

The Impact of the Siege and Communication Blackout during Tigray war ¹

Introduction

The Tigray conflict, which erupted on 3 November 2020, led to a complete communication blackout as the Ethiopian federal government severed all connections to the Internet, landlines, and mobile networks. This isolation was compounded by a military siege that restricted access to essential services and information. The resulting lack of communication created an "information black hole," obscuring the realities of the conflict from the international community and hindering humanitarian efforts. This policy brief summarises the results of a study investigating the lived experiences of Tigrayans during this period, focusing on the psychological and societal impacts of the siege and communication blackout.

Research summary

1. Phases of the siege:

The study delineates five phases of the siege and communication blackout. Throughout these phases, the degree of control over communication varied significantly, with the blackout severely limiting the flow of information both within Tigray and to the outside world.

- *Pre-war phase:* The period leading up to the conflict, characterized by rising tensions.
- *Initial conflict phase:* From the onset of the war until the federal government captured Mekelle on 28 November 2020.
- *Interim administration phase:* The eight-month period following the federal government's control, marked by limited communication.

Executive Summary

This policy brief examines the profound effects of the siege and communication blackout in Tigray during the 2020-2022 conflict. The study identifies five distinct phases of the siege, highlighting how the lack of communication exacerbated the humanitarian crisis and altered social dynamics within the region. Key findings reveal that the communication blockade not only hindered access to vital information but also fostered a sense of isolation and a 'we versus them' mentality among the Tigrayan population. The research underscores the need for innovative digital solutions to enhance communication resilience in future crises and advocates for a shift towards federated digital infrastructure to reduce dependency on centralized systems.

¹ The policy brief has been compiled on the basis of research by Gebreslassie, T. G., Kidanu, G., Mamo, L., Amare, S. Y. & Van Reisen, M. (2024). Life in Darkness: The Communication Blockade during the Tigray Siege. In: Van Reisen, M. & Mawere, M. (eds.) Tigray. War in a Digital Black Hole, Volume 1. Langaa, Bamenda. Pp. 103-144. Chapter URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385452677_Life_in_Darkness_The_Communication_Blockade_during_the_Tigray_Siege

- *Post-interim phase:* From June 2021 to November 2022, when the federal administration was expelled from much of Tigray.
- *Post-agreement phase:* The period following the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement.

2. Disbelief

The communication blockade had a profound psychological toll on the population, leading to feelings of disbelief. This was characterized by experiences of helplessness, and loss of trust in authorities and the system, as well as dependency. Due to collapse of banking system, people were resorting to alternative methods to obtain cash by sending money from abroad to others within Ethiopia. Participants reported a sense of abandonment and a deepening despair as they struggled to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances.

3. Adjustment

In the face of adversity and the emergence of a new reality, Tigrayans adapted their lives and introduced innovative solutions to alleviate their hardships. This shift was characterized by a heightened sense of solidarity among Tigrayans.

4. Dissent and creative adaptation

During the communication blockade in Tigray, NGO workers became key sources of information, sharing daily social media updates. Screenshots of these posts were then sold for a fee of 10 Ethiopian Birr, which were then disseminated via Bluetooth and local messaging apps. This situation spurred innovative solutions, such as a local mail delivery service between towns, or development of an alternative eLearning system through which students were able to come to specific locations sync tailored courses into a digital device and follow the course material at their own pace on their screens.

Recommendations for International Policymakers:

- 1. Advocate for communication access:** Communication continues to be blocked in other areas of Ethiopia such as the Amhara region. International policymakers should urge the Ethiopian government and relevant authorities to not to block communication services in conflict-affected areas, ensuring that civilians have access to information and can communicate with the outside world.
- 2. Support digital infrastructure development:** Invest in the development of decentralized and federated communication infrastructures that can operate independently of government control, enhancing resilience in conflict situations.
- 3. Monitor human rights violations:** Establish mechanisms to monitor and report on human rights violations related to communication blackouts and siege, holding accountable those responsible for obstructing access to information.
- 4. Facilitate humanitarian access:** Work with international organizations to ensure that humanitarian aid can reach affected populations, including the provision of communication tools and resources to support information sharing.
- 5. Promote research on communication in crises:** Fund and support research initiatives that explore the impact of communication blackouts on civilian populations, focusing on innovative solutions and community resilience.

Recommendations for EU Policymakers:

- 1. Implement sanctions for communication blockades:** Consider imposing targeted sanctions on individuals or entities responsible for implementing communication blackouts that violate human rights and hinder humanitarian efforts.
- 2. Enhance support for local innovations:** Provide funding and technical assistance to local organizations and communities that are developing innovative communication solutions in response to blackouts and siege.
- 3. Foster international collaboration:** Collaborate with international partners to share best practices and technologies for maintaining communication in conflict zones, ensuring that affected populations can stay connected.
- 4. Raise awareness of digital rights:** Advocate for the protection of digital rights as part of human rights, emphasizing the importance of access to information and communication technologies in crisis situations.
- 5. Encourage community-led initiatives:** Support initiatives that empower communities to develop their own communication systems and solutions, fostering resilience and self-reliance in the face of crises.

Recommendations for NGOs:

- 1. Develop communication strategies:** Create and implement strategies that enable affected populations to communicate safely and effectively during crises, including training on digital literacy and secure communication methods.
- 2. Facilitate information sharing:** Establish platforms for information sharing among communities, ensuring that individuals can access critical information about humanitarian assistance, safety, and resources.
- 3. Document and report experiences:** Systematically document the experiences of individuals living under communication blackouts, using these narratives to advocate for policy changes and raise awareness of the impact of such conditions.
- 4. Promote mental health support:** Provide mental health support services to individuals affected by the psychological toll of communication blackouts and sieges, helping them cope with feelings of helplessness and isolation.
- 5. Encourage creative solutions:** Foster an environment that encourages innovation and creative problem-solving among local communities, supporting the development of new technologies and methods for communication in crisis situations.