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The State of the World's Human Rights; Ethiopia 2023

After the signing of an agreement to end hostilities, evidence of aid supplies being diverted led humanitarian agencies to temporarily suspend food aid to the Tigray region. Fresh clashes between the federal army and Amhara Fano militias erupted in the Amhara region, and human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests and detentions, were committed in this context; extrajudicial executions were carried out in the Tigray region. Women in Tigray were subjected to sexual violence. Influential groups and individuals led a campaign that culminated in a government crackdown against LGBTI people. The internet was shut down in the Amhara region. Access to social media platforms was restricted across Ethiopia, and around 30 protesters were killed. The government successfully campaigned against regional and international investigative mechanisms that could have led to justice and accountability for victims and survivors of crimes under international law.

Background

The population forcibly displaced as part of the ethnic cleansing campaign against the Tigrayan community in the Western Tigray Zone were yet to return to their homes. New waves of people displaced from the zone, which is under the administration of Amhara regional civilian and security forces, continued arriving in other parts of the Tigray region. Local media reported that 47,000 people fled in March, while in September over 1,000 people, including those from mass detention centres, fled from the zone.

Fighting escalated in the Oromia region, after peace talks between the Oromo Liberation Army and the government failed for the second time, affecting civilians in the region.

Right to food

In May, some six months after the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) was signed in November 2022, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) announced the temporary suspension of food aid to the Tigray region. The measure was taken after agencies found evidence of supplies being diverted, allegedly by government agencies and the military. Despite announcements in November and December from USAID and the WFP of their intention to resume food distribution, reports from the region indicated that they were yet to resume distribution in full. The suspension affected more than 4 million people who were already food insecure. Reports from local health professionals and government authorities indicated that, following the suspension, hundreds of people had died from hunger in the region.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions

The government imposed a six-month nationwide state of emergency on 4 August, following widespread armed clashes between the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) and the Fano militia in the Amhara region. The emergency law granted sweeping powers to the security forces, resulting in hundreds of people being detained and denied access to lawyers and courts. While there was evidence of further gross human rights violations emerging during the clashes, the worsening situation prevented effective communication with people in the region, making it difficult to determine the extent of the violations (see below, Freedom of expression and assembly).

Extrajudicial executions

Eritrean Defence Force (EDF) soldiers continued to carry out extrajudicial executions against civilians in the Tigray region for months after the CoHA was signed. They executed at least 24 civilians between November 2022 and January 2023 in the Kokob Tsibah district. In 2023, Amnesty International verified the extrajudicial executions of at least 20 civilians between 25 October and 1 November 2022 in Mariam Shewito district. However, social workers in the district had a list of more than 100 civilians executed in the same period by the EDF.¹

Sexual and gender-based violence

The EDF perpetrated acts of sexual violence against women between November 2022 and late January 2023 in the Kokob Tsibah district in the Tigray region. During this period, EDF soldiers held at least 15 women captive for nearly three months, until 19 January 2023, at their military camp. The women were repeatedly raped by soldiers, in a situation that amounted to sexual slavery. In addition, they endured other physical and psychological abuse, and deprivation of essential resources like food, water and medical services.

The EDF also subjected women held captive in their homes in the same district to gang-rape and rape. Survivors, social workers and local officials said the EDF targeted these women based on suspicions that their husbands, sons or other male relatives were associated with the Tigrayan forces.

Local civil society organizations and media reported multiple cases of abduction for forced marriage. The abduction of Tsega Belachew, an accountant in a bank, was among those cases that received national attention, including on social media. She was abducted on 23 May by a bodyguard of the mayor of Hawassa in the Sidama region and held for nine days before being released.

LGBTI people's rights

An on- and offline campaign against LGBTI people was launched by social media influencers, religious leaders and popular artists. It culminated in early August with the authorities in the capital, Addis Ababa, raiding hotels, bars and entertainment centres they alleged were allowing “gay sexual activities” to take place. LGBTI people in Addis Ababa reported beatings after social media posts identifying them were circulated.

LGBTI rights defenders accused social media platforms, particularly TikTok, of failing to act against content that incited violence against people based on their sexuality or gender identity.

Consensual same-sex sexual relations continued to be criminalized and to carry a prison sentence of up to 10 years.

Freedom of expression and assembly

The communication blackout, imposed by the federal authorities in the Western Tigray Zone, persisted for a third year. On 3 August, as a result of the clashes in the Amhara region, the authorities suspended internet access there, while some parts of the region faced a complete communication blackout. This continued to the end of the year.

On 9 February, following tensions caused by a disagreement within Ethiopia's orthodox church, at least 30 protesters were killed by security forces in the city of Shashamane in the Oromia region, according to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. At the same time, the authorities banned

members of church factions involved in the disagreement from holding rallies and restricted access to social media until 17 July.

Impunity

The government continued to fail to investigate and prosecute alleged perpetrators of crimes under international law in open proceedings. Following a campaign by the Ethiopian government against justice and accountability efforts, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights terminated the mandate of the Commission of Inquiry into the situation in the Tigray Region in May. The Commission of Inquiry never published a report on its findings or communicated the fate of the evidence it gathered to victims, survivors or the public. The government tried to garner support to prematurely terminate the mandate of the UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE) in March. In September, however, the ICHREE published its report which concluded, among other things, that "the current situation across [Ethiopia]... continues to bear hallmarked risks of future atrocity crimes". Despite the report's findings, member states at the UN Human Rights Council failed to table a resolution to renew the ICHREE's mandate.

Meanwhile, the government held consultations on a policy proposal for transitional justice, a process that focuses on reconciliation rather than justice and accountability for the victims and survivors.

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1. *Ethiopia: "Today or Tomorrow, They Should Be Brought Before Justice": Rape, Sexual Slavery, Extrajudicial Executions, and Pillage by Eritrean Defence Forces, 4 September*