



Brief Monitoring Report on the Situation of Civilians in Humera, Dansha and Bissober

The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC/the Commission) is monitoring the situation of civilians in the war affected areas in the Tigray Region and surrounding areas and persons displaced as a result (IDPs).

Following the Commission's investigative mission to Dansha, Humera, and Maikadra from November 14 to November 18, 2020, a second monitoring mission was dispatched to Western Tigray and the bordering Amhara Region from December 15 to December 20, 2020. Although the security situation at the time did not allow the Commission to cover Humera, Maikadra, Dima, Adi Goshu, Rawyan and Berehet as originally planned, the Commission was able to assess the situation of civilians and IDPs from Tigray region in Dansha and Gondar cities. The mission team met with relevant state authorities, visited IDPs in hospitals and temporary shelters and talked to survivors, medical workers, as well as militias and soldiers who took part in the war.

From 31 December 2020 to 5 January 2021, EHRC also sent an investigation mission to the villages of Bissober and Ullaga, in Chercher Woreda of Raya Azebo Zone in the Southern Zone of Tigray, to investigate allegations of civilian killings, injuries, looting, and damage to properties, that took place from 14 to 17 November 2020. The Commission spoke with survivors, families of victims, witnesses and other relevant bodies in the villages.

The findings of the Commission's latest mission, in Mekelle and other parts of Tigray since January 10, 2021, will also inform upcoming reports as it continues to monitor developments in the region and the situation of civilians and internally displaced persons.

Humera

Humera is a city located 500 km from Mekelle and 252 km from Gondar, with a population estimated to be between 30 and 40 thousand.

Humera experienced heavy fighting which lasted for 3 days during the war and heavy artillery was heard. The Commission saw the damages to property and infrastructure in parts of the city, apparently caused by the use of heavy artillery. Although the investigation team received reports of serious damages to the area known as Kebele 2,

the team was unable to access the said area to verify the reports. Reports indicate that there was heavy shelling of Kebele 2 (Kudar sefer), near Mariam Church and a Mosque between November 9th and November 11th, 2020. According to these reports, public spaces and residential houses in Kebele 2 bore the brunt of the damage. The Commission's team also visited Humera Hospital which itself sustained serious damage.

An employee of Humera Hospital informed the investigation team that 92 people, including Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), TPLF forces (Tigray Special Forces) and civilians were killed due to the war. He added that some of them died while receiving treatment at the Hospital. The Commission was not able to verify this information from other sources.

Numerous people, including Humera Hospital staff, have fled the city of Humera. People who have received treatment at the hospital include civilians injured by shrapnel fragments. In Humera Hospital, the investigation team met an elderly man whose leg would have to be amputated due to injuries caused by a flying shrapnel. He was unable to flee with his wife and child and lay immobilized in bed for 3 days before he was found by people who brought him to the Hospital. The Commission later learned that the Hospital was obliged to transfer him to Abrajira Hospital for further treatment which it was unable to provide at the time. A staff of Humera Hospital informed EHRC that all these situations lead him to believe that the war has caused great suffering to civilians.

Residents of Humera report widespread looting of houses and businesses, by a youth group calling itself "Fano", some members of the Amhara Liyu Hayl (Amhara Special Force) and Amhara Militia, a few members of the Ethiopian Defense Force, and some Eritrean soldiers. Looters have also emptied food and grain storages. In addition, the Commission has received multiple accounts from various sources of insults and harassment targeting ethnic Tigrayans.

As one resident lamented, "several people, including some of those sent by the current administration to help, take part in theft – in the absence of an operational justice system, it is only one's own conscience that stops anyone from stealing." The Commission has also received information that although inadequate, some measures are being taken by the Amhara Liyu Hayl and the Militia to restore peace and security in the area, such as putting in place a curfew to address the rise in criminal activities. Curfew for vehicles is 6:00 PM and up to 7:00 pm for pedestrians. But residents report that this has not stopped organized groups of looters from roaming the city at night.

During the Commission's investigation mission to Humera in mid-November 2020, the team observed that the Amhara Liyu Hayl and Militia were providing security support to the city, and as part of the rebuilding efforts, interim administrations were being set up for each district/neighborhood. During this period, the Commission received multiple reports of harassment of residents of Tigrayan ethnic origin. An employee of Humera Hospital who stayed behind when almost all staff had fled, walking up to 7 km on some days to come to work, recounts being often subjected to verbal ethnic

abuse/slurs on the road and that ENDF members who were in the area had to intervene to help when, on one occasion, the situation seemed to escalate.

During the Commission's visit to Humera, the Kassaye Aberra General Hospital (Humera Hospital) did not have enough medical staff (doctors and nurses) or sufficient supply of medicines and medical equipment. The Hospital's pre-war 457 employees, had fled and, in mid-November 2020, the Hospital only had 5 employees, only one of whom was a doctor. The hospital has continued to provide treatment during the war, including to members of Tigray Liyu Hayl, ENDF and to civilians. In addition to the damage resulting from the War, the Hospital's medicine reserves, and laboratory equipment were looted during the security crisis that followed. The Commission's team was also informed that Humera Hospital stopped serving meals to patients as a result of the food shortage in the City. The Hospitals' employees themselves had only one meal per day and were forced to taking food handouts from neighbors and landlords.

Although the Commission could not access Humera during its second visit in mid-December 2020, the Commission has learned that Humera Hospital staff who had fled during the war were gradually returning and that 116 staff have currently resumed work. Of the 116, 5 are doctors, 12 nurses, 3 midwives and 1 Health Officer, while the remaining are administrative and support staff.

However, at the time of the Commission's investigation, the situation in Humera city and the Hospital remains dire. According to residents and Hospital staff members, "Public services and banks have not resumed operation and residents are fleeing to other areas and to Sudan. It is clearly evident that the number of residents in Humera city has declined. Some residents who returned have fled again because they found their homes and businesses looted or occupied by unknown people. Very few businesses have opened, and schools remain shut. People living near Humera Hospital get water from the Hospital's reservoir. Transport services are slowly resuming, but the fares have tripled or more for certain routes".

Humera Hospital staff also told the Commission, "the Hospital refrigerators and equipment are not operating to their full capacity, because of lack of electric power and water services have not resumed and fuel shortage limits the use of the Hospital generator. Ambulances are being used for non-medical purposes. We have provided treatment to women rape victims. There are also reports of unexploded ammunition in parts of the city. Some food aid was provided to all Humera residents, but it was grossly insufficient. The Hospital's staff have not been paid since October 2020, facing severe food shortage as a result. We are hungry, but people come to the Hospital hoping to find food. A colleague once fainted from hunger while cleaning the Hospital floor. We are going through all this because we want to keep the Hospital running. We go home in turns to protect the Hospital at night, but our own houses also get robbed. We find ethnic slurs written on the hospital's wall sometimes."

Dansha

Dansha comprises of 31 rural kebeles and 4 town kebeles. It is located 155 km from Gondar and 105 km from Humera. According to the latest population survey, between 30 and 40 thousand people live in Dansha.

During the Commission's second mission to Dansha, in mid-December 2020, the team received reports of civilian casualties and injuries from members of the interim coordination, survivors and witnesses. Residents informed the Commission that civilians were killed and injured in the crossfire between the warring parties. However, at the time of the Commission's visit the identity of the victims, their address, the extent of injuries and related information such as number of injured and gender was still being compiled. The fact that the deceased were buried outside Dansha also added to the delay in the identification process. The latest information obtained by the Commission put the number of civilians killed at 25 but their identity and the place where they were buried remains unverified.

During its first investigation mission to Dansha in mid-November 2020, the Commission met with ENDF representatives, who confirm that Dansha city went through "a very tense period during the war". The second EHRC mission which travelled to the area in mid-December observed that the security situation in the area had improved. ENDF member the team spoke to at the time indicated that "ENDF was working in a lawful and ethical manner to ensure the protection of the community". While admitting that "there were people who have fled the area fearing for their safety" he explained that "food assistance and other essential provisions to internally displaced persons currently in Dansha is improving".

Although some Dansha residents of Tigray ethnic origin have confirmed that the security situation in the city has improved, they also shared their fear and concern about ethnic-based attacks and "retaliation for what happened Maikadra". They told EHRC that some residents of Dansha have fled to other areas as a result.

According to the interim coordinator of Dansha, "Tigrayans live peacefully in the area, but those residents who felt at risk were provided with transportation to their chosen destinations". Regarding the current situation the coordinator informed the Commission's team, "a platform was set up where residents are encouraged to discuss issues openly in order to facilitate a return to peaceful and respectful co-existence. Nonetheless, we are concerned that TPLF operatives may still attack the woreda to cause discord between residents of Amhara and Tigray ethnic origins."

While it was possible to observe that relative peace had returned to Dansha Woreda, the Commission's team also noted many residents of Tigray ethnic origin still feared ethnic based attacks.

In mid-December 2020, the Commission's team also noted that health centers, transport, telephone, businesses, banks (Dashen and Abay Bank) had resumed operations (the latest

information shows that Abyssinia and Anbessa Bank are now also operational). Residents and the Dansha Woreda administration had also mobilized to collect millet, cotton, sesame, and other harvests which would have been wasted otherwise.

However, public services such as electricity, water, and schools have not been restored. The interim coordinator of Dansha Woreda explained that “the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia (CBE) has not started operation because electric power has not been restored, as a result illegal transfer of money is on the rise, the new Birr notes have not been introduced in the area and the old notes are still circulating.” But he indicated that the Bank is taking steps to resume services.

With regards to the Dansha Health Center, the Commission’s second mission in mid-December 2020 observed that it still faced some challenges. Employees of the Health Center were not paid since October 2020 and some staff had fled the area. The Centre’s own ambulances were not operational, so it had to borrow ambulances from other woredas. Since other government institutions were not yet fully operational and budget not yet allocated, Dansha Health Center had difficulty procuring material. Staff feared a looming shortage of medicines. The lack of electricity also meant that medication and medical equipment were spoiled.

Bissober and Ullaga Villages

Bissober and Ullaga Kebeles (Villages) are located in Chercher Woreda of Raya Azebo a multiethnic population of Amhara, Tigray, Oromo and Afar origins. The capital of Chercher Woreda, also called Chercher is located on the borders between Afar and Tigray region and is about 50 km from Alamata. The current population of Chercher City is estimated at 30,000 while the combined number of people who live in Bissober and Ullaga is estimated at below 3000.

Residents say that since June 2020, the TPLF administration of the time had made its special forces (Liyou Hail) camp in the primary school of Ullaga Kebele with the excuse to “prevent the spread of Covid-19 by controlling travelers from Djibouti coming into Tigray Region through Afar.” Instead, the forces have been digging trenches inside the school and preparing for war as residents explained to EHRC. The Commission’s team was able to visit the school and the trenches therein.

In the early hours of November 14, 2020, TPLF forces and Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) began an exchange of fire that lasted three days. Residents also heard heavy artillery. Witnesses describe seeing members of TPLF forces dressed as civilians fighting from inside residential houses. Residents have shown the Commission’s team houses damaged by bullet holes.

When the exchange of fire intensified, residents began to flee to the neighboring towns of Buta, Meferta and Yalo leaving all their properties behind. Victims describe seeing, along the way, people injured with bullets wounds and unable to flee.

A total of 31 civilians died during the fighting that lasted for three days. Residents explain that the majority of the victims died of bullet wounds during the exchange of fire, some were killed by soldiers participating in the fighting and by other unknown assailants.

The Commission was informed that in Bissober, 24 men and 3 women died, while 9 men suffered bodily injuries. The list of names of victims as compiled by residents is as follows: Zenabe and Abera Gelane; Iyassu Baraki; Tigabu Abraha, Gobeze Tegabu and Reda Tigabu (father and sons); Tadele Bogale, Tequare Arega and Gebre Tadele (husband, wife and son); Tesfaye Abera; Kole Sisay; Tigabu Abera and Abebe Negusu (neighbors); Birhanu Hagezom; Tigabu Hagos and Mesgan Abebe (neighbors); Asmare Asefe; Solomon Zegeye; Serge Tawya; Shambel Kassa and Kibrom Woldeselassie.

Victims in Ullaga, according to list compiled by residents, are Gobeye Reta and Adina Wodajo, who were husband and wife, and Derebe Gezai and Adane Faji.

Although Bissober residents say that most of the victims died in cross fires during the fighting, they describe finding one of the victims, Tesfaye Abera's body with a severed head. Those who coordinated his burial confirm that he was beheaded but they could not confirm by whom. One mother has told the investigation team that her husband and her son were killed by members of ENDF after being wrongly accused of "being TPLF informants." The Commission has also talked to a father who says his son, who had a disability, died in the same manner. The investigation team has also received reports from a few residents who say they were beaten, inside their house or while fleeing, by members of ENDF who wrongly accused them of "giving information to TPLF".

Families of victims say that it was only possible to organize burials for the dead five days after the fighting, on November 19, 2020, when the ENDF cleared the area for residents to return. Some of the victims were discovered only then. Some of the bodies were so decomposed that it was not possible to move them to a proper burial site forcing residents to bury them in the backyard of the victims' houses. The Commission's team was able to visit some of these grave sites.

Residents also told accounts of two pregnant women who faced a particularly difficult situation while fleeing to other towns. One of them went into labor on the road and lost her baby as a result. The long walks on foot put a lot of strain on the second mother but she was nonetheless able to return home to give birth.

EHRC's team also talked to members of the current interim civilian administration, command post representatives and security forces. But having taken up their posts only after the events of November 14, 2020, they did not seem to have full information on what transpired in the villages before they arrived. Residents attest to the fact that the current administration and members of security forces were themselves equally shocked and saddened by accounts of events that took place in the area.

In Bissober, the Commission visited and verified that 104 houses were either completely or partially burned or otherwise damaged by the war. The Ullaga primary school, located

in Bissober, is partially damaged by what appears to be heavy artillery. The Ullaga health center has sustained heavy damage and is no longer operational as a result.

Several civilian commercial and residential properties have also been looted. One resident says that his full grain storage was completely burned down, and his 15 goats stolen. Residents say they came back to the town to find that it has been looted and suspect people who are not from Bissober are responsible.

Current situation of victims and displaced persons

The Interim Administration in Tigray announced that about 2.2 million people in the region are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance as a result the two months long war. Members of the civilian and military leadership, humanitarian organizations and other stakeholders the Commission talked to in Mekelle all agree that the urgent humanitarian needs in the region has reached critical levels.

EHRC team has visited people who have fled to Mekelle city after long journeys on foot and are currently sheltered in various places including schools in the city. Most of the IDPs have reached Mekelle city after the war began and various damages already occurred. Some have received first round of critical humanitarian aid but the majority of them still rely on help from residents and the community. Although most of the IDPs would like to return to their place of residence, they worry about the overall security situation in their respective areas. They also explain that they cannot return without receiving some help to rebuild their lives including damaged houses, cattle and harvests which have either been looted or burned. In terms of various degrees of damage to the civilian infrastructure, although some reconstruction efforts are ongoing, the continued disruption to electricity has impaired the resumption of telecommunications and health services, including public service providers such as financial institutions and mills. Families with relatives in areas of Tigray where telecommunication has not been restored remain without news and disconnected.

The Central Gondar Zone branch of Amhara National Emergency Prevention and Food Security Coordination Office has informed the Commission, including with a letter, on the number of persons displaced from Tigray region and the humanitarian need. The letter states that, 73, 738 persons displaced from Tigray currently sheltered in Dansha, Adiremet, Haker, Humera and Maikadra are without any source of income and in urgent need of food assistance in particular. 2, 135 people sheltered in Ketema Negus as well as other areas and who were civil servants under the former TPLF administration are also in similar situation.

The interim administration in Dansha has explained that the situation of the IDPs who were formerly civil servants has been aggravated by the shortage of cash in the area coupled by the fact that “under the former administration civil servants were forced to deposit their savings at Dedebit Micro Finance. A large portion of the cash available is blocked in this institution and it has not been possible to pay account holders because the former Tigray region administrators destroyed all records including computer hard disks

before they fled.” The IDPs who were former civil servants the Commission talked to also confirmed the situation.

EHRC team made unannounced visits to IDPs sheltered in the Primary and Preparatory School of Dansha city and Azzezo Qebero Meda-Kebele 19 in Gondar city. It found the number of IDPs, a total of 3,136 in both locations, to be consistent with those provided by various government bodies.

The 648 persons displaced from Tigray region currently sheltered in Gondar city received aid only from the city’s residents. IDPs have said that the civil servants and residents of the city have organized themselves by neighborhood to provide them with various food items. The food shortage in Dansha and Humera has been particularly aggravated by the non-resumption of public services which has led to an increase in food prices making it unaffordable to IDPs and residents. The situation is worrying to the overall human rights protection in the areas.

IDPs also said that some non-governmental organizations have provided limited food and household items such as flour, oil and mattresses and access to medical services three times a week. They have also told the Commission that the NGOs have facilitated for pregnant women, people with mental health problems and other gravely ill persons to be referred to Gondar Hospital for treatment.

In Bissober, residents whose houses were burned, are sleeping under makeshift plastic tents set up along streets across the town. Some are either renting or sharing houses with other people. Residents of Bissober and people displaced from Ullaga have received a first round of humanitarian assistance from government consisting of wheat flour and cash. IDPs have also said other humanitarian organizations have provided them with tents, water jerricans, bed covers and other household items.

Recommendations:

- In all four visited areas of Humera, Dansha, Bissober and Ullaga, residents consistently regret the continued lack of security. People of Tigray ethnic origin residing in Dansha and Humera faced harassment. The fact that justice sector bodies have not resumed their regular operations only adds to residents’ sense of insecurity and escalates the risk of human rights abuses. It is therefore imperative for the government to restore security in these areas and take the necessary measures to ensure the protection of the community.
- The crimes allegedly committed by some members of security forces in the areas included in this report need to be investigated and perpetrators held to account.
- It is encouraging that a first round of humanitarian assistance was provided for many of the IDPs and victims visited during these missions. However, the degree of damage and injury the people and the areas sustained makes the humanitarian need still extremely high. EHRC therefore calls on the government, humanitarian

organizations and the people of Ethiopia to exert all efforts in this regard. A redoubling of efforts, including through support from ENDF, is required in particular for areas of Tigray region where the security situation remains unstable.