



Displaced Ethiopians from different towns in the Amhara region wait for food to be distributed at lunchtime at a center for the internally-displaced in Debarq, in the Amhara region of northern Ethiopia Friday, Aug. 27, 2021. (AP Photo/Mulugeta Ayene)

SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN ARMED CONFLICT (SVAC) PROJECT | MARCH 2023

SVAC Explainer:

Wartime Sexual Violence in Tigray, Ethiopia, 2020-2021

Ketaki Zodgekar

Background

The Tigray Region is the northernmost part of Ethiopia, bordering Sudan to the west and Eritrea to the north. (see Figure 1)

Struggles over national political power have been occurring in Ethiopia since 1960, when a group of government and military leaders attempted a coup against Emperor Haile Selassie. Though initially successful, this political takeover failed after a month, and the emperor remained in power until

1974, when, in the Ethiopian Revolution, he was usurped by the Derg, a military junta.¹

After the revolution, Ethiopia experienced a devastating civil war between the Derg and anti-government rebels, which concluded in 1991 when a coalition of rebel groups, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) overthrew the junta, establishing a federal democracy.² The EPRDF had four members: the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), which always led the coalition, along with the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) and the Southern Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (SEPDM).³

The **Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC)** dataset measures reports of the conflict-related sexual violence committed by armed actors during the years 1989–2021. The dataset includes information about the prevalence, perpetrators and forms of the reported sexual violence by each armed actor in each conflict-year. The information used to compile these data comes from three sources: the U.S. State Department, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

From 1991 onwards, the EPRDF ruled Ethiopia for 17 years, during which time the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) had leadership over policy design. After widespread protests in 2018 which resulted in the sudden resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn and a shifting

Figure 1: Administrative Map of the Tigray Region 2022



Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, link here: <https://immap.org/product/ethiopia-administrative-map-of-tigray-region/>

1 Uppsala Conflict Data Program. "Conflict 267: Ethiopia: Government" Uppsala University, 2022. <https://ucdp.uu.se/conflict/267>
 2 Ibid.
 3 UK Government and Washington University in St. Louis. "Understanding Conflict Related Sexual Violence in Ethiopia." Washington University, 2022. <https://publichealth.wustl.edu/items/understanding-conflict-related-sexual-violence-in-ethiopia/>

of the EPRDF coalition in 2019, the TPLF lost their control over national politics, though they did remain in power in the Tigray Region.⁴ Ethiopia's new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, who first gained political power by coming up through EPRDF ranks, formed a new political party, the Prosperity Party, that took government from 2019 onwards.

Current conflict: The Tigray War

Tensions began to escalate between the TPLF and the central Ethiopian government in August 2020, when the government mandated a delay to the national general election because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The TPLF rejected the delay, stating it was unconstitutional and still held regional elections in September 2020, which resulted in the party winning 98% of votes.⁵ The government then reduced federal funding to Tigray, and the TPLF announced that they consider the Ethiopian government constitutionally illegitimate. The delayed elections and contested constitutionality of the Prosperity Party are the background under which the current conflict sparked.

The armed conflict began on November 3, 2020 at the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) headquarters in Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region.⁶ There was a brief ceasefire from March–August 2022, when the parties engaged in unsuccessful peace talks.⁷ Fighting restarted and intensified after the ceasefire, until November 2, 2022, when Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a peace deal with the TPLF, agreeing to a permanent cessation of hostilities. The African Union facilitated peace talks in South Africa, in which the TPLF agreed to disarm, and the Ethiopian government agreed to restore the TPLF's political power in the region.⁸ Though this marked the official end of the conflict, violence, including sexual violence has continued in the months since. The Tigray Health Bureau registered 852 incidents of sexual violence that were reported in centers for survivors in the two months following the peace deal.⁹

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4 Uppsala Conflict Data Program. "Conflict 267: Ethiopia: Government" Uppsala University, 2022. <https://ucdp.uu.se/conflict/267>

5 Uppsala Conflict Data Program. "Conflict 267: Ethiopia: Government" Uppsala University, 2022. <https://ucdp.uu.se/conflict/267>

6 Lesley Wroughton, Max Bearak and Danielle Paquette. "Ethiopia says its military has taken control of capital in defiant Tigray region." Washington Post, November 28, 2022. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-offensive-abiy/2020/11/28/a3be6f90-3012-11eb-9dd6-2d0179981719_story.html

7 Nosmot Gbadamosi. "Ethiopia's Cease-Fire Collapses." Foreign Policy, August 31, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/31/ethiopia-tigray-civil-war-abiy-obasanjo-au-us-cease-fire-hunger/>

8 Fred Harter. "Ethiopia's truce is a step toward ending civil war, but there are reasons for caution." NPR, November 3, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/03/1133848992/ethiopia-tigray-war-peace-deal-truce-eritrea>

9 BBC News. "Ethiopia war in Tigray: Eritrean soldiers accused of rape despite peace deal." BBC News, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64635898>.

According to the UCDP, the main armed actors in this conflict are the TPLF, the Ethiopian government and the Eritrean government – though there are many other regional forces and non-state militias that have been active in the conflict. The Ethiopian Government placed the Tigray region under a media blackout when the war began. Reporters cannot operate in the area, or relay information to the international community. This makes it hard to get a full picture of all the different forms of conflict related sexual violence that took place.¹⁰ Though Eritrean forces have been involved in the conflict since the beginning, UCDP sources only add the Eritrean government as an active conflict actor from 2021 onwards.¹¹ Cooperation between these two countries is a recent development: after decades of conflict Ethiopia and Eritrea formally declared peace in 2018, resuming diplomatic and trade ties.¹²

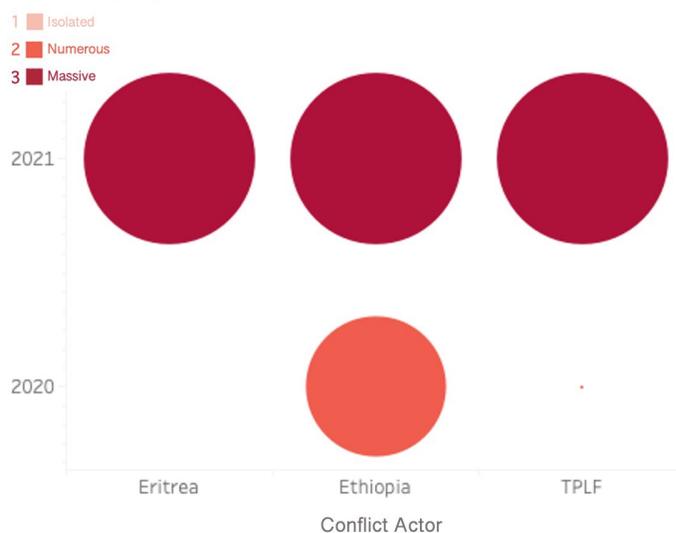
Who were the perpetrators of sexual violence in Ethiopia?

SVAC data show that since the outbreak of the conflict in November 2020, all three armed actors in the conflict perpetrated sexual violence on a massive scale.

In 2020, of Ethiopia and the TPLF, the two listed conflict actors at the time, Ethiopia is the only one reported to be perpetrating sexual violence according to SVAC coding criteria. Amnesty International described widespread violence perpetrated by Ethiopia against women and girls:

“Multiple forms of sexual violence – including rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, sexual mutilation and torture – have been perpetrated against Tigrayan women and girls by Ethiopian government forces – the ENDF and ASF, and their allied Fano militias.”¹³

Figure 2: Prevalence of sexual violence by perpetrating conflict actor, Tigray conflict, 2020 - 2021



Source: Chart constructed in Tableau. Data from US State Department Annual Reports, 2020-2021, and Amnesty International reports from 2020. Prevalence coded according to SVAC project criteria: 'isolated' indicates isolated reports of sv, 'numerous' indicates the violence was common or widespread, and 'massive' indicates the violence was systematic or innumerable.

10 Joshua Keating. “The Information Age Retreats From the Battlefield.” *Slate Magazine*, March 9, 2021. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/03/ethiopia-tigray-violence-media-blackout.html>

11 Uppsala Conflict Data Program. “Conflict 267: Ethiopia: Government” Uppsala University, 2022. <https://ucdp.uu.se/conflict/267>

12 Uppsala Conflict Data Program. “Conflict 409: Eritrea - Ethiopia” Uppsala University, 2022. <https://ucdp.uu.se/conflict/409>

13 Amnesty International. “Ethiopia: ‘I don’t know if they realized I was a person’: Rape and sexual violence in the conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia.” Amnesty International, August 11, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/4569/2021/en/>

In 2021, Amnesty International reported that Ethiopia continued to perpetrate sexual violence, this time on a massive scale:

“Reports were widespread that parties to the conflict in the northern part of the country used rape as a weapon of war, with numerous allegations against the ENDF, EDF, and Amhara Regional Special Forces and associated militia groups. Amnesty International documented 1,288 cases of sexual violence attributed to government forces between February and April.”¹⁴

That year, Eritrea was added as a conflict actor, and the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) joined the conflict on the side of the Ethiopian government, both actors conducting massive sexual violence. Sources have described the EDF as perpetrating the “most extreme” forms of sexual violence, and that this is consistent with their “documented history” of human rights abuses in conflict.¹⁵ For example, an Amnesty International source describes how:

“Troops fighting in support of the federal government committed widespread rape against hundreds of women and girls in Tigray, although access difficulties and under-reporting obscured the actual figures which were likely to be much higher. These violations included gang rape, used against women and girls as a weapon of war in this conflict. This was accompanied by shocking levels of brutality, including beatings, death threats and ethnic slurs. The perpetrators included members of the Eritrean Defence Forces, the ENDF, the Amhara Police Special Forces and Fano.”¹⁶

The TPLF also committed sexual violence in 2021, seemingly at a very high level of prevalence:

“TPLF fighters also raped women in Nifas Mewcha town, in the South Gondar zone of Amhara region, while they were controlling the town between 12 and 21 August as part of their offensive into parts of the Amhara and Afar regions. Given the context, scale, and gravity of the sexual violence committed against women and girls in Tigray and Amhara, the violations amounted to war crimes and may have amounted to crimes against humanity.”¹⁷

14 US Department of State. “2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ethiopia.” US Department of State, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ethiopia/>

15 UK Government and Washington University in St. Louis. “Understanding Conflict Related Sexual Violence in Ethiopia.” Washington University, 2022. <https://publichealth.wustl.edu/items/understanding-conflict-related-sexual-violence-in-ethiopia/>

16 Amnesty International. “Amnesty International Report 2021/22: The state of the world’s human rights.” Amnesty International, March 29, 2022. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/4870/2022/en/>

17 Ibid.

Where was the sexual violence reported in Tigray?

The sexual violence was concentrated in contested areas in the western part of the Tigray region, and spilled over to neighboring regions such as Amhara to the south and Gash Barka in Eritrea to the north.

Refugee camps were common targets of attack. The conflict prompted a mass exodus of Tigrayans from their homes – leading to 2.6 million people becoming internally displaced.¹⁸ There are four main refugee camps in the Tigray region¹⁹, two of which have been sites of sexual violence by multiple conflict actors. The State Department recounts how:

“Between November 2020 and January 2021, Eritrean forces and Tigrayan militia alternatively occupied Hitsats and Shimelba refugee camps in Tigray and committed killings, sexual violence, arbitrary detention, forcible disappearances, and looting against scores of the 20,000 Eritrean refugees living in these camps.”²⁰

Figure 3: Locations where sexual violence has been reported in the Tigray conflict, 2020 - 2022



Sources: Amnesty International. “Ethiopia: “I don’t know if they realized I was a person”: Rape and sexual violence in the conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia.” Amnesty International, August 11, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/4569/2021/en/>,

Amnesty International. “Ethiopia: Summary killings, rape and looting by Tigrayan forces in Amhara.” Amnesty International, February 16, 2022. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/5218/2022/en/>.

18 UN Refugees. “Ethiopia’s Tigray Refugee Crisis Explained.” United Nations, July 6, 2022. <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/ethiopia-s-tigray-refugee-crisis-explained/>

19 UN Refugees. “Ethiopia’s Tigray Refugee Crisis Explained.” United Nations, July 6, 2022. <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/ethiopia-s-tigray-refugee-crisis-explained/>

20 US Department of State. “2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ethiopia.” US Department of State, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ethiopia/>

When refugees attempted to flee the country, they were often met with sexual violence along the border.²¹ Amnesty International details the case of an 18-year-old named Sosina, who was raped on the way to the Sudanese border as she was fleeing Ethiopia November 2020 after the conflict broke out.²² Sexual violence was also common along the border with Eritrea.²³

Another key theme was soldiers forcibly entering people's homes to commit sexual violence against them. An Amnesty International report features testimony from a 20-year-old named Letay, who recounts when armed men, some in uniforms, entered her home and attacked her:

“Three men came into the room where I was. It was evening and already dark. I woke up due to the noise they were making. I did not scream; they gestured to me not to make any noise or [they] would kill me. They raped me one after the other.”²⁴

Often this sexual violence happened after soldiers coerced victims to conduct domestic tasks for them:

“In and around Chenna, a village north of the Amhara regional capital Bahir Dar, Tigrayan forces raped and sexually assaulted at least 30 women and girls as young as 14, often in their own homes after having forced them to provide food and cook for them.”²⁵

Violence was also commonly reported in rural areas, in detention centers and in polling stations during the June 2021 General Election.

What forms of sexual violence have been reported in Tigray?

Rape was the most frequently reported act of sexual violence, perpetrated by every actor in the conflict in both 2020 and 2021, and it was the only form of sexual violence reported to be perpetrated by the TPLF.

21 Amnesty International. “Ethiopia: “I don’t know if they realized I was a person”: Rape and sexual violence in the conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia.” Amnesty International, August 11, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/4569/2021/en/>

22 Amnesty International. “Ethiopia: “I don’t know if they realized I was a person”: Rape and sexual violence in the conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia.” Amnesty International, August 11, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/4569/2021/en/>

23 Amnesty International. “Ethiopia: “I don’t know if they realized I was a person”: Rape and sexual violence in the conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia.” Amnesty International, August 11, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/4569/2021/en/>

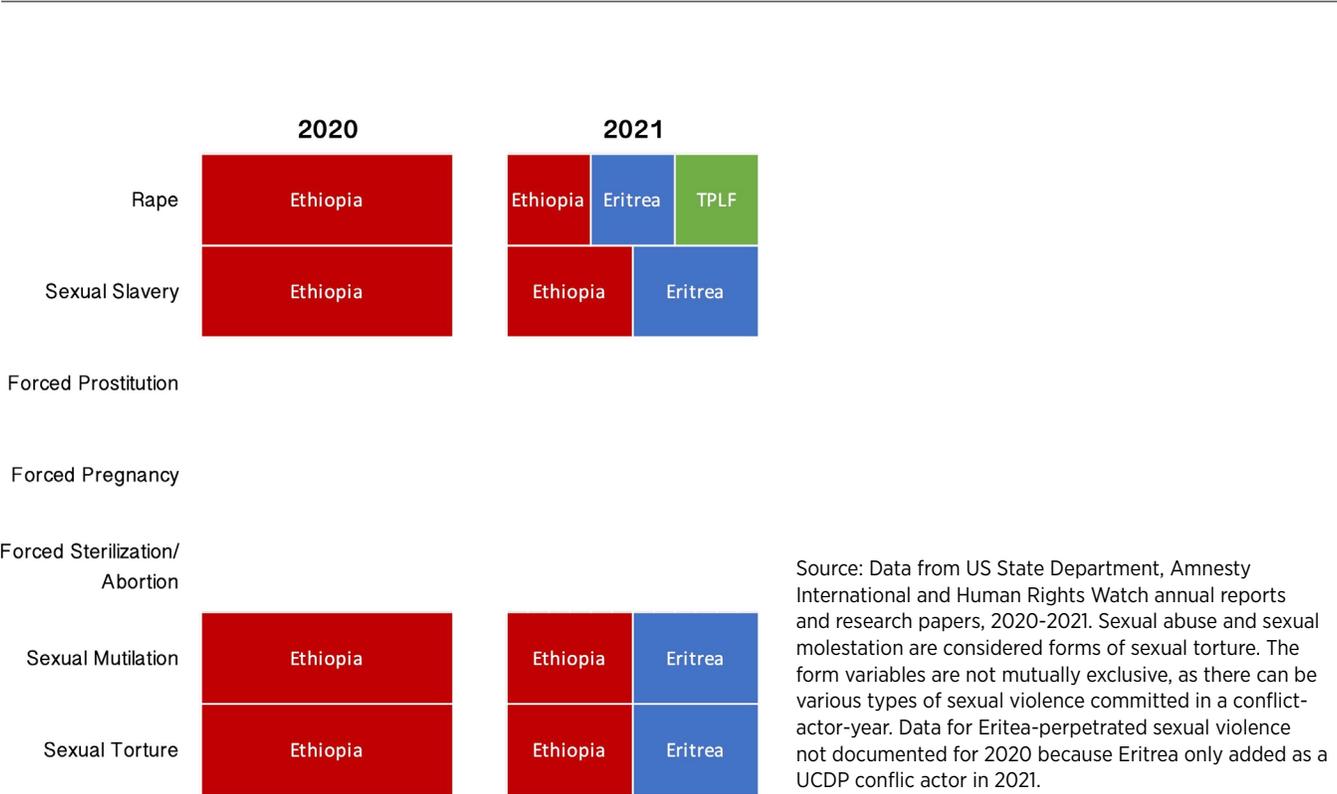
24 Ibid.

25 Amnesty International. “Ethiopia: Summary killings, rape and looting by Tigrayan forces in Amhara.” Amnesty International, February 16, 2022. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/5218/2022/en/>

Ethiopia and Eritrea also reportedly perpetrated sexual slavery, sexual mutilation, and sexual torture.

“Women and girls in Tigray reported to local and international media that men in Ethiopian military uniforms subjected them to rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, sexual mutilation, sexual exploitation and abuse, and other forms of gender-based violence.”

While the SVAC dataset does not code this as a form of sexual violence, a report by Washington University in St. Louis and the UK government highlights that members of families were “frequently forced to witness the rape and multiple perpetrator rape of their loved ones,” or to commit sexual violence against their own family members.²⁶



26 UK Government and Washington University in St. Louis. “Understanding Conflict Related Sexual Violence in Ethiopia.” Washington University, 2022. <https://publichealth.wustl.edu/items/understanding-conflict-related-sexual-violence-in-ethiopia/>

Sexual Violence Against Ethnic Minorities

Ethiopia is a country with eight major ethnic groups, of which ethnic Tigrayans make up 6% of the population.²⁷ In many reports of sexual violence in Tigray, survivors recount perpetrators using ethnic slurs against them, in a way that suggests that sexual violence was targeted on people of certain ethnic groups. An Amnesty International report on Tigrayan forces' violence in the Amhara region describes how:

“Fourteen of the 30 survivors interviewed by Amnesty International said that they were gang raped by multiple Tigrayan fighters, who often threatened them and used racial slurs.”²⁸

Similarly, Amnesty International's annual report from 2021 recounts that:

“Violations included gang rape, used against women and girls as a weapon of war in this conflict. This was accompanied by shocking levels of brutality, including beatings, death threats and ethnic slurs.”²⁹

These slurs were often accompanied by other racially charged language, with attackers telling victims *“this is what you deserve”* and *“you are disgusting.”*³⁰

Previous research from other contexts shows how the utterances by perpetrators during acts of sexual violence is important in helping determine the motivation for the sexual violence.³¹ Sexual violence can may have a genocidal motivation if it is targeted against a particular ethnic group, with the intent to destroy that group or their reproductive capacity. The use of ethnic slurs here suggests that certain ethnic groups were targeted for sexual violence.

The war has led to an increase in harassment and discrimination against ethnic Tigrayans, such as ethnic profiling, the ransacking of homes and businesses, and arbitrary arrests. This resulted in the UN Office on Genocide Prevention issuing a statement of concern about ethnic violence in Tigray, stating that “ethnic violence in Ethiopia has reached an alarming level.”³²

27 Simon Marks and Abdi Latif Dahir. “As War Goes On in Ethiopia, Ethnic Harassment Is on the Rise.” New York Times, December 12, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/12/world/africa/Ethiopia-Tigray-ethnic.html>

28 Amnesty International. “Ethiopia: Summary killings, rape and looting by Tigrayan forces in Amhara.” Amnesty International, February 16, 2022. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/5218/2022/en/>

29 Amnesty International. “Amnesty International Report 2021/22: The state of the world's human rights.” Amnesty International, March 29, 2022. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/4870/2022/en/>

30 Amnesty International. “Ethiopia: ‘I don't know if they realized I was a person’: Rape and sexual violence in the conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia.” Amnesty International, August 11, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/4569/2021/en/>

31 Xabier Agirre Aranburu. “Sexual Violence Beyond Reasonable Doubt: Using Pattern Evidence and Analysis for International Cases.” Law & Social Inquiry 23 (3): 609–27, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0922156510000245>

32 United Nations Press Release. “UN High-level Officials Express Deep Concern Over Escalating Ethnic Tensions in Ethiopia.” United Nations, November 12, 2020. <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Statement%20on%20Ethiopia%2012%20November%202020.pdf>

Conclusion

Sexual violence has been reported throughout the two years of the Tigray conflict, perpetrated by all three major actors. Based on the sources coded for the SVAC dataset, sexual violence seems to have escalated in 2021, and recent news reports indicate it also increased in the final two months of the war, in the run up to the signing of the November 2022 peace deal, and has continued throughout the months since.³³

Similarly to other conflicts, there is likely bias in reporting and underreporting of sexual violence that took place as part of this war, due to difficulties verifying reports, a de facto blockade for an extended time period, and a government-enforced media blackout of the Tigray region.³⁴ Like in other conflicts, survivors are often reluctant to report due to fear of retaliation or stigma, or their suffering goes unreported because limited access by journalists, NGOs, and health workers.³⁵

The huge magnitude of violence, and the reports of ethnic slurs used in tandem with sexual violence warrant renewed attention to conflict-related sexual violence in the Tigray region, and how, where and when it manifests, to better understand why it occurs, and how to tackle it. With the November 2022 peace deal and ongoing violence that has occurred since, it is important to continue to monitor the situation on the ground and act to ensure that sexual violence comes to an end.

33 Mariel Müller. "In Ethiopia's Tigray war, rape is used as a weapon." DW, March 17, 2023. <https://www.dw.com/en/in-ethiopias-tigray-war-rape-is-used-as-a-weapon/a-65022330>

34 UN Office of the Special-Representative of the Security General on Sexual Violence in Conflict. "Remarks from SRSR Pramila Patten: Georgetown University virtual event, "The crisis in Tigray: Women and girls under violent assault"." United Nations, April 22, 2021. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/remarks-srsg-pramila-patten-georgetown-university-virtual-event-crisis-tigray-women>.

Joshua Keating. "The Information Age Retreats From the Battlefield." Slate Magazine, March 9, 2021. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/03/ethiopia-tigray-violence-media-blackout.html>

35 International Committee of the Red Cross. "Survivors of sexual violence face untold stigma in Ethiopia." ICRC Website, August 22, 2022. <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/survivors-sexual-violence-face-untold-stigma-ethiopia>

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