

Call for Input to inform the High Commissioner's report to the Human Rights Council on the impact of casualty recording

Submission by the Tigray War Project (Ghent University) and Every Casualty Counts

20 February 2023

Researchers from the Department of Geography at Ghent University have been working in the Tigray region of Ethiopia since 1994. Following the outbreak of armed violence in the region in November 2020 the research team reached out to their existing contacts and information networks in the area to document casualties and the humanitarian situation. This information, and full details of the methodology used, is published and updated monthly at www.ethiopiaticigrawar.com.

Context

Since the beginning of the armed violence in November 2020, the Ethiopian government has imposed severe access and communication restrictions on the Tigray region. These include travel bans, media blackouts, and internet and telephone shutdowns. These restrictions have impeded the ability of independent news media and investigators, both national and international, from accessing the area to report on events. Humanitarian workers have also been expelled or threatened with expulsion for reporting on the situation. As a result, international awareness and understanding of the situation has been severely limited.

The Tigray War Project has been uniquely successful in circumventing these obstacles in order to gather and corroborate details of casualties. In addition to compiling the limited information from media or humanitarian agencies whenever it is available, Tigray War Project researchers have been able to use existing personal contacts in the region and diaspora to directly interview survivors and victims' relatives. This level of access is not open to any official investigating or monitoring body. As a result, data from the Tigray War Project has been exceptionally valuable in informing the world, and policymakers in particular, about the situation in Tigray.

As of February 2023, researchers for the Tigray War Project had managed to gather and corroborate details of [445 violent incidents, resulting in between 8,576 and 18,451 fatalities](#). Of these fatalities, the project has managed to [identify by name 4,453 individuals](#). This information was gathered and cross-checked through more than 2,000 telephone interviews, email correspondence, social media contacts, news media reports, NGOs and humanitarian alerts. Full details of the methodology can be found at <https://ethiopiaticigrawar.com/methodology.php>.

Impact on protection of civilians

The Tigray War Project's research has substantially influenced international understanding of the situation of civilians in Tigray. It is regularly cited in news media around the world: a Google search for '[Ghent University Tigray deaths](#)' yields 267 articles in English language; there are also numerous articles in other languages, and the team has been contacted dozens of times by media for interviews (see list in the annex below). The project is also regularly contacted by journalists seeking information on particular massacres, and has a mailing list of around 2,300 subscribers including concerned citizens, journalists, NGOs, diplomatic and UN staff.

The Tigray War Project's casualty research has been cited directly in parliamentary debates concerning the situation in Ethiopia, including the European Parliament, and [the UK parliament](#). It is also referenced in [briefing papers by the European Parliamentary Research Service](#).

On 6 December 2021, Professor Jan Nyssen presented the Tigray War Project's research to [an online conference organised by members of the European Parliament](#). One week after this event, [Slovenia on behalf of the European Union submitted a request for a Special Session of the Human Rights Council](#). This was held on 17 December and resulted in a [resolution establishing the international Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia](#).

In the framework of the preparation of the [report by International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia](#) (ICHREE), Professor Jan Nyssen was interviewed by ICHREE's legal adviser on 7 July 2022. The contents of the [www.ethiopiaticrgraywar.com](#) database was discussed in detail. In a series of follow-up email communications, additional information on the Tigray War Project findings was communicated, particularly with regard to massacres and hate speech.

Whilst the situation of civilians in Tigray remains dire, and the international response inadequate, the limited actions taken to date have undoubtedly been strongly influenced by the casualty records documented and verified by the Tigray War Project. Furthermore, analysis of the Tigray War Project's data reveals that deaths from direct violence are far exceeded by excess deaths resulting from the reverberating effects of the conflict, including starvation and lack of access to healthcare. The [Tigray War Project estimated that](#) there would be an average of 518,000 civilian victims in Tigray by the end of 2022, with a low estimate of 311,000 and a high estimate of 808,000. Around ten per cent would be caused by massacres, bomb hits, and other killings; 30 per cent by a total collapse of the healthcare system; 60 per cent by famine. This analysis must have an important impact on ensuring the international community's response to the crisis in Tigray is directed proportionately at the causes of greatest harm and risk to civilians.

Annex: International news outlet interviews with Tigray War Project researchers

Trouw (The Netherlands), 2 February 2021 : [‘Mijn stadje Hagere Selam in Tigray is leeggeroofd door soldaten’](#)

De Morgen (Belgium), 30 March 2021. [‘Tieners vermoord om te vermijden dat ze later wraak nemen’: Gentse geografen monitoren burgeroorlog in Ethiopië](#)

The World (USA), 2 April 2021: [Counting the victims in Tigray](#)

The Guardian (UK), 2 April 2021: [Ethiopia: 1,900 people killed in massacres in Tigray identified](#)

De Standaard (Belgium), 6 april 2021: [‘Duizenden burgers in Tigray doelbewust geëxecuteerd’](#)

The Economist (UK), 22 April 2021: [Daily Chart – Tigray is edging closer to famine](#)

Avvenire (Italy), 3 June 2021: [La guerra dimenticata. Etiopia, stupri usati come armi](#)

VRT-NWS (Belgium), 18 June 2021: [In Ethiopië dreigt bijna veertig jaar na de hongersnood hetzelfde scenario zich te herhalen](#)

MO* (Belgium), 14 August 2021. [‘Die hongersnood heeft Tigray zelf gezocht, is de redenering’](#)

The Globe and Mail (Canada), 14 March 2022: [Tigray war has seen up to half a million dead from violence and starvation, say researchers](#)

The New York Times (USA), 23 June 2022: [When Satellites Capture a Crisis - How one research team is telling the story of Ethiopia’s civil war.](#)

NRC (The Netherlands), 20 October 2022: [In Tigray vallen honderden hongerdoden per dag, ziet deze onderzoeker. Hoe komt dat?](#)

Le Soir (Belgium), 13 November 2022: [La province éthiopienne du Tigré est victime de l’une des pires catastrophes humanitaires](#)

De Standaard (Belgium), 19 November 2022. [Hoe tel je vergeten oorlogsdoden?](#)

Neue Zürcher Zeitung (Switzerland), 4 January 2023. [«Wir haben jahrzehntelang Feldforschung gemacht in Dörfern, in denen dann Massaker verübt wurden»: wie ein belgischer Geografieprofessor einen unsichtbaren Krieg sichtbar machte](#)

Financial Times (U.K.), 15 January 2023: [War in Tigray may have killed 600,000 people, peace mediator says](#)

BBC Focus on Africa (U.K.), 16 January 2023: [Ethiopia: Will peace lead to justice?](#)

VRT-NWS (Belgium), 23 January 2023: [Mogelijk 600.000 slachtoffers in Tigray: een oorlog in Ethiopië veel dodelijker dan die in Oekraïne waar nauwelijks iemand van afweet](#)

El Pais (Spain), 27 January 2023: [Etiopía, la guerra más mortal del siglo: 600.000 civiles muertos en dos años.](#)

Corriere della Sera (Italy), 27 January 2023: [Etiopia, la profezia di Jan Nyssen.](#)

Domani (Italy), 9 February 2023: [Il conflitto più sanguinoso di cui non avete mai sentito parlare](#)