



General Assembly

Distr.: General
XX January 2021

English only

Human Rights Council

Forty-six session

22 February–19 March 2021

Agenda item 2

Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[29 January 2021]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

Eritrea's Military Involvement in Ethiopia's Tigray Conflict should be investigated

For more than three months, conflict has been raging in the Tigray region of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. After attacks by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) on Ethiopian military command structures in Tigray on November 4, 2020, Ethiopia has launched a so-called "law and order enforcement operation" in Tigray. Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed promised at the beginning of the operation that the protection of the civilian population had absolute priority.

Credible reports and testimonies are indicating that this offensive has never been conceived as an internal Ethiopian operation but even in the beginning was planned in close cooperation with the Government of the State of Eritrea. Testimonies have been reporting about the massive transfer of Ethiopian soldiers to an Eritrean military camp close to the Eritrean capital Asmara in summer and autumn 2020. Later in November, these Ethiopian forces have been starting a military offensive against the Northern border of the Tigray region with at least logistical support by Eritrean soldiers. Many reports are indicating that later Eritrean military became more involved in the combats. The Governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia are still denying any foreign military involvement in the operation.

Yet, Ethiopian officials admitted that their forces retreated at some point of the offensive to Eritrean territory to regroup before once again attacking TPLF positions in Tigray. On November 28, 2020, the Ethiopian Prime Minister announced the official end of the "law and order operation". But since then, fighting in different regions of Tigray has been going on. Despite massive interruptions of all communication systems on the ground in Northern Ethiopia, civilians are reporting about attacks by Ethiopian fighter jets or drones. Mostly Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers are fighting TPLF units, but sometimes in January 2021, Ethiopian soldiers violently confronted looting Eritrean military units.

Despite the claims of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, there are massive casualties among the civilian population. Many reports are indicating that Eritrean soldiers became involved in looting, raping, murder and massacres against civilians. It is reported that the Catholic Cathedral of Adigrat in Tigray has been damaged and was looted by Eritrean soldiers. At least 29 people were identified as victims of a massacre by Eritrean forces inside Medhane-Alem Church in the village Gu'etelo. Among the victims were five priests and four deacons. More than 20 civilians have been killed by Eritrean troops in the Edaga Arbi area in the Central zone of Tigray on November 24, 2020. Among the victims were many priests. Intentionally attacking civilians or looting is strictly forbidden by international law and could be a war crime.

Some 750 civilians, who were hiding in the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Aksum, were massacred. Several monasteries and churches, including the monastery of Debre Damo, were attacked and looted by Eritrean soldiers. It is absolutely appalling that rich cultural heritage and even UNESCO world heritage sites are destroyed deliberately or looted by Eritrean military forces. This seems to be a deliberate attack against cultural identity of people in Tigray. By no means these attacks against cultural heritage could be justified as being element of a law and order enforcement operation.

Eritrean soldiers have occupied large parts of territory in Northern Ethiopia and destroyed or looted the key industry capacity of Tigray region. Numerous testimonies are reporting that all modern industry equipment systematically has been transported by Eritrean soldiers to Eritrea. This abuse of a military occupation is a blatant violation of international law and must be stopped immediately. This violation of the law of war will incite further ethnic tensions and hatred between Eritrea and Tigray by creating misery and hunger in Northern Ethiopia.

There are many credible reports that Eritrean soldiers have been acting undercover in Ethiopian army or Amhara militia uniforms to avoid being detected and being conceived as party to a regional war with military involvement of several states. This could be a violation

of international standards of the law of war. At Mekelle airport, Eritrean soldiers are acting in Ethiopian uniforms. For months both states deliberately have been misleading the international community and their own citizens regarding the military involvement of Eritrea in Ethiopia.

Society of Threatened Peoples is very much concerned about this shocking cooperation with a state which has been accused by UN experts of crimes against humanity, because it might bear huge consequences for the security of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. Opponents of the Eritrean Government feel insecure in Addis Ababa since Eritrean state security officials and Eritrean special forces are operating freely in the Ethiopian capital.

Society for Threatened Peoples is alarmed about the deliberate destruction of two Eritrean refugee camps in Northern Tigray by Eritrean soldiers as well as the abduction of some 6,000 people living in the camps to Eritrea. UNHCR reported in January 2021 that satellite imagery showed fires burning and fresh signs of destruction at the Shimelba and Hitsats camps, which have been shelter for 26,000 refugees. These are concrete indications of crimes against humanity. The protection and humanitarian needs of the 100,000 Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia must be ensured urgently.

Society for Threatened Peoples therefore calls upon the UN Human Rights Council to urge the Government of the State of Eritrea to:

- immediately stop its military intervention in Ethiopia: the illegal occupation and destruction of Tigray region in Ethiopia must end,
- end the persecution of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia,
- cooperate in an international independent investigation in war crimes and other massive human rights violations committed by Eritrean soldiers in Ethiopia and to bring them to justice.