The 4th Universal Periodic Review: War-Related Sexual Violence (WRSV) in Ethiopia's Tigray Region

Submitting Evidence on Gross Violations of Human Rights, War Crimes, Crime against Humanity, and Genocide.

5 April 2024

In light of the significant shifts in circumstances following the submission of the 2019 Universal Periodic Review (UPR) recommendations for Ethiopia, it is no longer feasible to base interventions solely on these guidelines for addressing the current situation. The outbreak of a genocidal war in Tigray, which began in November 2020, after the UPR submission, has surpassed the realm of policy adjustments or minor infractions. As a result, the primary focus must now shift towards alleviating the urgent and profound humanitarian crisis stemming from this conflict.

Acknowledging the structural shortcomings of the UPR mechanism, it's clear that the situation in Ethiopia today demands greater international attention and action than the UPR mechanism is able to provide. Rather than conscientiously addressing the UPR recommendations, Ethiopia has plunged into a state of conflict, resulting in the tragic loss of numerous civilian lives across various regions of the country. The dire situation in Tigray, where the conflict has inflicted unimaginable suffering and led to the deaths of over a million individuals, demands immediate and steadfast attention.

Given the unprecedented scale of human rights violations targeting ethnic Tigrayans in Tigray and beyond, our assessment and subsequent recommendations must be tailored to confront the gravity of this crisis. Swift and decisive measures must be implemented to halt the perpetration of atrocities and provide swift relief to those affected by this catastrophic conflict. Furthermore, it is imperative to address the broader context of ongoing atrocities in Tigray and other parts of Ethiopia, underscoring the urgent need for international attention and action.

Introduction

War-related sexual violence (WRSV) in Ethiopia's Tigray region has inflicted profound suffering, with women and girls disproportionately affected by its devastating consequences. Studies have revealed that WRSV encompasses various forms of violence, including sexual, psychological, physical, and economic violence (such as the denial of resources). Among the 5,171 women surveyed, a staggering 43.3% reported experiencing gender-based violence (GBV), with specific rates of sexual violence affecting 9.7%, physical violence 28.6%, psychological violence 40.4%, and rape 7.9% of women of reproductive age.[1]

> *One particularly harrowing testimony is that of a survivor who endured the cutting of her vagina and burning of her body, epitomizing the extreme brutality inflicted upon women and girls amidst the conflict in Tigray.*[2]

Throughout the war on Tigray, women and girls have been subjected to not only physical violence but also psychological and emotional abuse, alongside deprivation of crucial resources. They faced threats of severe physical or sexual violence, intimidation, and degradation through derogatory language.[3] Adding to the trauma, they were denied access to essential health and transportation services, with reports indicating that over 80% of health facilities were destroyed during the war.[4] Compounding this crisis, the denial of transportation services to zonal cities deprived survivors of timely medical care, exacerbating their suffering. This lack of access increased the risk of forced impregnation and led to the progression of

---

[1] Fisseha G, Gebrehiwot TG, Gebremichael MW, et al. War-related sexual and gender-based violence in Tigray, Northern Ethiopia: a community-based study. BMJ Glob Health 2023;8:e010270. doi:10 available at https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/war-related-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-tigray- northern-ethiopia-community-based-study

[2] TIC In-depth Interview with a survivor from Central zone undertaken on December 14, 2023

[3] BMJ Glob Health. Published online 2023 Jul 21. War-related sexual and gender-based violence in Tigray, Northern Ethiopia: a community-based study https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10364179/

[4] Addis Standard. News: Two-year war leaves 86% of Tigray's healthcare facilities devastated on October 5, 2023 https://addisstandard.com/news-two-year-war-leaves-86-of-tigrays-healthcare-facilities-devastated-new-report/

infections into chronic conditions.[5] Many impregnated women, after rape, undergo 'back-street' abortions that put their lives at risk.[6] Consequently, survivors were coerced into bearing the children of their assailants, perpetuating their psychological anguish.

The majority of sexual violence survivors endured rape by multiple perpetrators, with a significant percentage experiencing gang rape, particularly among young women aged eight to 69.[7] Reported consequences of GBV include physical trauma, sexually transmitted infections, HIV infection, unwanted pregnancy, and depression, with a disheartening 89.7% of survivors lacking access to post-violence medical or psychological support[8]. These findings, published in various reports by Amnesty International[9] , Refugees International[10], and The Lancet[11], underscore the systematic nature of WRSV and the urgent need for accountability and justice.

The ongoing war on Tigray has inflicted severe and multifaceted repercussions on women and girls, with widespread reports of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). The Tigray Inquiry Commission (hereinafter TIC) has investigated and documented that survivors have endured a range of abuses, including physical violence, psychological trauma, sexual assault, resource deprivation, rape, and sexual slavery. Testimonies from various areas of Tigray reveal the brutal methods employed by perpetrators, such as beatings with firearms, knives, electric cables, and stones, as well as slapping, pinching, and hair-pulling. Moreover, survivors have recounted instances of torture, such as eye gouging, fingernail extraction, and burning with hot, sharp materials, particularly within detention centers. Additionally, perpetrators have resorted to chemical assaults, burning, cutting, and even causing fatalities as forms of physical violence.

Consequently, survivors have grappled with a myriad of physical and psychological challenges, including difficulty in performing daily tasks such as carrying heavy loads and fetching water. They have reported impediments in speech, hearing, mobility, eating, sitting, and standing, along with injuries to various body parts such as the head, chin, tongue, neck, hand, and leg. These injuries range from joint dislocations to swelling across different body regions, exacerbating the already dire situation.

Gender-based violence, sexual abuse, and rape were also utilized as weapons of war by the federal government of Ethiopia, the Eritrean government, Amhara militias, and vigilant groups. Assessments of wartime sexual violence survivors conducted by the Dr. Denis Mukwege Foundation, an international human rights organization, revealed that out of 125 women and girls providing information about their attackers at the one-stop center in Shire between November 2020 and June 2021, 59 reported being gang-raped by armed forces personnel. Additionally, 2,204 survivors sought services for sexual violence at health facilities, including hospitals and health centers, across Tigray during the same period, from

---

[5] BMJ Glob Health. War-related sexual and gender-based violence in Tigray, Northern Ethiopia: a community-based study on On July 21, 2023 https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10364179/

[6] Ibid.

[7] OJAH PHR. Tigray, Ethiopia: Conflict-related Sexual Violence Widespread and Systematic Even After Truce on August 24, 2023 https://phr.org/news/tigray-ethiopia-conflict-related-sexual-violence-widespread-and-systematic-even-after-truce/

[8] Relief Web. War-related sexual and gender-based violence in Tigray, Northern Ethiopia: a community-based study on 21 Jul 2023 https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/war-related-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-tigray- northern-ethiopia-community-based-study

[9] Amnesty International Report 2022/2023 - The State of the World's Human Rights https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/WEBPOL1056702023ENGLISH.pdf

[10] Refugees International Alarmed by Humanitarian Crisis in Tigray, Effects of Conflict-related Sexual Violence on November 27, 2023 https://www.refugeesinternational.org/statements-and-news/refugees-international-alarmed-by-humanitarian-crisis-in-tigray-effects-of-conflict-related-sexual-violence/

[11] The Lancet. Conflict-related sexual violence continues in Tigray, Ethiopia on August 24, 2023 https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(23)01734-8/abstract

November 2020 through June 2021.[12]

The Genocidal Strategy: War-Related Sexual Violence in Tigray

War-related sexual violence (WRSV) in Tigray stands as a harrowing testament to the genocidal intent behind the atrocities committed against ethnic Tigrayan girls and women.

One chilling account involves 18-year-old Monaliza Abrha, who bravely fought off Eritrean soldiers attempting to rape her, only to suffer gunshot wounds resulting in the amputation of her arm and leg[13]. The brutality of these acts reflects a sinister motive aimed at eradicating the Tigrayan identity. Al Jazeera's exposé, "*A Tigrayan womb should never give birth*,"[14] unveils the horrific ordeal of Akberet, a resident of Humera, who endured unspeakable agony as her assailants inserted a scorching metal rod into her genitals, declaring, "*Your womb gives birth to woyane [derogatory term for the TPLF]. A Tigrayan womb should never give birth.*"[15] Such heinous acts, including the insertion of objects like nails and gravel into survivors' genitals, render them infertile, contravening Article II (d) of the Genocide Convention.

Amnesty International interviewed 63 survivors, revealing horrific accounts of soldiers forcibly inserting metal objects into survivors' vaginas and incidents of HIV transmission. One survivor, Letay (name changed for protection), described her experience: "*Three men came into the room [...] They raped me one after the other […] I was four months pregnant; I don't know if they realized I was pregnant. I don't know if they realized I was a person*." Another survivor, Nigist, who was also pregnant, was raped by three men in front of her child. Among the survivors, twenty-eight identified the perpetrators as Eritrean soldiers, while others were believed to be Ethiopian government soldiers or from the Amhara region.[16]

Testimonies from witnesses further corroborate the genocidal intent behind these barbaric assaults. Dr. Tedros, a Tigrayan refugee treating rape survivors in Hamdayt, Sudan, recounts how Amhara forces explicitly aim to alter victims' identities, intending to "*Amharanize them or at least leave their Tigriyna status*" as part of a broader agenda to "*cleanse the bloodline*."[17] Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch's collaborative research provides additional evidence, with Amhara forces threatening a raped woman, stating, "*If you were male, we would kill you, but girls can make Amhara babies*," exemplifying the targeted violence against Tigrayan women amidst the broader campaign of genocide aimed at eradicating the Tigrayan population. The survivors who have reported to the TIC have spelled out the specific intention the perpetrators have acted with. They revealed in the course of inflicting the violence, the perpetrators were saying, "*It is Time to destroy all Tigrayans. You have nowhere to go; now is your end; you will not give birth again. We will not allow you to have a Tigrayan child. This has to stop; we have to destroy your race. We came here to eliminate all Tigrayans. We have to see a Tigrayan-free world. This is the womb that produces Woyane/Junta. It has to be destroyed. Unless we do this, your son and grandson will continue troubling us. We have to rest by destroying it."*

Another brutal aspect of the war is the systematic use of disease to inflict conditions aimed at physical destruction. Survivors' accounts reveal that perpetrators systematically use Sexually Transmitted

---

[12] Dr. Denis Mukwege. UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN ETHIOPIA. Vol. 1, Research report. 2022.

[13] Al Jazeera Staff. (2021, March 1). Trauma, anger as Tigrayans recount Eritrea troops' 'grave crimes.' Al Jazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/1/we-are-dying-tigrayans-speak-of-abuse-by-eritrean-troops

[14] Kassa, L. (2021, April 21). 'A Tigrayan womb should never give birth': Rape in Tigray. Sexual Assault News | Al Jazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/21/a-tigrayan-womb-should-never-give-birth-rape-in-ethiopia-tigray

[15] Ibid.

[16] Women in Foreign Policy, Sexual Violence in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia available at http://www.womeninforeignpolicy.org/foreign-policy-career-newsletter-archive/2021/12/15/sexual-violence-in-the-tigray-region-of-ethiopia

[17] Feleke, B. E. M. (2021, March 22). "Practically a genocide": Doctors say rape being used as tool of war in Ethiopia. CNN. https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/19/africa/ethiopia-tigray-rape-investigation-cmd-intl/index.html

Infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS, as weapons. A 17-year-old named Selam and 17 others were gang-raped for three days by Eritrean soldiers. When Selam brought contraceptives and HIV drugs, the soldiers callously responded, "*Why the hell did you want this? We want you to be sick. That's why we are here. We are here to make you HIV positive*."[18] Similarly, the TIC has identified a significant number of survivors suffering STIs, predominantly HIV. In a certain Woreda where around 210 survivors have reported rape, 57 of them have tested positive for HIV. In the absence of access to health services, the perpetrators were attacking the survivors to slowly and silently destroy them. The perpetrators have committed such acts intending to create conditions of life that were calculated to bring about physical destruction of the same. This could be collected from the fact that perpetrators were telling the survivors, "*If you were HIV-negative, it is nice to me you have it now. I don't need to kill you; suffer longer."*

Despite the duty of states to hold perpetrators accountable for their alleged crimes, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed downplayed the acts in parliament, stating, "*For [Tigrayans], it is their women who are raped. But for us, it is our soldiers who were assaulted by daggers.*"[19]

It is crucial to address several issues regarding the Prime Minister's statement. First, he denies that Tigrayan women are his citizens, whom he would legally be responsible for protecting. The Ethiopian forces have used similar language, telling a survivor, "*Your father is Dr. Debretsion, and ours is Dr. Abiy. We are not the same*," perpetuating an 'us' versus 'them' mentality. Second, the Prime Minister's speech encourages perpetrators to continue raping women as retaliation for the "*attack on Northern Command*" at the war's onset. Third, he denies accountability and justice by promoting impunity. Fourth, and most importantly, he acknowledges that his army and its allies are using rape as a weapon of war, yet he is unwilling to prevent and punish those who commit the crime.[20]

In an interview with BBC, Berhanu Jula, chief of the ENDF, denied allegations of massive rape in Tigray, stating, "*Ethiopian defense forces don't rape. They aren't bandits. They are government forces. And government forces have ethics and rules of engagement.*"[21]

Similarly, Yemane Gebremeskel, Minister of Information of Eritrea, told the Telegraph, "Eritrean soldiers have never been accused of rape. All the fabricated stories - which are alien to our culture and laws - are peddled to cover up the crimes of the TPLF, which started the war." It is despite the massive and brutal rape incidents that Yemane denied that Eritrean soldiers do not rape Tigrayans. In the investigations conducted so far, Eritrean soldiers are repeatedly accused of rape as the other perpetrators.

Unveiling the Data: War-Related Sexual Violence in Tigray

According to reports, Tigrayan girls and women, from the age of 4 to 89 years old, including nuns, have been subject to brutal rape and sexual violence. The Washington Post reported that more than 100,000 Tigrayan girls and women have been raped during two years of the war, according to research conducted by a researcher at Columbia University.[22] Many have argued that rape has been used as a weapon of war

[18] Kassa, L., & Pujol-Mazzini, A. (2021, March 27). 'We're here to make you HIV positive': Hundreds of women rush to Tigray hospitals as soldiers use rape as weapon of war. The Telegraph. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/women-andgirls/make-hiv-positive-hundreds-women-rush-tigray-hospitals-soldiers/

[19] Zehabesha News. (2021, March 23). Ethiopia: ሰበር - "ብዙ ሰው ኢትዮጵያን አያውቃትም" - ዶ/ር ዐቢይ አህመድ አሁን በፓርላማ | Dr Abiy Ahmed's Speech [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8BBCfRMFkg

[20] BBC News. (2021, February 15). Ethiopia's Tigray crisis: "I lost my hand when a soldier tried to rape me." https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55832711

[21] BBC News. (2021, February 15). Ethiopia's Tigray crisis: "I lost my hand when a soldier tried to rape me." https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55832711

[22] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/26/ethiopia-tigray-rape-survivors-stigma/

to inflict lasting physical and psychological damage on women and girls in Tigray.[23] Thus, acts of sexual violence were part of the genocidal strategy intended to prevent births within the group by damaging reproductive organs and infecting diseases such as STIs and HIV. A wide range of reports have also demonstrated that rape survivors suffer significant physical and mental health complications. In this brutal war, sexual violence has been extensively used as a weapon of war.[24] TIC has discovered that post-traumatic psychological disorders emerged as a common consequence for survivors of the conflict, with many enduring elevated levels of distress, including severe depression and anxiety.

Regarding sexual violence, the comprehensive report by the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (UN-ICHREE) unveiled staggering figures, indicating that over ten thousand women fell victim to rape during the war, with the actual number likely surpassing this estimate.[25] The report also confirmed the immense scale of violence affecting individuals across all age groups, ethnicities, and religious affiliations in Tigray. Gang rapes emerged as a prevalent and pervasive form of sexual violence, with women and girls enduring captivity as sexual slaves for weeks or even months. Alarmingly, a consistent pattern was observed in the perpetration of gang rapes by enemy forces throughout Tigray, with an average of four perpetrators brutally assaulting one woman or girl. Shockingly, some survivors reported experiencing multi-perpetrator rape involving up to fifty assailants, particularly prevalent in cases of sexual enslavement.

A conservative estimate places the number of girls and women raped in the first five months of the war at 10,000.[26]

> *A 30-year-old Tigrayan woman who endured targeted sexual violence in Tigray, Ethiopia, alongside her family since 2016 G.C. Their livelihood, including a tractor for farming, was destroyed, forcing the survivor and her aunt to flee to Sudan in July 2020, leaving behind her husband and son. Upon returning to Tigray with her aunt, conflict erupted, and Eritrean troops arrived in her town. She and her blind father remained at home, where soldiers brutally attacked her, mutilating her genitals and setting her ablaze. Despite surviving the ordeal, she suffers severe physical and emotional trauma. Traditional treatments failed, and she only received medical care when the Tigray Defense Forces regained control. However, her genital mutilation remains unhealed, and she faces ongoing challenges accessing healthcare and coping with the uncertainty of her family's fate.*[27]

The report, conducted jointly by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) and the Organization for Justice and Accountability in the Horn of Africa (OJAH), meticulously analyzed 304 medical records documenting instances of conflict-related sexual violence from healthcare facilities throughout Tigray. Among these records, a staggering 128 cases indicated incidents of rape occurring subsequent to the agreement to cease hostilities following two years of civil war.[28]

---

[23] Amnesty's Secretary Agnes Callamard available at https://www.amicidiadwa.org/en/amnesty-stupro-come-arma-di-guerra-in-tigray-le-testimonianze-nel-report/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CIt's%20clear%20that%20rape%20and,Callamard%2C%20Amnesty%20International's%20Secretary%20General

[24] Nichols, M. (2021, April 16). Sexual violence being used as weapon of war in Ethiopia's Tigray, U.N. says. Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sexual-violence-being-used-weapon-of-war-ethiopias-tigray-un-says-2021-04-15/

[25] International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia: Comprehensive investigation findings and legal determinations, Issued on 13 October 2023. The UN-ICHREE provided so based on combined data from seven health centres in Tigray between the onset of the conflict and July 2023. However, 15,805 survivors reported to the one-stop- centres until January 2024.
https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/09/ethiopia-nearly-one-year-after-ceasefire-un-experts-warn-ongoing-atrocities

[26] APNews.UN experts say Ethiopia's conflict and Tigray fighting left over 10,000 survivors of sexual violence onSeptember 18, 2023 https://apnews.com/article/ethiopia-tigray-war-crimes-sexual-violence-c2f47284aa80f164cb822f716cc2a0f6

[27] TIC In-depth interview with a survivor from Central zone undertaken on December 14, 2023

[28] The Guardian. Rape still a weapon of war in Tigray months after peace deal - Medical records from across the region show sexual violence continues to be used 'to intimidate and terrorise communities' on August 25, 2023
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/25/still-a-weapon-of-war-in-tigray-months-after-peace-deal

The survivors of sexual violence documented in the report spanned a wide age range, from eight to 69 years old. The majority of cases (76%) involved gang rapes, while ten accounts detailed individuals who were held captive and subjected to rape by multiple assailants. Additionally, numerous patients recounted the tragic murder of family members, including children, either before, during, or after their assault. It's worth noting that in nearly all instances (96%), the perpetrators were identified as belonging to military and paramilitary groups.[29]

> *One particularly poignant testimony comes from a lactating survivor who endured over two months of sexual slavery.[30] Her harrowing account vividly illustrates the horrors faced by women and girls in conflict zones, emphasizing the urgent need for international intervention to protect the rights and safety of civilians trapped in such dire circumstances. This case is a stark example of grave human rights violations. It underscores the imperative for comprehensive support and intervention to address the multifaceted challenges confronting survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.*

Sexual violence encompasses intentional actions that violate an individual's autonomy over their sexuality. In the context of Tigray, women and girls, including minors and pregnant individuals, are subjected to rape by either individual perpetrators or groups. Shockingly, these heinous acts sometimes occur in front of the victim's own children or relatives.[31] A harrowing testimony from a woman who experienced gang rape in western Tigray in November 2020 illustrates the brutality endured by survivors. She recounted to Amnesty International: "They raped me one after the other... I don't know if they realized I was pregnant. I don't know if they realized I was a person."[32]

> *Similar to lactating women, pregnant women were also unable to escape the brutality of multi-perpetrator rape. Both quantitative and qualitative data collected by TIC attest to the merciless nature of these attacks, often resulting in miscarriages and preventing survivors from carrying their pregnancies to term. The following testimony provides insight into the harrowing experiences of a survivor who endured multi-perpetrated rape while nine months pregnant.[33]*
>
> *The survivor, a pregnant woman in her sixth month, resided in Western Tigray. On December 06, 2020, a war erupted in her town, compelling her to seek refuge in the nearby woods, following other residents attempting to safeguard their lives. Amidst the chaos, militias from Amhara and self-proclaimed armed individuals known as Fano pillaged and set ablaze the properties and homes of the townsfolk.*
>
> *In the turmoil, the survivor realized that crucial documents for her children were left behind in her home. Despite the danger, she courageously returned to retrieve them. However, upon re-entering her house, she found herself targeted by assailants from an unidentified direction, sustaining a gunshot wound to her uterus that caused her to collapse. As the perpetrators continued their rampage, setting fire to Tigrayan residences, the survivor's own home became engulfed in flames, resulting in burns to her leg.*

---

29 Ibid.

30 TIC In-depth Interview with a survivor from North West zone on June 6, 2023

31 The Green Political Foundation; Sexual Violence in the conflict in the Northern Etiopia, October 28, 2022 available at https://www.boell.de/en/2022/10/28/sexualisierte-gewalt-im-konflikt-nordaethiopien

32 Amnesty International; "I DON'T KNOW IF THEY REALIZED I WAS A PERSON", RAPE AND OTHER SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE CONFLICT IN TIGRAY, ETHIOPIA, August 11, 2021 available at https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/4569/2021/en/

33 TIC interview with a survivor from the western zone of Tigray on December 08, 2023

Fortunately, bystanders intervened, rescuing her from the inferno. However, amidst the chaos, access to medical assistance was scarce as people fled and health facilities ceased operations. Left with few options, she sought refuge in a nearby church, where a compassionate nun tended to her injuries using traditional herbal remedies. For three months, she remained under the care of the nun, enduring both physical and emotional trauma as she recovered from her wounds.

Amidst the ongoing conflict, she endeavored to seek refuge in a safer location where she could give birth. Joining forces with others, she embarked on a journey to reach this sanctuary. However, their progress was abruptly halted when a group of Eritrean soldiers, consisting of six males and one female, intercepted their vehicle. The soldiers forcibly detained the driver and subjected her to a barrage of insults before dragging her from the vehicle to the ground.

Demanding information about her origins, the soldiers subjected her to physical violence, slapping and beating her as she showed them the wounds inflicted during previous attacks. Four of the soldiers then took turns raping her, while a fifth assaulted her with the butt of his gun before committing the same heinous act. The sixth soldier inflicted further pain by beating her on the back and head with his weapon, using derogatory language to demean her due to the unpleasant odor emanating from the wounds on her leg.

Adding to the horror, the female soldier documented the brutal assault on her mobile phone while also physically restraining her abdomen, knowing full well that she was pregnant. Eventually, the driver was released, and they resumed their journey towards their intended destination. Tragically, amid their travels, the survivor suffered a miscarriage, a devastating consequence of the brutal assault she endured at the hands of the Eritrean soldiers.

A recent report by Refugees International, led by Senior Fellow Sarah Miller, revealed that during the war in Tigray, an estimated 40–50% of Tigrayan girls and women experienced gender-based violence, with over 80% reporting rape and nearly 70% experiencing brutal gang rape by armed groups.[34] Another report by the World Health Organization (WHO) found that in Tigray, 86% of health service delivery units have suffered structural damage, with 71% of medical equipment partially nonfunctional. Additionally, 28 health facilities have been destroyed completely, leaving 232 facilities unusable. Based on conservative estimates derived from the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) for Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH), a framework commonly utilized by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), it was projected that more than 26,000 women and girls would seek clinical care for sexual violence in Tigray in 2021.[35]

The evidence presented in Tigray's genocidal war underscores a disturbing pattern of widespread and systematic sexual violence perpetrated by men in uniform. Mark Lowcock, the U.N.'s emergency relief coordinator, highlighted one such account during his briefing to the United Nations Security Council on April 15, 2021. He recounted the harrowing experience of an internally displaced woman who sought refuge in Shire. According to Lowcock, the woman revealed that she and her family had fled their town at the onset of the conflict, hiding in the forest for six days. During this time, she gave birth, but tragically, her baby passed away shortly afterward, coinciding with the death of her husband. Continuing her journey, she encountered four Eritrean soldiers who subjected her to rape in front of her other children throughout the night and into the following day.[36]

[34] Addis standard issued on December 7, 2023 available at https://addisstandard.com/analysis-tigrayan-victims-of-horrific-sexual-violence-turn-to-holy-water-in-search-of-healing/

[35] International Society for Human Rights available at https://ishr.org/tigray-rape-as-weapon-of-war-in-tigray-ethiopia/

[36] Foreign Policy. In Tigray, Sexual Violence Has Become a Weapon of War available at https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/27/in-tigray-sexual-violence-has-become-a-weapon-of-war/

The joint investigation report released on November 3, 2021, by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) concerning human rights violations in Tigray during the armed conflict highlighted a significant increase in the utilization of services for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) survivors. Data provided by Ethiopia's Ministry of Women, Children, and Youth and the Ministry of Health from November 2020 to May 2021 indicated a total of 1,324 visits to hospitals in various cities and towns of Tigray, including Mekelle, Adigrat, Axum, Adwa, Shire, and Maichew, by survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Additionally, information obtained by Human Rights Watch in October from the Tigray Bureau of Health revealed that 2,204 survivors sought services for sexual violence at health facilities, encompassing hospitals and health centers, across Tigray from November 2020 through June 2021.[37]

The United Nations aid chief informed the Security Council that sexual violence is being utilized as a weapon of war in Ethiopia's Tigray region.[38]

It has been discovered that perpetrators of sexual violence have resorted to inserting foreign objects into the vaginas of survivors, either before or after committing rape. These perpetrators employ various types of foreign objects, distinct from their own bodies, with the intention of dehumanizing, humiliating, and inflicting deliberate harm upon the survivors' reproductive organs. These objects include pieces of razors or blades, military knives, sand, hard soil, tissue paper, condoms, nails, sharp and hot metallic materials, sticks, rough stones, dirty cloth, rubber, plastic, and used tissue paper. Such foreign materials are commonly inserted into both the vagina and anus of the victims, leading to severe damage and infertility of their reproductive organs. The brutality of the perpetrators extends to mutilating the genitalia of the survivors with sharp objects, exacerbating their physical and psychological trauma.

> *One survivor recounted an instance where the perpetrators inserted a necklace into her vagina following the rape, illustrating the extreme and degrading methods employed by these assailants.*[39]
>
> *It was on January 13, 2021, around 4 in the morning; the survivor was in a hospital taking care of her disabled 24-year-old son. 20 soldiers came, and 10 of them took a young lady that was there. The remaining ten cut the survivor's hair and ripped off her clothes. Then they started raping her turn by turn in front of her three years old daughter and 24 years old disabled son for hours. She was conscious until 7 of the soldiers raped her. But after that, she was rendered unconscious, and she is not sure whether three of them raped her or not. She bleeds heavily. They hit her disabled son and forced him to watch while his mom was gang raped. In addition, one of them molested her three years old daughter by inserting his finger into her vagina. As a result, her kid has sustained grave injury in her vagina and suffers from severe mental health problems.*
>
> *After the incident, she went to her family's village. After a month, She developed a fistula, so she went to the hospital. The hospital where she was admitted has referred her to Ayder Hospital. She got treatment there and returned to the village. However, the pain in her womb was not getting any better. There was a clinic nearby the town. She visited there and met a nurse who told her about her condition. The nurse checked her womb, and she found a silver necklace that used to belong to her daughter and some metal objects inserted in there. The nurse took them out, and after that, her pain got better.*

[37] Human Rights Watch "I Always Remember That Day" Access to Services for Survivors of Gender-based Violence in Ethiopia's Tigray Region issued on November 9, 2021, available at https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/11/09/i-always-remember-day/access-services-survivors-gender-based-violence-ethiopias

[38] Reuters. Sexual violence being used as a weapon of war in Ethiopia's Tigray region, U.N. says, April 15, 2021 available at https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sexual-violence-being-used-weapon-war-ethiopias-tigray-un-says-2021-04-15/

[39] TIC In-depth interview with a survivor from Eastern zone on December 06, 2023

Her daughter used to cry whenever she peed. She also has developed mental health problems, and she has to take medication every day. The survivor is now HIV positive as a result of the gang rape. She still feels the pain of the rape and beating she sustained. She has now to live with terrible headaches, anxiety, and confusion as a result of her experience. She says she doesn't have a stable mind since the time of the rape. Her daughter is also in constant fear and has severe trauma.

According to a study published in The Lancet commentary[40], the findings indicate that the acts of sexual violence documented in Tigray, Ethiopia, were not isolated or random occurrences but rather a systematic use of rape as a weapon of war. "They took her to their camp and raped her for six months," one medical record cited by the study says. The youngest girl raped was eight years old. Overall, 76% of the 304 women and girls whose cases were reviewed were sexually assaulted by multiple people, often three or more. One woman was assaulted by 19 men. In 94% of all cases, a condom was not used. Many perpetrators also wielded guns, sticks, or knives. Some women and girls were abducted for repeated assaults.

Almost all the women and girls said their attackers appeared to be members of a military group, often from neighboring Eritrea, whose soldiers fought alongside Ethiopian forces, despite the CoHA agreement, remain in parts of western and northern Tigray. At least 128 sexual assaults occurred after the peace agreement was signed last November, according to the study, which looked at records from the start of the conflict in November 2020 through this June.[41] According to the ICHREE report, interviewees have confirmed ongoing challenges in accessing sufficient healthcare, citing shortages of medicine and medical supplies as major obstacles. The situation regarding medical treatment was described as dire, both during the conflict and following the CoHA agreement. Interviewees informed the Commission that they were left with no alternative but to resort to traditional remedies, such as holy water, in attempts to treat illnesses, including those resulting from instances of sexual violence.[42]

Recommendations for Ethiopia

Acceptance of International Norms: Ethiopia must adhere to international human rights conventions and norms, ensuring compliance with standards aimed at preventing and addressing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in conflict situations. This entails taking concrete steps to uphold the rights enshrined in these conventions and effectively combatting any violations perpetrated by government forces or affiliated groups.

To incorporate the survivors' objectives into the recommendations, we have aligned them with the overarching goals of seeking justice, facilitating healing, ensuring education, and amplifying women's

[40] The Lancet. Conflict-related sexual violence continues in Tigray, Ethiopia on August 24, 2023 https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(23)01734-8/abstract

[41] PHR OJAH. Broken Promises: Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Before and After the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in Tigray, Ethiopia, August 24, 2023 https://phr.org/our-work/resources/medical-records-sexual-violence-tigray-ethiopia/

[42] International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia: Comprehensive investigation findings and legal determinations, Issued on 13 October 2023.

voices.

Seeking Justice for Survivors of Sexual Violence:

- Prioritize holding accountable not only the direct perpetrators but also the high-ranking individuals who ordered the commission of sexual violence against Tigrayan women. True justice entails bringing cases against these high-level individuals and providing appropriate compensation to survivors, enabling them to rebuild their lives.

Facilitating the Healing of Survivors:

- Allocate resources for trauma management training and support programs tailored to survivors of sexual violence. These initiatives should focus on equipping survivors with coping mechanisms and facilitating their healing process. Furthermore, survivors should be empowered to disseminate these lessons within their community, educating other women and fostering a culture of support and resilience.

Ensuring Education for Women and Girl Survivors:

- Recognize the importance of education as a pathway to recovery and empowerment for survivors of sexual violence. Advocate for the restoration of educational opportunities for women and girls affected by the conflict in Tigray. Commit to providing support and resources to facilitate their return to school and ensure their right to education is upheld.

Amplifying Women's Voices in Peace Processes:

- Acknowledge the disproportionate impact of ongoing violence, particularly sexual violence, on women in the Tigrayan community. Ensure the meaningful inclusion of women in discussions and decision-making processes related to the implementation of peace agreements, such as the Pretoria Agreement, and transitional justice initiatives in Ethiopia.
- Uphold the demand for women's participation in these processes, emphasizing that their voices are essential for addressing the root causes of conflict, promoting reconciliation, and ensuring sustainable peace and justice for all.

1. Sensitization and Training Programs:

- Ethiopia must collaborate with local and international partners to develop and execute SGBV-focused training programs for military personnel and law enforcement agencies. These initiatives must unequivocally emphasize the prohibition of sexual violence in conflict and be seamlessly integrated into existing training frameworks. Adequate resources must be allocated to ensure the successful implementation of these programs, coupled with regular assessments to gauge their efficacy.

2. Legal Reforms and Accountability Mechanisms:

- Prioritize the fortification of legal frameworks to hold perpetrators of sexual violence in Tigray accountable. This includes amending laws to ensure effective prosecution of sexual violence crimes and establishing specialized courts or tribunals dedicated to handling such cases.
- Close collaboration with local stakeholders, including legal experts and civil society organizations, is imperative to identify legislative gaps and enact necessary reforms.
- Adherence to the comprehensive fulfillment of the CoHA agreement must be ensured, halting the perpetuation of sexual and gender-based violence even after the agreement's enactment.
- Enforcement of laws safeguarding survivors of war-related sexual violence and facilitating access to justice and reparations is non-negotiable. A victim-centered transitional justice process, informed by survivor needs and concerns, is imperative.

3. Support Services and Rehabilitation:

- Allocation of resources to broaden access to comprehensive support services for sexual violence survivors in Tigray is imperative. This encompasses facilitating access to medical care, psychosocial support, and economic empowerment initiatives.

- Collaborating with local NGOs and international organizations to bolster healthcare infrastructure and deliver tailored support services for Tigray survivors is essential.
- Launching awareness campaigns to destigmatize sexual violence survivorship and counteract discrimination and victim-blaming attitudes within communities is paramount.

4. Organize a Standalone Tigray Post-War Reconstruction and Development Donors Conference:

- Convene a conference within a year, underscored by a robust human rights foundation, to demonstrate unwavering support for Tigray's recovery and sustainable development. This event should catalyze resource mobilization and foster partnerships while ensuring an inclusive, participatory reconstruction process that respects the rights of all affected individuals.

To ensure effective implementation:
a) *Prioritize repair and rebuilding* of critical infrastructure, ensuring universal access to water and sanitation with pro-poor planning. b) *Facilitate meaningful participation* of local communities and stakeholders in reconstruction efforts, respecting their rights to information and expression. c) *Implement a fair compensation scheme* for individuals and communities most affected by civilian losses, adhering to rights to property and an adequate standard of living within five years.

Moreover, comprehensive adherence to the CoHA agreement is vital to advancing peace and stability in Tigray. Transparent, accountable, and coordinated efforts among all stakeholders involved in the reconstruction process, including government entities, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector, are indispensable. Establishing a hybrid body for ongoing monitoring and evaluation will be pivotal in assessing progress, identifying challenges, and making necessary adjustments guided by human rights principles such as non-discrimination and participation.

Recommendations for the International Community

The international community must take **direct and decisive action** to address war-related sexual violence in Tigray. First, providing support for **capacity building and training** is crucial. This involves offering technical and financial assistance to Ethiopia for developing and implementing sensitization and training programs for its military personnel and law enforcement agencies, alongside monitoring and evaluation assistance to assess program impact.

Secondly, **legal assistance and accountability** are paramount. The international community should offer legal expertise and assistance to Ethiopia in strengthening legal frameworks to address sexual violence, including guidance on legislative reforms, establishing specialized courts or tribunals, and capacity building for legal professionals. Advocating for the establishment of **accountability mechanisms** to hold perpetrators responsible is also essential.

Thirdly, **funding and resource mobilization** are vital. International donors should allocate specific funding to address sexual violence in Tigray, focusing on supporting survivors and expanding access to support services, healthcare infrastructure, and prevention and response initiatives. Prioritizing resource mobilization efforts is necessary to meet the urgent needs of survivors and prevent further instances of sexual violence. Active engagement in these efforts by the international community can play a pivotal role in combating war-related sexual violence, supporting survivors, and promoting accountability for perpetrators.