

ETHIOPIA

Tigray, Ethiopia's Dirty War

By Sergio Ramazzotti



Mekelle, Ethiopia. On June 28, 2021, the Ethiopian army suddenly left town and Tigray Defence Forces troops prepared to enter it. As the news broke in the early evening, people gathered on the street to celebrate.



No winner for one of Africa's bloodiest conflicts

Two million internally displaced persons and one million dead: this is the still provisional toll of the civil war that broke out in Ethiopia in November 2020, when troops from Addis Ababa entered Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, to occupy the region dominated by the separatist TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) movement. After an eight-month military campaign that also involved troops from neighboring Eritrea, deployed alongside the Ethiopian federal army, in late June 2021 TPLF militias managed to recapture much of Tigray and the town of Mekelle, where the Ethiopian army was routed and thousands of soldiers were taken prisoner. It was a partial victory, however: for the next 18 months Mekelle and Tigray remained under siege, without electricity

or telephone, with the main communication routes closed and humanitarian convoys stopped at the border. Tens of thousands of people starved to death as Ethiopian and Eritrean troops resumed the offensive and the conflict raged again until November 2022, when a precarious ceasefire was signed that allowed humanitarian organizations to return to Tigray. While developments in the situation are uncertain, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 precisely for ending the long conflict with neighboring Eritrea, is staking his international reputation and political future on the numerous atrocities committed during this latest military campaign by Eritrean and Ethiopian troops against the civilian population.



The wrecks of military vehicles lie by the road near Adi Esher, some 70 kms south east of Mekelle, in an area heavily affected by combat, militia incursions, mass rape, and starvation due to the blockade imposed by the Ethiopian government after June 2021.



TDF (Tigray Defense Force) ex combatants in a coffee shop in Gijei, a village some 30 kms south east of Mekelle.



Mekelle, Ethiopia. On June 23 2021 the Ayder hospital, one of the three still operational in the whole Tigray and the region's referral hospital, was suddenly flooded with wounded civilians from Togogwa, a small town some 35 kms from Mekelle, whose market was hit on June 22 by an airstrike conducted by Ethiopian forces. The attack left over 60 dead and almost 200 wounded. Ambulances were finally allowed by the Ethiopian army to pick up the wounded people only 29 hours after the attack.

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Ethiopia. Desta Gebremedhin, 32, of Tigray origin, was working in Nairobi, Kenya, as a journalist for the Bbc when the conflict in Tigray broke out. A few weeks later, he decided to join the Tigray Defence Forces troops as a soldier.



The wreck of a tank in the town of Hawzien, near Adigrat.



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Togogwa, Ethiopia. The market of this small town of 1,000 people some 35 kms from Makalle was hit on June 22 by an airstrike conducted by Ethiopian forces. The attack left over 60 dead and almost 200 wounded. Ambulances were finally allowed by the Ethiopian army to pick up the wounded people only 29 hours after the attack.



Mekelle, Ethiopia. On June 29, 2021, one day after the Ethiopian army suddenly left town, Tigray Defence Forces, after approaching the city during the night, entered it in the early morning while people gathered on the street to celebrate the liberation of Tigray.

Tsilaley Gebrehiwez, 68, lost her husband, son and other relatives during the conflict. She lives in the village of Adi Esher, some 70 kms south east of Mekelle, in an area heavily affected by combat, militia incursions, mass rape, and starvation due to the blockade imposed by the Ethiopian government after June 2021.





Mekelle, Ethiopia. On June 29, 2021, one day after the Ethiopian army suddenly left town, Tigray Defence Forces, after approaching the city during the night, entered it in the early morning while people gathered on the street to celebrate the liberation of Tigray.



Mekelle, Ethiopia. The conflict has displaced over 80,000 people from their homes in the vicinity of Mekelle, and an estimated 2 million in the whole of Tigray. About 8,500 of them have been temporarily housed in the 4-story building of the Hadnet secondary school, where they suffer significant shortage of food and water.



Mekelle, Ethiopia. On late afternoon of June 30, 2021, Tigray president entered the regional capital. Later that evening, members of his staff and top military officers of the Tigray Defence Forces gathered at the Northern Star hotel for a celebration dinner.

A view of the city centre through a bullet-pierced window of Mekelle's Ayder Hospital.





Ethiopia. On July 2, 2021, an estimated over 6,000 Ethiopian POWs captured during the last days of the conflict for Mekelle were brought to the city. Most of them were forced to walk through the city, among two wings of Mekelle residents, all the way to the local prison where they would be kept.



Mekelle, Ethiopia. Hagush Gebremedhin, 50, is one of the nurses working at Ayder hospital's One Stop Centre, which takes care of women traumatized by sexual violence. There are several reports of female civilians – among them children – having been raped, sometimes for several days in a row, by Ethiopian or Eritrean army soldiers. In many cases, the rape was carried out by HIV-positive soldiers in order to deliberately infect the victims.



Mekelle, Ethiopia. People gather at a Usaid food distribution centre in downtown Mekelle to get cereals and cooking oil. The conflict has isolated the region of Tigray and food supplies are becoming scarcer by the day.



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Tesfasellasse Medhin, Catholic Bishop of Adigrat, in his office. Throughout the conflict, Medhin was extremely critical on many occasions of the atrocities committed by the belligerent parties.



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Traditional food is prepared every morning for the pediatric ward at Mekelle's Ayder Hospital. The ward receives many patients suffering from malnutrition, a consequence of the 18-months blockade imposed on Tigray by the Ethiopian government.



Mekelle, Ethiopia. Kisanet Gebremichael, 13, with her mother at the burn unit of the Ayder hospital, one of the three still operational in the whole Tigray and the region's referral hospital. Kisanet was severely burned during an airstrike conducted by Ethiopian forces on her village. Doctors say that the nature of the burns suggests the use of chemical weapons, possibly white phosphorous.

Mekelle, Ethiopia. In the outskirts of the city, Tigray Defence Forces militiamen, among which many underage boys and girls, get ready to be deployed towards active frontlines.





A marriage in the village of Adi Esher, some 70 kms south east of Mekelle, in an area heavily affected by combat, militia incursions, mass rape, and starvation due to the blockade imposed by the Ethiopian government after June 2021.



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