tigray conflict went through until late 2021, analysing the main patterns of reporting and narratives used by Ethiopian and international media, and identifying inaccuracies, bias, and instances of disinformation and misinformation, all of which occurred in both Ethiopian and international media.

## Methodological Note

The study deployed a methodology that is sensitive to the above challenges of identifying accurate reporting from disinformation and misinformation. Even the findings of what was intended to be the most authoritative account of the conflict – the joint investigation by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) – remain heavily contested. This is mainly because the composition of the team was imbalanced and the TPLF and its allies objected to the neutrality of the EHRC, which they saw as being too close to the Ethiopian federal government.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> These concerns motivated the UN Human Rights Council to adopt a resolution, on 17 December 2021, calling for a UN-led investigation without the involvement of the EHRC. The Ethiopian government strongly objected to the resolution.

To address the issues identified, this study used a diverse set of data collection tools ranging from desktop and media review to interviews with domestic and international journalists as well as Ethiopian and international analysts. A review of the reporting of eight domestic media organisations was conducted: three government-affiliated/public owned media (Walta TV, Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation and Fana TV); one non-profit independent media (ESAT) and one private media (Abbay); two media controlled by regional governments/forces (Amhara Media Corporation and Tigray Television, respectively controlled by the Amhara regional government and the Tigray regional administration); and one Tigrayan diaspora-based media house, Dimitsi Weyane. Three journalists from domestic public media organisations, three from domestic private media organisations and two domestic analysts were also interviewed. The study also reviewed the reporting of international media houses such as CNN, BBC, AFP, Al Jazeera, the New York Times, African Arguments, and The East African. This was complemented by a review of reports by domestic and international organizations. Moreover, the study was also helped by a balanced research team that included Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian experts.

For this report, disinformation is defined as the deliberate dissemination of false information whereas misinformation is defined as the dissemination of inaccurate information without the intention to do so. We considered a report as a case of disinformation or misinformation when it was conclusively established as respectively either disinformation or misinformation, or when there was plausible cause to consider it as such. Where we were unsure of the intention with which the information was disseminated, we used the two terms together. We define media bias as reporting practices where some events are covered or amplified but others are ignored in a systematic way.

## Origin of the Political Crisis and War in Tigray

The Tigray conflict remains hotly debated. Generally, a combination of four factors is advanced to explain the origin of the war: deep disagreement over the history, nature, and future of the Ethiopian state; power struggle within the former ruling party; rising ethno-nationalism; and the “Eritrean question”. Many analysts explain it in terms of the contestation

between a centralising federal government and an autonomy-seeking, possibly secessionist, Tigray.

Over the past decades, the history of the Ethiopian state and its desirable future was highly contested.<sup>7</sup> At the cost of oversimplifying the issue, two major political groupings have been prevalent in the country. The first group approached Ethiopia's oppressive past through the lens that the Amhara nation oppressed the other nations. Hence, it advocated a political arrangement that granted maximum autonomy to nations and nationalities of the country. A second group considered the same past as an attempt at nation building that nevertheless failed to achieve its goals due to the democratic deficits of the process. It therefore favoured to democratise the process, relying on individual rights rather than the self-determination rights of the nations and nationalities of the country.

When the TPLF-dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) overthrew the military regime in 1991, it imposed the view of the first group and established a constitutional dispensation that would allow ethnic groups to administer themselves and if necessary, secede from the federation. This, however, has been opposed by proponents of the latter category. When the EPRDF failed to implement the ethnic-federalist arrangements, discontent simmered for years among those who supported it. From 2014, this gave rise to protests, first in Oromia, and later in Amhara and pockets of areas of the Southern region. It led to, and was compounded with, power struggles within the EPRDF.

Although the protestors had many aspirations, the overriding one was the need to overthrow the TPLF's architecture of political repression and economic extraction. The government attempted to quell the protests, but the protestors demonstrated persistence, agency, and political innovation – including their attempt at cross-ethnic alignment. The protests were also intertwined with the power struggle within the EPRDF, following the vacuum created by the death of former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in August 2012. Probably inspired by the

<sup>7</sup> Tadesse, M., Kifle, A. A. & Desta, D. (2021) Evolving state building conversations and political settlement in Ethiopia, *Conflict, Security & Development*, 21(4): 455-474, DOI: 10.1080/14678802.2021.1974698

need to capitalise on the protests, but also out of fear for the unfolding events, the non-Tigrayan parties of the EPRDF sympathised with the protestors.

The failure to implement far-reaching reforms introduced by the EPRDF in 2016 led to the resignation of the then Prime Minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, in February 2018 and the election by the ruling coalition of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister on 2 April 2018. With Abiy's ascension, the Oromo wing of the EPRDF (with the support of its Amhara wing) controlled the highest position of the country. Abiy soon unveiled a reformist agenda. The top leaders of the TPLF swiftly moved to Tigray's capital, Mekelle, and began to oppose the reform process. It claimed that its ideology of "revolutionary democracy" was non-negotiable. Probably informed by this ideology, when political prisoners were released by the government, the TPLF accused Abiy of releasing "terrorists".

In June 2018, a demonstration in support of the new Prime Minister was disrupted by multiple bomb explosions targeting Abiy.<sup>8</sup> More than 100 people were injured. Government investigations, supported by the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), attributed the explosions to the former head of the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA), Getachew Assefa, and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).<sup>9</sup> An arrest warrant was issued, but the TPLF disregarded it and elected Getachew as a central committee member. The basis of the TPLF's rejection was that the findings of the investigations were inconclusive and that they descended into obscurity when other actors such as the OLF were vaguely implicated. In December 2019, the parties that constituted the EPRDF, except the TPLF, unanimously transformed the EPRDF into the Prosperity Party (PP). The TPLF interpreted the move as a further attempt to dismantle the ethno-federal constitution and introduce a unitary system that would, in their view, enable Abiy's monopolisation of power.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Maasho, A. (23 June 2018). *Ethiopian PM escapes grenade attack, one dead, scores hurt*. Available: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics-idUSKBN1JJ050>

<sup>9</sup> Engidu, W. (28 September 2018). *Ethiopia: Assassination attempt on PM linked to OLF operatives as five charged with terrorism*. Available at <https://ethsat.com/2018/09/ethiopia-assassination-attempt-on-pm-linked-to-olf-operatives-as-five-charged-with-terrorism/>; Engidu W, (12 November 2018). *Ex-spy chief planned botched assassination attempt on PM: Prosecutor says*. Available at <https://ethsat.com/2018/11/ex-spy-chief-planned-botched-assassination-attempt-against-pm-prosecutor-says/>

<sup>10</sup> The idea of forming a unified party was in principle accepted by all member parties of the EPRDF including the TPLF long before the 2018 reform was launched. The front was waiting the right time to transform the EPRDF into a unified party. Hence, the TPLF's refusal of the unification, it agreed to earlier, should have been probably due to its fear of loss of influence within the EPRDF. The EPRDF was a Front of four parties with equal vote though they represent population that range from 7% of the country's population by the TPLF to 34% by the Oromo People Democratic Organization. Unification of the party would invariably have ended the disproportionate influence of the TPLF elites.

The increasingly strained relations between the TPLF and the EPRDF (and later the PP), coupled with the rising influence of other social forces and actors, alarmed the Tigrayan elites in general, and the TPLF leadership in particular. For example, Abiy's acceptance of a previous international arbitration decision to grant contested territory to Eritrea alarmed the Tigrayan elites, who felt that they were not sufficiently consulted. The rise of Amhara nationalism, with its demand for the reincorporation of the two contested territories between Tigray and Amhara into the Amhara region, exacerbated the uneasy atmosphere. When the issue of local self-determination was raised by the Amhara in the Amhara-Tigray contested areas, the TPLF suppressed this demand, claiming that the problem was not about identity, but governance. The TPLF also sought to weaken these demands by forging an alliance with Oromo nationalists that, in turn, threatened the Oromo wing of the EPRDF as well as the Amhara elites, who subsequently accused it of inciting ethnic pogroms across the country.

The advocacy for individual-oriented citizenship-based politics generated anxiety in TPLF circles that the constitutional dispensation that it had presided over was to be dismantled. (In the contested 2005 elections, a party advocating such position was accused of anti-Tigrayan sentiment.) The pan-Ethiopianists and the Amhara blamed the leadership of the TPLF, not only for the rampant corruption and human rights abuses, but also for instituting a divisive ethnic-based federal arrangement that generated inter-communal conflicts. They wished to hold the TPLF to account for these allegations of corruption and human rights violations. This, too, raised fears within the TPLF leadership. Since the EPRDF, as a collective body, admitted the human rights violations and corruption, legal measures were taken against allegedly corrupt and abusive former TPLF officials. Nevertheless, these were interpreted as a "witch-hunt" against Tigrayans. Some observers attributed this to the disproportionate Tigrayan presence in key state institutions. The TPLF also framed government measures that would undermine its privileges as a threat to Tigrayans. Because of all these factors, while the political actors at the centre began to view the TPLF as a threat to the reform process, the TPLF and, to some extent, the Tigrayans, believed that they were being disproportionately targeted.

As tensions mounted, both sides began to make military preparations. When the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) wanted to take the bulk of the modern weaponry and its human resources out of Tigray to other parts of the country, Tigrayans obstructed the process, preventing the “Northern Command” from leaving Tigray. While this reassured the TPLF, which by then was concerted training security forces, that in the worst-case scenario, it could control the military capability of the Northern Command, Abiy, as he later admitted, got painfully aware that he would not have control over the Northern Command. Hence, the government started its own military preparations.

The political tension edged closer to military confrontation when the Covid-19 pandemic ushered in debate over the election schedule. The electoral problem was submitted to the House of Federation, a legally mandated body to interpret the constitution, which, after consulting the Council of Constitutional Inquiry, decided to extend the terms of federal and regional government beyond their five-year constitutional mandate – until the pandemic was under control. Although this was a legally binding decision, there was room to argue that it would not apply to regional assemblies. The TPLF defied the decision, arguing that it was a violation of the constitution. It proceeded to conduct parliamentary elections in the Tigray Region on 9 September 2020, securing 98% of the vote. The federal government called the vote illegal, escalating tensions between both parties.<sup>11</sup>

On 6 October 2020, the TPLF claimed that the federal government was no longer legitimate because its constitutional mandate had expired the day before. It declared that it would no longer accept decisions and regulations made by the federal government.<sup>12</sup> In response, the federal government decided not to deal with the Tigray Regional State Council and the cabinet, and directed the budgetary allocation from Tigray’s regional administration to its local levels.<sup>13</sup> This was regarded by the TPLF not only as a violation of Tigray’s constitutional right to administer itself, but also as a “declaration of war”. As this happened, some local

<sup>11</sup> Gash, J. (24 November 2020). *War in Tigray: How did it start and can it be resolved?* Available: <https://www.rte.ie/news/world/2021/1124/1262944-tigray-ethiopia-war/>

<sup>12</sup> Siyanne M. & Medihane E. (29 September 2020) “News: Tigray region says it will defy federal laws enacted as of Oct. 05; EDP calls for transitional gov’t, inclusive dialogue & reconciliation,” *Addis Standard*, <https://addisstandard.com/news-tigray-region-says-it-will-defy-federal-laws-enacted-as-of-oct-05-edp-calls-for-transitional-govt-inclusive-dialogue-reconciliation/>

<sup>13</sup> *Fana* (7 October 2020) “Federal Gov’t severs relationship with Tigray regional state,” <https://www.fanabc.com/english/federal-govt-severs-relationship-with-tigray-regional-state/>

actors urged the parties to try and find a negotiated settlement. The TPLF demanded inclusive dialogue and a transitional government. The federal government refused these demands, insisting that the question of power should be settled only through elections. The political tension was waiting for a spark to metamorphose into war.

## The first phase of the conflict

The immediate circumstances that transformed the conflict into a military confrontation happened on 3 November 2020, when the TPLF attacked the Northern Command and reportedly attempted to encroach on the Kirakir area of Amhara region. The TPLF claimed that the attack was pre-emptive because it was a response to the “massive” deployment of Amhara, federal government and Eritrean forces that were planning an assault against Tigray. The TPLF believed that the federal government and Eritrea were preparing a war against Tigray from as early as 2018, following the peace pact that ended two decades of hostilities between the two countries. On the other hand, the government believed that the TPLF was preparing for war from the time that it was removed from power. The Northern Command had more than 70 percent of the country’s military capability, giving whoever controlled it a disproportionate military advantage.

The TPLF argued that the federal government was planning to use the Northern Command in the suspected assault against Tigray. By attacking the Northern Command and seizing its weaponry, the TPLF wanted to neutralise what it regarded as an imminent attack against Tigray. However, the federal government claimed that the attack was unprovoked and intended to take over the weaponry and forcefully remove the federal government from power. It further claimed that during the attack, 174 locations were simultaneously attacked or seized; including army bases, banks, petrol stations, airports and communication offices.<sup>14</sup> The nature and degree of the attack remains controversial, with the TPLF claiming that the federal government exaggerated the account. Since both sides were preparing for war long

<sup>14</sup> Grey, S. (28 December 2021). *In Ethiopia war, new abuse charges turn spotlight on Tigrayan former rulers*. Available : <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ethiopia-conflict-tplf>  
European Institute of Peace | Political and Media Analysis on the Tigray Conflict in Ethiopia

before the attack against the Northern Command took place, there is a possibility that they misconstrued each other's intentions.

On 4 November 2020, the federal government ordered a military offensive against the regional forces in Tigray.<sup>15</sup> It enlisted the help of Eritrean forces and mobilised the Afar and Amhara special forces and militias. As these forces advanced into Western Tigray, on 9 November 2020, forces associated with the TPLF massacred more than 200 Amhara civilians in Mai Kadra.<sup>16</sup> Another civilian massacre was perpetrated by Eritrean forces in Axum on 28 November 2020, where more than 100 Tigrayans were killed.<sup>17</sup> By early December 2020, the conventional war came to an end, and guerrilla warfare gradually took shape. The TPLF was forced out of Mekelle, but it continued to fight in other parts of Tigray.

### Prominent media reporting during the first phase of the conflict

During the first phase of the conflict, local media extensively covered the conflict, whereas international media coverage was very selective. Four major themes dominated the local media reporting of this period. The first focused on what was regarded as the inhuman and treasonous nature of the TPLF's attack on the Northern Command and its attempted incursion into the Amhara region. The media authentically reported that the army was stationed in Tigray for over twenty years in a bid to protect the Tigrayan people and the country's sovereignty from potential Eritrean attacks.<sup>18</sup> It had also undertaken several social programmes to support the people of Tigray, including building schools, supporting helpless children, helping harvesting crops during peak times, and fighting the locust invasion that bedevilled the region in 2020.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Binnie, J. (12 November 2020). *Ethiopia Says Northern Command is Counterattacking Tigray Rebels*. Available: <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/ethiopia-says-northern-command-is-counterattacking-tigray-rebels>

<sup>16</sup> EHRC and OHCHR (3 November 2021) Joint Investigation into Alleged Violations of International Human Rights, Humanitarian and Refugee Law Committed by all Parties to the Conflict in the Tigray Region of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OHCHR-EHRC-Tigray-Report.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> EBC (10 November 2020). የሰሜን እዝ በዚያች ሌሊት- በሌተናል ጀነራል ባጭ ደበሌ አንደበት. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtT23e6-1d4&ab\\_channel=FanaTelevision](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtT23e6-1d4&ab_channel=FanaTelevision); EBC (27 November 2020) EBC (27 November 2020). የሰሜን እዝ ምስክርነት. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5aFQT7Fw40>

<sup>19</sup> EBC (13 November 2020). የጽንፈኛው ህወሃት ቡድን ጥቃትን ተከላክለው የተረፉ የሰሜን እዝ የመከላከያ ሰራዊት አባላት በእዙ ላይ የተፈጸሙት ጥቃት አስመልክተው የሰጡት አስተያየት Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qiSsrOsklo&t=293s&ab\\_channel=EBC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qiSsrOsklo&t=293s&ab_channel=EBC); EBC (27 November 2020) EBC (27 November 2020). የሰሜን እዝ ምስክርነት. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5aFQT7Fw40>

The local media therefore viewed TPLF's attack on the Northern Command not only as an affront on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country, but also inhuman. The media interviewed members of the Northern Command who claimed that they were held hostage by the TPLF: these soldiers narrated how they were subjected to atrocities.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, female members of the army reported graphic instances of sexual and gender-based violence perpetrated by the TPLF.<sup>21</sup>

Media affiliated with the TPLF, on the other hand, reported that the Northern Command agreed to work with the regional government of Tigray and denied the alleged atrocities committed by the TPLF. The Joint UN and Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (with the limitations noted above and below) confirmed that the Tigray Special Forces perpetrated human rights abuses against captured members of the ENDF and sexually assaulted their wives. During this early period, international reporting reviewed for this study was largely silent about these incidents.

The second theme of domestic Ethiopian media reporting was the narrative that the outbreak of the war was a continuation of the TPLF's enduring proclivity to use violence as a solution to political problems. Its attack against the Northern Command was framed as another attempt at derailing the reform process. Ethiopian media reported that when it was in power, the TPLF was perpetrating all forms of human rights abuses, preying on the country's resources, and suppressing any form of dissent.<sup>22</sup> The economic gains achieved under the TPLF were either overlooked or considered to be exaggerated.

Local media accused the TPLF of sponsoring inter-communal violence and ethnic and religious pogroms. It also cited instances where members of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLF-Shene),

<sup>20</sup> EBC (13 November 2020). የጽንፈኛው ህወሃት ቡድን ጥቃትን ተከላክለው የተረፉ የሰሜን እዝ የመከላከያ ሰራዊት አባላት በእዙ ላይ የተፈጸመውን ጥቃት አስመልክተው የሰጡት አስተያየት

Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qiSsrOsklo&t=293s&ab\\_channel=EBC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qiSsrOsklo&t=293s&ab_channel=EBC); EBC (10 November 2020).

የሰሜን እዝ በዚያች ሌሊት በሌተናል ጀነራል ባጫ ደበሌ አንደበት. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtT23e6-1d4&ab\\_channel=FanaTelevision](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtT23e6-1d4&ab_channel=FanaTelevision); EBC (6 December 2020). የፅንፈኛው የትህነግ ታጣቂ ቡድን በሰሜን ዕዝ ላይ የፈፀመው ጥቃት የጭካኔውን ጥግ ያሳየ መሆኑን ሴት የመከላከያ ሠራዊት አባላት ገለጹ። Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEmDs2RrX68&ab\\_channel=EBC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEmDs2RrX68&ab_channel=EBC); EBC (2 November 2020). አሸባሪው የህወሓት ቡድን ሀገርን ለማፍረስ የተጠነሰሰውን ሴራና ክህደት በመጀመሪያ የፈፀመው በሰሜን ዕዝ ላይ ጥቅምት 24/2013 ዓ.ም ነበር። Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHF5K2fSUo&ab\\_channel=EBC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHF5K2fSUo&ab_channel=EBC)

<sup>21</sup> EBC (2 November 2020). አሸባሪው የህወሓት ቡድን ሀገርን ለማፍረስ የተጠነሰሰውን ሴራና ክህደት በመጀመሪያ የፈፀመው በሰሜን ዕዝ ላይ ጥቅምት 24/2013 ዓ.ም ነበር። Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHF5K2fSUo&ab\\_channel=EBC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHF5K2fSUo&ab_channel=EBC)

<sup>22</sup> Amhara Television (26 November 2020). ቆይታ ከፖለቲካና አንዳርጋቸው ጽን ጋር. Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ynb1\\_nsBJ7c&t=9s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ynb1_nsBJ7c&t=9s)

the armed movements in Benishangul, and the Kemant Identity Committee were caught getting support from the TPLF to violently pursue their goals.<sup>23</sup> A few days before the outbreak of the war, parliamentarians who were frustrated by the inter-communal violence that was allegedly incited by TPLF and OLF-Shene called for the designation of these organisations as terrorist entities.<sup>24</sup>

At the political level, these media reported that the TPLF defied federal laws and regulations, and rejected the legal postponement of the election.<sup>25</sup> They claimed that well before the TPLF decided to reject any federal order, it was on the move to form a *de facto* state. They alleged that the president of the Tigray Regional State urged Tigrayan members of parliament to call for the independence of Tigray.<sup>26</sup> This was followed by the rejection of the newly appointed leadership of the Northern Command, which they claim was a continuation of its 6 October decision not to accept federal orders. In sum, according to these Ethiopian media, the TPLF had rejected the government's efforts to peacefully resolve the tension.<sup>27</sup> They regarded the government's response as "a law enforcement operation" intended "to bring the criminals to justice", to secure the release of kidnapped members of the ENDF, and to ensure the return to constitutional order.<sup>28</sup>

TPLF-affiliated media claimed that it was Abiy and his allies who were not interested in political solutions. According to these media, previous attempts at negotiation failed because Abiy was not ready for peace.<sup>29</sup> They claimed that Abiy was weakening Tigray by applying political, economic, and security pressure and violating the rights of Tigrayans. This pressure, they reported, included cutting the annual budget, denying Tigray the chemicals needed to fight locust invasions, and closing the road from Tigray to Addis that passes through Amhara.<sup>30</sup> In the prelude to the war, TPLF-affiliated media claimed, Abiy and Isaias Afwerki were

<sup>23</sup>EBC (8 November 2020). "የጃንታው ሴራ" ዘጋቢ ፊልም | etv. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AScRo02bJQ&ab\\_channel=EBC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AScRo02bJQ&ab_channel=EBC)

<sup>24</sup> Abbay Media (5 November 2020). አውድማ - ጦርነት ወይስ ህግ ማስከበር. Available: <https://rb.gy/ijsw8h>

<sup>25</sup> Abbay Media (3 November 2021). Breaking News/ሰበር ኬና/ ህወሃት በሽብርተኝነት እንዲፈረጅ በም/ቤት ተነሳ. Available: <https://rb.gy/yafp9h>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> ESAT News (6 November 2020). Ethiopia- ESAT Amharic News Fri 06 November 2020. Available: <https://rb.gy/i2yixd>

<sup>28</sup> Yesuf, J. (24 November 2020). *Law Enforcement Operation or Armed Conflict?* Available: <https://addiszebye.com/news/currentaffairs/law-enforcement-operation-or-an-armed-conflict-the-conflict-in-tigray-and-international-humanitarian-law>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbu3dkPOLEk>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuX0GohprXE>

<sup>30</sup> DW International News on 17 November 2020

amassing forces close to Tigray, making it imperative for them to attack the Northern Command.<sup>31</sup> The TPLF's defiance of federal orders and the attack on the Northern Command, Tigrayan media reported, were therefore Abiy's pretext to commence the war. But reports were vague as to the goals of Abiy. At times, they claimed that Abiy's goal was to take away Tigray's right for self-determination and establish a centralised system of government.<sup>32</sup> However, they also reported that Abiy wanted to eliminate Tigrayans, because he selectively arrested Tigrayans, discouraged investors from investing in Tigray, called Tigrayans insulting names, and prepared for a genocide against Tigrayans.<sup>33</sup>

During the early stages, international media did not pay much attention to the conflict – until it became exceptionally violent and devastating. When the war broke out, international media mainly reported that it started when Abiy deployed the army to Tigray in response to the TPLF's attack on the Northern Command;<sup>34</sup> although they seemed unsure why the Ethiopian military was deployed to Tigray. The fact that between 70 to 80 percent of the military assets of the country and more than half of the army personnel were stationed in Tigray, while widely reported in local media, was overlooked in these international reports. Nevertheless, during this phase, the international media largely relied on the government's narrative. Communication in the Tigray region was cut off, leading to a limited number of reports being released.<sup>35</sup> As a result, there were no serious contentions between the two. But as soon as allegations emerged that the government was violating international humanitarian law, including by carrying out atrocities against civilians and civilian objects, there was a shift in international reporting.

Some of the international media failed to highlight the role of the TPLF in forcing the government's retaliation. For example, some reports maintained that Abiy "accused the TPLF of attacking an Ethiopian army base in the region."<sup>36</sup> Yet, it was not simply an accusation, but

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgSEZ8vQGtE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57onaJFnr2E>

<sup>32</sup> DW International News on 17 November 2020

<sup>33</sup> [Tigray Television News on 01 December 2021 - Bing](#)

<sup>34</sup> BBC (29 June 2021). *Ethiopia's Tigray war: The short, medium and long story*. Available: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54964378>

<sup>35</sup> Culbertson, A. & Philippe, W. (16 March 2021). *Ethiopia Conflict: What are they fighting about and why?* Available: <https://news.sky.com/story/ethiopia-conflict-what-are-they-fighting-about-and-why-12137538>

<sup>36</sup> Schwikowski, M. (17 August 2021). *The Conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia*. Available: <https://www.dw.com/en/the-conflict-in-tigray-ethiopia/a-58886256>

rather a fact. International reports published shortly after the start of the conflict did reveal that the Ethiopian military was being aided by fighters from the neighbouring region of Amhara, along with Eritrean soldiers.<sup>37</sup> But there were very few mentions of the previous war between Eritrea and Ethiopia: an international journalist who was interviewed for this study maintained that international journalists partially or completely ignored the historical context of the conflict; with some of them merely copying and pasting a few lines from other reports.<sup>38</sup>

A third theme of local Ethiopian reporting during this phase focused on tracking the dynamics of the war. Journalists of government-affiliated media, who accompanied the ENDF, reported incidents from the war front and sought to debunk claims that were made by the TPLF. Embedding journalists within militaries, sometimes referred to as “militarised journalism”, is a strategy that has been increasingly common since the first Gulf war. This leads to the co-optation of journalists and reports that favour of the side they have embedded with. It occurred in this conflict too. In areas that were contested between the Amhara and the Tigray, an Amhara Media reporter showed local people welcoming the removal of the TPLF.<sup>39</sup> There were reports that the war was executed with limited civilian casualties, as well as stories that the TPLF stored weapons in churches, which is a violation of international humanitarian law. The media also claimed that when the TPLF fighters were unable to withstand the ENDF, they allegedly destroyed bridges and Axum airport (the TPLF claimed it only set obstacles). While the international media reported some of these military developments, it also expressed the concern that the war might be prolonged if the TPLF reverted to guerrilla warfare.<sup>40</sup>

Ethiopian media showed the TPLF’s massacre of the Amhara of Mai Kadra and its use of child soldiers and addictive drugs.<sup>41</sup> The Amhara Media Corporation claimed that in Mai Kadra of Western Tigray, more than 1,100 Amhara civilians were massacred by a Tigrayan youth group

<sup>37</sup> Martin, P. (8 January 2021). Eritrea in the Tigray war: What we know and why it might backfire. Available at <https://africanarguments.org/2021/01/eritrea-in-the-tigray-war-what-we-know-and-why-it-might-backfire/>

<sup>38</sup> Telephone interview with international analyst, on 14 December 2021

<sup>39</sup> Amhara Television (13 December 2020). ህዝባዊ ሰልፍ በወልቃይት ጠገዴ ቃፍታ ሁመራ. Available: <https://rb.gv/xskypZ>; Amahara Television (15 December 2020). ወልቃይት ኦዲረሙጥ ከተማ ሰልፍ. Available <https://rb.gv/mby7wg>

<sup>40</sup> Burke, J. (4 April 2021). Ethiopia is fighting 'difficult and tiresome' guerrilla war in Tigray, says PM. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/04/ethiopia-says-military-fighting-difficult-and-tiresome-guerrilla-war>

<sup>41</sup> Fana (23 July 2021) “Captured Child Soldiers Say Forced to Fight for Fear of Being Killed by TPLF,” <https://www.fanabc.com/english/captured-child-soldiers-say-forced-to-fight-for-fear-of-being-killed-by-tplf/>

called Samre, in cooperation with the local security apparatus and elements of the Tigray Special Forces.<sup>42</sup> International media maintained that “hundreds” of ethnic Amhara were massacred by the TPLF’s local structure. The joint investigation claimed that “more than 200 Amharas” were killed. An investigation by Gondar University put the figure as high as 1,644.<sup>43</sup> The Amhara Regional State media framed the massacre as a continuation of the long-standing victimisation of the Amharas perpetrated by the TPLF.<sup>44</sup>

TPLF media, on the other hand, reported that on 27 November 2020, more than 1,000 residents of Axum were massacred by the Eritrean Defense Forces.<sup>45</sup> After Amnesty International released a report on the Axum massacre, the international media widely reported the incident. Though the government initially denied the massacre, it later admitted that a total of 110 civilians were killed as a reprisal to an earlier attack against a contingent of Eritrean Troops.<sup>46</sup> International media did not extensively cover the TPLF’s recruitment and abuse of child soldiers.<sup>47</sup> During a latter phase of the conflict, as the TPLF denied the use of child soldiers, claiming that it had no shortage of fighters, an international photojournalist posted pictures of Tigray fighters, some of which were teenagers, who were referred to as “highly motivated young fighters”.<sup>48</sup>

## Disinformation and misinformation during the first phase

There were several plausible cases of disinformation and misinformation by all actors during this phase of the conflict.<sup>49</sup> First, the government’s denial of external actors’ involvement was a case of disinformation motivated by the desire to placate the international community’s

<sup>42</sup> Amhara Media Corporation (26 December 2020). በማይካድራ የዘር ጭፍጭፋ ወንጀል የተገደሉ ሰዎች ቁጥር 1100 በላይ ደርሷል። Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUAYas2eB4g&ab\\_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUAYas2eB4g&ab_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation)

<sup>43</sup> ESAT news 23 July 2021 Ethiopia - ESAT Amharic News Fri 23 Jul 2021 - YouTube

<sup>44</sup> Amhara Media Corporation (15 November 2020). በማይካድራ የትህነግ ገዳይ ቡድን የፈጸመው ጭፍጭፋ ላለፉት 30 ዓመታት በአካባቢዋ አማራዎች ላይ ሲፈጽሙ የቆዩው የዘር ማጥፋት ወንጀል አንዱ ማሳያ ነው። Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Kwx1t7PYwQ&ab\\_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Kwx1t7PYwQ&ab_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation)

<sup>45</sup> DW International News Broadcasted from Tigray Media House (TMH) on 27 March 20

<sup>46</sup> Walta (21 May 2021). *Attorney General Issues Summary on Efforts to Ensure Accountability, Legal Norms in Tigray*. Available: <https://walmartinfo.com/attorney-general-issues-summary-on-efforts-to-ensure-accountability-legal-norms-in-tigray/>

<sup>47</sup> Nunis, V. (19 August 2021). *Tigray crisis: Ethiopian teenagers become pawns in propaganda war*. Available: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58189395>; Amhara Media Corporation (24 November 2020). የትህነግ ቡድን ህጻናትን አደንዝዞ ወደ ጦርነት ለማስገባት ይጠቀሙበት የነበረ 32 ኩንታል ካናቢስ የተባለ አደንዛዥ ዕጽ በአማራ ልዩ ኃይል ሁመራ ላይ ተያዘ። Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EPbqA8lga0&ab\\_channel=](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EPbqA8lga0&ab_channel=)

<sup>48</sup> Screenshot featured in Peace, J. (19 July 2021) Ethiopia: The TPLF’s Sacrificial Lambs, <https://jeffpearce.medium.com/ethiopia-the-tplfs-sacrificial-lambs-e7b069747fdc>

<sup>49</sup> It remains beyond the scope of this paper to document all cases, but these are prominent examples that the study found.

concern over the regionalisation of the conflict. It emerged later that Eritrean Forces were involved in the war since the government’s declaration of an offensive against Tigray (see Figure 1). The government also denied that Eritrean Forces massacred Tigray civilians in Axum, which was a case of disinformation, as it is highly unlikely that the government was unaware of the execution of this massacre (and possibly of the planning thereof).

Second, the TPLF’s claim that the Northern Command agreed to work with the regional government of Tigray, its denial of atrocities committed by its forces against captured soldiers of the Northern Command and their wives was disinformation. Tigray Television did air soldiers claiming to have cooperated with the Tigray Regional State.<sup>50</sup> However, since they were held hostage and not a single military leader was reported to have cooperated, this can be considered a forced confession, and therefore disinformation.

**FIGURE 1: PRO-GOVERNMENT DISINFORMATION ON THE AXUM MASSACRE  
SCREENSHOTS FROM THE ETHIOPIAN HERALD & THE NEW YORK TIMES**

Ethiopia: Fake Axum Massacre Report Ends Amnesty's Credibility



*Sufian Abdul-Mouly/UNFPA*  
Recently arrived refugees from Tigray in Ethiopia bring supplies to help set up their shelter in Raquba camp, in Kassala, Sudan (file photo).

The Ethiopian Herald

2 MARCH 2021

The New York Times

### *Eritrean Troops Continue to Commit Atrocities in Tigray, U.N. Says*

Despite a promise to leave, Eritrea's troops remain in northern Ethiopia, aiding the Ethiopian government campaign there, a senior U.N. official told the Security Council.



A building is seen through a broken window in Shire, in the Tigray region of Ethiopia last month. Baz Ratner/Reuters

Third, the TPLF claimed that those who were killed in Mai Kadra of Western Tigray were Tigrayans.<sup>51</sup> Amnesty International, the EHRC, the joint investigation and some international

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6LuLnEbnwY>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7BaxEp2SDg>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfppa0MWLMA>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHeg5WLRBLg>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhgeSZBdZAk>

media reporting indicated that the victims were overwhelmingly Amhara, although it has to be noted that Tigrayans were killed as a retaliation for its attack against Amhara.

Fourth, those international media that reported that the war started when Abiy deployed the army to Tigray, without mentioning that this was in response to the attack on the Northern Command by the TPLF, disseminated either disinformation or misinformation. It is difficult to discern whether this essential context was left out of reporting by oversight or intentionally. But it is undisputed that the war started when the TPLF attacked the Northern Command, where most of the human and material capability of the country was located. It is hard to imagine that any government would not have reacted to such an attack.

Also noteworthy is the TPLF's claim of massive build-up of forces before it decided to attack the Northern Command. This claim can be supported or refuted, depending on the evidence that one uses. General Bacha Debele of the ENDF claimed that the army made some military preparations when the TPLF rejected the new leadership of the Northern Command,<sup>52</sup> but he was not clear whether that was for offensive or defensive purposes. Military leaders of the Republican Guard, an elite army unit, also confirmed this, stating that about 4 or 5 days before the outbreak of the war, they were ordered to be on standby.<sup>53</sup> This evidence can be used to support the claim by the TPLF.

However, the TPLF's claim can also be refuted because more than half of the ENDF troops were already in Tigray and Eritrean forces have always been stationed at the border area. Hence, the TPLF should not have justifiably referred to these forces in its claims about the massive deployment of forces in the area. The non-AMISOM members of Ethiopian forces based in Somalia were moved to Tigray only after the war started.<sup>54</sup> As one of the military generals narrated in December 2020, the entire Western Command, a force that later controlled Mekelle from Western Tigray, was dispersed on mission in Benishangul, Gambella,

<sup>52</sup> Walta TV (7 September 2021). ከሌተናል ጀነራል ባጭ ደበሌ ጋር በወቅታዊ ጉዳዮች ላይ የተደረገ ቆይታ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HovXycjVLg4&t=1056s&ab\\_channel=WaltaTV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HovXycjVLg4&t=1056s&ab_channel=WaltaTV)

<sup>53</sup> Ethiopian Television (25 December 2020). ከሰሜን እገ ከፍተኛ አመራሮች ጋር የተደረገ ቆይታ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FUS9xbVBB4&t=5s&ab\\_channel=EBC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FUS9xbVBB4&t=5s&ab_channel=EBC)

<sup>54</sup> Somalia Guardian (05 November 2020). *Ethiopia Begins Troop Withdrawal from Somalia*. Available at: [Ethiopia Begins Troop Withdrawal From Somalia \(somaliguardian.com\)](https://www.somaliguardian.com)

Oromia and the southern region.<sup>55</sup> Even members of the Republican Guard were stationed in different places, some in the South of the country.<sup>56</sup> If one takes out all these forces and considers that the ENDF does not have more than 140,000 personnel, the “massive presence” claim may be an exaggeration.

Fifth, the TPLF media reported the bombing of Mekelle university that resulted in the killing of students, an issue that turned out to be disinformation. Professor Haregweyen Assefa, who was trapped in Tigray in the first two months after the outbreak of the war, indicated that the University was not bombed but that she was pressured to report that the university was indeed targeted during attacks.<sup>57</sup>

## The second phase of the conflict

On 28 November 2020, the government announced that Mekelle was under the control of the ENDF and that an interim administration would take over the administration of the Tigray region.<sup>58</sup> In the next two months, a number of TPLF’s leaders were either captured or killed, while many others remained unidentified. During this time, the tasks of convincing the Tigray population to accept the interim administration, the delivery of humanitarian aid, the reconstruction of infrastructure and the restoration of services that had been disrupted were pursued. While the TPLF was initially weakened, it gradually reorganised, probably helped by two major developments. First, the role of Eritrean forces and the atrocities they committed appeared to have ignited Tigrayan support for the TPLF; second, the occupation of the contested territory between Amhara and Tigray by the Amhara administration and the displacement and retaliatory attacks committed in the process made it difficult for the interim administration to generate popular support or to act as a cohesive force.

<sup>55</sup> Amhara Television (17 December 2020). ከህደት እስከ ውርደት... በጀነራሎች አንደበት. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X978fIT-58C4&t=8s&ab\\_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X978fIT-58C4&t=8s&ab_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation)

<sup>56</sup> Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (25 December 2020). ከሰሜን እዝ ከፍተኛ አመራሮች ጋር የተደረገ ቆይታ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FUS9xbVBB4&t=5s&ab\\_channel=EBC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FUS9xbVBB4&t=5s&ab_channel=EBC)

<sup>57</sup> Nahoo TV (8 December 2021). 95% ትግርኛ ተናጋሪዎች እንና ልጄን ይጠሉናል | ፕሮፌሰር ሐረገወይን አሰፋ (የሔርሜላ አረጋዊ እናት) | NahooTV. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRHakvTltbw&t=2751s>

<sup>58</sup> See Abiy’s announcement on Twitter, <https://twitter.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1332730958999588864>

On 8 May 2021, acting under the Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism Crimes Proclamation (2020), the federal government declared the TPLF a terrorist organisation. This, however, was not helpful in arresting the reinvigorated Tigrayan forces, who announced a new offensive to recapture areas taken by the Ethiopian government at the end of June 2021. They had spectacular success. On 28 June 2021, the government declared a unilateral ceasefire and withdrew from Tigray, a move that was probably driven by a combination of military setbacks, international pressure, and growing concern for humanitarian issues.<sup>59</sup> The TPLF rejected the unilateral ceasefire and demanded that certain conditions be met, including the withdrawal of all forces from Tigray, access to an aid corridor, and accountability for human rights violations. Within days, the TPLF leadership entered its regional capital Mekelle, marking the end of the second phase of the conflict.

During this second period of the conflict, the humanitarian situation continued to deteriorate. After nearly months of mounting violence between government and Tigrayan forces, reports of significant internal and international displacement of people began to surface. The UN estimated that by June 2021, almost two million people had been displaced from their homes into parts of Ethiopia, with over 63,000 crossing over into eastern Sudan.<sup>60</sup>

### Prominent media reporting during the second phase of the conflict

Over the first half of 2021, the reporting by Ethiopian media focused on the leaders of the TPLF that were captured and killed, its guerrilla-style fighting activities, the interim administration and its measures, as well as humanitarian and human rights issues. The first two months (December 2020 and January 2021) after the government declared that its “law enforcement operation” was completed were dominated by reports of senior TPLF leaders being killed or captured.<sup>61</sup> Parallel to this, accusations of atrocities committed by both sides

<sup>59</sup> “News Update: Tigrayan Forces take over capital Mekelle; Fed. Gov accepts interim admin’s call for unilateral ceasefire” (28 June 2021) *Addis Standard*, <https://addisstandard.com/news-update-tigrayan-forces-take-over-capital-mekelle-fed-gov-accepts-interim-admins-call-for-unilateral-ceasefire/>

<sup>60</sup> Dahir, A. L. (29 June 2021). ‘I miss home’: The war spawned a wave of displacement. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/29/world/africa/i-miss-home-the-war-spawned-a-wave-of-displacement.html>

<sup>61</sup> Fana (9 January 2021). #ሰበር ዜና ስብሃት ነጋን ጨምሮ በቁጥጥር ስር የዋሉ ዘጠኝ የጁንታው አመራሮች አዲስ አበባ ገቡ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsC1n9qg5fw&ab\\_channel=FanaTelevision](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsC1n9qg5fw&ab_channel=FanaTelevision); Fana (8 January 2021). ጅርምጃ የተወሰደባቸው እና በቁጥጥር ስር የዋሉ የሀውላት ጁንታ አመራሮች. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GphP9NIbcuU&t=9s&ab\\_channel=WaltaTV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GphP9NIbcuU&t=9s&ab_channel=WaltaTV)

became pronounced in both local and international media outlets.<sup>62</sup> Local media reported that the government provided humanitarian aid through domestic resource mobilisation efforts. In February 2021, the government reportedly delivered humanitarian aid to over 2 million people out of the 2.5 million people that needed assistance at that time, but the number kept on increasing.<sup>63</sup> By June 2021, it was reported that over 5.2 million people had been reached and that 55% of the hospitals and 52% health centres of the region became operational.<sup>64</sup>

International media reported complaints from United Nations agencies that the government was hindering humanitarian access to Tigray. There were reports of ENDF and Eritrean troops blocking food aid convoys, forcing trucks belonging to humanitarian NGO's to be used for military purposes.<sup>65</sup> While this led to accusations of the use of starvation as a weapon of war,<sup>66</sup> it is important to note that the media blackout within which the fighting took place prevented accurate accounting of displacements and other atrocities committed during this phase. Occasionally, this resulted in factual errors, such as in Figure 2 below.

However, Tigrayan journalists interviewed for this study generally denied these reports: one journalist claimed that the Relief Society of Tigray was providing aid for the needy.<sup>67</sup> A pro-TPLF activist who later turned to anti-TPLF activism reported that the pro-TPLF Tigrayans “do not want aid to get to people because it will make Abiy Ahmed’s government to look good.”<sup>68</sup> However, a Tigrayan analyst who was interviewed for this study claimed that the government and its allies were responsible for 99 percent of the obstruction of humanitarian aid while the TPLF was responsible for only 1 percent. He claimed that the government obstructed

<sup>62</sup> Keaten, J. & Anna, C. (20 November 2020). *UN prepares for up to 200,000 Ethiopian refugees in Sudan*. Available: <https://apnews.com/article/sudan-ethiopia-united-nations-kenya-2dff3bd3b156cef1067e3c4286080ff>

<sup>63</sup> ESAT (9 February 2021). Ethiopia – Amharic News Tues 09-Feb-2021. Available: <https://rb.gy/87eury>

<sup>64</sup> Fana (9 June 2021). የሰብአዊ ቋንቋ በትግራይ ክልል #ፋና ዜና #ፋና 90. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHSxu3XEs3Y&ab\\_channel=FanaTelevision](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHSxu3XEs3Y&ab_channel=FanaTelevision)

<sup>65</sup> OCHA. (17 June 2021). *Ethiopia - Tigray Region Humanitarian Update: Situation Report*. Available: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation%20Report%20-%20Ethiopia%20-%20Tigray%20Region%20Humanitarian%20Update%20-%2017%20Jun%202021.pdf>

<sup>66</sup> Mackintosh, E. & Roth, R (13 May 2021). *UN confirms military forces blocking aid in Ethiopia's Tigray region following CNN investigation*. Available: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/05/13/africa/ethiopia-tigray-un-confirms-military-aid-blockade-intl/index.html>.

<sup>67</sup> Interview conducted on 19 October 2021, online.

<sup>68</sup> Ethiopian News Agency (24 September 2021). *TPLF Blocked Aid to Not “Make Abiy Look Good”: Tigrayan Reporter*. Available at [TPLF Blocked Aid to Not “Make Abiy Look Good”: Tigrayan Reporter \(msn.com\)](https://www.msn.com).

humanitarian aid because it used starvation as a weapon of war, although the joint UN-EHRC investigation found no evidence of this accusation.<sup>69</sup>

**FIGURE 2: PHOTO OF DISPLACED PEOPLE FROM BENISHANGUL GUMUZ, USED BY THE NEW YORK TIMES, TO FRAME THE STORY OF DISPLACEMENT IN TIGRAY**

**‘I miss home’: The war spawned a wave of displacement.**



Displaced people at a camp in Chagni, Ethiopia, in January. Eduardo Soterias/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images



By Abdi Latif Dahir

June 29, 2021

TPLF-affiliated media also reported massive atrocities perpetrated by the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), the ENDF, and their allied forces. These included massacres, indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian objects, unlawful killings, widespread looting, rape and sexual violence, destruction of crops, looting and destruction of cultural and religious heritages, and obstruction of humanitarian aid.<sup>70</sup> Ethnic cleansing of Tigrayans in Western Tigray and ethnic profiling of Tigrayans across the country also took centre stage in TPLF media reporting. The reports alleged the use of famine and rape as weapons of war and the commission of genocidal acts by the “invading” forces.<sup>71</sup>

Though not with the same tone that was used by these TPLF media, one private Ethiopian media reviewed for the purpose of the study commented on the human rights abuses and the inefficiencies of Tigray’s interim administration. This media invited individuals from the

<sup>69</sup> Interview conducted on 21 December 2021, Nairobi, Kenya.

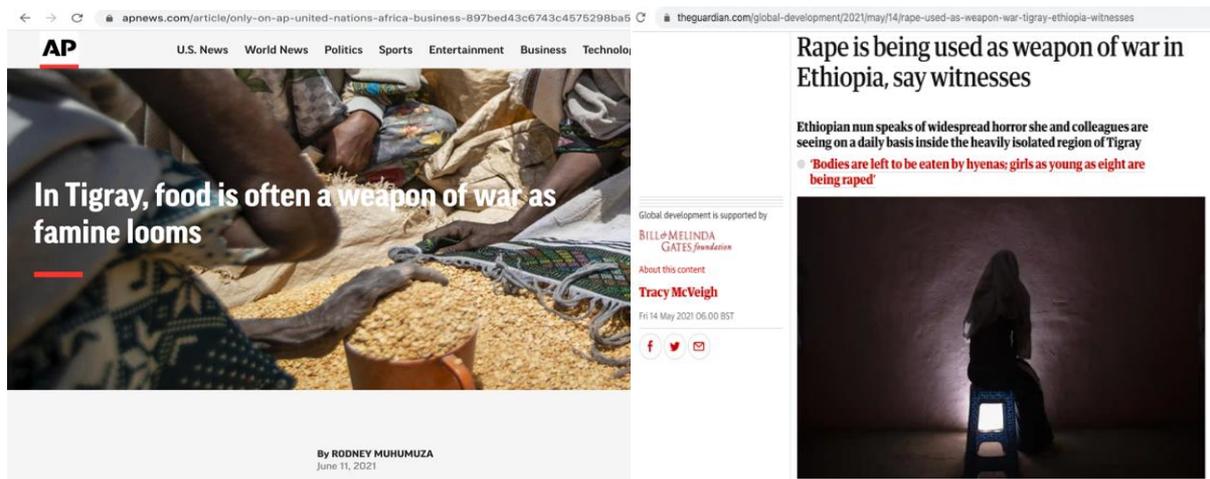
<sup>70</sup> DW International News Broadcasted from Tigray Media House (TMH) on 11 March 2021

<sup>71</sup> DW International News Broadcasted from Tigray Media House (TMH) on 27 March 2021

interim administration and the Tigray-based opposition parties who reported various atrocities such as the looting and destruction of factories, household properties, burning of houses, and widespread killings and rape.<sup>72</sup> These atrocities were primarily attributed to Eritrean forces. Tigray-based politicians, along with the TPLF, condemned the involvement of Eritrean forces and the crimes committed by the Amhara Special Force (ASF), calling for their withdrawal from the contested territories.<sup>73</sup> (The US government initially supported this demand by Tigrayan politicians, viewing it as a precondition for peace, but later turned to the need for unconditional ceasefire).

International coverage during this period was dominated by stories of mass killings, rape, sexual violence, and looting. Humanitarian organizations, not the Ethiopian government, became the primary source of information for international media. Most of these reports focused on the human costs of the war and the humanitarian crisis. Local Ethiopian media began to talk about these issues, to a lesser extent, only from around February 2021.<sup>74</sup>

**FIGURE 3: ALLEGATIONS OF RAPE AND STARVATION AS WEAPONS OF WAR**



International media reported alleged atrocities committed by the Ethiopian government and its allies. Themes such as “torture and extrajudicial killings”, “genocide”, “rape as a weapon of war”, and “hunger as a political weapon”, became prominent in reporting by the BBC,

<sup>72</sup> Abbay Media (19 March 2021). ጉዳያችን - "የትግራይ ሁኔታ አሳዛኝና አሰቃቂ ነው" ምዕራባዊያኑ የሚጮሁት ትግራይን ለምጥቀም. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGCDRThOJ14&ab\\_channel=AbbayMedia](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGCDRThOJ14&ab_channel=AbbayMedia)

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Telephone interview with international analyst, on 14 December 2021

Associated Press, the Guardian, Reuters, CNN, and others. Hence, the TPLF media and the international media had a convergent narrative.<sup>75</sup> Reports of Eritrean troops committing atrocities in the region – looting, massacres, and sexual assaults – despite assurances by Abiy that they would be withdrawn were also prevalent.<sup>76</sup>

The government either rejected these allegations outright or claimed that they were exaggerated. At this stage, local Ethiopian media, quoting Ethiopian government officials, reported that the problem was not the lack of unfettered access, but international actors' reluctance to commit resources. The local media reported that the government was providing up to 70 percent of the humanitarian aid and more than 100 billion birr (approximately 2.08 billion US dollars) for the rebuilding of Tigray.<sup>77</sup> This notwithstanding, state media reported that the TPLF was obstructing the government's efforts by setting up roadblocks and killing staff of the interim administration, as well as staff of Ethio-Telecom and the Ethiopian Electric Corporation, who were sent to repair telecom and power infrastructures.<sup>78</sup>

The international media largely ignored the federal government's efforts to alleviate the humanitarian crisis and the alleged obstructions of the TPLF, while local media did not provide sufficient reporting on the atrocities committed in Tigray during this phase. When asked why this was the case, journalists interviewed for this study raised several challenges, including government pressure, the lack of security guarantees, the TPLF's consideration of government media as enemies, lack of financial resources for private media, and the designation of the TPLF as a terrorist organisation.

Without doubt, human rights abuses and humanitarian problems were prevalent during this period. However, it is hard to conclusively establish their scope and nature, owing mainly to

<sup>75</sup> McVeigh, T. (14 May 2021). *Rape is being used as weapon of war in Ethiopia, say witnesses*. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/may/14/rape-used-as-weapon-war-tigray-ethiopia-witnesses>; Muhumuza, R. (11 June 2021). *In Tigray, food is often a weapon of war as famine looms*. Available: <https://apnews.com/article/only-on-ap-united-nations-africa-business-897bed43c6743c4575298ba5cf7bdd1c>

<sup>76</sup> Walsh, D. (15 April 2021). *Eritrean Troops Continue to Commit Atrocities in Tigray*. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/15/world/africa/ethiopia-eritrea-tigray.html>

<sup>77</sup> Tadesse, H. (9 March 2021). *Canada Vows to Support Ethiopia's Humanitarian Assistance in Tigray*. Available: <https://walmartinfo.com/canada-vows-to-support-ethiopia-humanitarian-assistance-in-tigray/>; Amhara Media Corporation (30 June 2021). ሌተናል ጄኔራል ባጭ ደበሌ እና አምባሳደር ሬድዋን ሁሴን የሰቡት ምግላጭ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W42PQPVT9vg&ab\\_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W42PQPVT9vg&ab_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation)

<sup>78</sup> Mengistu, T. (26 May 2021). *TPLF Kills 22, Kidnaps 20 Civilian Leaders of Tigray Interim Administration – Fact Check*. Available: <https://walmartinfo.com/tplf-kills-22-kidnaps-20-civilian-leaders-of-tigray-interim-administration-fact-check/>

the communications blackout and lack of access. According to the joint UN and EHRC investigation, well before the conflict was expanded to Amhara and Afar, all parties to the conflict committed human right abuses, including obstructing humanitarian access. However, the joint investigation did not find evidence of genocide, the use of rape as a weapon of war, and the use of hunger as a political weapon.

As discussed earlier, the authenticity of the findings of the joint investigation has been questioned, partially or completely, because of two main reasons. First, its composition was seen as biased because of the involvement of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, a body that could not be expected to be critical of the federal government. The government's reluctance to allow independent investigations is seen by its critics as testament that it committed atrocities and that it is unwilling to be exposed. Second, to its own acknowledgement, the scope of the joint investigation was limited. An analyst who was interviewed for this study claimed that it investigated only 6 of the 20 massacres that were committed.<sup>79</sup> Whether the investigation failed to find evidence due to these flaws or because these crimes were not committed remains controversial. When the report was released, international media widely reported that all sides committed atrocities, but offered little or no explanation of why their previous allegations were found to have no evidence. Domestic media made the lack of evidence for claims of genocide their headlines.

Overall, this phase of the conflict was mainly characterised by media bias rather than disinformation: some issues were amplified, while others were simply overlooked. Though private media sought to compensate pro-government media bias by interviewing the opposition parties of Tigray, this was not as frequent as it should have been. The international media could be considered biased because it did not report government efforts to stabilise Tigray, including restoration of services and provision of humanitarian aid. Apart from this, claims of starvation and genocide were often uncritically reported, and all the blame was placed on the federal government.

<sup>79</sup> Anonymous interviewee. Interview done at Nairobi on 21 December 2021  
European Institute of Peace | Political and Media Analysis on the Tigray Conflict in Ethiopia

### Third phase of the conflict

When the federal government refused to meet the ceasefire conditions proposed by the TPLF, in July 2021, the TPLF expanded its war effort into Western Tigray, Amhara and Afar region. Its initial advance to Afar and Western Tigray was successfully repelled by the ENDF and allied forces. The TPLF then continued to advance to North Wollo and to North and South Gondar of Amhara region. By September 2021, however, its advance to Gondar from two directions was repelled, but their push into South Wollo and eventually part of Afar and North Shoa was successful.

Towards the end of October 2021, the Tigrayan fighters, aided by the outlawed OLF-Shene, took the strategic towns of Dessie and Kombolcha, about 350 km northeast of Addis Ababa. They continued to advance to Addis, eventually reaching as close as Debre Sina, some 190 km from the capital. At this point, the capture of Addis looked probable, and the federal government responded by declaring a six-month state of emergency on 2 November 2021. The expansion of the conflict was once again accompanied by massive displacement of civilians, loss of lives and livelihoods, destruction of civilian property, sexual violence, gross violations of human rights, communications blackout, and the disruption of humanitarian aid.

### Prominent media reporting during the third phase of the conflict

This phase was characterised by increasing attention from local and international media. Initially, domestic Ethiopian media defended the “unilateral ceasefire” declared by the federal government. Some media commentators hoped that the decision would serve as an entry point for a negotiated solution to the conflict.<sup>80</sup> The international media, on the other hand, reported international actors’ calls to transform the unilateral ceasefire into a negotiated one without which, they claimed, Tigray would remain in a *de facto* blockade. They were sceptical of the government’s intentions. Local media, in turn, took the international scepticism as indicative of a bias towards the TPLF.

<sup>80</sup> Fana (2 July 2021). የተናጠል ተኩስ አቁም ውሳኔው ተግባራዊ ሲደገፍ #ፋና ዜና #ፋና 90. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NDuqsEl6Lc&ab\\_channel=FanaTelevision](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NDuqsEl6Lc&ab_channel=FanaTelevision); Amhara Media Corporation AmharaMediaCorporation (7 July 2021). "የተናጠል ተኩስ አቁም ውሳኔው በበሰል እይታ የታየ ውሳኔ ነው።" ጥ/ር ብሩክ ሃይሉ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqwfCfwgwkU&ab\\_channel=](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqwfCfwgwkU&ab_channel=)

As the government's "unilateral ceasefire" was rejected by the TPLF and the conflict expanded, local media reported battlefield incidents, largely focusing on field losses by the Tigray forces, whereas TPLF affiliated media reported battlefield gains. Most of this was either exaggerated or outrightly false.<sup>81</sup> The retreat by ENDF and Amhara Special Forces further southward was framed by Ethiopian media as a military tactic aimed at drawing the TPLF deep into hostile territory and away from its support base. However, as the TPLF encroached deep into the Amhara region, it was reported that this was because of its deployment of "human wave" tactics and, therefore, the need to counter it with a human wave.<sup>82</sup>

International media, broadly in line with the TPLF media, continued to consider the government's retreat as an indication of its military weakness and a sign of worsening crisis. When the federal government declared a six-month state of emergency in response to this advance by the TPLF, international media reported that this would provide the government sweeping powers to arrest and detain critics, restrict the news media, and maintain a monopoly over the narrative of the conflict.<sup>83</sup> Hence, the arrest of many – mostly Tigrayans – that followed this was a cause for concern for the international community and media affiliated with the TPLF. According to some local media commentators, however, the measures were needed to make sure that everyone contributed to the struggle and to clean out TPLF fighters disguised as civilians.<sup>84</sup>

As the war continued, allegations of atrocities, looting and destruction by the TPLF in Amhara and Afar were given wide coverage by the domestic media. They reported several such abuses, often interviewing victims and those who fled from scenes of violence. In Chenna Teklehaymanot of North Gondar, it was reported that close to 200 civilians were killed by TPLF fighters who were retreating from battlefield.<sup>85</sup> In the Kobo area of North Wollo, TPLF

<sup>81</sup> Amhara Media Corporation (27 July 2021). "የሰላም ጊዜ አርሶ አደር የጦርነት ጊዜ ወታደር" በመሆኑ የሚታወቀው የአማራ ሚሊሻ ከፍተኛ ተጋድሎ... Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rexI3V4Bpeo&ab\\_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rexI3V4Bpeo&ab_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation); Walta (15 September 2021). በራያ ቆቦ የወጣቶችና ሚሊሻዎች ተጋድሎ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXpPsOldBpU&t=8s&ab\\_channel=WaltaTV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXpPsOldBpU&t=8s&ab_channel=WaltaTV)

<sup>82</sup> Fana (2 October 2021). ለአሸባሪው የሕዝብ ማእበል ጦርነት የሚሰጥ ሕዝባዊ መልስ. Available: <https://rb.gy/macn3m>

<sup>83</sup> RFI (3 November 2021). Ethiopia Declares state of emergency as Tigray forces threaten capital. Available: <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20211103-ethiopia-declares-state-of-emergency-as-tigray-forces-threaten-capital>

<sup>84</sup> Amhara Media Corporation (2 November 2021). የአስቸኳይ ጊዜ አዋጁ አንድምታ በዶክተር ዳኛቸው አሰፋ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xbUqB-LLeY&ab\\_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xbUqB-LLeY&ab_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation). Fana (4 November 2021). የአስቸኳይ ጊዜ አዋጁ አንድምታ በዶክተር ዳኛቸው አሰፋ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xbUqB-LLeY&ab\\_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xbUqB-LLeY&ab_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation)

<sup>85</sup> Balageru Tv (8 September 2021). የጭና ጭፍጭፋ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TO5dGII\\_d5Q&ab\\_channel=BalageruTV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TO5dGII_d5Q&ab_channel=BalageruTV)

forces allegedly killed more than 500 civilians.<sup>86</sup> In Gale Koma of Afar, TPLF fighters reportedly shelled a camp occupied by displaced people where 237 civilians were killed and their food store burned.<sup>87</sup> In Kombolcha of South Wollo, it was claimed that more than 100 youths of the town were summarily executed; and in Wurgesa town of South Wollo, 13 people were reportedly set on fire by the TPLF.<sup>88</sup>

Widespread (gang) rapes by TPLF fighters were also extensively covered by the local media.<sup>89</sup> This issue was also picked up by Amnesty International and other human rights and advocacy organisations.<sup>90</sup> In addition, the local media focused on how the TPLF looted government institutions, including schools and health centres and banks as well as the properties of private citizens, and destroyed properties it could not possess. Though it is not clear what methodology was used, the Amhara Planning Commission reportedly stated that the agricultural loss of the region due to TPLF occupation amounts to 260 billion Ethiopian Birr (5.3 billion US dollars).<sup>91</sup>

Some of the massacres, such as in Chenna and Kobo, as well as the (gang) rapes, were confirmed by human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, but the number of victims was well below what was reported in local media – a pattern common to investigative reports, be it in Tigray or Amhara. Likewise, the looting and destruction of educational institutions, health centres, banks and factories were also confirmed, as observed from later liberated areas.

<sup>86</sup> Fana (23 September 2021). ህወሓት በቆቦ የፈጸመው ጭፍጨፋ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7TH5Ocl7FA&ab\\_channel=FanaTelevision](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7TH5Ocl7FA&ab_channel=FanaTelevision)

<sup>87</sup> EBC (26 August 2021). በአፋር ጋሊኮማ በአሸባሪው ህወሓት ዘር ተኮር ጭፍጨፋ የተፈፀመባቸው ሚሾች ቁጥር ከ240 ሊያሻቅብ እንደሚችል ተገለፀ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PynOu24sWpY&ab\\_channel=EBC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PynOu24sWpY&ab_channel=EBC)

<sup>88</sup> Abbay Media (1 November 2021). የኮምቦልቻ ጭፍጨፋና የመከላከያ ተጋድሎ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2NBEE8x5F8&t=4s&ab\\_channel=AbbayMedia](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2NBEE8x5F8&t=4s&ab_channel=AbbayMedia); EBC (20 October 2021). የአሸባሪው ህወሓት በውርኔሳ ከተማ በጋዝ አርከፍክፎ ያቃጠላቸው 13 ንፁሀን |. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7aEjAwNrs&ab\\_channel=EBC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7aEjAwNrs&ab_channel=EBC)

<sup>89</sup> Amhara Media Corporation (25 September 2021). የትህነግ ግፍ ሴቶችን አስገድዶ መድፈር. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6XnZ\\_0-Pto&ab\\_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6XnZ_0-Pto&ab_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation)

<sup>90</sup> Amnesty International (9 November 2021). *Ethiopia: Survivors of TPLF attack in Amhara describe gang rape, looting and physical assaults*. Available: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/11/ethiopia-survivors-of-tplf-attack-in-amhara-describe-gang-rape-looting-and-physical-assaults/>; Amhara Association of America (2021). Special Report: Sexual and Gender Based Violence in North and South Gonder Zones of Amhara Region by Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) militias. Available: <https://rb.gv/ppumff>

<sup>91</sup> Walta (27 December 2021). የ266 ቢሊዮን ብር ውድመት በግብርናው ዘርፍ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMlrkkLILNI&ab\\_channel=WaltaTV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMlrkkLILNI&ab_channel=WaltaTV)

With very few exceptions, international media remained silent on the allegations of atrocities committed in Amhara and Afar. It rather focused on allegations of atrocities against Tigrayans in Western Tigray and the federal government's air strikes in Mekelle and its surroundings.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, international media reported that the new TPLF offensive that started in July had prompted government and allied forces to launch a new phase of mass incarcerations of Tigrayan residents of Western Tigray, a territory contested between Amhara region and Tigray region which has been under the control of the Amhara region since 2020. Various CNN investigations, for example, claimed that the ethnic profiling, mass detention, and killing of Tigrayans "bore the hallmarks of genocide" as defined by international law, drawing statements of concern from US and UK officials.<sup>93</sup>

When the federal government stepped up its use of air power by launching a campaign of airstrikes in October 2021, killing at least 10 people and injuring 20, international media widely reported this as signalling a further escalation of the conflict into a new, dangerous phase. Media affiliated with the TPLF also reported these incidents. It was hard to verify these allegations because the area had for long been inaccessible for international journalists. Some took this restriction as a sign of potential abuses by federal government forces, while it could simply be due to lethargy towards international actors, framed as biased to the TPLF.

The war strategy of the TPLF and popular sentiments and mobilisations against it was also another widely reported issue by the local Ethiopian media. According to their stories, the TPLF mobilised the entire Tigrayan population, including children, the elderly, and women (including pregnant ones) to take part in the invasion of neighbouring regions.<sup>94</sup> Local media dubbed this a "human wave" approach in which a large force of poorly trained youths were deployed to the battlefield to win due to their sheer number and readiness to die.<sup>95</sup> The use

<sup>92</sup> AFP (28 October 2021). *Ethiopia air strike on Tigray kills 6: hospital, rebel sources*. Available <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211028-ethiopia-air-strike-on-tigray-kills-6-hospital-rebel-source>

<sup>93</sup> Mackintosh, E. (5 November 2021). *Ethiopia is at war with itself. Here's what you need to know about the conflict*. Available: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/03/africa/ethiopia-tigray-explainer-2-intl/index.html>; Elbagir, N., Polglase, K., Arvanitidis, B., Mezzofiore, G., & Smith-Spark, L. (10 September 2021). *Men are marched out of prison camps. The Corpses float down the river*. Available: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/05/africa/ethiopia-tigray-humera-sudan-bodies-cmd-intl/index.html>; Feleke, B., Polglase, K. & Messofoire, G. (21 October 2021). *Fresh Airstrikes hit capital of Ethiopia's war-torn Tigray Region*. Available: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/20/africa/airstrikes-hit-mekelle-tigray-ethiopia-intl/index.html>

<sup>94</sup> Walta (2 August 2021). ትውልድን እያጠፋ ያለው አሸባሪው ሕወሓት. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HWaaJ8sig&t=8s&ab\\_channel=WaltaTV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HWaaJ8sig&t=8s&ab_channel=WaltaTV)

<sup>95</sup> Amhara Media Corporation (9 August 2021). ከሞከላከያ ሚኒስቴር የሕዝብ ግንኙነት ዳሬክተር ኮሎኔል ጌትነት አዳነ ጋር በወቅታዊ ጉዳይ ላይ የተደረገ ቆይታ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RE-63BU\\_4Q&t=11s&ab\\_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RE-63BU_4Q&t=11s&ab_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation)

of child soldiers, drug abuse and the use of civilians as a human shield by the TPLF were also much-discussed by the local media.<sup>96</sup> The international media, which was already steeped in the narratives of the “battle-hardened” Tigrayans defeating two of “Africa's largest Arm[ies]” were largely silent on these features of the conflict.<sup>97</sup>

During this period both the local and international media, to varying degree, reported the government's call for popular mobilisation and its procurement of military weapons, including drones from Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran, and China.<sup>98</sup> International media framed this mobilisation as another escalation of the conflict whereas local media approached it as a legitimate move to curtail advancing TPLF fighters.

An issue that was peculiarly dominant during this phase of the conflict was the increased perception that the international community and the international media were biased towards the TPLF. Local media amplified this by raising several complaints – some justified, and others less so. The TPLF expansion was also accompanied by international reporting that it was on course to overrun Addis. When the TPLF controlled Shewa Robit, hundreds of kilometres from Addis Ababa, CNN reported that the TPLF was just at the outskirts of the capital, drawing the ire of many Ethiopians.<sup>99</sup>

How international media and actors framed the TPLF's expansion of the conflict, and how they ignored the atrocities in Amhara and Afar was another common complaint.<sup>100</sup> The expansion of the conflict by the TPLF was framed by international media as justified or comprehensible because “Tigray was under *de facto* blockade.” Moreover, local media rightly noted that the alleged atrocities in Amhara and Afar were not given adequate international

<sup>96</sup>EBC (16 July 2021). አሸባሪው የህወሃት ቡድን ህጻናትን በአደንዛዥ ዕፅ በማስከር በቦርነት የመማገድ ወንጀል ዓለም አቀፍ ማህበረሰብ እንዲያውግዘው . Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oe5bwPMldml&ab\\_channel=EBC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oe5bwPMldml&ab_channel=EBC); Fana (15 July 2021). ህጻናትን በቦርነት ማሰተፍ- የቦር ወንጀላችንን #ፋና ዜና #ፋና 90 #ፋና. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0gfyv6TLACk&ab\\_channel=FanaTelevision](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0gfyv6TLACk&ab_channel=FanaTelevision)

<sup>97</sup> The Economist (1 July 2021) “Tigrayan forces have routed the Ethiopian army,” <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/07/01/tigrayan-forces-have-routed-the-ethiopian-army>

<sup>98</sup> Fana TV (2 November 2021). ለአሸባሪው የሕዝብ ማእበል ቦርነት የሚሰጥ ሕዝባዊ መልስ. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgkSRJisfdY>

Fana TV (20 August 2021). የኢትዮጵያና ቱርክ ግንኙነት. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-HMLjds4INw>

<sup>99</sup> Mackintosh, E. (3 November 2021). *Ethiopia: Rebels threaten Addis Ababa as US slams Tigray Atrocities*. Available: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/03/africa/ethiopia-tigray-un-ehrc-investigation-intl/index.html>

<sup>100</sup> Fana (5 November 2021). ዓለም ዓቀፍ መገናኛ ብዙሃን በኢትዮጵያ ላይ የከፈቱት የፕሮፓጋንዳ ቦርነት Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbsyxF-ZJY&t=3s&ab\\_channel=FanaTelevision](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbsyxF-ZJY&t=3s&ab_channel=FanaTelevision); Mengistu, T. (6 August 2021). Some Media Outlets Continue to Manipulate Int'l Community on Passage of Humanitarian Aid – PMO. Available: <https://walmartinfo.com/some-media-outlets-continue-to-manipulate-intl-community-on-passage-of-humanitarian-aid-pmo/>

media coverage while smaller-scale violations occurring in Tigray were amplified. By the time the international media was widely reporting the civilians killed by the ENDF's air strikes in Tigray, the TPLF was allegedly indiscriminately shelling residents in Wuchale, Chifra and Hayak.<sup>101</sup>

The most serious complaints were directed at aid agencies and the UN system, which were accused of being biased towards the TPLF. Local media also accused the UN of providing logistical support to the TPLF. To support this accusation, it used some residents of areas that were freed from TPLF control as witnesses. Locals in Dessie and Kombolcha, for instance, were reported to have witnessed the World Food Programme (WFP) and World Vision providing logistical support to the TPLF.<sup>102</sup>

Domestic media also alleged that the UN prioritised the humanitarian situation in Tigray, provided logistical support to the TPLF, concealed their own misdeeds, and that they criticised the federal government for the humanitarian problems but ignored its efforts to address them.<sup>103</sup> The UN seemed to imply that this was because of the severity of the crisis in Tigray where, it claimed, an estimated 400,000 people reportedly faced famine-like conditions under a *de facto* aid blockade. The UN also claimed that only a trickle of food trucks and no medical supplies or fuel had entered the region since late June 2021.

Furthermore, local media claimed that the UN agencies ignored the TPLF's role in aggravating the crisis. The TPLF, they claimed, had expanded the conflict into Afar and Amhara, denied aid to those who refused to contribute at least one member of their household to its pool of fighters, and repurposed UN trucks for military logistics. According to the federal government, more than a thousand humanitarian trucks that entered Tigray since the declaration of the unilateral ceasefire did not return, which it claimed were being used to transport TPLF fighters

<sup>101</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs (18 October 2021). Press Statement: The TPLF is once again crying wolf to cover up its fresh attacks on civilians <https://www.facebook.com/623401301020450/posts/5216152758411925/>

<sup>102</sup> Leyou (8 December 2021). *An Eyewitness from #Dessie said "UN was feeding and supporting #TPLF fighters"*. Available: [https://twitter.com/Be\\_LeYou/status/1468541496680980485](https://twitter.com/Be_LeYou/status/1468541496680980485)

<sup>103</sup> Aynishet, S. (2 October 2021). Ethiopia calls upon UN to continue to uphold principles of Impartiality, Neutrality. Available: <https://waltainfo.com/ethiopia-calls-upon-un-to-continue-to-uphold-principles-of-impartiality-neutrality/>

and loot properties.<sup>104</sup> According to the UN, this was because drivers raised safety and fuel shortage concerns.<sup>105</sup>

Local media also alleged that the TPLF's looting of aid agencies' warehouses, confirmed by the local USAID chief, did not invite condemnation – as did the UNHCR's failure to make sure that its refugee centres in Sudan would not be used to recruit fighters.<sup>106</sup> Some fighters with UNHCR IDs were captured or killed fighting against the government in Northwest Ethiopia and the UNHCR later indicated that there was unexplained modest reduction in the number of Tigrayan refugees camped in Sudan.<sup>107</sup> Leaked information from the UN personnel in Addis in which staff criticised the conduct of UN officials from the Headquarters was also taken as evidence of its partiality.<sup>108</sup>

## The fourth phase of the conflict

The conflict entered its fourth phase following Abiy's decision to lead the army from the battlefield in late November 2021. The TPLF was forced to retreat to Tigray. Prior to this decision, it seemed to have faced a crushing defeat in the Afar, while its defeat in the Gashena front appeared imminent. Drone strikes crippled its logistical system and the supply line of its forces, which had advanced as deep as Debre Sina, 190 km from Addis Ababa. The TPLF announced that it was making a "territorial re-adjustment" to "give peace a chance."<sup>109</sup> Debretsion Gebremichael, the TPLF leader, wrote a letter to the UN to pressure the Ethiopian government so that its forces would not enter Tigray for the second time.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Abera, B. (9 December 2021). *Terrorist TPLF wrestles in combat, 1010 Trucks carrying Humanitarian Assistance*. Available: <https://wainfo.com/terrorist-tplf-wrestles-in-combat-1010-trucks-carrying-humanitarian-assistance/>

<sup>105</sup> VOA (29 September 2021). *UN Aid Chief to Ethiopia on Famine in Tigray: 'Get Those Trucks Moving'*. Available: <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-aid-chief-to-ethiopia-on-famine-in-tigray-get-those-trucks-moving-/6249984.html>

<sup>106</sup> EBC (31 August 2021). *USAID mission director to Ethiopia Sean Johnes has said that TPLF looted warehouses*. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kOxCyqcKK8&ab\\_channel=EBC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kOxCyqcKK8&ab_channel=EBC)

<sup>107</sup> ENA (9 September 2021). *UNHCR admits "modest" decrease in number of Ethiopian refugees*. Available: <https://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/press/2021/9/613736584/unhcr-statement-on-ethiopian-refugees-registered-in-sudan-allegedly-involved.html>

<sup>108</sup> Tare AW (6 October 2021). *Leaked audio exposes conspiracy by un workers in Ethiopia*. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJKvslfV3lU&ab\\_channel=TareAW](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJKvslfV3lU&ab_channel=TareAW)

<sup>109</sup> Al Jazeera (20 December 2021). *Tigray Forces Announce Retreat to Ethiopia's Tigray Region*. Available: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/20/tplf-rebels-announce-retreat-to-ethiopia-tigray-region>

<sup>110</sup> Abbay Media (24 December 2021). *ለምባዲና -ጁና ሰይድ፣ ትግራይና የመከላከያ*. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ichiZC4hyys&ab\\_channel=AbbayMedia](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ichiZC4hyys&ab_channel=AbbayMedia)

The federal government initially indicated that its next step would be decided only after the Afar and Amhara regions were liberated. When this was achieved, it decided not to proceed into Tigray.<sup>111</sup> The government claimed that this decision was inspired by two considerations.<sup>112</sup> First, lessons were learned from the previous operation, when the people of Tigray were mobilised against the ENDF. Second, the international community was looking for the pretext to accuse the regime of genocide; hence the need to deny it such a pretext. In early December 2021, the federal government announced the launching of a commission for national dialogue and shifted its narratives to the reconstruction of Amhara and Afar regions.<sup>113</sup> With the launching of national dialogue and the release of some of the TPLF leaders on January 7, 2022, a window of opportunity for peace opened up.

Local media reported this major development. TPLF's argument that its withdrawal was intended to "give peace a chance" was completely discredited in local media coverage, while the government's decision not to enter into Tigray was robustly debated, even by government media.<sup>114</sup> Some commentators supported the decision, but others argued that if the government believes that TPLF was indeed a terrorist organisation and that Tigrayans are its citizens, it has to enter Tigray, remove the TPLF and establish the services that were disrupted.<sup>115</sup> Others worried that the decision not to enter Tigray might give the TPLF the chance to reorganise.<sup>116</sup>

The issue of resolving the conflict through negotiation was also equally contested. The ruling Prosperity Party circulated a text to its members underscoring the need for a negotiated settlement, but many argued that this was too late. Calling for negotiation after all these destructions and abuses was viewed as inappropriate, and the government was blamed for

<sup>111</sup> Abbay Media (26 December 2021). መከላከያ ወደ ትግራይ... - ነጻ የወጡ አካባቢዎች... - Dec 26, 2021 - ሰሞንኛ - ዓባይ ሚዲያ ዜና  
Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvI5mQ-ur3Q&ab\\_channel=AbbayMedia](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvI5mQ-ur3Q&ab_channel=AbbayMedia)

<sup>112</sup> Abbay Media (24 December 2021). ለምባዲና -ጄኖሳይድ፣ ትግራይና የመከላከያ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ichiZC4hyys&ab\\_channel=AbbayMedia](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ichiZC4hyys&ab_channel=AbbayMedia)

<sup>113</sup> Abbay Media, (21 December 2021). ሰራዊቱ ወደ ትግራይ? ያልተጠበቀ ውሳኔ! Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yb-QGX17I6E&ab\\_channel=AbbayMedia](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yb-QGX17I6E&ab_channel=AbbayMedia); Amhara Media Corporation (5 January 2022). ከአማራ ክልል መንግስት በመልሶ ግንባታና የዳያስፖራ ሚና ላይ የተሰጠ መግለጫ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svPOwLDnp10&ab\\_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svPOwLDnp10&ab_channel=AmharaMediaCorporation)

<sup>114</sup> Walta (27 December 2021). ወደ ትግራይ ያለመግባት ውሳኔ ትርፍና ስጋት - (ዋልታ ሰሞንኛ ክፍል 1). Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsANkXTbHiM&ab\\_channel=WaltaTV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsANkXTbHiM&ab_channel=WaltaTV)

<sup>115</sup> Abbay Media (24 December 2021). ለምባዲና -ጄኖሳይድ፣ ትግራይና የመከላከያ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ichiZC4hyys&ab\\_channel=AbbayMedia](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ichiZC4hyys&ab_channel=AbbayMedia)

<sup>116</sup> Walta (27 December 2021). ወደ ትግራይ ያለመግባት ውሳኔ ትርፍና ስጋት - (ዋልታ ሰሞንኛ ክፍል 1). Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsANkXTbHiM&ab\\_channel=WaltaTV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsANkXTbHiM&ab_channel=WaltaTV)

disregarding the people's suffering.<sup>117</sup> Probably reading this popular sentiment, the government was quick to clarify that the national dialogue would not include armed movements, although the release of some of the TPLF leaders seemed to indicate a move towards their inclusion in the national dialogue process. The exact set-up of the national dialogue is still under discussion.

International reporting, on the other hand, underscored the ineffectiveness of diplomatic efforts to avert further atrocities. The African Union's push for de-escalation and ceasefire, led by former Nigerian president and AU envoy in the Horn of Africa, Olusegun Obasanjo,<sup>118</sup> Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta,<sup>119</sup> and the US Government<sup>120</sup> was reported to have registered very little, if any, progress. Probably acknowledging this failure and the US role, Foreign Policy magazine published a report that called for the US to correct its course in a piece that was broadly sympathetic to the Ethiopian government and critical of the US decision to expel Ethiopia from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA).<sup>121</sup> This may signal a turning of the tide in international analysis and coverage of the conflict.

The abuses and destructions in Amhara and Afar committed by the TPLF continued to be reported during this period, often interviewing victims and witnesses and showing scenes of destruction. A few international media houses covered these abuses, with some of them, such as Reuters, providing what many Ethiopians considered balanced reporting for the first time.<sup>122</sup> The AFP reported the looting and abuses in the UNESCO's world heritage site, Lalibela.<sup>123</sup> They also widely covered violations that the local media reported in the third phase, citing the reports by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. International

<sup>117</sup> Abbay Media (24 December 2021). ለምብራና -ጄኖሳይድ፣ ትግራይና የመከላከያ. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ichiZC4hyys&ab\\_channel=AbbayMedia](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ichiZC4hyys&ab_channel=AbbayMedia)

<sup>118</sup> Mutambo, A. (9 December 2021). *Obasanjo visits Nairobi as Ethiopia mediation proves elusive*. Available: <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/obasanjo-visits-nairobi-3646674>

<sup>119</sup> Yussuf, M. (15 November 2021). *Kenyan, Ethiopian Leaders Discuss Tigray Conflict Ahead of Blinken Visit*. Available: <https://www.voanews.com/a/kenyan-ethiopian-leaders-discuss-tigray-conflict-ahead-of-blinken-visit/6313743.html>

<sup>120</sup> In renewed diplomatic efforts, U.S. Special envoy for the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman visited the UAE and Turkey in mid-December to discuss international support to end the conflict.

<sup>121</sup> Bruton, B. & Fitz-Gerald, A. (28 December 2021). *Biden's One-sided Support for the TPLF Can't Achieve Peace in Ethiopia*. Available: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/28/ethiopia-tigray-abiy-tplf-war-biden-needs-to-correct-course/>

<sup>122</sup> Grey, S. (28 December 2021). *In Ethiopia war, new abuse charges put focus on Tigrayan former rulers*. Available: <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ethiopia-conflict-tplf/>

<sup>123</sup> AFP (9 December 2021). *Life under rebel rule in an Ethiopian holy city*. Available: <https://www.rfi.fr/en/life-under-rebel-rule-in-an-ethiopian-holy-city>

media continued reporting on the air strikes that killed civilians in the Tigray region, and cited the UN's claim that record number of civilians were killed in the strike.<sup>124</sup>

## Conclusion

A range of concluding observations emerge from this study. The outbreak of the conflict was due to a combination of a power struggle and ideological polarisation on how the Ethiopian state should be structured and how various identity groups should relate to it. The conflict was highly dynamic. It metamorphosed from conventional war to guerrilla warfare and back to conventional war just within a year. It was accompanied by massive human rights violations and humanitarian crisis. In their reporting, both international and local media demonstrated a clear pattern of bias and selective coverage, either towards the government or the TPLF. This pattern of reporting made it extremely difficult to establish the truth, especially on contested issues that were characterised by patterns of disinformation and misinformation. The war was fought in context that was fraught with challenges that made field-based reporting difficult. These included access, communications blackouts, a shrinking civic space, visa restrictions, and financial and regulatory challenges. Even in situations where journalists reported from the field, they did not seem to probe the accuracy of witness statements. Overall, in the reporting on the conflict, the voice of the people who suffered the brunt of the fighting was largely suppressed.

## Recommendations

- The government of Ethiopia should address government-induced barriers to accurate and independent reporting by easing regulatory requirements, lifting visa restrictions, opening access to conflict areas, and tolerating critical journalists.
- The government of Ethiopia and other stakeholders should provide training for local journalists on conflict sensitive and pro-peace reporting in situations of armed conflict.

<sup>124</sup> AFP (31 December 2021). *UN reports record number of civilians killed in airstrikes across Ethiopia's Tigray region*. Available : <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20211231-un-reports-record-number-of-civilians-killed-in-airstrikes-across-ethiopia-s-tigray-region>  
European Institute of Peace | Political and Media Analysis on the Tigray Conflict in Ethiopia

- International media should overcome local allegations of biased reporting by contextualising their reporting, avoiding reliance on few over-referenced analysts, and doing as much field-based reporting as possible.
- International and regional actors, particularly African, should immediately exploit the window for peace that opened with the launching of national dialogue and the release of some of the leaders of the TPLF. They should seize this momentum by convincing warring parties to a permanent ceasefire, urging aid agencies to upscale humanitarian aid, and pushing for negotiations to ensure accountability and address the political disagreements.
- Given the controversy that characterised the composition and findings of the joint investigation team, it is important that an investigation team that is regarded as independent by both parties is instituted to establish the truth about the cause(s) of the conflict and the atrocities that were committed. In these investigations, the voice of the people, especially those who bore the brunt of the conflict, should be given pride of place.



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