



War, massacre and starvation face millions in Ethiopia-Tigray War

Dave Stockton Fri, 12/11/2021 - 12:59

Dave Stockton

According to a report to the United Nations' Security Council, 400,000 people in the Ethiopian federal province of Tigray are facing full-scale famine and a further seven million in northern Ethiopia are desperately in need of food, shelter and medical assistance. It seems 2.2 million people have fled their homes. The death toll is heavily disputed between the warring parties but must by now amount to many thousands. It includes massacres of unarmed youths and women. And the war shows no signs of ending since the atrocities will only inflame the feelings for revenge.

Despite the scale of the suffering, international aid bodies, like UNICEF and Médecins Sans Frontières, have been blocked from sending supplies into Tigray by the year-long war, the government has even detained drivers for these agencies. This 'civil war' is being waged between the central government, headed by the country's prime minister and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Abiy Ahmed, on one side and, on the other, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, TPLF, led by Debretsion Gebremichael.

Huge numbers of refugees have fled across the border into Sudan, already home to large numbers of people displaced by its own internal war and massacres. Large scale rapes, committed by both sides, have been reported by Human Rights Watch.

The war began on November 4, 2020, when the Ethiopian National Defence Forces, ENDF, one of the largest on the African continent, launched a full-scale attack on Tigray, claiming it was in retaliation for a TPLF attack on its northern command base in the Tigrayan capital, Mekelle. Ahmed, prematurely as it transpired, declared victory over the TPLF after his forces occupied the city on November 28, 2020.

With 112 million people, Ethiopia is the second largest state in Africa by size of population. Half its GDP is accounted for by agriculture in two sectors, subsistence farming on small plots, up to 6 acres (2.5 hectares) and cash cropping of the main export, coffee, and sugar cane.

Modern industry, mainly textiles for domestic markets, accounts for only 10 percent of GDP. Before the Covid pandemic and the war, the economy was one of the fastest growing in the region, expanding by an average of 10 percent a year in the decade to 2019, according to the World Bank, and hailed as an 'economic miracle, despite the fact that the country was the third poorest in the world when measured in GDP per capita, with over 50 percent of the population living below the poverty line. Yet the country's national and regional elites have brought this 'miracle' (for some) to a shuddering crash. In August, the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, said the fighting had "drained over a billion dollars from the country's coffers".

The war is a product of long-standing rivalries between the ethnically based military and political elites that governed the country after the ousting of the military regime of the Derg, led by Mengistu Haile Mariam, in 1991. The Derg, based on junior military officers and backed by a radical student movement, had nationalised virtually the whole economy, including expropriating the great feudal landowners who exploited the peasantry.

This led many Stalinists to dub it a 'socialist revolution' and even some Trotskyists (like Ted Grant) hailed it as a 'deformed workers' state' as they had Burma and Syria. Indeed, from the 1960s on, many of Ethiopia's ethno-

linguistic groups did develop guerrilla movements that defined themselves as Marxist-Leninists, generally inspired by Enver Hoxha of Albania rather than Beijing.

For nearly 18 years after the Derg's ouster, Tigrayans dominated Ethiopia's ruling coalition government, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF, even though they comprise only 6 percent of the population. This began to change rapidly in 2018 when Abiy Ahmed, a member of the largest ethnic group, the Oromo, who account for some 35.5 percent of the population, instituted constitutional reforms that weakened the federal character of the state and gave the central government greatly increased powers. At the same time, he drove forward the neoliberal reforms pushed for by the IMF and the United States. For his role in signing a permanent peace agreement with neighbouring Eritrea, he was awarded the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize. This put him in the company of such champions of peace and human rights as Henry Kissinger, Menachem Begin, Barack Obama and Aung San Suu Kyi.

Mobilisations had been building for months before the outbreak of the current war, which is essentially a conflict between the former dominant force, the TPLF, and Ahmed's new Prosperity Party. The TPLF had hoped to elect a Tigrayan to the premiership but, when Ahmed was elected, they went ahead with regional elections in Tigray. Ahmed then refused to recognise these and started to mobilise forces to remove the 'illegitimate' TPLF government. These acts were clearly in defiance of the 1995 constitution which declared Ethiopia a federal state with its component parts having the right to self-determination, up to and including secession.

In reality, this democratic principle has never been applied. Had it been, war might have been avoided. The TPLF, however, was not so much interested in independence as in restoring their domination in Addis Ababa. Equally, Ahmed's priority was to assert control over Tigray, whatever its people thought or voted for. Thus, the war is a product of the utterly undemocratic politics of two rival military elites, set on plundering their own countries and inflaming ethnic chauvinism amongst the peoples to achieve this.

The 11-month war has seen appalling massacres and rapes of women on both sides. Initially, Tigrayan forces withdrew from the cities, waging a guerrilla war through which they rapidly re-organised themselves into an effective fighting force. In the Spring, they began to inflict serious defeats on the government forces, who were eventually driven out of Mekelle and other towns and cities. After forming an alliance with the Oromo Liberation Forces and other defenders of regional autonomy against Ahmed's centralising drive, the TPLF declared that it would lead an advance on Addis. The government called for a levée en masse at huge demonstrations in Addis and a counter-offensive seems to have turned this back.

Neither of the warring sides can be regarded as progressive, the forcible maintenance of the unity of Ethiopia can only lead to reactionary consequences. On the other hand, the country's ethnic Balkanisation, as events in Yugoslavia in the 1990s showed, would also have profound reactionary consequences.

Only if the workers, students, peasants and rank and file soldiers, rebel against and depose their criminal leaders and form councils of elected and recallable delegates can the unity of the country on a democratic and genuinely federal basis be achieved. But that democracy must not be under military tutelage or the domination of the rich business class which itself is constantly playing off the rival imperialists (China and the USA) or the regional powers (Saudi and the UAE) against one another. Their allies will be the workers and peasants of Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia.

Meanwhile, socialists and trade unionists internationally must call for an immediate end to the fighting and atrocities and force the governments of Europe and the USA to send massive food and medical aid with no strings.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/war-massacre-and-starvation-face-millions-ethiopia-tigray-war>