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Sexual Violence in Ethiopia's Tigray Region



30 March 2021

On 4 November 2020 the Ethiopian army began a **military offensive against the Tigray region's ruling party**, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Four months later the ongoing conflict has killed thousands of civilians, displaced over two million, forced thousands of refugees to flee to Sudan, and caused widespread destruction.

At the end of January the United Nations (UN) Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict reported that **serious allegations of sexual violence by conflict parties were being reported**. Women reported being gang raped, family members were forced to rape members of their own family at gunpoint, and women were forced to have sex in exchange for basic commodities.

Communication blackouts and restrictions on journalists' access to the region made it difficult to verify survivors' accounts; however, as more journalists are allowed in, horrific stories of sexual violence have begun to emerge.

Doctors, nurses and aid workers have reported an alarming increase in accounts of women being drugged, held captive and gang raped, and there is **emerging evidence** that sexual violence is being used as a weapon of war and humiliation, with one doctor describing the attacks as effectively a form of genocide.

Some women have described how while they were being raped the rapists said that they were "cleansing the blood lines" of the women they were raping and that these women needed to change their Tigrayan identity. Another woman recalls Eritrean soldiers saying while raping her that they were ordered "to come after the women", while another woman recalls Eritrean soldiers saying that their actions were revenge against Tigray.

This document analysis a sample of 36 reported incidents of sexual violence that occurred in Tigray region between November 2020 and March 2021. Among this sample, 106 women and girls were affected by sexual violence and at least 144 different perpetrators were involved. Get this data on **HDX**.

This sample was selected because the descriptions of the incidents contained sufficient details to allow the nature and patterns of the violence that occurred to be described in this document. It is not known to what extent these examples are unique or similar to the hundreds of other incidents of sexual violence that have been reported by various hospitals around the region and by UN and other humanitarian organisations.

A woman described how she and five other women were gang raped by 30 Eritrean soldiers (i.e. five soldiers raping each woman). During the attacks the soldiers joked and took photos of the women while assaulting them.

The woman managed to escape and get help. However, she was caught again by more Eritrean soldiers and held captive in a forest with her 12-year-old son and other women. Their clothes were removed and they were tied to a rock or a tree. They were stabbed, injected with drugs and raped for ten days while their rapists partied. Her 12-year-old son was shot and killed in front of her.

Analysed incidents	36¹
Women/girls affected in analysed incidents	106
Perpetrators involved in analysed incidents	At least 144
Data: November 2020-March 2021 Sexual violence in Tigray region, Ethiopia	

Additionally, many more incidents have gone unreported due to survivors' feelings of shame and the stigma that they experience, as well as fear of retribution from perpetrators.

Lack of infrastructure due to the **widespread destruction and vandalism of health facilities** in the region have also compounded survivors' inability to seek help. There have also been reports of refugee women being particularly targeted; however, these cases remain severely under-reported.

The use of threats to prevent survivors from seeking help and reporting their experiences

Nearly a third of survivors were threatened with further violence if they sought help and/or reported the assaults:

- In Addis Ababa a woman journalist who reported on a story about a Tigrayan woman and her sister who were held captive and repeatedly raped by Eritrean soldiers in a military camp was threatened by armed men who broke into her home and confiscated her laptop and other evidence.
- A therapist who was treating the survivor was also threatened with violence if he attempted to identify Eritrean soldiers as the perpetrators of this attack.

Survivors

The majority of survivors in the sample that this document is analysing were Tigrayan women who were attacked by soldiers.

Survivors reported being raped in their homes after Amhara, Eritrean or Ethiopian soldiers had broken in.

Survivors were also kidnapped and taken to military camps, forests or the countryside, where they were held captive for a number of days and repeatedly gang raped, physically assaulted and injected with drugs.

In two incidents survivors were kidnapped together with their children, one of whom was murdered in front of his mother.

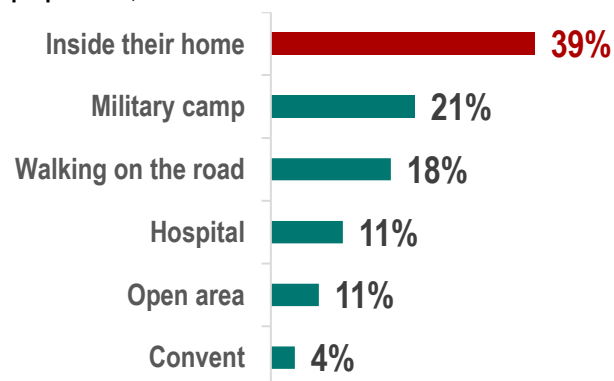
Women were kidnapped from the streets while walking home, and in at least two incidents displaced women were raped while trying to flee the conflict.

In other cases a medical student was raped inside a hospital in Mekelle city, where government soldiers were stationed to guard the hospital. After the incident was reported, ten more student survivors came forward. Two medical doctors were also raped inside the same hospital by government soldiers.

In Wukro town Eritrean soldiers raped an unspecified number of nuns in a convent.

Two survivors were raped more than once in different incidents by different perpetrators.

Category of locations where sexual violence was perpetrated, based on 28 incidents²



In early January 2021 a displaced 27-year-old mother of two and her 24-year-old sister returned to their village to collect crops and check on their house. While walking back Eritrean soldiers stopped the sisters, forced them into a pickup truck and took them to a military camp. The 27-year-old woman reports seeing at least eight other Tigrayan women at the camp, and more women were brought in daily. She recalls being repeatedly gang raped by the soldiers – one day she counted 15 soldiers who took turns at raping her over an eight-hour period. Her spine and pelvis were fractured, and her perpetrators laughed while assaulting her.

One day her sister was brought into the room and she was forced to watch her being raped. While in captivity she was given almost nothing to eat, and her injuries left her unable to walk. Eventually she was able to crawl out of the camp. She was found on the main road and was taken to Mekelle for medical treatment. Due to her spinal and pelvis injuries the woman is now in a wheelchair. The whereabouts of her sister are still unknown. The woman and her therapist have received threats for reporting the attack.

Raped, assaulted and killed

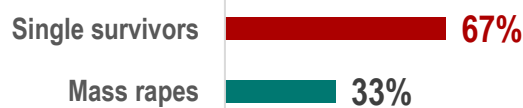
Survivors were also physically assaulted. In a particularly heinous incident a woman was held captive for ten days and repeatedly raped by 23 Eritrean soldiers who stuffed nails, stones and used condoms inside her. In another two incidents survivors were shot repeatedly in their arms, which had to be amputated, during attempted rapes by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers.

Another woman was left in a wheelchair after injuries to her spine and pelvis during repeated gang rapes.

Four women were shot and killed after they had been raped. In one incident a woman in Wukro town was raped and then killed by Eritrean soldiers in front of her three sons, who were not allowed to touch or bury her body for three days.

In another incident a 13-year-old girl was gang raped by Amhara special forces in her home in Humera city. Her family took her for medical treatment, but they were all shot and killed while on route to the hospital.

Mass rapes and single survivors, based on information from 106 survivors



Raped in front of their families

Women were raped in front of their children, husbands and other family members. In Wukro town a woman was raped by four Eritrean soldiers in her home, while a fifth soldier forced her husband to kneel and watch at gunpoint.

In another incident a husband was forced to pay a ransom for the release of his wife and two-month-old baby, who were held in captivity for five days by nine soldiers.

In Abiy Addi town a man was ordered to rape his 18-year-old grand-daughter and was beaten and shot when he refused.

Another man was beaten when he attempted to stop soldiers from raping a 19-year-old girl in Mekelle city.

Perpetrators

The most frequently reported perpetrators of sexual violence were Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers.

Amhara special forces were also implicated, but were not as frequently mentioned in the incidents under analysis.

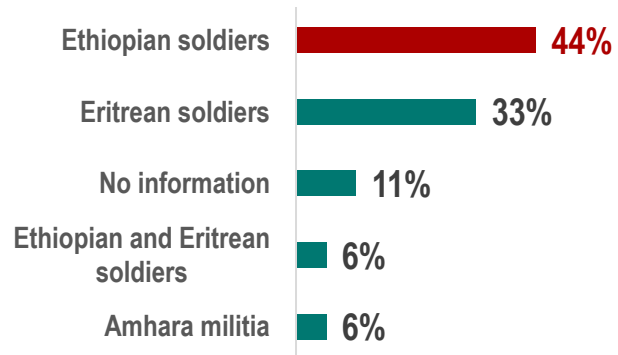
Perpetrators were usually armed with firearms, and raped women at gunpoint.

More than half of reported incidents involved gang rapes with more than five perpetrators.

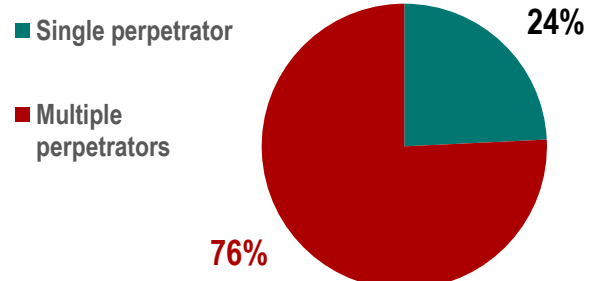
In some cases more than ten soldiers were involved. Mainly Eritrean soldiers were implicated in these mass gang rapes.

In at least two incidents in or near Wukro town survivors implicated both Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers in gang rapes.

Reported perpetrator affiliations, based on incidents involving 144 reported perpetrators



Single and multiple perpetrators committing sexual violence, based on 33 reported incidents³



Reporting conflict-related sexual violence

On 22 March 2021 a UN statement called for a stop to indiscriminate and targeted attacks on civilians in the region, including rape and other forms of horrific sexual violence, and called for an independent investigation into conflict-related sexual violence. The Ethiopian prime minister has claimed that his government will hold soldiers accountable if they have been found to be responsible for rape or looting in Tigray.

Reporting sexual violence is an important first step towards holding perpetrators accountable.

The accounts in this report only give us a glimpse into the systematic sexual violence that has occurred in Tigray region, and may still be occurring according to reports as recent as March 2021.

Survivors, journalists and medical professionals have all been threatened with violence if they report incidents, while local structures where survivors of sexual violence would usually report an attack are no longer in place or have decreased as a result of the conflict.

Ideally, survivors should be provided with safe and secure reporting mechanisms that empower them to report their stories.

Reports show that women in rural areas and refugee women are particularly at risk of further alienation by not having access to reporting mechanisms, and this should be taken into account when developing safe and secure reporting procedures.

Research and data limitations

This document was compiled as part of an event-based approach to documenting attacks involving sexual violence. Event descriptions from multiple sources were cross-checked and consolidated into a single dataset of recorded incidents that were coded using standard definitions.

The incidents reported are neither a complete nor a representative list of all attacks involving sexual violence during the conflict in Tigray, and have not been independently verified.

The figures presented in this report can be cited as the total number of publicly available reports of attacks and of the number of women and girls affected by such conflict-related sexual violence in Tigray, as identified by Insecurity Insight. The data summarised in this document has been systematically compiled from information available in open sources, as published in the “**Sexual Violence in Conflict Monthly News Brief**”.

The dataset suffers from limitations inherent in the information provided by the sources used. These publicly available sources use different methodologies, and certain biases within individual sources influence the data. Also, the information provided may contain inaccuracies. Most importantly, the cases referred to are not a representative sample of sexual violence in Tigray, but merely reflect the attacks that survivors and their families were courageous enough to report.

Definitions used in this report

- **Mass rape:** refers to an incident where multiple survivors/victims experienced sexual violence in the same location at the same time.
- **Gang rape:** refers to an incident where a single survivor or victim was attacked by multiple perpetrators.
- **Survivor:** refers to an individual who has experienced sexual violence.
- **Victim:** refers to an individual who has been killed during or after an act or acts of sexual violence.

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¹ Reports of these incidents were taken from hundreds of emerging reports about systematic sexual violence that has occurred in the region. Many more attacks have occurred and have not been reported.

² No information was reported on the location of sexual violence in eight incidents in this sample.

³ In three incidents no information was available on whether there was a single rapist or multiple perpetrators.