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An article by Jan Nyssen, a Belgian physical geographer, and professor of geography at Ghent University, on the ongoing war and its impact on civilian life in Tigray

"Ever since I started research in Tigray in 1994, the fight against famine has been a major priority. With academic colleagues, we tried to assist through studies and projects for environmental conservation. But now, it feels as though we are back to square one" he says

From February to May 2021, more than half of Tigray's territory is expected to suffer "Emergency" outcomes by the U.S.'s Famine Early Warning System Network—the last stage before "Famine.

What is reported is therefore catastrophic; worse even than anticipated in our prescient paper in November. In that analysis, we warned that food security in Tigray was already critical before the start of the conflict: for instance....

....large areas were on a path towards hunger due to a desert locust invasion that significantly reduced harvests.

However, we did not anticipate the many more disasters to come, such as the countless war crimes, systemic looting, bank closures, and telecoms blackout.

Two sources told us that people go to bushes and collect branches+leaves of non-toxic thirst-quenching plants such as sorrel (Rumex nervosus) in order to have something in their stomachs. In some places, there are not even matches available for people to light a fire for cooking.

Even if farmers have grains, there are no operating mills in many towns. Thus, people can't make bread or tayta (fermented flatbread), and many are living on roasted barley and whatever else they can find.

A witness from a village near Hagere Selam name-checks several slain farmers whom I know from fieldwork. When fighting started in the area, people moved from the village to the mountains; after a time, they thought that the fight has ended and they came back to their homesteads.

The eye-witness's father then ran into the soldiers who were slaughtering his cattle. The dog which had been with them to the mountains started barking at the troops and they shot it.

Afterwards, they started hitting his father and he quickly became unconscious. They hit him very badly and left him for dead in the courtyard of his family house.

Eye-witnesses in Adigrat, where intermittent telephone communication is now possible, say that the men have fled to the mountains for fear of being killed.

They shelter in caves, gorges, and forests, but not in churches because those are not considered safe anymore. From there, many join the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF).

A Tigrayan in Belgium mentions that he expects many friends and relatives have been killed. But it's a culture in Tigray not to tell the death of relatives to someone overseas.

The Economist pointed to an additional obstacle – confirmed by many witnesses: the Eritrean army and Amhara militia have been spotted diverting aid coming into the region. Ground evidence shows that very little is received by the most in need.

A town like Adwa, nominally under Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) control, has no administrative bodies; it can be three to four days without the presence of the military. The villages surrounding the town are a kind of no man's land.

The army is not there, but an Eritrean or ENDF military unit may decide to go control a village and loot.

Some people move few kilometers away from the towns and go to places where there is a presence of Tigray Defense Forces. Such places host displaced people who moved there to be safe from the Ethiopian and Eritrean armies.

We were in contact with a close friend who lives near Maryam church in Mekelle. She's terrified after witnessing a scene in front of her door: two Eritrean soldiers shot a young man. One said "Finish him!". The other: "Let him agonize." As the young man did, with terrible moans.

Academic and commentator Kjetil Tronvoll notes that as with all minorities, the Irob minority group in Tigray is vulnerable in the war as it straddles the Ethiopia-Eritrea border, and part of its homeland was granted to Eritrea by the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission

Killings, looting, and coercive 're-identification' as Eritrean are reported. We had a telephone contact with an older man from an Irob village. He confirmed that Eritrean identity cards are being handed out

In Hawzien and Gheralta, where there is ongoing warfare, much is said of looting, and damage to some of the historical rock-hewn churches.

One witness who was clearly uncomfortable about it specifically named the Debretsion Abuna Abraham and Yohannes Ma'iqudi churches in relation to the fighting and hinted that they may have been damaged. Tourist lodges in the area are

also destroyed.

In such places where there is an ongoing warfare, civilian young men are not safe as they are suspected to belong to the TDF. By mid-January, an eyewitness from Inticho reported that “those who don’t have cattle have already died”.

With the restoration of telephone lines to Aksum, we also managed to talk to a church servant about the mass killings in November that are yet to be investigated and brought to light. At first, he simply could not speak; the trauma was too much.

In a second call, a few days later, he said the reported number of 750 causality has been underestimated and that the number of casualties is in the thousands.

“People (mostly men but also women) were killed en masse within the church compound. They raped women from the church

Killing and rape also happened outside of the church throughout the town and in rural areas. They do whatever they want, they destroy things, loot, rape and slaughter” he said

According to him there was shelling towards the church from a distant location but the church wasnt hit

He says: “Eritreans are not only killing people. They rape women, loot people’s houses, they cut legs, remove eyes, and leave people to die”. He adds: “Just killing would have been fine.”

A source near Hagere Selam states that the Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers are searching for the ousted regional leaders in every cave and every exclosure

They warn the people: “For each soldier that is killed by woyane (a generic name for TPLF, Tigray Defence Forces, and any Tigrayan resistance), we will kill five or ten villagers.”