

WAR AFTER PEACE:

A tide of sexual violence washes over Tigray

The Ethiopian region of Tigray accumulates 2,000 dead and almost two million displaced seven months after the offensive of the central government with the support of Eritrea. Amidst this spiral of terror, rape and sexual abuse as a weapon of war are horrifying due to their brutality and systematic nature.

"I witnessed firsthand the ugliness of war in frontline battles. I have seen older men, women, and children trembling in terror under the deadly shower of bullets and artillery shells."

Abiy Ahmed Ali, Ethiopia's current Prime Minister, spoke these words in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. His efforts to end the border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea earned him international recognition. At long last, the twenty years of confrontation that left more than 100,000 dead came to an end.

Now, the African country is waging an internal war, in absolute opacity and with reports of systematic rape of women as a weapon of war and sexual exploitation. The northern region of Tigray, which shares a border with Eritrea and Sudan, has sunk into chaos since last November, when Abiy launched a military offensive against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in which the Ethiopian government restricted access to the press and humanitarian aid to the area. Cuts in

communications and roads make it difficult to obtain and verify information, but the numbers are worrying and point to a humanitarian catastrophe. 1.7 million Tigrayans are estimated to have been displaced according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). In some towns, refugees have outnumbered the local population.



Map of the region. Source: The New York Times

The United Nations World Food Program has warned that a total of 5.2 million people, 91% of Tigray's population, need emergency food

assistance. And amidst this hurricane of hunger, fear and deaths, rapes and cases of sexual exploitation of women have skyrocketed.

“War is the epitome of hell for all involved. [...] I was also a witness to its cruelty and what it can do to people.”

The catalyst for the conflict was an alleged TPLF attack on a military facility, but disagreements between the central administration and the Tigray government dated back to the electoral victory of Abiy Ahmed, who removed several Tigrayans from the government and accused others of corruption and human rights abuses. The TPFL not only controls the Tigray region, but previously held power in the country for 30 years, leading the coalition of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, until massive protests due to the regime's authoritarianism led to the rise of the current head of the Executive.

The fighting between the TPLF rebels and the Ethiopian army lasted just a month. Neighboring Eritrea supported Abiy in the assault and on November 28 the Tigrayan capital of Mekele fell, theoretically putting an end to hostilities.

The reality is that clashes between the Ethiopian forces and allied troops and the TPFL insurgents have not stopped.

Neither have the attacks on the civilian population or the cases of rape or the tide of displaced people stopped.

“War makes for bitter men. Heartless and savage men.”

There is no official data on the number of civilian casualties. A report prepared by the University of Ghent has recorded 2,200 verified deaths, and 8,000 those reported in which the cause could not be confirmed. Both sides have committed human rights abuses but Eritrean troops are responsible for a large proportion.

In March, Abiy Ahmed acknowledged the presence of the neighboring country's armed forces in Tigray for the first time, but assured that they would soon withdraw. He had so far been reluctant to confirm their involvement, in order to maintain a facade of control and security. He also admitted that "atrocities" had been committed in Tigray and assured that soldiers who had raped women or committed acts of war would be held responsible, but also cited "propaganda" by the TPLF.



"I believe that peace is an affair of the heart. Peace is a labor of love."

Smret Kalayu is a twenty-five-year-old woman who ran a coffee shop in the town of Dengelat. The massacre at the hands of Eritrean forces and the fear of facing the same fate as some of her companions forced her to flee. "If there are still Eritreans there, I am not going to go back," she told the Associated Press. "What can I say? They are worse than beasts, I cannot say that they are human beings."

Officially, the war is over. However, Eritrean soldiers have not withdrawn and the female body is their conquest ground.

In times of war, traditional accountability mechanisms collapse, gender-based violence and sexual abuse are normalized and the satisfaction of basic needs is prioritized. There is no place for conversations about gender.

The International Rescue Committee has reported that refugee women are exchanging sex for small amounts of cash: \$ 1.25 for engaging in sexually exploitative relationships. Female-headed households are particularly vulnerable.

There is also an increase in domestic violence. Although gender-based violence was not an isolated phenomenon in the community, respondents to the report perceived higher rates of intimate partner violence, including verbal, physical and emotional abuse perpetrated by their partners.

Sexual and reproductive health is also highly endangered. Looting and vandalism of hospitals and medical centers by Eritrean militias exacerbate the situation of an already dilapidated health system. A woman who wants to receive medical assistance for must overcome three obstacles: the journey, the lack of resources and personnel, and soldiers. The cutting of roads and highways delays the journey of pregnant women who need medical help, which sometimes leads to giving birth in terrible conditions or the death of the woman and the child. If they do manage to get there, services are limited as a large part of the staff has fled and the facilities have been seriously damaged.

International calls for the withdrawal of Eritrean troops from Tigray and for the free flow of humanitarian aid are growing. The United States has already imposed restrictions. And the brutality of gang rapes and massacres of civilians shatters any semblance of control of the Nobel Peace Prize winner.

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