

Steal, Burn, Rape, Kill - on Ethiopia's new famine

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In Tigray in northern Ethiopia a famine is unfolding in the dark. Reporters and aid workers have been unable to access large parts of the region since war broke out in November. Satellite imagery and aerial photographs have shown that only a fraction of the land was ploughed in preparation for the summer rains. Children are dying of hunger. When villagers are spotted by Eritrean or Ethiopian soldiers they are told: 'You won't plough, you won't harvest, you won't get any aid. We'll punish you if you try.' Some news reaches me by phone. I recently spoke to a Tigrayan colleague who had experienced a previous famine. The elders in his village were saying that the situation now was as bad as it had been in the worst months of the 1980s.

Even if a massive aid effort gets underway and the Ethiopian prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, allows international agencies to reach people in need, it's already too late for tens of thousands of Tigrayans, most of them children. Two months ago, aid agencies completed spot surveys of villages they could access and reported malnutrition of between 27 and 33 per cent among children under five. This is famine-level, but the surveys were already out of date. In early May, the same places were visited again and child malnutrition rates were said to have reached 50 per cent.

At the beginning of the year the UN estimated that 4.5 million people in Tigray – roughly two-thirds of the population – were in need of emergency aid. It has now raised that estimate to 5.2 million. Aid agencies say they can reach 11 per cent of them. Abiy tells Western envoys that he is co-operating, but this is far from the case. The starvation of Tigray is a punitive Carthaginian operation. The aid agencies are hesitating to call it famine because they're scared of reprisals by the government in Addis Ababa, which controls their travel permits and threatens their staff. They're also bound by complicated rules of appraisal that don't allow them to declare a famine unless they have full data to back them up.

Until a decade ago, famines had almost vanished from the globe thanks to better living standards in poor countries and cheaper food everywhere. Humanitarian operations had expanded in scale, reach and technical capacity. Sophisticated protocols developed by the UN, the Red Cross and others meant that relief agencies could work in warzones, provide assistance across front lines, negotiate local truces and create protected spaces. Progress in the drive to end famine stalled with crises in Somalia (2011), Syria (from 2012), South Sudan (2014-18), Nigeria (2015-16) and Yemen (since 2015), but there was no evidence of a return to the days when famines could kill a million people. Tigray is different.

Tigray and the neighbouring province of Wollo were the epicentre of the famine of 1984. About six million Ethiopians were affected; the number of deaths is estimated at around one million. Another famine, eleven years earlier, denied and ignored by Haile Selassie's government, led to hundreds of thousands of deaths. In response to these crises, a pioneering generation of scientists developed the practices used today to keep malnourished children alive, to prevent outbreaks of deadly

communicable diseases and to read the warning signs of impending distress. In a paper from 1976, John Rivers of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine described the shift from severe poverty to famine as like freezing water turning to ice: it's not just a lower temperature, but a change in state. During the early stages of a food crisis, the graph of excess deaths resembles the foothills of a mountain range. Then comes a sudden, precipitous rise. Within a short period – sometimes only a few weeks – the community's ability to provide the bare minimum of sustenance collapses. Food stocks run out. There are no wild grasses and berries left in the woods or on the mountain slopes. People have sold their last goats and chickens, their jewellery and even their cooking pots, usually for a pittance. The markets are empty; there's no work to be had.

This is what happened in Tigray and Wollo. The result, filmed by Mohammed Amin for Michael Buerk's BBC report in October 1984, shocked the world. Six weeks later, the Foreign Affairs Select Committee summoned the directors of Oxfam and Save the Children to a hearing. Why, the committee chairman, Anthony Kershaw, wanted to know, had the government not been forewarned? Hugh Mackay, the overseas director of Save the Children, pointed out that his agency had repeatedly alerted the British embassy in Addis Ababa. It was a curious fact, he added, that 'people will not believe a famine until they see it.' But Kershaw kept coming back to the question of what Save the Children had or hadn't done until Mackay silenced him with a summary of the official UK response, which was excluded from Hansard: 'They did fuck all, sir.'

Although it was little acknowledged at the time, the 1984 famine wasn't simply caused by drought: starvation was also a counterinsurgency strategy. Ethiopia's military government, headed by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, was fighting the Tigray People's Liberation Front. The Tigrayans suffered terribly, but their anger at Mengistu only strengthened their determination to resist. The TPLF won a military victory in 1991 and, leading a coalition known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, became the dominant force in government for the next 27 years. There are many legitimate criticisms of their rule, notably its failure to institute democracy, but one achievement is undisputed: the establishment of a national system for food security. This began with rehabilitating eroded hillsides and building small dams for irrigated gardens; it expanded to include micro-credit schemes and a 'productive safety net programme', providing cash credits, food and other essentials to farmers to allow them to stay on their land. The system worked successfully in 2015-16, when drought and harvest failure threatened a nationwide food crisis. The government responded promptly and effectively, with a relief programme that reached more than ten million people, many of them in Tigray, the most drought-prone region. Ethiopia's annual economic growth of about 10 per cent took a dip, but the country emerged from the biggest threat for decades without loss of life.

International relief agencies have a complex system for early warning and response. It's known as the Integrated Phase Classification system, or IPC. It has five levels, from Phase One (food secure) through to Phase Four (emergency) and Phase Five (famine). In October last year, almost all of Tigray was shaded yellow for Phase Two (stressed). Now the maps of the humanitarian crisis show the region in red: Phase Four. Famine occurs when three thresholds are reached: 'At least 20 per cent of households face an extreme lack of food, at least 30 per cent of children suffer from acute malnutrition, and two people for every ten thousand are dying each day due to outright starvation or to the interaction of malnutrition and disease.'

The IPC system is designed to diagnose the severity of a food crisis as it is occurring. In the emergency phase, children will be dying of hunger and disease. When a large population is in a state of emergency for months or years, the figures can build up staggeringly without triggering a Phase Five classification. Between 2014 and 2018, only two counties in South Sudan suffered 'famine', but across the country about 200,000 people died of malnutrition and infection; of those, 99 per cent were outside the two famine zones. By using the term 'famine' to describe nothing less than an absolute state of food insecurity, the IPC classification system has had the unintended effect of

implying that anything short of it is acceptable. But there is another, more fatal flaw: the descriptions don't work when a government is using starvation as a weapon.

Starvation is a crime of material deprivation. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court defines it as a war crime, consisting in the destruction or removal of 'objects indispensable for the survival of the civilian population': not only food, but water, medical supplies and care for children. It's a crime best perpetrated without media access, by severing communications and rigidly controlling information systems such as the IPC. It's hard to cover up a famine completely, but it's not hard to delay responses and ensure that when it does become public it's already too late.

A recent alert from the US Famine Early Warning System included the line: 'The reduction in household access to cash income has resulted in a widespread food security Emergency in the region and has likely led to even more severe consumption gaps for worst-affected households.' Decoded, this means: 'Everything tells us that there must already be pockets of famine.' The Ethiopian government is running its own IPC analysis on Tigray with data gathered by phone survey, and is due to report soon. But internet and phone networks have been shut down across Tigray, except in and around the main towns, so its results won't cover the rural areas where people are actually starving. It wouldn't be surprising if Ethiopia declares itself free of famine. If the UN or international donors give any credibility to such a claim, they will be complicit in the concealment of what is in effect a major famine already.

Abiy has other ways to tighten the curtain around his starving citizens. In May he declared the TPLF a terrorist organisation. The common word for the TPLF in Ethiopia is woyane, 'rebel' or 'revolutionary', referring back to the guerrillas of the 1970s and 1980s, and before that to a rebellion in 1943. In practice, woyane refers to any Tigrayan suspected of sympathy with the TPLF. But given that the party won more than 90 per cent of the vote in Tigray's regional elections in September, that means pretty much everyone. For aid workers, this means no travel beyond the first checkpoint out of town, no distribution, no food security surveys, no contact of any kind.

In Somalia a decade ago, the US government designated the militant group al-Shabaab a terrorist organisation too. This cast a shadow over aid agencies trying to give support to the hungry. Any relief worker in Somalia who even inadvertently assisted al-Shabaab - for example by paying a fee at a checkpoint - risked prosecution under the Patriot Act. Relief workers clamoured for action as indicators pointed to imminent famine. But it was only when excess deaths rose sharply, and the UN officially declared a famine, that the Obama administration exempted emergency aid workers from prosecution. Around 200,000 people had already died. Afterwards, aid workers quietly adopted a principle they call 'no regrets' programming. It's simple: if you have reason to fear the worst, respond at once, bend the rules and ask for forgiveness later.

To understand the rapid spread of hunger in Tigray we need to revisit the war, which broke out on the night of 3 November last year. There are four belligerent parties: the Federal Government of Ethiopia; its coalition partner, the government of Eritrea; the regional government of Amhara, which shares an administrative border with Tigray; and the TPLF, which was in control of Tigray until the war began. In September, Tigray had defied the government in Addis Ababa by going ahead with regional elections, which had been delayed in part because of the pandemic. In response, funding to the region was cut. The first shots were fired when Tigrayan special forces and militia stormed federal government army bases in the region, an assault the TPLF claim was a pre-emptive mission to seize weapons as the government amassed its forces. Within hours a well co-ordinated military offensive against Tigray had begun.

When his forces entered the Tigrayan capital, Mekelle, on 28 November, Abiy announced that 'not a single civilian had been killed.' This wasn't the case. He declared the 'law enforcement operation' a

success: all that remained was to round up fugitive TPLF leaders. This didn't happen. He also assured the world that Eritrea hadn't sent its army into Tigray. This was also untrue. If the war had ended when Abiy said it had, there would have been only modest disruption to Tigray's harvest. A swift military advance down the main roads with limited damage to infrastructure would have been a minor setback to the region's economy.

But in those first weeks something else was already happening. The Ethiopian media relentlessly denigrated Tigrayans: they were 'daytime hyenas' or a 'cancer'. Tigrayans were purged from the army and government service. On the ground, killing and looting began as soon as the Tigrayan forces retreated. Isaias Afewerki, Eritrea's president, has been stonily silent on this: his modus operandi is to say nothing and expect the world to accept the new arrangements. His army of brutalised young conscripts are terrorising the area. An Eritrean soldier who deserted the front line told me they had been ordered to 'crush' Tigray. Eritrean forces, he said, were encouraged to steal, burn, rape and kill.

This is more or less what has happened. Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers have looted shops, farms, factories and houses. They have burned crops and granaries, rustled cattle, slaughtered plough oxen and crushed the chicks of poultry farmers underfoot. They have cut down orchards and ripped up water pipes and pumps, many of them paid for with UK aid. They have ransacked the region's hospitals and clinics. The militias in Amhara have occupied and ethnically cleansed the western lowlands, where hundreds of thousands of poorer Tigrayans from the highlands travel for seasonal work on sesame farms. Having suspended banking services when the war began, the government refuses to unfreeze the accounts of 450,000 Tigrayans in the microfinance scheme, robbing them of access to precious savings.

The most thoroughly documented massacre took place in the city of Axum, where an estimated 750 civilians were murdered by Eritrean troops. There are credible reports of hundreds more mass killings, including a video recording by an Ethiopian soldier that shows a unit rounding up and shooting more than a dozen young men before pushing the bodies off a cliff; some of the victims were still alive. Soldiers and militiamen have raped Tigrayan women and girls. More than five hundred survivors of gang rape have been reported to clinics. Everything we know about the reluctance of survivors to come forward, and the dangers of reaching a hospital while a war is raging, suggests that there are many more such victims. Despite the media blockade, there's more than enough material to warrant an international criminal investigation.

Last year the TPLF's leaders were full of bravado, insisting that they could resist all comers. Tigrayans were aghast at their reckless miscalculations. When the coalition forces closed in on Mekelle, the leadership fled to the mountains. Since then, they have cranked out statements that resemble their Marxist-Leninist tracts from the 1970s, praising the valour of the youth and honouring the martyrs who have perished. The TPLF has no international office; there is no regular phone communication and no internet link with their commanders in the field. They have issued almost no statements for the international community - though they did release an eight-point peace proposal in February, which was ignored.

The Tigrayan figureheads who have re-emerged since the start of hostilities are retirees from the former guerrilla war against Mengistu's regime: men in their sixties who left public life twenty years ago. Among them is the veteran TPLF leader and former Ethiopian army chief of staff, General Tsadkan Gebretensae, often considered the best African military strategist of his generation. This time last year he was running a brewery; now he is overall commander of the resistance. Tens of thousands of young men, outraged by the atrocities and destruction, have volunteered for the Tigray Defence Forces, as the new Tigrayan army calls itself.

Thirty years ago, after winning the war with Mengistu and capturing Addis Ababa, Tsadkan reflected on the Tigrayan victory over the largest army in sub-Saharan Africa. 'War is primarily an intellectual activity,' he told me. Today, his old comrades are walking with sticks but undimmed. In December and January they were in headlong retreat, fighting a defensive war. They found temporary refuge in the steep escarpments of southern Tigray, beyond the reach of tanks and artillery. In February they broke out of the encirclement, destroying five Eritrean and Ethiopian divisions – a deployment of more than 12,000 troops. By the end of April, after another round of fighting in which they saw off co-ordinated assaults by 25 Eritrean and seven Ethiopian divisions – about 80,000 troops – the TDF had achieved parity with their major adversary, the Eritreans. 'We were biting the dust, now we are on our feet,' Tsadkan said this week.

The war is still the main event. The military balance is uppermost in the minds of Abiy and Isaias, who have redoubled their efforts to crush Tigray. Abiy has promised that Eritrea will withdraw its troops. But if it did, his own army would lose control of Tigray, and he would have to negotiate with the TDF as an equal partner. That would spell the end of his dream of being the glorious leader of a unified Ethiopia. For his part, Isaias has gambled everything on the war, and believes that if he doesn't destroy Tigray his regime will collapse. Both countries are buying drones and other sophisticated armaments, but for now their most reliable weapon is hunger: they aim to starve Tigray into submission and keep it permanently dependent on an international aid pipeline that they can switch on and off at will. On 3 June they rejected international calls for a humanitarian ceasefire, proclaiming that a final victory was within their grasp. Reports from the ground speak of yet another build-up of troops.

Until a few weeks ago, Tigrayans were hopeful that famine could still be averted through a combination of emergency aid and stores of seed and fertiliser. Now that the rains are falling it's too late. If Eritrea could be forced to withdraw through a UN Security Council resolution, they argue, Tigray wouldn't starve. But the Eritreans are digging in: towns are being encircled with trenches. Last week, the UK special envoy for famine prevention, Nick Dyer, tweeted: 'Just back from Tigray. The humanitarian crisis is worsening and the risk of famine conditions growing.' But famine is no longer a risk, as another senior diplomat wrote privately: it's a 'mathematical certainty'. With their arms twisted by the Ethiopians, it seems likely that the UN and donors will stick with circumlocution and euphemism. If this isn't a famine then the word has no meaning.

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P.S.

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