



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **The politics of conflict in Northern Ethiopia, 2020-2021: a study of war-making, media bias and policy struggle**

Abbink, G.J.

### **Citation**

Abbink, G. J. (2021). The politics of conflict in Northern Ethiopia, 2020-2021: a study of war-making, media bias and policy struggle. *Asc Working Paper Series*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3238877>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3238877>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

African Studies Centre Leiden  
The Netherlands

*The Politics of Conflict in Northern Ethiopia,  
2020-2021: a study of war-making, media bias  
and policy struggle*

Jon Abbink

ASCL Working Paper 152 / 2021

African Studies Centre Leiden  
P.O. Box 9555  
2300 RB Leiden  
The Netherlands

Telephone +31-71-5273372  
Website [www.ascleiden.nl](http://www.ascleiden.nl)  
E-mail [asc@asc.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:asc@asc.leidenuniv.nl)

© J. Abbink ([g.j.abbink@asc.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:g.j.abbink@asc.leidenuniv.nl))

## Table of contents

Abstract	1
Résumé	1
The problem	3
Recalling the background	6
The dismal impasse	7
Unproductive ‘both-side-ism’	8
The heavy burden and traumas of violence	10
TPLF becoming aimless	13
Muddled policy	14
Dilemma	17
The diplomatic stalemate: wrecking Ethiopia?	17
Forward moves	20
Concluding remarks	23

# **The Politics of Conflict in Northern Ethiopia, 2020-2021: a study of war-making, media discourse and policy bias**

## **Abstract**

This paper offers a political analysis of the development of the TPLF-induced armed conflict in northern Ethiopia and considers the international responses in media and international policy circles. The extension of the conflict by the TPLF after the unilateral ceasefire proclaimed by the federal government on 28 June 2021 (followed by its retreat from Tigray) did not lead to an easing of the fighting. On the contrary, the TPLF used scorched-earth tactics, perpetrated substantial abuse of civilians (mass killings, burning down villages, destroying and looting hospitals, health centres and other economic infrastructure), and created food scarcity, hundreds of thousands of IDPs and hugely aggravated humanitarian problems in the Amhara and Afar regions. In spite of this unilateral TPLF extension of the armed conflict, the responses of international policy circles, notably from the Western ‘donor countries’ and the UN, have been negative towards the federal government and mild on the TPLF.

This paper explores aspects of this paradoxical and problematic approach and argues that it will not lead to a political or other solution of the conflict, especially not in view of the undiminished belligerent strategy of the TPLF. The Ethiopian federal government and its leader PM Abiy Ahmed, having been confirmed in power after a relatively successful and credible parliamentary election on 21 June 2021, are pressurized by much of the global media and Western policy makers for the problems in Tigray – including the ‘famine’ declared by TPLF - and urged to negotiate. The TPLF, incorrectly identified with the people of Tigray as a whole, is not held to account. But an overbearing Western approach based on the threat of sanctions (by the US government) and on what often seem ‘neo-imperialist’ demands, as evident from serious interference in the conflict - even by a number of UN individuals (expelled from the country on 30 September 2021) - will not contribute to political negotiations or dialogue, restoration of peace, or rehabilitation of the war-torn regions, neither to stability in Ethiopia. Not only improved media reporting, based on solid local (Ethiopian) information and checking sources, but also a fundamental reset of certain UN and Western donor country policies on Ethiopia, are needed.

## **Résumé**

Cette étude propose une analyse politique du développement du conflit armé induit par les TPLF dans le nord de l'Éthiopie et examine les réponses internationales dans les médias et les cercles politiques internationaux. L'extension du conflit par le TPLF après le cessez-le-feu unilatéral proclamé par le gouvernement fédéral le 28 juin 2021 (suivi de son retrait du Tigré) n'a pas conduit à un apaisement des combats ; au contraire. Les tactiques de la terre brûlée, les abus sérieux contre les civils (meurtres en masse, incendies de villages, pillage et destruction des hôpitaux et autres infrastructures économiques), la pénurie alimentaire, des centaines de milliers de déplacés internes et des problèmes humanitaires extrêmement aggravés dans les régions d'Amhara et d'Afar en ont été le résultat. Malgré cette extension unilatérale du conflit par le TPLF, les réponses des cercles politiques internationaux, notamment des pays « bailleurs-de-fonds » occidentaux et de l'ONU, ont été négatives envers le gouvernement fédéral mais modérées envers le TPLF.

Cet article explore quelques aspects de cette approche paradoxale et discutable et soutient qu'elle ne conduira pas à une solution politique ou autre du conflit, surtout pas compte tenu de la stratégie belliqueuse persistante du TPLF. Le gouvernement fédéral éthiopien et son chef le Premier ministre Abiy Ahmed, confirmés au pouvoir après des élections parlementaires relativement réussies et crédibles le 21 juin 2021, subissent des pressions de la part d'une grande partie des médias mondiaux et des décideurs politiques occidentaux pour les problèmes du Tigré – y compris la « famine » déclarée par TPLF - et exhortée à négocier. Le TPLF, identifié trop souvent par les médias et les pays occidentaux avec le peuple du Tigré dans son ensemble, n'est pas tenu de rendre compte. Mais une approche occidentale présomptueuse basée sur la menace de sanctions (de la part du gouvernement américain) et sur ce qui semble souvent « néo-impérialiste », comme en témoignent leurs graves ingérences dans le conflit - même par un certain nombre d'individus de l'ONU (expulsés du pays le 30 septembre 2021) - ne contribuera pas aux négociations ou au dialogue politiques, au rétablissement de la paix ou à la réhabilitation des régions déchirées par la guerre, ni à la stabilité en Éthiopie. Non seulement une meilleure couverture médiatique, basée sur des informations locales (éthiopiennes) solides et des sources de vérification, mais aussi une réinitialisation fondamentale de certaines politiques des Nations Unies et des pays bailleurs de fonds occidentaux sur l'Éthiopie, est nécessaire.

“Most people, in fact, will not take the trouble in finding out the truth, but are much more inclined to accept the first story they hear.”  
— Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book 1, chapter 1 (Rex Warner transl. 1954).

## The problem

This paper takes up the current problems of global media representation and Western policy deficiency towards Ethiopia, in particular since the expansion of the Tigray armed conflict by the insurgent TPLF<sup>1</sup> after 28 June 2021. On that date, the Ethiopian federal government declared a ceasefire and withdrew the army from Tigray. The TPLF refused to go along. Their expansion of the fighting outside Tigray changed the equation and led to huge destruction, mass civilian killings and untold suffering in northern Ethiopia. But most of the global media and many Western and UN policy-makers largely remained stuck in a narrative of ‘Tigray being the victim’, ‘suffering ‘famine’, etc. and showed serious bias and lack of factual appraisal. It is a puzzle why they cannot adjust their perspective and reflect on the new realities of war-making by the TPLF. These failures of media representation and international policy in fact prolong the conflict.

As we know, the conflict started on 4 November 2020 by the TPLF attack on Ethiopian federal forces. It is now devastating the northern part of the country and may have wider implications for the Horn of Africa. We need to [understand](#) what has happened since the conflict’s inception and contribute to informed analysis and the restoration of peace.<sup>2</sup> While there is a huge number of reports, essays, and social media exchanges on the conflict, many aspects of it remain underexposed and seriously misrepresented in global news outlets, international diplomatic circles, and of course social media. For this reason, we may surmise that there is a danger that demonstrable lies will pass into history<sup>3</sup> and that (international) policy choices continue to be made that will perpetuate the violence and instability in Ethiopia and in the wider region. This paper offers a political analysis of the unfolding of the TPLF-induced conflict and of developments in the international responses in news media and international policy circles.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The Tigray Peoples Liberation Front, a rebel front that emerged in the 1970s as an ethno-regional insurgent movement against the then military *Derg* government, came to power in May 1991 and dominated the Ethiopian state in a dictatorial manner from 1991 to March 2018 (as part of a nominal coalition that it created, the EPRDF). Since the internal EPRDF troubles and mass protests in 2016-18 and the March 2018 election of a new reformist Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, the TPLF top cadres largely retreated to the regional state of Tigray, and started to undermine the new federal government. The 6,5 mln Tigrayans (or ‘Tegaru’) are ca. 6% of the Ethiopian population.

<sup>2</sup> I recommend consulting the referenced hyperlinks in this paper. These elaborate points and offer supporting evidence. The links were all active in the period of writing (final edit, 17 October 2021). I sincerely thank two readers (to remain anonymous) for giving critical comments on an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. what the great British author George Orwell already warned about (in his *Collected Essays*, vol. 1, 1971): “The very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world. Lies will pass into history.”

<sup>4</sup> For those familiar with the backgrounds that I partly discussed in my earlier paper (*The Atlantic Community mistake on Ethiopia: counter-productive statements and data-poor policies of the EU and the USA on the Tigray conflict*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Leiden: African Studies Centre, Working Paper 150, <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3158742>), I suggest first reading the main sections of the current paper: on ‘both side-ism’, ‘The heavy burden and traumas of violence’, ‘The diplomatic stalemate’, and ‘Forward moves’.

Global commentators and policy makers still try to make sense of these dramatic events since 4/11, 2020, with the TPLF attack (see below). They offer multiple views and advice on the way to solve the conflict. The fighting has been vehement and the suffering horrendous, with major battles, thousands of combatants killed, gross abuse and killing of civilians, notably by the TPLF insurgents, and serious material destruction. In [global media](#) discussions on this domestic Ethiopia conflict we see that *local* commentators' voices from within Ethiopia – mostly in Amharic, the language of most news sources there – are not well represented if not ignored, or very selectively used. Rather, the notable but often ill-researched supply from dominant global outlets, like AP, AFP, Reuters, CNN, or *New York Times*, is given (too) much attention. The [bias](#) there is great: i.e., in favour of a movement, or rather an elite, that has to take most of the blame for this devastating conflict: the TPLF. The easy but wrong assumption in much of the international media is still that TPLF equals with 'all the people of Tigray', in- and outside the region, and that their food scarcity and other suffering would warrant support for the TPLF. That is incorrect. The well-organized '[cyber-mafia](#)' of pro-TPLF activists and sympathizers that work on the news outlets and on social media is [still operating](#) . But their manipulated 'truths' [do not contribute](#) to constructive discussion or solutions. One of the most misleading themes in cyberspace is that there is a 'Tigray genocide': a meme recklessly used and repeated time and again but incorrect in the juridical and actual sense. Remarkably, the first tweets on a so-called 'Tigray Genocide' already [appeared](#) 24 hours after the TPLF attacked the Northern Command federal forces in Tigray. So, it was prepared, and part of what became a regular propaganda campaign to work on media 'world opinion' and Western policy makers.

As commentators we might express our dismay at the rapid escalation of the conflict since 4 November, when the Ethiopian federal government army reacted quickly and massively to a well-planned midnight [attack](#) by the TPLF on federal army bases in Tigray. Was the 'escalation' necessary? It seemed inevitable. The federal government could not be blamed for *responding* to the [well-prepared](#) insurgent assault<sup>5</sup> that threatened the federal order and was aimed to ultimately recapture power for the TPLF in Addis Ababa. In the years since March 2018 the TPLF government in Tigray also prepared hidden stores of [missiles](#), [fuel](#) and arms, buried in underground locations (of which pictures and [videos](#) are available). In addition, the TPLF attack was unprecedented in its cruelty and treacherous nature, causing great shock among the large majority of Ethiopians.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, any government would have acted against such a large-scale national insurgency. The TPLF army of the Tigray State regional government was defeated in late November 2020, with many top party leaders killed or arrested. But, with the encouragement of pro-TPLF media and Western policy circles in the name of providing 'unfettered, free access' for food aid, it morphed into an irregular force and started to target non-military assets, like infrastructure, communications, air ports, roads, the Tigray care-taker government, and civilians.

On 28 June 2021 the federal government declared a unilateral ceasefire, not wanting to enter a protracted, asymmetrical conflict in Tigray, whereby the population might totally turn against it and suffer more (see below). Before that date, they had withdrawn most of their equipment, units, and supplies. But the remnant TPLF presented it as their own military victory and refused any ceasefire or rapprochement. Instead, the course that they chose was disastrous: an invasion of Afar and Amhara Regions, outside the regional state borders of Tigray. They thereby indulged in massive human rights abuse, killings of non-combatants, 'scorched earth' tactics, and, one could argue, war crimes in the areas they occupied in Northern Amhara and Afar

---

<sup>5</sup> Whereby a large number of pro-TPLF officers within the federal army committed treason and joined the insurgents, killing and maiming many of their fellow army members.

<sup>6</sup> See note 4, *ibid*.



Regions (shelling civilian targets, forcibly recruiting and using child soldiers, taking non-combatant civilians hostage in war action). As will be referenced below, they bombed neighbourhoods with artillery, destroyed civilian infrastructure (hospitals, health centres, banks, schools, communications), practised the targeted destruction of communities, and carried out the plunder of already poor people: their homes, fields and cattle. Indeed, the TPLF robbed from the poor and destitute in Northern Wollo and Afar regions in a manner unseen in Ethiopia, even taking kitchen utensils and people's stored grain supplies. There were also unconfirmed reports that TPLF forced captured local youths in Afar and Amhara to be a defence line in front of their own units. It is not clear yet why the Ethiopian army could not prevent this offensive in to Afar and Northern Amhara by the TPLF. It is partly due to the latter not engaging in battle warfare but in dispersed campaigns not targeting military aims but civilian infrastructure and communities.

In addition to actual war, there is, as mentioned earlier, the pro-TPLF cyberwarfare and global media [dis- and misinformation](#), in [many forms](#). On 5 October 2021 in her US Congress hearing, Frances [Haugen](#), the Facebook ex-employee whistle-blower, mentioned the negative impact of this on Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup> Facebook unfortunately still provides an unmediated platform for pro-TPLF and other hate mongering, and rarely removes malicious disinformation accounts. Most of the statements emanating from the TPLF make a fictitious or bizarre impression, like in the social media messages or interviews by TPLF [spokesperson](#) Getachew Reda or the pathetic [letter](#) of TPLF leader (?) Debretsion Gebremichael in early September 2021 sent to 52 countries. Such products can hardly be taken seriously. In the global news media many [badly-researched messages](#) come out, with in particular [CNN](#) perpetrating gaffe upon gaffe, and with the Sudanese reporter Nima [Elbagir](#) in a 'star role'. These articles are repeatedly dissected as faulty and biased, as the analysis in the series of [tweets](#), aptly entitled 'The CNN-TPLF Marriage', clearly reveals. Media also quietly [redact](#) news items later if they are [found out](#) misrepresenting facts. This, for instance, has made [CNN](#) one of the less relevant global news outlets on [Ethiopia](#) today. An earlier example was an irresponsible article in the [Daily Telegraph](#) of 23 May 2021 on the alleged use of phosphorus bombs by the federal army - later also disproved as incorrect. In fact, global media, including the *New York Times* and also Amnesty International, repeatedly issued recalls of their incorrect articles and reports. Major academic studies will likely be produced in the near future on the media wars and the tactics of news manipulation in this conflict.

The current conflict also has international dimensions, with Sudan and Egypt exerting pressure on Ethiopia's federal government instead of staying out of a domestic problem. Egypt is still trying to block any movement on the [GERD](#) Nile dam built by Ethiopia. It appears to [continue](#) to play a subversive role by promoting the TPLF, giving a special [forum](#) to its spokespersons in the months after the territorial expansion of the conflict (August-October 2021). During their 27-years of monopolist [authoritarian reign](#) (as part of the EPRDF 'coalition' in power from May 1991 to March 2018), the TPLF and its cronies also built links with many global institutions, like UN, the WHO (its current director-general was a core member of the TPLF Polit-bureau), think-tanks (ICG, Atlantic Council, or American Enterprise Institute), lobby firms, NGOs, news outlets, etc. apart from those with the 'donor countries', who often (incorrectly) vaunted about TPLF-EPRDF having created 'stability' when in power. During

---

<sup>7</sup> See S. Parviainen's commentary on this: <https://spp-fi.medium.com/facebooks-role-in-destabilizing-ethiopia-and-wider-horn-of-africa-region-98fcb08f40eb>. Facebook is an example of a tech company that by its ill-reflected corporate strategy 'favours' tyranny. Cp. Yuval N. Harari's 2018 argument, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/yuval-noah-harari-technology-tyranny/568330/>.

their rule, the TPLF-EPRDF leaders never forgot to further primarily their own cause rather than that of [Tigray](#) or Ethiopia as a whole, in a material and political sense.

## Recalling the background

The relationship of the TPLF-dominated Tigray Regional State and the Ethiopian federal government went sour after April 2018. Multiple efforts to maintain a working relationship in the changing political dynamics of Ethiopia since the reformist PM Abiy Ahmed came to power were tried, but the authoritarian and conservative TPLF elite did not go along, fostering unrealistic national ambitions to regain central power. One of the breaking points in the relationship was certainly the holding of regional elections in Tigray, against the federal order that had postponed them under the emergency law due to COVID-19. But there were other issues, and for the TPLF elite in Meqele the ultimate aim to regain power on the federal level was there from the start since April 2018. The TPLF had built up an army and para-military of close to 200,000 men, prepared to take over the Ethiopian Army's Northern Command and march on to Addis Ababa, having prepared allied insurgent groups in some other parts of Ethiopia in Western Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz, Qemant, and elsewhere. In-depth political-anthropological studies of the current conflict and its course are still to be made<sup>8</sup>, but preliminary analysis suggests the crucial role of this [premeditated](#) conflict agenda of the TPLF. It emanated from their long-standing authoritarian practices and defence of its business empire established when in power, and more directly from the intra-EPRDF political power shift in early 2018. This to their great dismay 'side-lined' TPLF and its leaders and exposed them to potential judicial investigations on abuse of power and privilege perpetrated when they ruled the country. As a dictatorial elite used to ruling mostly unchallenged, they could not accept their reduced role. Their entire history as a 'vanguard' party insurgent movement since 1975 shows extremely problematic aspects, with violent 'purges' and harsh suppression of dissent, as demonstrated in the works of many authors, including insiders.<sup>9</sup>

As TPLF's domestic armed insurgency started on 4 November 2020, it combined with a massive propaganda, even agitprop, campaign in cyberspace and via appeal to global political networks, including in US and EU policy circles, built up in TPLF's 27 years of rule. It was recently confirmed in an internal TPLF document of October 2020 that their actions were indeed [well-prepared](#).<sup>10</sup> The TPLF effort was clearly to restore their authoritarian grip on the country as a whole, using the Tigray people as the pawn and representing their struggle as

---

<sup>8</sup> See for one very interesting study, Hibist Kassa, 'Ethnonationalism, imperialism and the working class in Ethiopia', *Review of African Political Economy blog*, 21 September 2021 (<https://roape.net/2021/09/21/ethnonationalism-imperialism-and-the-working-class-in-ethiopia/>).

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Aregawi Berhe 2009, *A Political History of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (1975-1991)* (Los Angeles: Tsehai Publishers), Asguede Gebre-Sellase 2007, *Gahdi* (Gaithersburg, VA: Signature Book Printing), Ermias Legesse, 2014, *The Legacies of Meles - A City Without Owners (= Ye-Meles Tirufatoch – Balabet Alba Ketema)*, (Washington, DC: Netsanet Publishing Agency), or Araya Tesfamariam 2020, *The Backroom of the TPLF (= YeHewehat Gwada)*, (Addis Ababa, n.p.), and an earlier generation of critical people from Tigrayan background in the early years (1980s) warning about TPLF's intentions, divisive politics and practices, among them Gebremedhin Araya (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1X1X4cYWEB8>).

<sup>10</sup> A copy of this document (Amharic version, 86 p.), entitled 'Development of the special phases of the struggle and the continuation of our resistance – strategies, methods and directions. Number 2. Strictly confidential' (= የትግል ልዩ ምዕራፍ እድገቶች እና የምክታችን ቀጣይ, ስትራቴጂዎች፣ ስልቶች እና አቅጣጫዎች. (ቁጥር - ሁለት), በጥብቅ የሚያዝ, dated 30 Meskerem 2013 EC = 10 October 2020), was translated in 'A Week in the Horn', 24-9-2021, available on <https://mfathiopiablog.wordpress.com/2021/09/24/a-week-in-the-horn-24-09-2021/>. It was written and distributed by the then TPLF secretariat in Meqele.

‘nationalist’. The TPLF leadership has callously [assumed](#) that the Tigray population has to suffer for them to remain in place.

Influencing global media reporting and ‘cyber-war’ activities by pro-TPLF groups to bend world opinion was as important as the combat activities on the ground. These activist online groups, exchanging instruction manuals and [tips](#), are still well-placed to [push](#) their [interests](#) and points of view. And indeed with some success, as next to CNN, influential print media like the *New York Times* or the *Daily Telegraph* (to mention only a few), published incomplete and questionable [accounts](#) based on partially fake data and biased ‘eye-witness’ accounts, usually letting the TPLF go scot-free and generally accusing the federal government. A very partial *New York Times* [article](#) of 11 July 2021 described the TPLF child soldiers as ‘highly motivated young recruits’.. CNN incitement on Ethiopia continues until this day, as evident from another incorrect story on 6 October 2021, asserting that *Ethiopian Airlines* had transported weapons to Eritrea on civilian planes.<sup>11</sup>

The TPLF also appears to maintain covert contacts with Sudan and [Egypt](#), and in addition, there is a group of foreign academics continuing to commit to the agenda of the TPLF, maintaining contact with its leadership and carefully selecting their ‘evidence’ in their writings. This is puzzling. Several of them apparently operate with a vague rhetorical concern with ‘the ordinary Tigrayans’, or because of hatred of Eritrean President Isayas Afewerki and an unreasonable dislike of PM Abiy Ahmed. They thereby support an increasingly abusive movement (TPLF) which was declared a ‘terrorist organization’ by the Ethiopian Parliament on 1 May 2021 (It was previously labelled [as such](#) already in the late 1970s in the Global Terrorism Database and in several US Citizenship and Immigration Services documents, e.g. of [2014](#)).

## The dismal impasse

Signs are that the narrative of the TPLF ‘being the underdog’ and ‘Tigray people being targeted’, ‘Tigray being under siege’, or even ‘Tigray genocide’, etc. is slowly crumbling, as its veracity is increasingly questioned. The record of TPLF’s violence since 4 November 2020, their abuse of the Tigrayan people for their own purposes and their dismal record in northern Afar and Amhara regions is [coming out](#). Evidence of their abuse of civilians, the use of [children](#) as ‘soldiers’ and their war crimes-like behaviour gets stronger (see below). TPLF has realized that militarily they ultimately are [without prospects](#) – what is left is ‘scorched earth’ campaigns and massive [destruction](#) in areas where they move.

The stated aims of the TPLF as of October 2021 are vague and confused. The core idea peddled seems to be that they are ‘victimized’ by everyone: by the Ethiopian federal government in the first place, and that they fight defending ‘their people’, and that ‘food aid to Tigray is blocked’. The ‘famine’ narrative is [instrumentalized](#) to get political and military support for their insurgency.<sup>12</sup> But these talking points have never been convincing or acceptable to critical

---

<sup>11</sup> For EAL’s denial, see: “Statement Refuting CNN’s Report” (<https://t.co/oy4kzLidS8> and on <https://borkena.com/2021/10/07/ethiopian-airlines-reacts-to-allegation-by-cnn/>). And this Twitter thread of 8 October 2021 reveals another appalling story of the deceit of CNN’s journalist N. Elbagir: <https://twitter.com/DocD19606053/status/1446576346516307968>.

<sup>12</sup> The pro-TPLF ‘Tigrai Media House’ broadcasted images of videos where we saw women in Tigray [preparing huge amounts of dry rations](#) (*injera dirqosh*) for TPLF combatants, either under pressure or not. Also, images were seen of Tigrayan men presenting substantial numbers of sheep/goats and money. On social media messages of pro-TPLF activists, people even expressed warnings not to post this because it would contradict the ‘Tigray famine’ narrative.

analysts. What the TPLF did is victimize the Tigray people and perpetuate war. There is no orchestrated blockade of Tigray food aid or ‘using famine as a weapon’ – only strict checking of the hundreds of trucks of aid organizations going there on weapons or advanced telecommunication equipment that could be smuggled in for the TPLF war effort. What was blocked was the road for aid trucks via Afar Region by the TPLF military advances and by their destruction of bridges (e.g., across the Tekkeze river). In addition, as of mid-September 2021, since early July hundreds of aid lorries that *did* arrive in Tigray [did not return](#) but were [confiscated](#) by TPLF, probably for military use, as shown in videos posted [online](#). Even the UN expressed concern. If true, this would be a double crime - to steal or confiscate UN and NGO property, and then accuse the authorities falsely of ‘starving Tigray’. The USA would then better be advised to ‘condemn in the strongest possible terms’ this TPLF sabotage of food aid reaching the Tigrayan population.

Any goodwill that the TPLF-EPRDF might have gained during its 1991-2018 rule – having chased out the dictatorial Mengistu regime, pursuing economic growth policies, more ethno-regional autonomy, striving toward realizing some of the Sustainable Millennium Goals, etc. – has been squandered and sacrificed on the altar of TPLF elite interests. Indeed, the TPLF ethno-class formed in Ethiopia in that 27-year period has chosen a course that will leave Tigray and Ethiopia poorer, politically unstable, and socially disrupted. Signs of this course were already discussed in several earlier [studies](#).

The violence perpetrated by the TPLF since the federal government’s unilateral ceasefire declaration on 28 June 2021 is [remarkable](#) in its extent and intensity. But they had no business going into adjacent regions like Afar and Amhara. They did not take care of Tigray people, did not allow peace to return to Tigray, and did not rehabilitate the regional administration and economy after the federal forces withdrew. The TPLF used the huge amount of food supplies, fuel and crop seeds, [left](#) by the federal government to relieve food scarcity and to enable agriculture and the economy to get going again, for intensifying their war effort. In the ensuing months they chose wanton military action, including mass killing of villagers in the Afar and Amhara Regions. In one recent case in Ch’enna village, over 200 civilian non-combatants were [massacred](#). A week later in Qobo town, more than 600 people, again non-combatants, were killed in house-to-house ‘searches’ (see also below). With what aim? What was the military advantage? There is no answer: it seemed wanton destruction and massacre by TPLF, out of spite of not being able to win the military battles, and purposeful cultivation of community hatred. The Ethiopian public observes this and considers them as callous and cruel acts of a movement labelled terrorist by the Ethiopian parliament in May 2021. The TPLF leadership knows that they will never get back to power on the national level in Addis Ababa (which was their aim when they attacked on 4 November 2020), and will be perpetually unstable in the Tigray Region. They are much resented by the overwhelming majority of the Ethiopian population. But while more incriminating facts are coming out demonstrating the lack of veracity of the TPLF’s narratives, the global media and policy circles are slow to recognize this.

### **Unproductive ‘both-side-ism’**

The above-mentioned slaughters in Ch’enna and Qobo are only the most recent testimony to TPLF’s aim of destruction of civilian communities, of the livelihoods of ordinary people and the traditionally accommodative relations between Ethiopians of diverse ethno-regional or linguistic backgrounds. In view of this kind of TPLF [‘combat’ record](#) in the past months, the



moment should come for analysts, observers, the media and Western foreign policymakers to rethink their ‘both side-ist’ approach and to avoid to studiously blame *both* the federal government and the TPLF of equal abuses and gross war misconduct. The facts from the ‘battlefield’ – in fact already *since* the unprecedented [attack](#) on 4 November 2020 – show it is quite a stretch to presently find the ‘feats’ perpetrated by the TPLF on the side of the federal army. From day one, there was no ‘equivalence’ of these two parties; blame cannot be nicely shared 50-50. A critical view on the activities of ‘both sides’ is of course necessary, and the Ethiopian federal government, having made mistakes (with cases of serious transgressions especially in the early stage of the war in November-December 2020, also by Eritrean troops), should not get a free pass.<sup>13</sup> There is much we still don’t know in detail or if it is truthful. But in any analysis, it will be clear that the TPLF is the real problem. It was the [initiator](#), with its violent insurgency against the legal government in place, on pretexts that cannot stand justification and with acts of violence and humiliation in the first week of the war that were [repulsive and shocked the nation](#). Its expansion of the conflict since June 2021 adds to its bad record, but remarkably, in the global media and international policy representations, the both side-ism is now even shifting towards a scapegoating of the Ethiopian government.

One common premise of much scholarship on insurgencies is that there is at least a kind of understandable or justified social movement element in having ‘caused’ the insurgency. But this seems flouted in the case of Tigray: here the population had no say in any politics and did not state the conflict from its own concerns. The armed rebellion in November 2020 was started *top-down* by the established TPLF *elite* ruling in Meqele, feeling [resentful](#) of having been voted out of office on the federal level in March 2018 and of losing dictatorial power. This was no social grievances-led grass-roots insurgency. So, without denying initial grave human rights abuse in Tigray on both sides, as evident from several [reports](#) from the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, it appears that the TPLF was and continues to be the chief perpetrator, intensifying its belligerence, notably towards civilians, as we will show below.

Until 28 June 2021, the conflict was largely fought on Tigrayan soil, and directed at the TPLF insurgent forces. On that day the government, seeing the danger of becoming embroiled in a broader conflict than only with TPLF military, decided to withdraw unilaterally. The government offered the TPLF a chance to give the Region’s inhabitants breathing space, to allow more food aid into the region disturbed by fighting and infrastructure destruction ([largely by TPLF](#)), to allow farmers to start the new agrarian planting cycle in its own region, and urge the TPLF to perhaps rethink its ‘strategy’. But the opposite happened: the TPLF intensified the war by expansion into other regions, with attendant abuses on civilians. It also produced more cyber-warfare pressure on national and global media, by using largely unverified stories and misinformation, e.g., about [bodies floating](#) in rivers<sup>14</sup> and so-called ‘aid blockades’ of Tigray Region by the federal government. But this government would have no interest or advantage in withholding food aid to Tigray; in fact, it already initiated such aid in the first months of the conflict.

In light of all the recent new evidence on the TPLF violence perpetrated since the 28 June 2021 federal ceasefire declaration it is time for the ‘international community’, and notably the Western countries, to change course. Statements by the US President Biden after that date, calling for ‘negotiations on a political solution’ are an example of simple and unfair ‘both side-

---

<sup>13</sup> But already in a report of the (partly government-supported) Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, *Brief Monitoring Report on the Situation of Civilians in Humera, Dansha and Bissober* of 18 January 2021 abuses and problems were listed.

<sup>14</sup> For a critique of that (CNN) report, see <https://youtu.be/7kJqKMqgFLg>.

ism’, an unproductive course towards attaining peace and stability, because TPLF at this stage is not a credible or reliable partner for anything. Biden repeated it in his UN speech of 21 September 2021. Ignoring TPLF's violence and destruction in Afar and Amhara regions is inappropriate, all the more because it seems to be much worse than what occurred in Tigray since 4 November 2021. Blaming now only the Ethiopian federal government for things that went wrong in Tigray and remaining silent on the TPLF deeds is unacceptable and shows a puzzling bias. The diplomatic efforts of ‘US special envoy to the Horn’ Jeffrey Feltman, appointed by President Biden in April 2021, also showed misplaced ‘both-side-ism’. Feltman travelled far and wide but did not produce any result or useful insight for moving forward. Similarly unhelpful were the string of [surprising statements](#) by the [head of USAID](#), Ms. Samantha Power, by some US State Department officials, by various people in US government-linked ‘think tanks’, and by USA’s representative to the UN, Ms. Linda [Thomas-Greenfield](#).

The EU seems to follow suit in a similarly prejudiced way. On 4 October 2021 some members of the EU Parliament (MEPs) tabled a [motion for a resolution](#), adopted three days later, on the ‘humanitarian situation in Tigray’. In this superficial and biased [text](#), none of the grave TPLF-caused problems in other regions of Ethiopia was mentioned. But in predictable fashion, especially the Ethiopian government was primarily threatened with sanctions. The MEPs made their ‘moral point’ and did not find it necessary to inform themselves of the context and the relevant facts.<sup>15</sup>

## The heavy burden and traumas of violence

The violence perpetrated by the TPLF shocked the nation and reveals a nihilistic agenda, meant to hit civilians and tear up the social fabric of Ethiopian society. Since 28 June 2021, the start of the unilateral ceasefire, the Ethiopian army is no longer present in Tigray,<sup>16</sup> and all the violent confrontations have occurred in the Afar and Amhara Regions. I here enumerate a sequence of the main attacks and violent incidents by the TPLF *since that date* (compare also the overview by [ENA](#)). They indicate the gross abuse in their armed campaigns.

- Unprovoked TPLF attacks in the [Afar](#) Region in July-August, the regional state to the east of Tigray, with targeted destruction of public facilities and hundreds of civilians killed. The apparent aim, next to intimidation of the local population, was to close the land route for trucks bringing food aid to Tigray from the south and east, and to thereby force international NGOs and the UN WFP to open an air bridge, preferably straight from Sudan or Egypt under UN auspices. This would allow the TPLF to avoid checks on the contents (arms and equipment that could be smuggled in).
- Summary executions by the TPLF of civilians in Tigray, as revenge for ‘collaboration’ with federal authorities or on other vague suspicions. They killed dozens of [Tigrayan people](#) who worked with the pro-federal Tigray Interim administration, as well as [civilians](#) refusing to hand over [children](#) to fight for the TPLF forces. One case was a mother refusing being killed in front of her three children. A particularly gruelling case was the killing on 22 June 2021 of Tigrayan engineer [Enbza Tadesse](#), who had returned to Tigray to help rebuild the region but was critical TPLF policies. He was tortured,

---

<sup>15</sup> For instance, apart from ignoring the disasters in northern Amhara and Afar, they may have had no idea that next to aid trucks and food aid flights going to Tigray, there were in the past weeks 21 EU-supported return flights (under UNHAS) from Addis Ababa to Meqele for humanitarian aid (cargo, funds, personnel). So, no ‘blockade’ of Tigray. See <https://t.co/CSThZIS9M4>.

<sup>16</sup> Except for the Wolqayt area (see below), the contested region from the Gondar Region annexed in 1991 by Tigray Regional State that its Amhara inhabitants deny was ever part of the historic Tigray.

murdered by TPLF people and his body mutilated.<sup>17</sup> The pattern of abuse and killing of civilians was repeated in Afar and Amhara regions.

- Since July 2021, [attacks](#) and abuse on towns and villages in northern Amhara (e.g., Lalibela, Woldeya, Debre Tabor, Nefas Mewch'a, Ayna Bugna, Adi Arkay) and in Afar (Uwwa, Galikoma and Berhale towns); hundreds of [civilians](#) killed by shelling, or massacred; over 550,000 people are displaced by mid-September 2021. The point here is that civilians were [purposely killed](#) and *not* in the crossfire in combat situations, which happened sometimes in the first phase of the war in Tigray (Before the 28 June 2021 ceasefire declaration).
- Substantial forced recruitment of [child soldiers](#) by the TPLF, not only from [their own Tigray region](#), but also from areas they occupied (including the administration of [drugs](#), like Captagon<sup>18</sup>). They reportedly also forced local Amhara and Afar youths to walk in the frontlines in battles with the Ethiopian federal army. So, this would be the use of children as [human shields](#), which is a war crime. The Ethiopian army as a rule refused to engage in combat for fear of killing the youngsters.
- [Massacre](#) of villagers in Agamsa (Amhara Region) in August 2021, by indiscriminate artillery shelling on the villages and burning down houses and granaries.
- In mid-August 2021, killings of ca. 30 civilians and destruction of livestock and property in several villages in the [Farta](#) district, Amhara.
- Cases of gross [sexual abuse](#) and [rape](#) in Amhara regions by [TPLF](#) forces. News of related atrocities, as [reported](#) on 5 October 2021, stands to be investigated.
- Random killings of civilians in Nefas Mewch'a town in September 2021, amongst whom a [couple with three children](#): the parents were killed on the road.
- Destruction of [churches](#), without there being any military purpose. Reportedly, occupation and damaging of the ancient Orthodox-Christian monastery of [Waldebbba](#) in the Wolqait area since 29 July 2021. Many religious artefacts were looted or destroyed; monks were said to be assaulted. To attack religious institutions and use them as military base or target is a national shame in Ethiopia and deeply resented. On 5 August 2021 the TPLF took control of the town of Lalibela, probably also to control the airport there. The town has the famous World Heritage rock-hewn churches and other religious treasures. UNESCO noted some concern, but kept largely [silent](#) and issued no appeal to prevent fighting around the churches. Many details of the town's occupation are not yet known, but judging some [reports](#), we have to fear the worst. TPLF placed their mortars and other artillery close to the churches. The rest of the town was already ransacked, including a Chinese road construction camp nearby. An [audio-report](#) of 2 October 2021 by American journalist Jemal Countess is very alarming, recounting the human toll and the scale of destruction. It appears that hatred is guiding the TPLF against specifically the Amhara-speaking civilians. Again, hardly one word about the Lalibela misery was uttered by global media or the international community.
- Looting of banks, agricultural warehouses, [health centres](#), offices, and property of ordinary citizens in Afar and Amhara [regions](#); destruction of food supplies, dwellings, fields and cattle of [villagers](#). All non-military targets. The TPLF forces also cut off all communication infrastructure in the areas they occupied – a repetition of what they did in Tigray Region in November-December 2020.

---

<sup>17</sup> Moving testimonies on him were given by his wife and other friends, see <https://youtu.be/NTWf639eO-U>.

<sup>18</sup> Fenethylamine, a strong stimulant drug (illegal), combating fatigue. Also used in the Syrian civil war and by 'Islamic State' terrorists. See also <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-55378461>.

- [Looting](#) of official food aid convoys sent by the Ethiopian federal government, WFP, USAID and other NGOs, and using it for their own TPLF [troops](#). At the same time pro-TPLF circles and USAID were still complaining about the so-called ‘food aid blockade’ of Tigray, an especially popular theme in pro-TPLF cyber-space postings. But while the USAID country representative in Ethiopia Sean Jones [admitted](#) the TPLF looting of USAID's warehouses, his boss Samantha Power, judging to her tweets and statements still a big friend of TPLF, kept quiet - except for a few vague calls to the TPLF to “... withdraw from the two regions [Afar and Amhara] and negotiate.” She may be mistaken in her expectation: the TPLF will not and cannot really ‘negotiate’. And as their record shows since their broken ‘promise’<sup>19</sup> on 3 November 2020 to accept a ‘peaceful solution’, they would be unlikely to keep any of their eventual commitments. A new USAID [call](#) accusing the Ethiopian government of ‘blockade’ came out on 20 August 2021, *at the same time* that the people of northern Wollo were being subjected to killings, abuse and looting, and suffered massive food insecurity because of TPLF actions. So, it was an inappropriate and biased call. The TPLF leaders also seem not to have any serious interest in assisting their people in Tigray: while there *is* serious food deficiency and suffering, their foremost aim is to maintain themselves militarily. The famine story is used as a [propaganda](#) tool to keep soliciting support from the international community. This is a repeat of the strategy [they used in the 1980s](#) – withholding food aid to Tigrayans and instead [buying weapons](#), when fighting the *Derg* government.
- From several TPLF-occupied villages and city quarters in the North Wollo region, there were reports in local Amharic-language media in Ethiopia that TPLF units, after killing civilians, ‘buried’ them in private houses, in a pit dug in the living room. If what remained of the owners or relatives came back, they, in their shock, could not reoccupy the house.
- The Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation mentioned on 13 September 2021 in a transmission that in Worebabo village in North Wollo the TPLF forces, after having done another mass killing of civilians, “did not allow family members to bury their loved ones.” The bodies were deliberately abandoned for wild animals. Meanwhile, as of September 2021 the city of Woldeya was still occupied by TPLF forces, and Ethiopians braced for the abuse and destruction that would be revealed when the TPLF is beaten back from there. It has already been reported that the city’s university was heavily damaged.
- Incursions of trained and armed Tigrayan ‘refugees’ occur from Sudan into Ethiopia via the border (e.g., near Humera town), thus trying to enforce a corridor from Sudan to Tigray (for smuggling in heavy weapons and supplies). These [repeated incursions](#) - apparently with Sudanese support - were repelled by the Ethiopian federal army, which sealed the border. Several tens of thousands of troops recruited from the ‘refugee camps’ in Sudan (e.g., Hamdayet), who mainly house Tigrayans, are ‘waiting’ on the border to invade, and the Ethiopian army is set to prevent this.
- In the above-mentioned massacre of over 200 villagers in the village of [Ch’enna](#), in the [Dabat area](#) of northern Amhara Region in [September](#), eye witnesses reported that there were cases where up to six members of the same family were [killed](#), and that priests and deacons doing church services were dragged from the church and executed. They were killed after having been forced to hand over the keys to the local church, with treasures like hundreds of years-old religious manuscripts and crosses. These were looted by the

---

<sup>19</sup> Cf. J. Abbink, *The Atlantic Community mistake on Ethiopia*, *ibid.*, p. 17.



TPLF units: war crimes aimed at obliterating the cultural identity of local Amhara communities.

- A similar civilian massacre occurred in Boza locality, also in the Dabat area, by retreating TPLF forces. After battle defeat, they killed the civilians they met on the road. According to reports, on 3 and 4 September 2021 some 128 were killed.
- In mid-September news came out, via the Ethiopian Human Rights [Commission](#) and [others](#), of another deliberate [mass killing](#) by TPLF units, of youngsters of Amhara background in the town of [Qobo](#) (with ca. 600 [victims](#)), even reported on by [AFP](#). In addition, the TPLF destroyed a large [irrigation project](#) in Qobo, purposely damaging the livelihoods of over 8000 local farmers.

## **TPLF becoming aimless**

The scars of such targeted ‘ethnic killings’ and destruction will be felt for years to come. The TPLF's record in areas occupied since 28 June 2021 - in northern Amhara and Afar - is unmatched to whatever happened in Tigray in the first months of the war. In view of this appalling record, it is difficult to see the TPLF as a partner for peace. They have saddled Ethiopia with huge problems. The material destruction, the targeted killings, creating hundreds of thousands of IDPs, [sexual abuse](#), forced child recruitment, etc. have purposely fostered community hatred and strongly damaged the [economy](#) of an already poor area. When they were in government, the TPLF had installed harsh authoritarianism, judicial arbitrariness, aggravated ethnic tensions, and created festering territorial disputes. One of these is the issue Wolqait-Tsegede, an historically Amhara/Gondar area annexed to Tigray in late 1991 and contested in the current conflict. For decades, according to a report from the Amhara Media Corporation, the TPLF government here pursued a [ruthless policy](#) of demographic repression and abuse of the [local, largely Amhara population, so as](#) to make the region ‘Tigrayan’. The Wolqait-Tsegede issue points to a conflagration of underlying political-economic problems with ethnicized demographic policies, that cannot be discussed in detail here. The international community has no legal right and thus, it can be argued, no business meddling in this issue; it will be decided later on the Ethiopian federal level.

In its current campaigns, TPLF neither seems interested in nor capable of ‘negotiation’ or compromise. Furthermore, the idea of negotiations with them is now also rejected by the government and by a large majority of Ethiopians, who are shocked by the cruelty and destruction wreaked on the people in the war zones, as evidenced in comments by [ordinary local witnesses](#) and journalists in Ethiopian media. Since decades the TPLF are an elite that ruled with repressive and stealthy methods, also in [their ‘own’ regional state](#) of Tigray. In the present conflict they intimidate and abuse not only the villagers in Amhara and Afar regions but also [their own population](#). They seem to fight only for their own power and business interests and their well-endowed [diaspora](#) elite, not for the wider population of their Region, the progress of which, after their 30 years of reign, has been quite disappointing. One could additionally blame them for forcing a large group of the Tigray population to be a partner in crime, with methods of threat, [intimidation](#), food-aid blackmail and compulsory [\(child\) recruitment](#). The TPLF elite's struggle for their privileges and their amassed financial and other resources is nowadays cloaked in a fake discourse of ‘defence’ of the region, or of ‘the Tigray people’. They thereby deprive an [entire generation in Tigray](#), as well as in [Afar and North Amhara](#), of education, economic activity and gainful employment - not to speak of a normal life with entertainment, cultural events, socializing, collective religious life, etc. The TPLF are thus destroying the social-economic fabric of local society.

The violence against infrastructure, schools, village structures, banks, bridges, electricity cables, water supplies, etc. reveals a ‘scorched earth’ tactics, aimed to evoke hate. It also made some observers wonder where the Orthodox-Christian religious outlook, that characterized 96% of the Tigray population, has gone. It is certainly absent among the TPLF cadre. No shades of peace, forgiveness or other such ideas are recognizable in the TPLF; nor can they be expressed by the Tigray common people (not allowed), to whom great injustice is done. It is difficult to investigate what Tigrayans as a whole want, and it is difficult if not unjustified to ascribe to them a collective or unified attitude. But since [March 2018](#) many in Tigray felt that due to TPLF’s repressive government they were left behind in a changing Ethiopia under the new PM Abiy Ahmed, whose policies they welcomed. It is unlikely that many relish the prospect of a protracted ‘guerrilla resistance’. At some point, the Tigrayans [themselves](#), in view of their long-term interests, have to change [course](#) and stop acknowledging or reject the TPLF – if that does not endanger their safety.

## **Muddled policy**

As noted, the USA and EU policy-makers in recent months have said hardly anything about the TPLF’s campaigns of wholesale destruction; they were only muttering when the TPLF was receiving a beating in the first months of the conflict, and still go on about a so-called Tigray famine. While there is serious and dramatic food scarcity in Tigray, produced by TPLF’s actions, it is reckless to state, as EU ‘Crisis management commissioner’ J. Lenarčič did in the European Parliament on [6 July 2021](#), that what the Ethiopian government did was “... a siege” and that “... starvation is being used as a weapon of war”. Western nations offered no real condemnation when TPLF’s mass killings and [destruction](#) of Western Afar, Southern Gondar and Northern Wollo became clear since early July 2021. We should remember that after the Ethiopian federal government announced a ceasefire on 28 June 2021, *no* reports of such abuse by the federal army were reported. Compare that to the TPLF side.

On 11 September 2021 US President Biden conveyed Ethiopian New Year wishes, but this was seen by many Ethiopians as cynical, especially when he stated “...my Administration is engaging in robust diplomacy with our partners throughout the region to peacefully resolve conflicts in the Horn of Africa”. Again, no political and humanitarian support or concern was expressed on the affected people in Wollo or Afar, while the facts of destruction, killings, and thousands of IDPs were already widely known. Only the Ethiopian [government](#) and the Ethiopian diaspora communities did offer assistance, as for example to the city of Dessie in Wollo, where close to 200,000 IDPs, having [lost](#) everything, are living in poverty and lack food and amenities. International aid agencies only responded slowly, with the WFP trying to provide assistance after weeks had gone by. It picked up by late September Western donor country bias and [selectiveness](#) still seem in place, notably on the policy level. It was [analysed](#) earlier in several [publications](#).

In fact, there is confusion if not [hypocrisy](#) in Western policy towards Ethiopia. It is remarkable that no serious condemnation of the TPLF was heard despite the overwhelming evidence (see above) of their violence. This Western policy is apparently influenced by vested interests, misplaced ‘moral concerns’, resistance to a balanced appraisal of the facts, links of communication between pro-TPLF operatives that appear to be [embedded](#) in Western [media](#) and international institutions, and incomplete media reporting. According to *The Economist* (28 July 2021), only 29% of the US public ‘trust the media’. But the US government seems to have no such problem; they often act on any questionable and sensationalist media report on Ethiopia

that appears, without proper checking of their own. There has also been a kind of Western over-concentration of (perceived and real) human rights violations in Tigray of months ago by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops. Balanced assessment is lost. One example was the almost sentimentalist concern primarily on the issue of sexual violence by Eritrean or Ethiopian troops in the initial phases of the war. While very bad and unacceptable things indeed happened, the data are still scarce and unreliable on the extent/number of incidents, as revealed in a [recording](#) from a UN-organized video meeting on 26 March 2021. Also, the deep problems of gender-based violence that [already existed](#) in Tigray [before the conflict](#) were ignored. A related issue here was the opening and/or [destroying of most prisons](#) in Tigray by TPLF in the first week of the November 2020 conflict (with 20 to 30,000 inmates [released](#), including major offenders). In addition, rape continues on a large scale, months [after](#) the Ethiopian army left the area. In May 2021, three soldiers had been convicted in Ethiopian courts of law for such abuse and in June 2021, the Ethiopian federal attorney-general had opened [prosecution](#) against 53 more Ethiopian/Eritrean army personnel in connection with transgressions and abuse. Making a clean slate and [addressing it](#) on the federal side should continue. Among the TPLF, however, we know of no one ever indicted or punished for such abuse.

Current U.S. (and EU) policy has thus had a destabilizing effect on the Horn of Africa region, e.g., by slanted complaints about rights abuse or about a ‘lack of total, unfettered access’ to Tigray for aid organisations, and putting constant [pressure](#) on the federal government, but not on the TPLF. They also keep coming back to the role of Eritrean forces in the war, seeing this as illegitimate, especially due to the abuses. This is a highly contested issue, but in itself it is not illegal for Eritrea to act (border control, self-defence, and as a response to the TPLF firing missiles to Asmara in the first week of the war) - if that happens with the consent of the Ethiopian government. It is likely that Eritrean troops still are involved in border protection. In addition, the Western governments do not act to appeal to Egypt to moderate its constant undermining of any GERD accord and its covert support for the TPLF. It perhaps fits in with a US policy of supporting Egypt as the regional hegemon (with military hardware and billions of dollars annually). And there is also tacit support or condoning of Sudan operating against Ethiopia. A Sudan military attack on Ethiopians in a disputed border area was [already started](#) in December 2020. If Sudan is not criticized for such acts by the international community, this in effect privileges Sudan’s military leaders above Sudanese civilian Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok - who is for negotiation and compromise - and endangers the shaky Transitional Government (Sovereign Council) and the gains of the 2019 Sudanese popular revolts that ousted former president Omar al Bashir.

There is disarray in US foreign policy - with the Afghanistan debacle and the Iran ‘nuclear deal’ issue coming up as next – and they are struggling to formulate one. But on Ethiopia one would expect a learning curve. Unfortunately, the ‘policy’ so far shows little understanding not only of all relevant facts but also of the political psychology and societal realities of Ethiopia, and led by ill-conceived priorities and mirages of ‘regional stability’ in the Horn of Africa. Theirs seems to be a view of stability based on keeping Ethiopia small. But not stability but the opposite will be the result. There are even deeply flawed and insincere articles by self-appointed US foreign policy ‘experts’ who [suggest](#) ‘regime change’ in Ethiopia (i.e., some written [after](#) the Ethiopian elections, and without any word on the TPLF-created havoc). In the paper cited, published by the American Enterprise Institute, another US ‘think tank’ where people cannot think, the disdain for African leadership (PM Abiy Ahmed), and for the Ethiopian people having voted in a difficult but quite acceptable parliamentary [election](#), is remarkable. There is also an active, under-the-radar lobby group in the US, aided by certain pro-TPLF academics, students and diaspora activists, also in Europe, to promote this non-starter idea of

‘regime change’. Several Ethiopian opposition party figures, TPLF-affiliated, and media figures were even invited to the US in mid-2021 to discuss this.

EU policy, as seen in the often inept interventions by, among others, EU foreign affairs commissioner J. Borrell, EU Special Representative to the Horn of Africa A. [Rondos](#) (replaced on 1 July 2021 by Dr Annette Weber) and EU ‘special Horn of Africa envoy’ P. Haavisto (appointed in early 2021 by Borrell), is moving along the path of the USA, also with little positive effect. On 13 July 2021, Mr. Borrell already [called](#) for sanctions on Ethiopia, two weeks after the federal government had declared a ceasefire, but while TPLF had continued fighting, attacking civilians, and [stealing food aid](#) for their own troops. No EU word on sanctions on the TPLF. The EU makes ‘[analyses](#)’, but gives them no suitable and balanced policy follow-up. An op-ed of 17 October 2021 co-authored by former EU Horn of Africa Representative Alexander Rondos even [pleaded](#) for a Yugoslav-like solution for Ethiopia via a Dayton model. It is difficult not to see such a plea as not only ignorant of Ethiopian conditions but also as very inappropriate if not arrogant. In addition, in both the EU and the US, we have to reckon with the fact that the policy-makers (in the Biden Administration many are drawn from the Obama Administration and good friends of the TPLF<sup>20</sup>), may feel they cannot be seen to ‘lose face’ if forced to admit that they have bet on the wrong horse (the TPLF). EU and USA still give valued humanitarian aid to Ethiopia, but that does not substitute for constructive foreign policy and long-term developmental pathways. Ethiopia appreciates foreign countries for this humanitarian and developmental aid - necessary and useful, but regrets the dependency it creates.

The USA and the EU must by now have access to enough evidence on TPLF’s actions in the past months on the devastating violence and abuse referred to above, in areas where this movement has no business at all to be. I repeat that they should do their homework better: the US and EU would be advised to mend the lack of coherent and flawed policy, and recognize the TPLF’s destabilizing, belligerent activities and utter neglect of the (Tigray) region/people they say they are fighting for. The USA and the EU entirely failed to urge TPLF to change their policies and approach. That the USA, after all the field evidence available, on 17 September 2021 gave out an ‘[Executive Order](#)’ announcing the possibility of sanctions “...on certain persons with respect to the humanitarian and human rights crisis in Ethiopia”, shows the US Administration’s muddled approach. In principle it is a neutrally worded order and did not mention specific persons, and reading it, it is clear that the threat of sanctions would perfectly apply to all the TPLF operatives, perpetrators of the violence mentioned above. Indeed, “...persons responsible for the crisis” from day one on 4 November 2020 are without any doubt the TPLF. Still, there are contradictions in the Order, and it tries to substitute moral posturing for real policy. In Section 7, the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea are mentioned, but not the TPLF. There are enough indications of a continued disconnect to reality in current American [policy](#) that they would now try to primarily apportion blame to the federal government. That would be continuing an unhelpful and fruitless approach and constitute a [real let-down](#). In an Open Letter to President Biden, Ethiopian PM Abiy Ahmed gave a [forceful reply](#) to this misguided policy. President Biden himself is not involved in the details of the Ethiopia-file, which was prepared by State Department officials like Robert Godec (Ass. Secretary for African Affairs, until 1 October 2021<sup>21</sup>) and his team, and rubber-stamped by Secretary A. Blinken. Godec already in May 2021 [called](#) for sanctions, not on the TPLF but on the federal

---

<sup>20</sup> See for instance [this video](#) (from Awramba Times.com), showing evidence of the close links of the Obama government people (many of them still active) with TPLF, and with a fragment on former President Obama’s baseless praise for the so-called ‘democratic’ Ethiopian elections of May 2010.

<sup>21</sup> He was succeeded by Ms. Mary Catherine Phee. See: [www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/nominations-072021](http://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/nominations-072021).

government. If the ‘sanctioning’ called for in this executive order will be biased and not identify the causes and culprits that brought about this conflict, then it will be another exercise in futile foreign policy, which won’t work on the Ethiopian government and will ultimately lose the USA and EU an important African ally. Being the result of policy not based on the relevant evidence or on strategic insight, the executive order should never have been issued.

## **Dilemma**

How to deal with an exceptionally violent and negative insurgent army and also to recognize the suffering and secure the interests of the common Tigray people this TPLF army claims to represent but whose opinions and feelings we cannot fully gauge because they are or have to be suppressed? It is a well-known ‘secret’, discussed also by various Tigrayan commentators in Ethiopian media, that if the TPLF would stop their war they would have to face questions from parents on where their children are, i.e., those taken to the battlefield and not returning. The course of the TPLF elite - in its aim to save itself, its international protégés, its collaborating Tigrayan diaspora communities, and its link to power centres and foreign financial sources as well as to Egypt – shows that it has no sincere intention to rebuild its region and take the interests of the Tigray population at heart. Their aims and end game are fuzzy. Secession would deliver a small, dependent rump state and is not a popular option. They seem to fight and destroy because they *can* fight and destroy. The just mentioned support of various Western countries in the past year, under the label of humanitarian aid, has encouraged them. So did the support of Egypt and Sudan - which, incidentally, shows the sorry state of ‘African solidarity’. The TPLF will perpetuate war, people’s misery and economic-environmental destruction until they will be incapacitated, see no more prospects, or are more challenged by the Tigrayan people on their political and military course. They will also keep trying to provoke the Ethiopian federal army to lose patience and take harsh retaliation. The fault of the West has been to indirectly offer the TPLF survival prospects, regularly falling for their, what often amounts to, biased propaganda under the labels ‘famine used as a weapon’ or ‘genocide in Tigray’. For most other Ethiopians (> 105 mln), who remember the repressive and abusive rule of the TPLF-EPRDF in 1991-2018, the TPLF as it is now is not acceptable as a future political partner. TPLF leaders have shown themselves to be accountable to no one except themselves.

## **The diplomatic stalemate: wrecking Ethiopia?**

The TPLF insurgency started in November 2020 has the hallmarks of failure: it has no positive societal aims, did not help the Tigray [population](#), endangered Ethiopia as a whole, destroyed local food security and economic life, heightened regional instability, and antagonised local community relations. We cannot but conclude that TPLF’s illegal use of violence for dubious reasons and out of selfish interests of an entrenched authoritarian elite, its recruitment and use of [child soldiers](#),<sup>22</sup> its campaigns of abuse and routine killing of civilians and of wholesale property destruction of non-combatant communities (see above), make it a hindrance to any solution that would give the populations of Tigray and northern Ethiopia respite and recovery. Seeing the fatal conceit of the TPLF remnants still committed to continuing their campaigns and giving out fanciful and immature statements with bizarre preconditions (like in a [letter](#)

---

<sup>22</sup> Here is a video of a TPLF child soldiers’ training camp, from the ‘Tigray State TV’:  
<https://twitter.com/deb30911/status/1446982898771431426>.



issued by the ‘Government of Tigray’ of 27 July 2021), it is unlikely that there will be any kind of ‘peace’ soon, and certainly not with them. The 11 October statement from TPLF’s ‘Tigray External Affairs Office’, tendentiously entitled ‘Press statement on Abiy’s ‘final’ offensive on the people of Tigray’ (*sic*), neither offers any hope for a breakthrough; its language is duplicitous and not a basis for serious talks. And any kind of ‘negotiations’ cannot be enforced by an international community using aid and development cooperation in ‘blackmail’ style. In this light, the recent USA executive order is a worrying and unacceptable policy measure and is full of contradictions. If it is used against federal government officials instead of against TPLF operatives, then it will miss the mark, and will only lengthen the armed struggle, emboldening the TPLF in its campaigns of abuse and destruction. Also the 20 September 2021 [press briefing](#) from the US Embassy in Addis Ababa is unhelpful and misleading in that it seems to refuse to hold the TPLF to account for the ongoing and past violence and call for a return to the political *status quo ante*. That is unlikely to ever happen.

In addition, the UN again has shown its deep flaws throughout this conflict. It has no efficient institutional means of addressing international conflicts without bias and clouds the issues at hand. UN personnel in Ethiopia were [deeply implicated](#) in furthering the cause of the TPLF, [instead of](#) operating neutrally. UNSG Antonio Guterres made some unhelpful, so-called ‘non-political’ comments on “... the need for ... negotiations”, etc. in Ethiopia, presumably referring to the TPLF as well. We all know that this is not going to happen, because for the Ethiopian government and people the TPLF has made itself impossible. Recently, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin [Griffiths](#), taking up TPLF propaganda points, again fell into blaming the Ethiopian government for allegedly ‘blocking aid’ to Tigray. But this was to cover up the failure of the UN and WFP to prepare for efficient truck transport (including reserve fuel) to Tigray: as we mentioned above, per 29 September 2021 a total of 428 of 466 trucks sent out to Tigray [had not returned](#) to Addis Ababa and other food aid distribution points because they were clearly confiscated<sup>23</sup> by the [TPLF](#) for their [troop transports](#) – a fact the UN had [not prepared](#) for. That they would only have carried enough fuel for a one-way trip is very unlikely (and furthermore, there apparently were still fuel [supplies](#) for the trucks in Tigray in September).<sup>24</sup> Griffiths neither thought it worthwhile to mention the recent mass killings, devastation and famine threat produced by TPLF in the northern Amhara/Afar Regions. As of mid-October these issues were still not adequately addressed.

The string of mistakes of UN agencies – which seemed to have started already in November 2020 by them supporting TPLF leaders in various ways<sup>25</sup> – led to the Ethiopian federal government expelling eight UN staff from the country on 30 September 2020, following on the same day by a condemnation and threat from the [White House](#) on Ethiopia.<sup>26</sup> And predictably,

---

<sup>23</sup> It is relevant to follow this twitter thread, sorting it out:

<https://twitter.com/TheStrangerEth/status/1444561298700840961>

<sup>24</sup> See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2deexE3AxU&t=4s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2deexE3AxU&t=4s) (from 30 to 36 minutes) for an interesting analysis of the situation by Eugene Puryear.

<sup>25</sup> One WFP staffer, Tommy Thompson, was caught on camera when delivering goods to TPLF insurgent spokesman Getachew Reda. The UN realized the mistake and relocated him outside Ethiopia (see: [www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2021/08/01/un-official-whose-photo-went-viral-moves-to-another-country/](http://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2021/08/01/un-official-whose-photo-went-viral-moves-to-another-country/)). Thompson recently (October 2021) appeared in a TPLF-flag T-shirt at pro-TPLF demonstrations in the US.

<sup>26</sup> The Ethiopian government appears to have accumulated evidence of UN personnel complicity with the TPLF war effort for a long time. One of the expelled people, a certain Dr. Kwesi Sansculotte-Greenidge, was implicated in his close links with the TPLF during the current conflict, and his seriously overstepping his UN OCHA mandate might even make him liable for prosecution (This tweet collection is worth reading: [https://twitter.com/Onie\\_Addis/status/1444626818875678723?s=03](https://twitter.com/Onie_Addis/status/1444626818875678723?s=03)). His attitude was already shown on his (now deleted) [Twitter account](#) reproducing an incorrect text he wrote, NB, for the AU’s African Commission on Human and People’s Rights ([Elementor #536 – Commission Of Inquiry \(achpr.org\)](#)). The Commission was

it was followed by a [tweet](#) of support of EU Foreign Affairs Commissioner Josep Borrell rejecting the expulsion, but seemingly without knowing the facts. The USA, which has been expelling foreign diplomats and international personnel left and right during the past decade, denies Ethiopia this legal right (as stated in Article 9 of the [Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations](#)), and as further specified in the 1991 [UN resolution 46/182](#) of 1991 (Annex, articles 2 and 3). The US thereby persisted in its misconceived pattern of hasty statements, selectively being [shocked](#), and ignoring evidence of continued TPLF war-making on the ground. The US also continued to show its disrespect of a sovereign government defending its country.<sup>27</sup> But what is more, the UN personnel were clearly engaged in criminal activities on behalf of the TPLF, as was clear from a [revealing media story](#) on *Feta Daily* of 1 October 2021: helping this violent insurgent movement to secretly buy, transport and install a military radar system on Zoba and Raya mountains, with which they intended to track and then shoot down aircraft. The Ethiopian intelligence services followed the entire process and ultimately destroyed the system. This connivance of the UN people with the TPLF, believing they could cheat Ethiopian intelligence, is unacceptable and in effect criminal: it constitutes aiding and abetting violent insurgency against a UN member state. The Ethiopian government was entirely right in expelling them. The UN people breached the ‘Memorandum of Understanding on Enhanced Coordination Mechanism for Humanitarian Access in the Tigray Regional State’, that the government had signed with UN agencies on 29 November 2020.<sup>28</sup> There is more worrying evidence against UN people in Ethiopia, as a [recent article](#) by J. Pearce has made clear. The UN’s prestige – already at an all-time low - received another blow with these cases of unprecedented meddling in a sovereign country.<sup>29</sup>

On 7 October 2020 the Ethiopian UN representative Mr. Taye Atske-Selassie gave an [excellent analysis](#) in the UN General Assembly meeting of the subversive actions of certain UN staff in Ethiopia, and rightly referred to the 1991 UN resolution [46/182](#), referred to above, on ‘Strengthening the Coordination Humanitarian Emergency Assistance’ stating that UN staff have to respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity of the states they work in. That a worrying ignorance and ill-will towards Ethiopia are present also among certain high-level UN personnel is evident from a recent disingenuous [op-ed](#) by Mark Lowcock, the former UN Under-secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief, who may want to cover up for his own mixed record. His idea seems to be that an independent African country in need still needs to cower to the rich and mighty ‘do-gooders’. The scapegoating of the Ethiopian government visible here is questionable and unhelpful.

---

later obliged to recant it (see [Commission Of Inquiry – The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights \(achpr.org\)](#)).

<sup>27</sup> The US and other Western nations neither made a fuss in 1998 when the TPLF government then in power expelled 30 UN people, nor in 2020, when Burundi expelled four.

<sup>28</sup> The UN [contested](#) the right of Ethiopia to expel its employees and argued that the Vienna Convention only refers to diplomats of states. This issue is, however, not entirely clear, and this is why that special ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ was signed. This faulty UN argument would also give UN personnel immunity for whatever they do in a foreign country. In addition, it ignores the general injunction from the UN Charter, article 105(1), which sets out that “...[t]he Organization shall enjoy in the territory of each of its Members such privileges and immunities *as are necessary for the fulfilment of its purposes*” [my italics, J.A.]. This last requirement or admonition was flouted by UN personnel in Ethiopia. In response to Ethiopia’s decision, the UN spokesperson said on 1 October 2021 that “... [w]hen issues are raised regarding U.N. personnel ... the requirement is that such concerns are appropriately conveyed to the organization” (*ibid.*, Newsweek, 1 October 2021). The Ethiopian Foreign Ministry asserted that this was done [repeatedly](#), but that there was no UN response. In view of the gravity of the UN staff’s activities, expulsion was then the right measure.

<sup>29</sup> As J. Pearce has shown in several revealing articles (of [1 September 2021](#) and of 12 [May 2021](#)), this was not the first time that the UN was going too far.

At this juncture it would also seem time for the EU to dissociate itself from the US approach and finally develop *its own*, evidence-based, approach to African challenges in general and to Ethiopia in particular, either collectively as EU or individual countries. This would be in line with EU's declared wish to strive for more overall 'strategic autonomy'.<sup>30</sup> In general, external powers should avoid all semblance of a neo-imperialist agenda towards any independent country and certainly towards Ethiopia, a never colonized African country. The eventual application of a sanctions regime to Ethiopia would strongly hurt the ordinary Ethiopians and damage economic life. It would be another case of Western/rich country blackmail although it would have no political effect on the government. As one Ethiopian commentator recently said, the 'wrecking of a Black nation' should stop.<sup>31</sup>

## Forward moves

The way forward is difficult to indicate but some dialogic process between federal government and the Tigray Region's population, via grass-roots civil society organizations or alternative political groups, will of course be needed. It will take time. The major issues are: a) obviously, the destructive course of the TPLF, who have proven themselves to be an impossible partner for anything, b) the disappointing and unprofessional global media reporting, following sensationalist leads and accepting unreliable information, and often lies (e.g., as in the case of CNN and the *Daily Telegraph*, see above), from unchecked sources and cyber-propaganda; and c) the ambivalent and so far unhelpful policies of Western donor countries and the UN: they have not produced positive results (excepting their provision of a large part of the humanitarian aid). Major (policy) changes are needed in all three domains, as already suggested earlier:<sup>32</sup>

a) The US, EU and other 'concerned' parties, including global media, would do well to restore balance and change course in their policy towards Ethiopia, including getting fuller evidence of all relevant facts on the ground.<sup>33</sup> [Supporting and condoning TPLF](#), a movement that has brought mayhem and instability to the wider region, is not productive and is politically and morally questionable. There was much complaining and accusing of the federal government about human rights abuse and the so-called creation of famine in Tigray, but the federal government provided aid from the start (subject to check of the cargo on weapons, etc.).<sup>34</sup> When in June 2021 the armed conflict was expanded by the TPLF towards the Afar and North Amhara Regions, with unprecedented series of mass killings of civilians, appalling cruelty, and destruction of infrastructure and the local economy (see above), nothing was heard from the EU and US spokespersons except some vague mutterings. But the horrors have been exposed, and more will unfortunately be revealed once Woldeya city and other parts of Amhara Region will be freed from TPLF occupation. The Ethiopian people at large have seen the images and stories, and are [not inclined](#) to support negotiation with a group that by its actions has now shown itself to be, in the international law sense, an 'enemy of humanity' (*hostis humani generis*), meaning they appear to commit 'crimes against

---

<sup>30</sup> Cp. Paul Timmers, 'Debunking strategic autonomy', *Directions Cyber Digital Europe* blog piece, 23 July 2021, on: <https://directionsblog.eu/debunking-strategic-autonomy/>.

<sup>31</sup> See Taytu Bitul (pen name), How to Wreck a Black Nation in the Age of "Black Lives Matter", 23 May 2021 (<https://taytu.medium.com/how-to-wreck-a-black-nation-in-the-age-of-black-lives-matter-cdcd3f6239bf>).

<sup>32</sup> See Jon Abbink, *The Atlantic Community mistake on Ethiopia*, pp. 27-29.

<sup>33</sup> Part of this effort could be to stop employing and supporting highly controversial 'think tanks' like the often very biased SAHAN-Research ([https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/partner/sahan-research\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/partner/sahan-research_en)), or even the International Crisis Group, whose reporting on Ethiopia and the Horn has been quite sub-standard.

<sup>34</sup> See also on current aid provision (October 2021): [www.fanabc.com/english/emergency-humanitarian-assistance-being-distributed-to-tigray-woredas-via-44-ngos/](http://www.fanabc.com/english/emergency-humanitarian-assistance-being-distributed-to-tigray-woredas-via-44-ngos/).



humankind'. A diplomatic policy of asking for 'mediation' and [negotiation](#) with TPLF in its current shape and at this point continues to destabilize the Horn. It is tantamount to condoning massive human rights abuse and the creation of famine conditions to continue, and it might be a repeat of US policy of early 1991, when they let the TPLF enter Addis Ababa and assume power *while at the same time* having called negotiations in London between the Ethiopian *Derg* government (1974-1991) and the TPLF, as a deflection manoeuvre. More advisable for the international community at this point is to work with, and critically follow, the federal government of PM Abiy Ahmed. It has the support of the mass of the Ethiopian population. Interestingly and to their credit, PM Abiy and his government have also continued with multiple development and infrastructural projects in the rest of the country, as if there was no war.

- b) A fuller understanding is also needed of the backgrounds of the genesis and nature of the *ongoing* armed confrontations after 4 November 2020. It is to be realized what is at stake in the region: the fate of a big African nation, with the second-largest population on the continent. Unhelpful in this respect is listening to outfits like the USA lobby firm [Von-Batten-Montague-York](#), employed by the TPLF to work on the US federal government and undermine Ethiopia's government via information manipulation. Without evidence and having no clue of international-law definitions, [this lobby firm](#) even labelled federal forces as performing 'genocidal military actions' towards Tigray, parroting the pro-TPLF diaspora activists. Western donor country information-gathering and weighing is defective: if the EU and US policy-makers rely on an unreliable CNN journalist to [chair their meetings](#) (as on 10 June 2021), then we know that things are wrong. Entertaining the idea of regime change, as suggested by certain eternally disgruntled Ethiopian opposition figures, is a dangerous road to go and unacceptable after the recent Ethiopian parliamentary elections.

In addition, US and EU policy statements and measures often continue to give the impression of superficial appraisal and reluctance to evaluate what is happening on the ground.<sup>35</sup> They simply do not see the entire picture and studiously ignore the genesis and nature of the conflict since 4 November 2020 or the totally unacceptable TPLF rejection of the 28 June 2021 ceasefire offer of the Ethiopian government, as well as the TPLF ravages in Afar and northern Amhara Region. Remarkable also is the total lack of any reference in recent US-EU-UN statements and resolutions to the first TPLF-orchestrated big mass murder on (non-Tigrayan) civilians: that in Mai Kadra town,<sup>36</sup> on 9 November 2020 (ca. 1500 people killed). But this was a tragic and defining event.

The US would also do well not to follow its current 'policy' of responding to every incident from either side (TPLF or Federal government) with a statement 'condemning it in the strongest possible terms'. This hopping from incident to incident<sup>37</sup> reveals a lack of long-term strategy and serious evaluation on the nature and context of this TPLF insurgency and of the danger it poses to the stability and development of Ethiopia as a whole.

- c) Checking and double-checking all global media [reporting](#) is needed (from the big three AP, AFP, Reuters, and in the *Washington Post*, BBC, *New York Times*, [CNN](#), *Daily Telegraph*,<sup>38</sup> and secondary media in other countries) against *Ethiopian domestic* news sources, notably

---

<sup>35</sup> For example, see this leaked [Memo](#), authored by J. Naudts at the Delegation of the EU to Ethiopia, dated 20 August 2021. In addition, the EU saw fit to table a resolution (<https://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/47/13>) at the UN Human Rights Commission meeting on 13 July 2021 entitled 'Situation of human rights in the Tigray region of Ethiopia'. *Nothing* was mentioned of the appalling human rights abuse in Northern Amhara and Afar by the TPLF, that had then been ongoing for two weeks.

<sup>36</sup> Victims were interviewed in this documentary: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQTkFu2OvhY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQTkFu2OvhY).

<sup>37</sup> And often blowing up minor ones, such as the [bizarre US statement](#) on a speech by Ethiopian MP Daniel Kibret, whose Amharic was misunderstood and wrongly interpreted.

<sup>38</sup> This newspaper saw fit to publish a terrible and incorrect story by a pro-TPLF journalist in Nairobi, making [exaggerated claims](#) on the basis of unverified information from TPLF sources and biased speculation.

news broadcasts in Amharic, both state and independent media. Ethiopian government-supported media and statements are *not* by definition unreliable but highly informative, often in-depth, and reflecting a broad spectrum of serious news-gathering; they are not what the TPLF-EPRDF government's media were before 2018.

- d) The international community, including the Western donor countries and the UN, should abandon the illusion that one can work with the TPLF as a 'political partner'. In realistic terms, support for them via diplomatic channels or UN relief activities via UNDP, UNICEF or [WPF](#), who even appear to have connived with the TPLF in giving them rides, issuing them [ID cards](#) or getting them advanced V-Sat [satellite phones](#) or [medicine](#), is [not acceptable](#). TPLF should not be resuscitated or be kept on life support, because they are not a credible party anymore; they are leaving Tigray and the North in ruins *while now and then suggesting* they would be open to talks (with the US; not the Ethiopian government), and with illusory and shifting [preconditions](#). In addition, 'negotiations' at this stage would not be a good idea – they will not be productive and would be rewarding violent insurgency. And reports of emerging internal factions within the TPLF (as of October 2021) would make it complicated with whom to talk. Realistically, for the large majority of Ethiopians and many analysts, the historical role of the TPLF is over. The expectation is that any 'agreement' that might be made with them would be null and void. There may certainly be a [deep wish for peace](#) among the Ethiopian public, but if the PM Abiy government would conclude an agreement with the TPLF as it is now, it would quickly lose the support of the majority of the Ethiopian people. During a press appearance in Meqele on 1 October 2021, top [TPLF military cadre](#) also clearly indicated that they would continue their fighting, at whatever price.
- e) With the Tigrayan people, a deal is needed, with reconciliation and reconnection with the rest of Ethiopia. TPLF has tried at all costs to prevent this, again 'ethnicizing' the conflict and fomenting hatred. It caused the traumatization of hundreds of thousands of people, including in Tigray. The remaining TPLF leadership have thus proven themselves to be incapable of constructive politics – they have shown no honesty, sincerity or goodwill. According to most Ethiopians, they should all be arrested and tried. Also, the funds that the TPLF elites while in power reputedly took out of the country should be recovered. It was part of illicit financial [outflows](#) from Ethiopia, which in 2015 were estimated at an average of ca. [\\$2 bln annually](#) since 1991. TPLF has allegedly amassed much capital in accounts outside the country, with its elite having many family members and adherents living abroad. On 15 September 2021 the Ethiopian federal government via the media [appealed](#) to the Tigray youth to stop letting themselves be drawn into a destructive conflict and to dissociate from TPLF.
- f) Cease-fire, disarmament of insurgents, humanitarian aid across the entire region, and rebuilding of agriculture, food security, and infrastructure are needed, and maybe with a broad transitional Tigray government, based on new dialogue partners - not TPLF, as it has refused all and will not be accepted. They called the 28 June 2021 federal government ceasefire 'a joke' and continued to expand the fighting, but achieving nothing except misery, death and destruction. The TPLF has trouble in accepting their expiry date. Without positive signs from the TPLF it is realistic to expect that the military degrading of this force on the ground will continue. While Tigray Regional State will continue, there will indeed be no return to the political *status quo ante*.

## **Concluding remarks**

Since 4 November 2020, Ethiopia was made the victim of devastating insurgent conflict, mendacious cyber-warfare, media misinformation and political prejudice in international policy circles that chose to neglect the study and evaluation of the relevant evidence. It is time to stop this. It has led to a perpetuation of the crisis in northern Ethiopia - including Tigray, one of the most interesting and historically important areas of the country, a suffering region and a population which need peace, recovery and development as much as any in the country. While normalization and the restoration of a workable peace (including punishing proven abuse by its soldiers during the conflict) is the task of Ethiopia itself, a change of perspective and policy of the international community, notably the USA-EU-UN, would help. It would require: a) calling to account the violent insurgency and terror of the TPLF, which refused a ceasefire, expanded the war, pursued scorched-earth tactics, and indulged in large-scale use of child-soldiers and in killing and abuse of civilians, and b) constructively working with the Ethiopian people and the country's federal government, based on critical, new information gathering and a longer-term strategic appraisal. Such a policy change is more urgent than ever, and might be a good learning curve for future interactions of (Western) policy makers with African countries in general.

# ASC Working Papers

ASC Working Papers are only online available on the ASC website:

www.ascleiden.nl > Publications > ASC Series > ASC Working papers  
or: <http://www.ascleiden.nl/?q=content/asc-working-papers>