



Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Expresses Alarm Over the Number of Recent Civilian Deaths in Tigray

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has expressed concern that in only the first few weeks of the calendar year, at least 108 civilians have been killed and another 75 wounded in airstrikes on Tigray. A spokesperson for the OHCHR described multiple attacks by the Ethiopian air force against civilian targets in the region including a bus, an airport, and a camp for displaced people. The attack on the camp was particularly troubling and devastating, as 59 were killed and a further 30 wounded in the densely-populated site. The OHCHR has pressed the government in Ethiopia, and its allies, to protect the country's civilian population and verify that any targets in its ongoing military campaign are in fact combatant locations. The targeting of civilians and noncombatant infrastructure is a direct violation of international law, and the organization warned in its alarm that these attacks could be evidence of war crimes.

The United Nations World Food Program has also cautioned the international community that its ability to provide food, clean water, medicine, and necessary daily supplies to civilians in the north of Ethiopia is about to become impossible because of ferocious fighting there. Without access to affected civilians, the world is going to witness another humanitarian disaster in the region, with 5.2 million people in Ethiopia relying on international aid for their survival.

The current conflict in the country is part of an ongoing 14-month war between the government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). An aid worker who has been based in the camp that was attacked by the Ethiopian air force has said that a majority of the camp inhabitants are old women and children. The aerial bombing began in the dark at midnight and in the confusion, many people could not escape the murderous weaponry falling from the air. Since October of 2021, at least 146 civilians have been killed and 213 injured in airstrikes. The government has denied targeting civilians in airstrikes but it is believed that the TPLF lacks the technical capacity to conduct these types of attacks. Aerial bombardments such as one last week that killed 17 civilians, most of whom were women that worked at a flour mill, have regrettably become daily events in certain parts of the country.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, has reiterated his pleas to both sides to cease their fighting. UNICEF, in its statement, has said that violence against civilians has been perpetrated by the Ethiopian government and the TPLF, and that neither is free of guilt for the violations of international humanitarian law. UNICEF and the U.N. have urged both sides to build on the progress from recently in December when the government agreed to halt any further advances and the TPLF stated they would withdraw from their positions back into Tigray. U.S. President Biden has spoken to the Ethiopian President, Abiy Ahmed, and urged him to take steps to improve the humanitarian situation and help aid groups access those in need.

The start of the conflict can be traced back to protests four years ago when diverse groups of Ethiopians from various ethnic backgrounds were protesting the dictatorial oppression they had endured for 27 years under the TPLF. The resolution to the protests and, at the time, the saving of the country came when the TPLF agreed to surrender its leadership to a new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed. The TPLF withdrew to the Tigray enclave and rejected any engagement with the new government. Some experts and analysts at the time warned that a military confrontation would be inevitable, which is in fact what has transpired.