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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL REPORT 2021/22; THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S HUMAN RIGHTS; ETHIOPIA 2021

All parties to the armed conflict committed serious human rights violations and abuses, including extrajudicial executions and sexual violence against women and girls, and millions of people were internally displaced. Humanitarian aid was denied to millions of people in Tigray. Ethnic violence claimed at least 1,500 lives. Police carried out arbitrary arrests and detentions in the context of the state of emergency. Vaccination rates against Covid-19 remained low.

Background

The armed conflict in Tigray continued throughout 2021 and spread to the neighbouring regions of Afar and Amhara in July. Armed violence also erupted in the Benishangul-Gumuz, Amhara, Oromia, Afar and Somali regions. In November, the government adopted a state of emergency law with sweeping restrictions on human rights.

VIOLATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

All parties to the armed conflict perpetrated violations of international humanitarian law that amounted to war crimes, some of which may have amounted to crimes against humanity. The conflict resulted in thousands of civilian deaths mainly based on ethnic identity, destruction and looting of property, and displacement of communities. According to the UN, millions of people were internally displaced and more than 70,000 fled to Sudan. Amnesty International documented extrajudicial executions of hundreds of people, rape, indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, blockades on humanitarian assistance, and arrests and detentions based on ethnic profiling.¹

Targeted attacks on civilians

On 8 January, following fighting between the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) on the outskirts of Bora town in Tigray, ENDF soldiers raided houses in the town and killed at least 40 civilians including farmers, civil servants and students. Families of those killed were not allowed to collect and bury the dead. On 9 January, after the ENDF unit commander in the town held a meeting with residents, ENDF soldiers collected the bodies on a truck and took them to the nearby graveyard at Abune Aregawi church. They were buried unceremoniously without a funeral requiem or observation of other rituals. Families were present, but the soldiers warned them not to cry during the funeral.

In Edaga Berhe, a town near Axum, ENDF soldiers killed at least 30 civilians on 5 February, two days after nearby fighting with TPLF members. Witnesses identified the ENDF by their uniforms and their use of the Amharic language.

On 17 January in Adi-Goshu town, Western Tigray, the Amhara Police Special Force and Fano, an informal Amhara militia group, killed at least 50 residents in a reprisal attack following fighting between the Amhara Police Special Force and TPLF forces near the River Tekezie bridge the previous night. The Amhara Police Special Force and Fano seized the victims from their houses and the surrounding area and took them to the town's police station before driving them to the River Tekezie bridge on a truck and executing them.

Indiscriminate attacks on civilians

On 22 June, an airstrike by the ENDF on the Edaga Selus village market in Tigray killed more than 50 and wounded many others among the civilian population. Survivors told Amnesty International that the attack took place around noon on market day while there was no known military target nearby.

On 19 August, in Debre Tabor town in Amhara region, an artillery attack on a residential area, allegedly by TPLF forces, killed six people – five of them from the same family, including a four-month-old baby – and wounded one more. According to survivors and other witnesses, there was no military target in the vicinity.

Sexual and gender-based violence

Troops fighting in support of the federal government committed widespread rape against hundreds of women and girls in Tigray, although access difficulties and under-reporting obscured the actual figures which were likely to be much higher. These violations included gang rape, used against women and girls as a weapon of war in this conflict. This was accompanied by shocking levels of brutality, including beatings, death threats and ethnic slurs. The perpetrators included members of the Eritrean Defence Forces (see Eritrea entry), the ENDF, the Amhara Police Special Forces and Fano.²

TPLF fighters also raped women in Nifas Mewcha town, in the South Gondar zone of Amhara region, while they were controlling the town between 12 and 21 August as part of their offensive into parts of the Amhara and Afar regions.³

Given the context, scale, and gravity of the sexual violence committed against women and girls in Tigray and Amhara, the violations amounted to war crimes and may have amounted to crimes against humanity.

Survivors of sexual violence in Amhara and Tigray faced multiple difficulties. Support services were severely limited and survivors were unable to access adequate medical, psycho-social and economic assistance to meet their needs. Medical facilities, for example, had been destroyed or looted during the conflict. This was further compounded by restrictions on humanitarian and medical assistance in Tigray.

Denial of humanitarian access

According to the UN, following the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces from Tigray in July, the Ethiopian federal government allowed only 10% of the humanitarian aid intended for Tigray to enter the region, resulting in starvation. The UN estimated that there were 400,000 people in

famine-like conditions and more than 5 million people in need of emergency food assistance. All medicine was blocked from entering the region from July. This led to an alarming deterioration in the health of the population as a result of depleted anti-HIV, cancer and diabetes medication, as well as starvation. The last aid convoy allowed into Tigray was on 25 November, and it was not carrying medicine.

ABUSES BY ARMED GROUPS

Ethnic violence claimed at least 1,500 lives in the Oromia, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, Afar and Somali regions.

Territorial disputes between the Somali and Afar regions triggered repeated armed violence. In January, an attack by the Somali Issa militia in Adaytu village killed at least 40 members of the Afar and federal police. On 6 April, at least 30 people were killed during armed violence between Afar and Somali people. On 24 July, hundreds of residents were killed in an armed attack by Afar people on Gerba Isse town. Following the attack, at least three women were gang raped.

On 19 March, several days of violence broke out in Ataye town in the North Shewa Zone, Amhara region, and spread to neighbouring areas of the Oromia Special Zone, resulting in hundreds of deaths, and destruction and looting of property.

ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND DETENTIONS

Police in the capital, Addis Ababa, and other cities arbitrarily arrested and detained thousands of Tigrayans. The arrests appeared to be ethnically motivated and the police checked identity documents before arresting and taking people to detention centres. Tigrayan activists, journalists and media workers at media outlets Awlo Media and Ethio Forum, who reported on the situation in Tigray region, were among those arrested.

The use of arbitrary detention against Tigrayans increased after the government declared a state of emergency on 2 November. The measure allowed the authorities to arrest, without a warrant, anyone if there was “reasonable suspicion” that they had cooperated with “terrorist groups”, and to detain them without judicial review indefinitely.⁴

Dawud Ibsa, the chairman of the Oromo Liberation Front, an Ethiopian opposition political party, remained under house arrest in Addis Ababa. Since his arrest on 3 May, the police have not allowed anyone to leave or enter the compound of his residence.

RIGHT TO HEALTH

The Ministry of Health reported close to 400,000 cases of Covid-19 and 6,531 deaths as a result of the virus, by December. Political gatherings including indoor meetings, continued. The ministry administered almost 5 million Covid-19 vaccine doses, received from donor countries. According to the WHO Regional Office for Africa, as of 2 December, Ethiopia had fully vaccinated only 1.23% of its population.

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1. “Ethiopia: End arbitrary detentions of Tigrayans, activists and journalists in Addis Ababa and reveal whereabouts of unaccounted detainees”, 16 July
 2. *“I Don’t Know if They Realized I Was a Person”: Rape and Sexual Violence in the Conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia* (Index: AFR 25/4569/2021), 11 August
 3. “Ethiopia: Survivors of TPLF attack in Amhara describe gang rape, looting and physical assaults”, 9 November
 4. “Ethiopia: Tigrayans targeted in fresh wave of ethnically motivated detentions in Addis Ababa”, 12 November