

AFRICA ETHIOPIA | STATEMENT

Refugees International Alarmed by Humanitarian Crisis in Tigray, Effects of Conflict-related Sexual Violence

By Sarah Miller | November 27, 2023

Statement from Refugees International Senior Fellow Sarah Miller, who recently returned from a research and advocacy trip in the Tigray region of Ethiopia:

“The war in the Tigray region of Ethiopia officially came to an end a little over a year ago. However, the civilian population remains in the grip of massive humanitarian crisis with access to only a fraction of the aid and basic services required to survive, much less recover. On a recent visit to Tigray, Refugees International was alarmed by widespread humanitarian suffering, the weakness of the international relief effort, and the scale of conflict-related sexual violence that women in the region experienced.

The plight of women and girls across Tigray is shocking. Over the course of 2021 and 2022, hundreds of thousands of people were killed during the war between Tigrayan, Ethiopian, Amharan, and Eritrean forces. Women of all ages were raped by armed actors – some in front of family members. Others were brutalized in other sexually violent ways.

A huge number of Tigrayan women suffered physical and mental injuries: it is difficult to know the precise numbers because many do not report, but health experts estimate that between 40 and 50 percent of women experienced

gender-based violence (GBV), with more than 80 percent of sexual violence survivors reporting having been raped, and nearly 70 percent of those having been gang raped. The impact and ongoing collective trauma of that violence was on clear display during our fieldwork. So too was the lack of resources available to women suffering the physical and mental effects of extreme sexual violence. Interviewees noted that there are only three psychologists for the entire region of Tigray – a population of more than 7 million.

One year on, many of the survivors of conflict-related sexual violence remain internally displaced. They are unable to return home due to ongoing fighting or insecurity in some areas, as well as destroyed infrastructure, clinics, and schools. IDP families – a majority of which are headed by women – remain with family, in camps, or huddled in local schools. They lack food, water, sanitation, and medical attention.

Hunger, which had been prevalent throughout the conflict and imposed blockade, became even more widespread during the recent USAID food aid pause in Ethiopia. Refugees International welcomes USAID's recent announcement that food aid will be resuming soon. But many women have had to make difficult choices during this time. Some resorted to negative coping practices, such as survival sex. Others had to choose which children would get to eat. These desperate circumstances put women at far great risk of exploitation.

Women in Tigray need urgent help. Local health officials and civil society groups, as well as a small contingent of international organizations are doing what they can. But women need access to a range of services to begin to heal. These services need to reach Tigray at scale. Mental health support is an urgent priority.

Tigray needs peace to hold, and for the Pretoria Agreement to be upheld so they can return home. But it also needs greater humanitarian aid: protection and assistance, particularly to IDPs, is greatly needed.

As the United States resumes food aid to Ethiopia, it must also work with donors to significantly scale up funding and staffing for GBV programming to internally displaced Tigrayans. It should activate and implement a more robust response in line with its 2022 “Safe from the Start” initiative. They must do so under the

leadership of local health experts who are driving the response and know well what their community needs.

Women will play a key role in the rebuilding of Tigray. They need urgent support to survive, and ultimately thrive in their recovery.”

For more information or to schedule an interview, please contact Etant Dupain at edupain@refugeesinternational.org.

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