



TESTIMONIES

Conflict-Related Gender Based Violence in Tigray

Webinar 25 May 2021

Europe External Programme with Africa *ivzw*
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Testimony 1 Obtained from Tigray

These testimonies were presented at the Webinar 'Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Women in Tigray', Voices from Tigray. EEPA (25 May 2021).

A video was obtained of a victim of rape. The video is a heart-breaking and sickening story of a woman who is raped and physically attacked by a group of Eritrean soldiers. The story is as follows:

The Eritrean soldiers took a group of women to a remote place, their military camp, somewhere out of Adigrat. She estimates the number of women taken by force to the camp are like the number of women in a minibus (full of women in a minibus).

She was raped by a group of five Eritrean soldiers, it was gang rape, three times.

She heard the names of the soldiers (the rapists) when they called each other. Two of them are called Awot and Mohammed. She said the soldiers who raped are from the Bilen tribe of Eritrea. They have scars on their face (around their cheeks).

First, she came to Adigrat Hospital, but she was referred to Mekelle.

On her way to Mekelle (accompanied by the soldiers who had raped her), the soldiers abused and raped her again. This time she doesn't remember how many soldiers and how many times she was raped.

The woman says there was a woman who gave birth recently and was raped (she was among the women taken to the camp). What is so sickening about the story of this woman is her recently born newborn is killed brutally. The soldiers say they kill the newborn because he will become 'Woyane' when he grows up. It is horrific when the woman explains how the soldiers kill the newborn. The mother of the dead newborn was killed as well. The victim continues to tell her painful story...

Her 12-year son was killed in-front of her and she is worried her dead son is eaten by hyenas or wild animals. This imagination and the death of her son has disturbed her unimaginably. From her story and explanation, the death of her son made her mentally unstable.

The survivor said the rapists were taking pictures while they were raping her.

The soldiers strictly warn her to say she is raped by the Ethiopian soldiers, if in case she is asked. If they know she said she is raped by Eritrean soldiers ('Shabiya'), they will find and kill her.

The victim was so hungry. When she found something to eat and tried to eat, she realized that her teeth were broken and lost. In the video, she shows her lost teeth and the injuries she has because of the physical abuses she had. She was raped and physically abused and violated. The soldiers took her jewellery as well. She said they took all her gold jewellery.

When she came to Mekelle for treatment and reached around Agulae, the soldiers injected her, and she became unconscious.

Although it is not clear from the story...it seems the rapists threw her out somewhere between Augulae and Mekelle...and a red-cross ambulance took her to Ayder hospital...

The video where this testimony is narrated is in possession of EEPA.

Testimonies 2: Collected Testimony by a solidarity group in Tigray

These testimonies were presented at the Webinar 'Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Women in Tigray', Voices from Tigray. EEPA (25 May 2021).

A doctor in the city of Adigrat reported that one woman had been left on the side of the road after she had been raped by over twenty Eritrean soldiers. When she received medical care surgeons had to remove stones and nails that had been inserted inside her genitals. A video was circulated.

A twenty-seven-year-old woman had been kidnapped by five Eritrean soldiers and subjected to severe sexual violence for over two weeks. During her captivity she was repeatedly gang raped by Eritrean forces, sometimes up to fifteen soldiers for over eight hours at a time. The ordeal left her with a fractured spine and pelvis.

One woman lost her ability to move her legs and control her bladder after being raped by three Eritrean soldiers and two Ethiopian soldiers.

In the town of Abiy Addi, a teenager lost her right hand after being raped by an alleged Eritrean soldier wearing an Ethiopian military uniform. The soldier initially tried to force the schoolgirl's grandfather to have sex with the teenager but when he was not successful, he shot the grandfather.

In the town of Wukro a husband was forced, by gunpoint, to watch his wife being raped by four Eritrean soldiers.

In Western Tigray, Eritrean soldiers pulled aside 20 women and raped them. The following day only 13 returned. Eritrean soldiers told them to go, saying "We already have what we want."

Reported by The Telegraph:

'Selam, a 26-year-old coffee seller in Edaga Hamus, 100km away from Tigray's capital of Mekelle, said she was abducted by Eritrean soldiers with 17 other women in January.

"They took us into the forest. When we arrived there, there were around 100 soldiers who were waiting for us. They tied the hands and feet of each one of us. And then they raped us without mercy," she told the Telegraph as she fought through tears.

"We stayed that way for three days. After three days the soldiers killed five girls who had been tied with us. They poured [alcohol] over our wounds. They danced standing over us."

By the time she was taken into the forest, she had already been raped several times by men she recognised as Eritrean soldiers. After the first attack, her abusers were waiting for her as she returned to her house from the hospital with contraceptives and post-exposure HIV drugs.

"Why the hell did you want this? We want you to be sick. That is what we are here for. We are here to make you HIV-positive," Selam recalled one of the men as saying.' (The Telegraph, 27 March 2021)

Testimonies 3: Obtained by a Women's Solidarity Group in Tigray

These testimonies were presented at the Webinar 'Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Women in Tigray', Voices from Tigray. EEPA (25 May 2021).

People fled in doves to mountains, caves and churches and mosques when the occupying forces came closer to the Eastern zone of Tigray.

Case One

Atsede Hadera (16), fled from the town of Fireweyni with her family, to the mountains with no food or water. After a week, she came to a deserted town. Assuming there were no soldiers, she walked to her house. Little did she know, she was being followed by two soldiers.

They followed her into her house and told her to take off her clothes or else, they threatened to kill her and burn the house along with her body if she didn't comply. As this was taking place, her neighbour Letebrhan walks into the house to hear this conversation.

Letebrhan overhears the conversation and immediately starts to beg the soldiers to stop what they're doing, she tells them Atsede is underage.

The soldiers ignore Letebrhan and tell Atsede to lay on the bed and take off her clothes. Letebrhan, finally, hopeless and desperate that she won't be able to get their attention, asks them to rape her instead. She was finally able to get their attention, they turned around and looked at Letebrhan - considering her proposition.

The soldiers agree to rape Letebrhan instead, for hours, one after the other. Atsede says Letebrhan didn't leave her room for over a week, she covered her face and body, she didn't speak to anyone. She didn't seek medical care - not that any was available. She remains in her home crying day and night.

Atsede couldn't bare the guilt of what happened to Letebrhan. She holds herself accountable, she cries talking about what happened, she calls it her misfortune. Atsede finally couldn't bear what had happened and runs away to Mekelle, the capital of Tigray.

Atsede, a child, carries the guilt for a crime she neither perpetuated nor had the power to stop.

Tigray is now soaked with stories like Atsede - stories of terror, sexual abuse, massacres, destruction and hate to an unimaginable degree.

Case Two

Lemlem Ataklti (30), is from Semema Adet, just south of Axum. She now lives in one of the many makeshift camps built for IDP's in Axum. She speaks in agony about what happened to her four months back in January of this year.

Like many of the raids undertaken by the Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers in her small town, this too would quickly turn into a horror show for its residents. This time, Eritrean soldiers had started shooting at civilians and three came into her house and locked her inside.

Noticing that her husband wasn't present they asked her if her husband is fighting against them along with 'Weyane'/TPLF. Lemlem's husband and father of her children had to run to the mountains to avoid military raids as they often turn into murder scene for men. They could not have quite imagined what might unfold.

She said he was not. One of the soldiers then asked that she take off her clothes. Lemlem lied and said she was pregnant, assuming they'd have mercy on her.

Without a second thought, the soldiers said "that's good, let's remove the 'junta' inside you, and replace it with our own race." Two of them opened her legs forcefully and the other brought a rough stick and inserted it into her vaginal canal and stirred it with the intention of aborting her pregnancy.

After the Eritrean men removed the stick, they took their turn raping her, as she screamed in pain. She doesn't really know for how long this was taking place. It may have been minutes, or may be hours - but it felt like it had been forever.

They finally left, she ran off to the bushes to avoid ever having to see them again. For two months, Lemlem couldn't control her urine, continuous abdominal pain & vaginal discharge, she is unable to fully communicate even with her family members, she cries most of the day. The health facility in her town has been destroyed by the Eritrean troops.

It may have been minutes, may be hours - it couldn't have been days - but it's also a lifetime, in a way.

Case Three

Zemam is a 70 years old nun with mental illness. She had lived all her life in the monastery .one day she was wandering in her church, as she always does, when the Ethiopian soldiers arrived.

Kidnapped her and kept her for 3 days in one room. On the 4th day they brought her back and left her near the monastery. She was confused, disturbed, suspicious and silently cried. She only talks to one nun otherwise kept to herself. since then she avoids going to churches and prayers saying "I am not allowed to go in there anymore." When she came to the hospital she was told that she has STD.

Case Four

One of the survivors was 22 years old she used to live in Humera. in November when the war started she was separated from her husband whom she married 5 months earlier to the war. They found her while she was running for her life and she was pregnant of 2 months and was raped by 3 Eritrean soldiers. The next day she started bleeding and she had a miscarriage but still it took her 3 days to go to hospital to get medical help. She then came to Mekelle. She has developed PTSD. After 3 months of waiting she was told that her husband was killed by the Amhara force and she went back to her home town for his funeral and then again Eritrean soldiers took her and other 3 women from the bus and kept her for 4 days.

Case Five

Two survivors from around Wuqiro aged 67 and 75. they have been neighbours for 25 years. On March 1 evening two Eritrean soldiers came to Weyzero Teberah house and forcefully started taking her clothes at this time she started to shout and ask for help. After hearing the loud shout Weyzero Medhin came to provide help thinking what has happened to her neighbour, she went there she was pulled inside the house and both of them was raped at the same time. When they came to the hospital both of them were ashamed and worried about the social stigma they have to face for the rest of their life.

Case Six

Genet is a 39 years old woman from Tigray, who was fleeing her home town with two other women and her three children to escape the war. They were then stopped by 5 Eritrean soldiers and taken to their camps and questioned to the whereabouts of their husbands. The husbands of the two women including Genet are part of the Tigray Defence Force. The third woman exposed them to the soldiers in hopes they would leave her. But the Eritrean soldiers took turns raping the three women for hours, after that one of the soldiers pulled out a metal from his Kalashnikov and put it on fire and then inserted it into her uterus, he then said now you will never give birth to a baby of the 'junta'. She then passed out and as she would find out later they put small pieces of metals inside of her. They were held there for 24 hours and released on to the streets, she then joined IDP shelter and there she started to have complications, she couldn't walk, sit or control her urine. It was at this time she decided to give her children up and commit suicide. She talked to one of the aid workers there and they brought her to the hospital, they did an ultrasound and could see the metals lodged inside her uterus. She then had surgery and the metals were extracted. She still hasn't healed fully, she limps and is unable to sit. She still lives in fear that they will come to take her, a while ago she heard that some of the soldiers are coming

towards where she is and she ran into the bushes limping with pain with her kids but came back later when they left the place. She said she doesn't want to cry in front of people, she wants to be strong and when the time comes be an example and advocate for women's rights. She then asked will I ever be able to live without my past holding me back? Without people seeing me as a victim.

Conclusion

What is happening in Tigray is devastating; public service - telecommunication, electricity, water, banks, health facilities, schools - essential service providers that can reduce the plight of women have been the primary targets of occupying forces.

Police, justice systems, health facilities cannot investigate perpetrators of sexual violence.

The number we have of GBV victims is clearly the tip of the ice-berg, the number of women that report rape looking to terminate a pregnancy are much higher and above those that report rape because it is a crime.

Weaponized rape and sexual slavery have made Tigray a living hell for women.

Not only are women and girls being sexually abused, these abuses are followed by other acts of cruelty. It has become common to hear about hospitals being occupied with women that have foreign bodies like stones, sand, metals, inside their uterus in hopes of making women of Tigray infertile. These acts and verbal confirmation of the intention of the acts by perpetrators are signs of genocide.

A total war has been launched on the people of Tigray; unarmed men have been taken out of their homes shot and killed, women raped with intention to 'purify their blood', hospitals looted and destroyed. Occupying forces have demonstrated once again that words like 'never again' mean nothing and actions have no consequences.

Testimonies 4 – “End Impunity of Eritrean Troops in Tigray” by Selam Kidane

Presentation by Selam Kidane at the Webinar ‘Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Women in Tigray’, Voices from Tigray. EEPA (25 May 2021).

My name is Selam Kidane, I am an Eritrean psychotherapist, born and mostly raised in Ethiopia. I have spent many years worrying and advocating for the right of Eritreans inside the countries and fellow refugees too.

As a researcher into traumatic stress and collective trauma, I spent several years travelling back and forth to Tigray and this gave me an opportunity to get to know the region and understand the people of Tigray really well. A refined people who try hard not to offend you, while they are not afraid to tell you what they think. I have received the blessings of many elders, found kindred spirit in many women in the villages, as well as had the opportunity of in-depth discussions with academics and politicians.

It really makes me sad to hear what we have just been hearing; it is harrowing to hear it happened to the people of Tigray who accommodated Eritrean refugees and treated us as their own despite the political standoff for two decades.

It is particularly gut-wrenching to realise that it is happening at the hands of Eritrean Soldiers, who to all intents and purposes, are victims of the very regime that is deploying them.

Many would have been captured from the streets of their towns and villages and forcefully drafted into the national service army, which has effectively become an indefinite bondage of slavery.

In the Eritrean National Service, the men and women are kept for years, with no education, no access to credible information, and under a constant bombardment of hateful propaganda and indoctrination into the hateful policies that we have been witnessing in Tigray, for the last six months. The result is devastating sadism.

"I don't feel safe in Tigray anymore. Even the sight of the military uniform frightens me very much," Tirhas, (not her real name) told AFP during a tearful interview in March. She is one of thousands, who have had to face heinous sadistic experiences of gang rapes, rapes in front of members of family, incestuous sexual violence forced at gun points and nails and other objects being inserted into women. It makes me shudder, even listening to this, I hear that Tirhas is clearly traumatised and so are many of the rest of us upon hearing this.

During my research among Eritrean refugees I had come across Eritrean women who were violated in similar ways in Sinai, where they were trafficked for ransom. Eritrean women were captured, relatives or other Eritreans forced to rape them, their genitals burned, many things we also hear happening in Tigray.

Eritrean women face constant sexual harassment at the Military training centres in Eritrea too. The extent might not be comparable, but the devastating effect of this barbarity, to the women and their communities will not be different.

I have witnessed what the situation inside Eritrea and the experiences of Eritreans along the human trafficking routes has done to Eritreans across the globe. And in Tigray it is the same and a thousand times worse.

Here we have sadistic and systematic violations, under war condition, as a way to subjugate the entire population and possibly across generations too. To make matters worse the responses so far are deaf ears, for six relentless months; if this situation is an indictment against the criminals committing these crimes is certainly is also an indictment against the leaders who have created a situation in which this can happen without impunity and a world that is still slow to hear the plight of survivors and even slower to protect them.

The root of much of the plight in Tigray is inside Eritrea, where the government perpetrates heinous crimes against humanity that were investigated by a UN Human Rights Commission in 2016. It qualified the indefinite National Service that affects all Eritreans as a Crime against Humanity. National Service is slavery. It is now deployed outside the borders, in foreign land committing heinous crimes.

Similarly to the silence now, in Tigray, by 2018 the world completely bypassed the plight of Eritreans and let Isayas Afewerki totally off the hook; by 2021 he scaled up the sadism of his crimes and doubled his victims to include the entire people of Tigray in addition to the people of Eritrea.

The crimes against humanity, that Isayas Afworki is responsible for, should no longer be ignored or overlooked. We have international mechanisms devised for just this, and it is imperative that they are used to contain evil and protect victims.

Isayas Afewerki should be referred to the ICC without delay, to account for his crimes against humanity committed against Tigrayans and Eritreans.

Only ending the circle of impunity will stop the cycle of devastation across the Horn of Africa.

Presentation “Rape as a weapon of war” by Malgorzata Tarasiewicz – East-West Women Network

Presentation by Malgorzata Tarasiewicz at the Webinar ‘Conflict-Related Sexual Violence against Women in Tigray’, Voices from Tigray. EEPA (25 May 2021).

Surprisingly, rape was formally recognized as a war crime relatively recently i.e. in the second half of the 20th century. At that time cases of rape were documented in more than 20 conflicts.

The most discussed cases initially included rape committed on a mass scale in the 1990s, when rape was used as an instrument of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia and as a means of genocide in Rwanda. In the former case, women belonging to the „enemy nation” were intentionally impregnated through rape by soldiers; rape was an instrument to humiliate and terrorize, and make people leave their homes. In the latter case, women belonging to the Tutsi ethnic group were systematically raped by HIV-infected men recruited and organized by the Hutu-led government.

Due to the massive scale of rape in the Balkan and Rwandan conflicts, the international institutions and community began to recognize rape as a weapon and strategy of war. The existing laws were used to prosecute those cases of rape. A clear need for new legislation emerged.

Article 27 of the Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (1949), included language protecting women “against any attack on their honor, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault”; this protection was later extended in an additional protocol adopted in 1977.

In 1993 the United Nations Commission on Human Rights declared systematic rape and military sexual slavery to be crimes against humanity punishable as violations of women’s human rights.

In 1995 the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing explicitly declared that rape by armed groups during wartime is a war crime.

The jurisdiction of the international tribunals established to prosecute crimes committed in the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda included rape as a war crime. Hence these tribunals were the first international bodies to prosecute sexual violence as a war crime. In 1998, the Rwandan tribunal ruled that: “rape and sexual violence constitute genocide.”

The statute of the International Criminal Court, established in 1998, declared rape and forced pregnancy as war crimes.

In a resolution adopted in 2008 the UN Security Council affirmed that

rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide.

The International Criminal Court first ruling and conviction for rape as war crime was made in the case of former Congolese vice-president Jean-Pierre Bemba in 2018. The case was the first before the ICC to focus on ‘sexual violence as a weapon of war, as well as on a senior military official whose forces carried out the atrocities’ – even if he himself not directly order them to do so. The ICC found him guilty on five charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes, including rape, committed in 2002-2003 in Central African Republic. More than 5,000 survivors participated in the proceedings.

It is important to look for support and knowledge in coalitions like Women’s Initiatives for Gender Justice, an international women’s human rights organisation that advocates for gender justice through the International Criminal Court (ICC) and through domestic mechanisms, including peace negotiations and justice processes. At the moment it is supporting victims in Uganda, Libya, Congo, Central African Republic and Darfur.