

Gender Based Violence in Tigray

08 March 2021

Special Briefing No. 3

Situation Report EEPA HORN

“The day before yesterday, a woman in her 40s was found dead on the road to her home. She was found with her hands tied, injured to her head and sexually assaulted. This was in Mekelle. I know her son.”

This is what one of our reporters (A.G.), who herself is a young woman, has reported to us.

The extent and cruelty of the assaults, sexual violence and rape of women and girls that EEPA has received information about is simply chilling. Much of it goes unreported. There is still no internet, and journalists were prevented from reaching the region for three months. Often, these atrocities are not reported, because the facts are just too repulsive. How do you talk about such horrific incidences?

How do you report on the murder of a grandfather, in front of his family, after he was instructed to rape his own granddaughter at gunpoint, but refused to do so? Minds blank out these images; refusing to engage with the utter cruelty of the Gender Based Violence (GBV) that is so widespread in the Tigray war. It is paralyzing.

Ten thousand women: this is the conservative estimate of the number of victims of rape in Tigray.

One inventory of confirmed cases from just a handful of health clinics in Tigray found 108 women who had been raped. (Ethiopia Commission on Human Rights, 11 February 2021)¹. In Adigrat alone, the public hospital received over 174 rape survivors since the beginning of the war (Deutsche Welle, 2021)². According to Dedebit media, 750 women were raped and admitted to Ayder hospital in Mekelle alone (Dedebit, 29 January 2021).³ There have been multiple reports of gang rape. One documented incident involved more than ten soldiers raping a single victim. Victims include girls as young as ten years old as well as grandmothers.

¹ The Commission received reports of 52 instances of rape in Mekelle, 22 in Adigrat, 7 in Wukro and 27 in Ayder (a total of 108) (Ethiopian Commission on Human Rights, 11 February 2021).

² Deutsche Welle, Anger and collective trauma scar Ethiopia's Tigray region, 6 March 2021.
<https://www.dw.com/en/anger-and-collective-trauma-scar-ethiopias-tigray-region/a-56794452>

³ Dedebit is a broadcasting and production company, and it broadcasted and produced in three languages: Tigrigna, Amharic & English. It work in Science and Technology, Art and Tourism, History and Heritage Management, News and Politics. It is based on NSW, Australia. (info from their facebook-page:
<https://www.facebook.com/DedebitMedia/videos/4013987365280643/>).

Many incidents go unreported. As an aid worker stated:

“Whenever a girl or a woman comes and shares her story, she is speaking for 6, 8 or even 10 other women who were raped in the place she comes from. She is the only one who was able to come and get treatment. This helps you to imagine the scale of the atrocities. So, talking about the official numbers is downscaling the problem.”

Reporting in many parts of the region is simply impossible. Communication with large parts of the region have been cut, or is very difficult, so numbers have been reduced. Rape and sexual assault is generally a deeply taboo subject, that brings shame on the woman and her family. It can be very costly for women to come forward and testify. There is a tendency to not report GBV to avoid the consequences – which can include becoming an outcast.

There is also fear. Women are also fearful of reporting to the clinics, since they do not believe the centres or the authorities can or will protect them. They do not report these atrocities because they do not believe there will be either support or justice. They are justifiably fearful that if they go public that they, or their family members, will be punished once again, with even more violence from the soldiers.

Only the most severe cases tend to be reported when victims come to seek urgent medical help. However, 90% of clinics and hospitals have been destroyed and are no longer in use, with health workers having fled.

“These [cases] are only those who have access to this hospital, but we don't know what happens in the 18 districts in the Eastern [Tigray] zone - what happens to the mothers, what happens to the other community [members].”
(Deutsche Welle, 6 March 2021)

The doctor said women are being gang-raped, drugged and gravely injured in the assaults. One woman was held captive for over ten days, raped by 23 Eritrean soldiers, then left on the side of the road. Surgeons had to remove stones and nails that had been inserted inside her genitals. (Deutsche Welle, 6 March 2021).

There are several ways in which rape against women is employed as a weapon of war in the conflict.

First, there is the widespread fear that it instils in the entire civilian population. They become paralysed and inactive. Rape, together with other forms of cruelty and torture, degrades and dehumanises the victim and their relatives. The severe trauma associated with such assaults may have long term effects, inducing in these victims a state of paralysis. This is one of the eye-witness reports EEPA has received:

A woman in a place near Wukro was raped and killed by Eritrean soldiers in front of her three sons. She was left with the sons, who were not allowed to bury her. The body, with her hands tight together, was left for three days. The sons were not allowed to move it. (G.W. 7 March 2021)

The purposeful degrading of women – even when they are dead – forms part of a collective humiliation. It can be seen in this desecration of women in holy orders:

In Wukro, Eritrean soldiers have raped the nuns of the monastery collectively. (G.W. 7 March 2021)

From the reports it appears that the women are targeted as a collective punishment for the war. Soldiers use perpetrating sexual assault and rape to create a human shield, to enforce compliance with their forces controlling the area. Devex found that women and girls who had been able to flee to Sudan:

“also witnessed loved ones and friends killed, and tortured, creating a high need for psycho-social support.”

At the same time, there are reports of male relatives being forced to carry out rapes on family members. If they refused, they were threatened with execution.

They force the family members to rape their relatives. There is so much to it that it really is a weapon. (A.G., 6 March 2021)

There are similar reports of family members, including husbands and children, being forced to watch the rape:

Sadistic perpetration of sexual violence reported. Report received that a girl from Abyi Adi was shot 4 times on her hands by a soldier who first went into their home asking where 'woyane' (a term for people in Tigray) is. Her father, a blind man, responded they didn't know and he was ordered to rape his own child. He was taken into another room and beaten by another soldier after he strongly refused. The girl was then ordered 'lawtash'. (This is an offensive term widely used referring to sexual intercourse in the context of violence or rape). When she refused, he fired a shot wounding her left hand small finger and then followed it with three shots on her right arm leaving her now amputated. (EEPA, 2 February 2021)

Involving relatives in rape destroys the dignity of all involved, and with it the fabric of society. Such incidences, associated with Eritrean perpetrators, are not new. The attacks reported in Tigray resemble the acts allegedly perpetrated by human trafficking gangs operating within an Eritrean-facilitated chain. These listed the following crimes:

- Rape and gang rape by traffickers, torturers and guards
- Rape in front of father, husband, wives, daughter, sons, and other family members (there are several accounts of daughters, including very young girls, gang raped in front of parents or threats thereof)
- Rape ordered between hostages while guards watch (including the rape of very young girls)
- Other sadistic sexual acts (The Trauma of Survivors of Sinai Trafficking, 2017: 289)

Human traffickers from Eritrea also used sexual violence against men and boys as a means of enforcing their submission. This is socially and culturally taboo, and has not yet been reported, to our knowledge, in the current war in Tigray.

The report on the Trauma of Survivors of Sinai Trafficking (2017), perpetrated in a chain that is facilitated by Eritrean commanders, also reports other forms of torture that strongly resemble the practices reported from Tigray:

Forcing hostages to witness the harm done to others, especially family members

- The torture of other hostages
- The killing of other hostages
- Leaving dead hostages' bodies in view (The Trauma of Survivors of Sinai Trafficking, 2017: 289)

In Tigray, women and girls are targeted as the (future) mothers of children who might (one day) take up arms against the invading army. They are being strategically targeted to humiliate them and their families as a way of diminishing the strength of the Tigrayan people. It can be seen as part of a genocidal strategy against the entire population. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports on the massacre in Aksum:

The massacre left the town's inhabitants reeling. One man visited a relative who lost her children in the house-to-house killings: "They killed her children and locked the compound door behind them, so no one could get in at first. She was left alone with the bodies of her two dead children for a day and a half. She was numb, unresponsive by the time we saw her." (HRW, 5 March 2021)

Women who become pregnant as a result of the rape have few options. Prior to the conflict abortions could be carried out in hospitals, but the medical facilities have been looted and few have any remaining medicines. Refugees who managed to flee to Sudan still face a difficult situation, since in Sudan abortion is difficult to obtain. Devex published that Tigrayan women who are now in the refugee camps are resorting to unsafe abortions.

Aid agencies have repeatedly urged the Ethiopian authorities to open the region up for humanitarian aid. The head of UKAid, Christian Rogg, said on twitter:

In #Mekelle today. Met with people displaced by violence from across #Tigray. Heard haunting accounts of rape and murder. Families separated, incl. young children. Free access by humanitarian agencies is critical. @UKinEthiopia calls for investigation of abuses and violations. (Twitter, 5 March 2021)

It is important to note that the violence against women is not only perpetrated against the Tigray population, but also against Eritrean refugees, hosted in Tigray. In such cases violence perpetrated by Eritrean troops on Eritrean refugees may be designed to force them into submission.

There is great fear among the victims of rape about further repercussions and collective punishment if they report the crimes. Tigray expert, Prof. Jan Nysen, reports:

According to official reports, all of Tigray is happy that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has restored law and order. But that is far from apparent from the visit of Ethiopian President Sahlework Zewdie to Mekelle on 7 February. Several contacts in the city reported that she was not really welcome. Civil society people did not show up. The sad face of the displaced woman in the photo speaks volumes. The president insisted on visiting survivors of sexual assault at the local hospital. Despite having been warned by doctors, Ethiopia's first woman president, accompanied by soldiers, stormed into the hospital room. According to those present, there was great panic among these women, who suffer from post-traumatic stress. (MO Magazine, 5 March 2021)

The interim provisional administration in Mekelle has confirmed the high incidence of rape perpetrated against women and girls. The reporter from Mekelle observes:

When the government is comparing the numbers from before and now, they are very different (A.G., 6 March, 2021)

The sexual assaults and rape of women and girls in Tigray has been carried out by Eritrean forces, Amhara forces and Ethiopian National Defence Forces. A first analysis indicates that there are different patterns associated with such attacks by the different forces. It would appear that the most hate- and revenge inspired acts have been carried out by Eritrean forces, especially in areas over which they have sole control. Further details of these attacks have to be investigated:

A spokeswoman for Patten's office wouldn't say which "military elements" were involved. The fighters in Tigray include those from the neighboring Amhara region and other parts of Ethiopia as well as soldiers from neighboring Eritrea. (AP, 2021)

EEPA's reporter from Mekelle states that rape should be investigated as a weapon of war:

I compare it to what is described in „The world within the war“. This book is about Congo when there was a war with Rwanda. When I was reading it - I saw the resemblance with the situation here, it exactly what is going on in our country. The conclusion was clear - when rape is used as a weapon of war it is used to humiliate the woman to demoralize everything. And this is very brutal. It is not just rape - it is followed by killings and very hostile abuse. There is so much hate. It is not even about rape - there is so much to it. When they rape they say things so full of hate. It is clear. You can understand. (A.G., 6 March 2021).

There is an urgent need for investigation on the ground of all such alleged crimes. This must include the use of rape as a weapon of war. It must stop the rampant attacks on innocent citizens, women and girls. Some young women in Tigray remain combative:

"We will not be silenced. We are continuing to advocate. We are now activists. This must stop!"

Said one young woman in Mekelle, when asked by EEPA what 8 March means to her this year.

Overview of reports on crimes committed against civilian women from EEPA Situation Reports (as confirmed per 7 March 2021)

Report. No 45 Report of severe violence against women: “countless number of women” are victims of physical and sexual abuse and rape, including gang rape. Some of these acts are aggravated by other forms of brutality like shooting victims or mutilating them with knives. In Mekelle many women are asking for a post pill as a precaution for avoiding unwanted pregnancy. Reported that women are kidnapped and taken by armed forces from different parts of the region without any information of their whereabouts. Call made for urgent investigation

Report. No 54 It was revealed by ETV that women were raped in Mekelle in the week following the takeover by the ENDF at the beginning of December; this was reported by an unidentified man in an Ethiopian military uniform who spoke of repeated abuses against women.

Report. No 63 United Nations Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict and Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, Pramila Patten said, “I am greatly concerned by serious allegations of sexual violence in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, including a high number of alleged rapes in the capital, Mekelle”. Pramilla Patten states that: “There are also disturbing reports of individuals allegedly forced to rape members of their own family, under threats of imminent violence. Some women have also reportedly been forced by military elements to have sex in exchange for basic commodities, while medical centers have indicated an increase in the demand for emergency contraception and testing for sexually transmitted infections. In addition, there are increasing reports of sexual violence against women and girls in a number of refugee camps.” Pramilla Patten calls on all parties involved in the hostilities in the Tigray region “to commit to a zero-tolerance policy for crimes of sexual violence, in line with their respective obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law.”

Report. No 64 Pramilla Patten, UN Special Rapporteur on Sexual Violence in Conflict, states that there are increasing reports of sexual violence against women and girls in a number of refugee camps.

Report. No 67 Aid workers report sadistic violence used against civilians, including rape: a young woman separated from relatives was given a choice to be killed or to be raped. Reuters reports that aid workers report multiple of such stories perpetrated allegedly by militia fighters from Ethiopia’s Amhara region and Eritrean soldiers, both allied with Abiy’s troops. There have been many such reports of soldiers forcing themselves on civilians or demanding sex in exchange for basic supplies.

Eritrean refugees are high at risk. According to Reuters, medical centers in the area are under high pressure for emergency contraception and tests for sexually-transmitted diseases.

Report. No 69: The United States has made clear its position that all Eritrean troops need to leave Tigray immediately citing "Credible reports" had emerged of their involvement in human rights abuses, assaults in refugee camp, sexual violence and looting. The statement says there is “evidence of Eritrean soldiers forcibly returning Eritrean refugees from Tigray to Eritrea.”

Report. No 72: Reported from a source in Mekelle that young women working in the eating places, cafeterias, restaurants and bars are vulnerable to abuse, due to the curfew at 18:00 a.m., leaving the places open only for the soldiers. The girls have no one to protect them.

Report. No 73: Reported that six young girls were raped by ENDF soldiers in Mekelle city and threatened to not report it to anyone or even seek any medical care. But one of them came to get medical help and fled after hearing they were looking for her at her coffee shop (a small cafe like place for drinking traditional coffee) without the termination of her treatment. She said: “when we asked them why they are raping us, while we are all Ethiopians and brothers and sisters, they said your father is Dr. Debretsion and ours is Dr. Abiy. We are not all the same.” Report that women working in the

mill house were raped in Mekelle, kebele 17. The ENDF soldiers went into the establishment, scared the men off and raped the women while they were at work. Report that in Mekelle, 'Ayder' sub city, women aged 18 and 20 were raped by Ethiopian defense forces in broad daylight. A doctor in Axum reported that people are scared to assist and help rape victims. The Eritrean and ENDF soldiers shot people who try to assist when women cry and try to escape the raping soldiers. Not only people who try to help but also people who see the rape scene by accident are shot to death. Because of this, it has become a custom in Adwa and Axum to not give help even when you hear women cry out loud for help in time of rape and danger.

Report 74: Sadistic perpetration of sexual violence reported. Report received that a girl from Abyi Adi was shot 4 times on her hands by a soldier who first went into their home asking where 'woyane' (a term for people in Tigray) is. Her father, a blind man, responded they didn't know and he was ordered to rape his own child. He was taken into another room and beaten by another soldier after he strongly refused. The girl was then ordered 'lawtash'. (This is an offensive term widely used referring to sexual intercourse in the context of violence or rape). When she refused, he fired a shot wounding her left hand small finger and then followed it with three shots on her right arm leaving her now amputated. Reported that a girl from Abyi Adi was presented to the emergency room at Ayder Hospital after being raped and then shot on her thighs multiple times by ENDF soldiers. Report received on another girl from Abyi Adi who was raped by an ENDF soldier. He asked her to go and buy him cigarettes. As she went, he followed her and told her to have sex with him using the term 'lawtash'. When she refused, he hit her leaving her behind unconsciously. It is reported that "she was lucky enough to be brought to Ayder and provided with care, unlike many other girls.

Report 75: Reported that in Humera, a young girl aged 13 was raped by Amhara militia while in her house after being separated from her parents. After being discovered by her family and on her way to the hospital they were all shot and killed before they could reach the hospital.

Report 77: FANA, the Ethiopian government broadcaster, announced that the government has set up a task force to investigate the allegations of sexual violence in Tigray. The task force will be composed of members from the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs (MoWCYA), the Ministry of Defence, and the Federal Attorney General. The task force has arrived in Mekelle to begin investigations.

Report 78: Reported that some parents in Tigray are shaving their daughter's hair off and dressing them as boys to protect them from being raped. The Ethiopian minister for women, Filsan Abdullahi, has confirmed that there are cases of rape in Tigray. A task force deployed to the region confirmed it. The taskforce has however only been able to operate in and around Mekelle, so the number of rape cases will rise.

Report 85: Weyni Abraha, from the Human rights group Yikono, says that rape is part of a strategy to break the people of Tigray. It is a weapon of war: "Many women were raped in Mekelle. This is being done purposely to break the morale of the people, threaten them and make them give up the fight."

The head of the ENDF has denied the claims of rape to the BBC and the interim government has said that the numbers are grossly exaggerated. More incidences of rape are reported in Tigray. Some were perpetrated on underage children. According to a doctor, 4 cases involved 10 year olds.

Report 85: Devex has reported on the conditions that many raped women from Tigray find themselves in after arriving in camps in Sudan. Many of the women have asked to abort the pregnancy, however due to Sudanese legislation, this has been made difficult. Sudan allows abortion for 90 days after the start of the pregnancy, but only if a police report has been submitted and a judge determined that it occurred. These obstacles have led many to seek illegal abortions, which are significantly more dangerous for the health of these women.

Report 95: According to sources, female students from Ayder Referral Hospital College of Health Sciences in Mekelle were raped yesterday by Ethiopian troops while traveling from the library to their dormitories. The raped victims of the College are currently receiving treatment at Ayder Referral Hospital.

Europe External Programme with Africa is a Belgium-based Centre of Expertise with in-depth knowledge, publications, and networks, specialised in issues of peace building, refugee protection and resilience in the Horn of Africa. EEPA has published extensively on issues related to movement and/or human trafficking of refugees in the Horn of Africa and on the Central Mediterranean Route. It cooperates with a wide network of Universities, research organisations, civil society and experts from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda and across Africa. The situation reports can be found [here](#).

Disclaimer: All information in this situation report is presented as a fluid update report, as to the best knowledge and understanding of the authors at the moment of publication. EEPA does not claim that the information is correct but verifies to the best of ability within the circumstances. Publication is weighed on the basis of interest to understand potential impacts of events (or perceptions of these) on the situation. Check all information against updates and other media. EEPA does not take responsibility for the use of the information or impact thereof. All information reported originates from third parties and the content of all reported and linked information remains the sole responsibility of these third parties. Report to info@eepa.be any additional information and corrections.

In order to protect the safety and security of EEPA reporters, the initials of the names of the reporters have been anonymised.

Links of interest

https://www.eepa.be/?page_id=4237

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/ethiopia-108-rape-cases-reported-in-tigray-region/2141616>

<https://www.dw.com/en/anger-and-collective-trauma-scar-ethiopias-tigray-region/a-56794452>

<https://www.facebook.com/DedebitMedia/videos/4013987365280643/>

<https://apnews.com/article/international-news-violence-ethiopia-united-nations-kenya-166e4f47eaeec6e424ba3b773c61e>

<https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/press-release/united-nations-special-representative-of-the-secretary-general-on-sexual-violence-in-conflict-ms-pramila-patten-urges-all-parties-to-prohibit-the-use-of-sexual-violence-and-cease-hostilities-in-the/>

<https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Chapter-7.pdf>

<https://nation.africa/kenya/news/africa/tigray-war-a-tale-of-genocide-rape-starvation-3305392>

<https://www.mo.be/ opinie/conflict-tigray-ooggetuigen-geweld-straffeloosheid?fbclid=IwAR1oLWwACNv3RqT9kGRbwCWNb12sqyzFprMap6USxW4y13vPUCIpcPdGqs8>