

Commentary



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The frontline voices: Tigrayans speak on the realities of life under an insurgency regime

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Ethiopians of Tigrayan descent, residing both inside and outside of Tigray, have contacted this researcher to request greater scrutiny of grassroots Tigrayan opinion on the ongoing conflict in Northern Ethiopia. These “silenced voices” have been characterized by many Western analysts and English-language media as supportive of the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), a vanguard armed group that exercises authoritarian control of both the “Tigray government” and the “Tigray Defense Forces.”

Researchers’ access to the Tigray region is carefully controlled by this armed group and its well-developed surveillance networks, rendering independent research impossible. Canvassing grassroots opinion therefore required travel to two camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs): one in Ambara (accommodating 620 Tigrayan civilians), and one at the Awash Basin centre near Chifra, Afar (accommodating approximately 15,000 captured/surrendered Tigrayan fighters). The rationale behind this piece, the methodology, an analysis of feedback from respondents, and recommendations for policy consideration are presented below.

Introduction

While a great number of written commentary pieces on the conflict in northern Ethiopia have been produced over the last 18 months,¹ little to none has exposed the grassroots views of Tigrayan communities actually living in Tigray. Instead, three main groups have sought to represent the views of ethnic Tigrayans. One is the leadership of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) based in the region's capital city Mekelle, with affiliate leaders and senior party officials in Washington and Geneva, relying on media appearances and formal statements issued by the political party.²

Another is made up of TPLF supporters in the Ethiopia diaspora, many of whom have been organized as part of a wider auxiliary and "digital army"³ and who – as a result of access to opportunities made possible to them during the 27 years of TPLF rule in Ethiopia – have also supported the TPLF party leaders. Arguably, this group would also include leaders across the reputed "one in five"⁴ intelligence network (Immigration and Refugee Board Canada 2016; Aalen 2019; Fitz-Gerald and Segal 2021), which has existed in Tigray under the TPLF for decades and which serves as a mechanism to control, monitor, and silence grassroots voices.⁵ The final group are those members of the Tigrayan opposition who are primarily based in Addis Ababa, and whose voices are often dismissed (Borkena 2020) in the face of the TPLF's wide international networks.

While the voices of the first two groups dominate international coverage, those whose views depart from their narrative are silenced, threatened, harassed and vilified; in effect, insurgency tactics are being replicated in the virtual battlefield of the Internet. But what sets this insurgency movement apart from many others is the extraordinarily large budget that the TPLF amassed during its 27 years in power, and just prior to its departure from office in 2018, which left the Government of Ethiopia's coffers empty (Steinman 2017). Besides supporting its digital attack and rebel force, these funds also pay for Washington-based lobby groups and law firms that have issued threatening letters to individuals – and their employers – who dare depart from the TPLF narrative.

The TPLF's *modus operandi* is a digital insurgency of unprecedented proportions; one that has, not surprisingly, created two completely polarized conflict narratives. Whereas evidence has gradually emerged and is still being found for what is actually happening in the war, aspects of international policy, not least of which include the harsh sanctions that have been enacted and continue to be threatened on Ethiopia, have not changed nor have been adjusted to factor in the ground-based realities.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) crossing from Tigray into Amhara, in addition to the captured/surrendered Tigrayan fighters currently situated in a large centre in the Afar regional state, offer an opportunity to hear true voices.

es of various communities in Tigray. These individuals have lived under the TPLF leadership and been impacted most significantly by the conflict that was initiated in November 2020 by the party leadership. This commentary aims to expose their voices and let their stories be heard.

Methodology

The research supporting this article is informed first by a desk-based data analysis and trend analysis that tracked alignment between international policy narrative/statements and the narrative of TPLF leaders and their digital networks. The initial desk-based research helped in identifying the key groups influencing the discussion and, therefore, influencing the policy agenda. Field research was then conducted between March 29 and April 8, 2022 with individuals and groups in the northern regional states of both Afar and Amhara, where permission was granted to access both the IDP camp in Jarra, in the Amhara regional state (where 620 Tigrayan civilian IDPs are accommodated), and the compound in the Awash Basin of the Afar regional state (near Chifra), where approximately 15,000 captured/surrendered Tigrayan fighters are currently being accommodated.

During this period, the researcher engaged with over 162 respondents. In both the Jarra IDP camp and the Awash Basin compound, sample sets of respondents across different age groups (16-20 years, 20-35 years, 35-55 years, and 55-plus years) were interviewed individually. Permission was sought from each of the respondents prior to the interviews taking place. In each interview, a semi-structured question set was used, answers for which were organized by way of coding following the interviews. Following the camp-based interviews, and for validation purposes, the researcher also spent time speaking with community members in the southwest region of Afar and the Wollo region of Amhara where the fighters had been active. Aspects of the community-based research were supported by both individual interviews and focus group discussions using groups between four and six respondents.

Two different translators were used to support the interviews: a Tigrigna-English translator and an Amharic-English translator to give respondents a choice in the language used. A number of respondents also spoke English.

Both translators were fluent in both Amharic and Tigrigna, and each cross-checked the accuracy of the other's translation – and the understanding of the researcher – immediately after each interview. In order to optimize the opportunity for diverse views across the sample set, the selection of interviewees was led by the researcher. The sample set of respondents selected was also representative of the home localities. All interviews were held privately in various indoor and outdoor locations (depending on time of day) with only the researcher and the translators present.

As always with any research project, methodological limitations must be highlighted. The first limitation was that, although data was triangulated with feedback from members of communities in the Wollo region of Amhara, and in the Afar regional state, the researcher was unable to travel to Tigray to verify aspects of data shared with her. Second, although more interviews were conducted among the 15,000 captured/surrendered Tigrayan fighters housed in the Awash Basin compound, that sample set was, in relative terms, smaller than the sample set for civilian respondents accessed amongst the 620 Tigrayan civilians at the Jarra camp. Third, due to the ongoing conflict, the researcher was unable to interview currently active Tigrayan fighters, despite having engaged with some “commanders” in the Awash Basin compound sample set.

In addition, respondents interviewed were primarily from the Axum, Adwa, Adigrat, Mekelle, Shire, Shiraro and Tembien areas of Tigray. While covering an expansive part of the Tigray regional state, these areas do not account for all corners of the region. This selection bias was partially caused by the fact that large segments of the Tigrayan populations within the southwest and the southern districts of Tigray identify themselves with the Amhara regional state and have Amhara-based family members in Amhara proper. As such, most residents from these areas crossing from Tigray requested at the border to simply assimilate with their family and extended family members and therefore did not take up residence in the camp. This was confirmed by discussions across the Wollo region of Amhara and within the camps themselves.

It should be noted that interview questions focused mainly on the experience of each individual in the Tigray regional state and their individual cross-border journeys; the recruitment, training and deployment experience of the fighters; the circumstances that brought the individuals to the camps; the conditions and treatment received prior to arriving, and during their stay, at the camps; and, lastly, views on what is required for future peace and stability in Tigray. It is important to note that, based on the focus on Tigray, the research did not canvass the respondents for views on policies of the federal government and the Prosperity Party of the current Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Further research on these issues is still required.

Lastly, as all respondents spoke to the researcher on the condition of anonymity, neither names nor personal information on the respondents has been disclosed. Specific details characterizing the many testimonials that were shared with the researcher have also been withheld for this reason.

Cross-border movements: The experience of civilian IDPs

The start of the cross-border movements from Tigray began over four months ago, as the TPLF’s offensive into the Amhara and Afar regional states became reversed and fighters were driven back into Tigray (Grey 2021). In this con-

text, the experience of civilians differs from that of captured/surrendered Tigrayan fighters. Generally, all civilian respondents confirmed that sufficient aid was entering Tigray prior to June 2021, when the interim regional government was in place. When the Ethiopian federal army withdrew from Tigray, and the TPLF assumed control, the population was informed that all aid was being blocked at the border by Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF).

Whereas some federal government bureaucracy certainly caused delays in the rate at which aid was going through, this claim is shown to be false by the positioning of ENDF forces during the initial five months after the unilateral ceasefire: federal troops were not located close to the border crossing along the road connecting Samara (Afar) and Mekelle (Tigray), the primary aid transit point, during this period. It was also at this time that hundreds of UN aid trucks reportedly entered Tigray and did not return (Al Jazeera 2021b).⁶

Many respondents observed that these trucks were redeployed to support the TPLF's armed insurgency effort southwards into Afar and Amhara regional states and described them as having been used to transport fighters and to re-route aid to rebels. Several respondents added that some of the drivers in possession of both resources and permission to access fuel for these trucks also became part of the TPLF efforts to expedite the transport of large numbers of fighters across the border into Amhara and Afar. These observations are corroborated by members of communities interviewed in the Wollo region of Amhara

When civilian respondents were asked about the issue of aid deliveries, all confirmed that only a small amount of aid was made available to those families who contributed fighters to the rebel force under a “one fighter per family” rule. Very little or no aid would be given to families that did not have fighters to contribute. All civilian respondents felt that, no matter how much aid flowed into the Tigray regional state, priority would always be given to the TPLF leaders, some select TPLF-linked businessmen (who were given some of the staples, like oil, to sell in their shops), and the fighters.

When asked whether the humanitarian organizations working in Tigray would challenge this form of aid distribution, all respondents explained that these organizations had no voice in aid distribution; instead, aid was all handed over to the TPLF leaders. Sixty percent of the respondents described how any individuals inquiring about food directly to aid organizations would be arrested.

Of the civilians interviewed, 83 percent were motivated to leave Tigray due to fear. The specific circumstances for fear also differ; many of the incidents concerned four new proclamations that were introduced by the TPLF following the unilateral ceasefire declared by the Ethiopian government (Al Jazeera 2021a) and following the TPLF leaders' return from the Tembien region in June 2021. The proclamations were described as “new laws” targeting anyone who had been working – even interfacing – with the interim government administration or the federal government more generally.

Once arrests under these four new proclamations were initiated, word spread as to whose names appeared on the arrest list. This accounts for 30 percent of the respondents interviewed and their motivation to flee. Others stated that, with family living in other regional states, they too may be eventually implicated under these orders. The proclamations did not just involve former public servants but also private contractors among the respondents who had previously worked in the areas of logistics and textiles.

In one case, a contractor who had simply continued his job from prior to the interim government administration was deemed to be “cooperating with the enemy” and arrested. Another respondent shared his fear after claiming to have witnessed the falsification of videos implicating Oromo Liberation Front-Shene members and fighters using false ENDF uniforms, for which others had informed him had led to his name being added to an arrest list. This respondent managed to flee. Some individuals who were imprisoned described how they were called upon after several months to have their day in court. The respondents who had been given a court hearing confirmed that the bail payment requested of them was more than eight times the amount of the court fee for bribery purposes; only this ensured a release by the judge.



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Another respondent described his motivation to leave after witnessing the tactic used by the TPLF to fire weapons under the drones (claimed to have been used by the Ethiopian government for surveillance purposes), some of which were observed over Mekelle. When hit by weapons, a drone would spray shrapnel around the area underneath; the TPLF relied on this so-called “evidence” to announce on local and international media that the federal government was bombing Mekelle. He explained that this form of “manipulation” and “fake news” that he witnessed had compelled him to flee.

Within the total civilian sample set interviewed, 71 percent of the respondents also identified hunger as a primary motivation to flee, as many had not had a proper meal in weeks. Respondents included the elderly, whose children had either left Tigray or no longer lived with them and who therefore had no fighter to contribute to the cause. Women among the group also argued that they felt compelled to flee as their sons were living in Addis Ababa, and they were living with the threat of imprisonment if their sons did not return to Tigray to join the fighting force.

Most of the civilians arriving at the camp had crossed at Kobo, near Alamata; 88 percent of the respondents handed themselves over to the Kobo police station, and the remaining 12 percent were identified by regional Amhara police at other border areas. Feedback from civilians confirmed both dignified and

decent treatment at the Kobo police station, where some of the respondents were held for 10 days before being taken to the camp at Jarra. Only one respondent described an incident involving a member of the Fano militia who was present when he was identified at the border. This militia member was verbally hostile to the Tigrayan IDP before walking away. Two other Fano members explained to the respondent immediately afterwards that, while they considered the particular Fano member's behaviour unacceptable, they informed him that that individual's mother had reportedly been killed by a group of Tigrayan rebels and both his sisters had been gang-raped by the same group.

Cross-border movements: The experience of the Tigrayan fighters

The experience of recently captured/surrendered fighters was different. All fighters came from the same six areas as the civilians but also included respondents from the Tembien area. All fighters interviewed claimed to have been recruited by force; 70 percent of respondents had been forced to join over the previous eight months. Respondents described how regional authorities and paramilitary forces (“Liyu Hail” – translated as “Special Police”) came door-to-door in search of recruits. The only alternatives to recruitment that they offered were to be fined, “see bad come to their family,” and have their family members, no matter what age, be imprisoned.

One female fighter justified her decision to put herself forward based on her desire to protect her brother, who required medical treatment; another respondent who had young children described how the special forces waited for him at his workplace the next day after having expressed his preference not to join the force due to his young children and his ill wife. When he tried to run from the paramilitary members, he was shot at and had no option but to hand himself over and join the force.

Other fighters, who had been members of the ENDF and who were back in Tigray for the purposes of leave and visiting family, were not permitted to exit Tigray and also forced to join. Two of these ENDF soldiers described how their efforts to resist these demands led to regional administrators coming to their house each day, collecting daily fines and their signatures, described by one respondent as “they were controlling our every movement and quickly reducing our savings.” In the end, faced with their total savings being turned over to the authorities and threats of family members, including grandparents being imprisoned, they believed they had no option but to join.

One recruit in the 35-55 age group from Adigrat stated that, despite being recruited under force, and the “one family, one fighter” rule, he agreed to be voluntarily recruited when the special forces arrived at his home. He explained that his primary motivation was to help respond to the presence of

Eritrean forces in Tigray and the threat that they posed to Tigray, as described to him by the special forces' representatives.

Of the respondents interviewed, 10 percent had been recruited into the elite paramilitary force, the “Special Police” (“Liyu Hail”). All other respondents formed part of what became known as regular fighters in the “Tigrayan Defense Forces.” Depending on when recruits joined, they might have as much as 45 days of training – or as little as none. Fighters with experience were rapidly deployed with no training into both Afar and Amhara. Only 18 percent of those interviewed confirmed that they were given a weapon on recruitment and were trained how to use it.

Depending on the home district of the fighters, training locations included Agula, Misham, Romana (near Mekelle), Debre Hamous, and an area close to Adwa. Some experienced soldiers were tasked with meeting contingents of fighters in Afar and Amhara and supporting training programs in these locations. The rationale used by the commanders was that many of the fighters could not be given a weapon until sufficient numbers of the enemy had fallen and only after enemy weapons could be collected, hence the need for training within the battlespace.

The deployment experience of the fighters varied. Of the respondents interviewed, 19 percent were taken directly to Kombolcha in the Amhara regional state. Others were sent to Chilla before moving onwards to the Hamusit area in South Gondar. Of these fighters, many moved from Amhara to Chifra in the Afar regional state, as well as to Kasagita. Others were deployed to War Ilo in Wollo and to Mezezo and Sela Dingay in North Shewa. One group of respondents described being deployed to Mersa (in Amhara between Dessie and Woldiya) but were armed only at Hayk. Others described deployments to Kar Kore (Amhara) and the “Dankal Front” (Afar).

The respondents described the fact that commanders would continuously state that the rebel force was winning and had the “upper hand,” and that new groups were being armed with the weapons from fallen ENDF soldiers. While other respondents confirmed that a number of ENDF soldiers had been killed or wounded, they also saw that the number of fallen Tigrayan fighters far outweighed the enemy's losses; it soon became clear to the initially unarmed respondents that they were acquiring arms of their fallen fellow Tigrayans. Four respondents spoke about a particular battle that took place at Mezezo, which involved approximately 10,000 Tigrayan fighters and where, after seven days of fighting, those who had survived and had not surrendered retreated to Mille.

The fighters' point of capture

The point of capture was also different for the wide range of respondents; 31 percent of those interviewed confirmed that they actively sought out ENDF

soldiers and asked for safe sanctuary. Six fighters described how they escaped the battleground and sought shelter with Amhara families. Two of these fighters telephoned relatives who encouraged them to hand themselves over to the ENDF. One female respondent described how she telephoned a relative in Oromia, who assured her that “the ENDF will look after you and protect you.” Another fighter, who had been a member of the ENDF, telephoned a friend with whom he had served in the ENDF: “He told me to stay where I was and that he would come and help me; he did do this, and brought others to help me.”

The remaining fighters confirmed that they had, at one stage, found themselves surrounded and “gave their hand” (surrendered). Of the group that surrendered, once they were surrounded, 13 of the respondents described how they had hidden in holes or other areas where foliage could be used as a cover. All respondents confirmed that having raised their hands to surrender, all captured fighters were supported by the ENDF forces.

One female fighter aged 17 recalled seeking shelter in a town called Habru, between Woldiya (Amhara) and Chifra (Afar). Hiding with four other young female fighters and having been offered accommodation by a local Amhara family, the fighter decided to hand herself over to the ENDF, which had reoccupied Dessie and Kombolcha by that time. She explained how after she told the ENDF soldier about her friends – who were naturally frightened about repercussions – they were all escorted to safety in War Ilo, given food, water, medical treatment, and sanitary provisions, before being brought to the Awash Basin centre.

Eight male respondents also described how, following their surrender, ENDF soldiers checked their uniforms to ensure that all arms had been handed over, and not insignificant sums of money were discovered; 10,000 and “almost 20,000” Ethiopian birr were amounts cited by two fighters. The amounts were placed back in the pockets and left in the possession of the fighters. Other surrendered fighters applauded ENDF soldiers for carrying wounded Tigrayan fighters on their backs, often for more than two hours along the road. Of the respondents interviewed, all reported that the ENDF soldiers treated them in a supportive and reassuring way.

In contrast, 78 percent of respondents shared their concern over being directed by TPLF leaders not to surrender to the ENDF and “to take their own life before surrendering to the enemy.” With many of the fighters having witnessed the impact of the new proclamations introduced in Tigray after the unilateral ceasefire, and having commented on how many of the regional administrators had been killed or imprisoned by the TPLF leaders as a result of being perceived to be “cooperating with the enemy,” they felt that this left all of them – while in the custody and care of the federal government – in a precarious position that would impact on their safe return back to Tigray.

Camp conditions

Respondents confirm that they were equally well-treated and supported at the Awash Basin centre; 93 percent stated that they were very satisfied with the food, water, and medical support they received, though 9 percent of respondents said that on some occasions, there is not as much food as they would ideally wish there to be. Of respondents interviewed, 60 percent commented on the intense heat in the Afar lowland area, which was different to the temperatures they were accustomed to in Tigray. All respondents confirmed that the ENDF soldiers who staff the Awash Basin centre eat the same food as the captured/surrendered fighters and in the same dining area. All female respondents confirmed that they were treated in a decent and supportive way and were given all required “female provisions,” in addition to detergent, soap, and other things to support their daily necessities.

This feedback differed somewhat from that of the Tigrayan IDPs at the Jarra camp. All respondents confirmed that there was insufficient food and water as well as medical support. In some cases, two or three IDPs had to share one mattress to sleep on. Discussions with the IDP camp staff following the interviews corroborated these observations and indicated that, due to the lack of infrastructure at this location, the Jarra camp was considered a temporary holding area for IDPs. At the time the interviews were conducted, no further information was obtained on where the Jarra camp may be relocated.

Perspectives on the future and prospects for peace

The final area discussed with the respondents concerned the more general future of Tigray and Ethiopia. All respondents in the Jarra and Awash camps confirmed that “there must be peace” and that their own desire was to have “one Ethiopia” and to live peacefully with their “brothers and sisters” of other ethnicities and regional states. Many of the respondents also cited different parts of the country, including Addis Ababa, where they had relatives and wanted to continue visiting regularly in the future.

All respondents interviewed at the Jarra camp argued that there could be no peace in Tigray as long as the TPLF existed. Many respondents also stated that “there will never be any democracy for Tigray if we are not part of Ethiopia.” Both in the individual and group sessions, references were made to the TPLF’s ideology of “divide and rule,” repression, “vanguard politics,” and wealth accumulation to the detriment of the people.

In this context, 64 percent of those interviewed underscored the need for the constitution to change as it was felt that the current one facilitated and supported the TPLF’s “divide and rule” ideology; 78 percent of the fighters interviewed commented on the fact that the TPLF’s wealth accumulation had

catered for their direct family members, most of whom were living in the United States; and that they (the captured/surrendered fighters) were being sacrificed while the TPLF leaders' families and extended families were safe from any of the repercussions and violence and were referred to by some respondents as "helping to continue the war." Of those respondents interviewed, 90 percent referred to "a small group of political leaders in Tigray who are responsible for this conflict"; and 40 percent of this subset added comments concerning their perception that "the world" was not doing enough to stop the fighting and "bloodshed."

The majority of the respondents also referred to the need for a "different system" under TPLF rule. When asked to describe the "system," words such as repressive, violent, and fearful were all used. Further elaboration described communities as having no voice, no freedom to hold meetings or to communicate their true feelings and views, and an environment where "leaders would say one thing but do the other." Of respondents across both camps, 86 percent argued that the people needed to have a voice in Tigray and in politics, which had never been the case. Three respondents used the word "negotiations," but they described these negotiations as needing to involve the people and as necessary to facilitate ways for people to be heard and share their views on the future; 55 percent of the respondents raised the issue that certain individuals had remained the same leaders for too long without opening space for "different" and "new and younger voices," and without giving opportunities for the common people or youth.

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Some respondents referred to a lack of any meaningful opposition parties in Tigray to "offer choices for the people." Almost all respondents raised the issue of the "one in five" intelligence network that artificially empowered the "one" of the "five," repressed the people's voice, and monitored their movements. And, if the people did not cooperate with the government agents, the consequences would be severe. Other respondents stated that, not only was this system meant to be a controlling mechanism but also a way of forcing people to join and remain loyal to the TPLF as a party member.

Numerous respondents also referred to the inter-marriages between ethnic groups, which included individuals in their immediate families, such as their parents. The respondents went on to describe the persecution of non-Tigrayan members of their families and even forced separation (and forced divorce) during the lead-up to, and throughout, the current crisis.

A member of the elderly group in Jarra said that he was forced to divorce his Amhara wife. Two of the fighters in the Awash camp referenced the fact that, although one of their parents had lived for over 20 years in Oromia, their identity card specified “Tigray,” which prevented them from ever feeling like a permanent member of their Oromo community. One respondent described this as having been intentional in order to perpetually “divide” Tigrayans, which was important for when the TPLF leaders required the loyalty of ethnic Tigrayans living in different parts of Ethiopia; 38 percent of the respondents interviewed in the Jarra camp raised the issue of their “Eritrean brothers and sisters” whom they “loved” but whom the TPLF had tried to convince the population of being “poison.”

Conclusion

This short article, which will be further supported by a longer piece that will include detailed testimonials, facilitates a reasonably representative sample set of the only accessible Tigrayan community voices most impacted by the conflict in northern Ethiopia. Some initial propositions can be drawn from these empirical findings.

Within the sample set of Tigrayans interviewed in both camps, there is a clear sign of a widened divide between the common people of Tigray and the TPLF leaders. The strong consensus that the TPLF’s ideology, network, and governance system must be eradicated is also an indication of a lack of interest in its radical agenda and a high-level of resentment towards what has been described as a small group of leaders accumulating both power and wealth. In contrast, there is considerable evidence of support for a united Ethiopia and a newly reformed constitution that does not facilitate continuity of the current TPLF ideology and governance arrangements, including the repressive “one in five” network.

Fear of ongoing repercussions also seems to have either prompted Tigrayans to flee the region or incited fear across the captured/surrendered Tigrayan fighters, the latter being instructed to take their own lives before capture or believing they cannot return to Tigray because of this order. Based on the supportive feedback on cooperation between the fleeing Tigrayans and the Amhara and Afar communities – who, in the very communities that Tigrayan fighters occupied and left destroyed, provided many of them with food, water and shelter – the narrative surrounding the tensions between Tigray and its border regions does not appear to be as problematic as suggested by TPLF leaders. Tensions seem more prominent between political groups, rather than the common people. Lastly and most concernedly, the many male and female fighters under the age of 18 who were recruited under the “one family, one fighter” rule and trained by the TPLF commanders require psycho-social support to ensure that these young teens can transition back into a stable, school-aged civilian existence.

The conclusions captured above have implications for any discussions on mediation, accountability, safety and security, and any national dialogue-related issues concerning future governance arrangements in Tigray. The feedback from these camps also provides evidence that the narrative echoed by TPLF supporters living outside of Ethiopia does not align with the voice of the Tigrayan communities on the ground. There are also issues concerning the safety and security of approximately 16,000 Tigrayans (a number that continues to grow as more IDPs cross into Amhara and Afar) currently being housed at both the Awash and Jarra camp locations as well as implications for national and international aid agencies to ensure that the nutrition, water and medical requirements of these IDPs are supported and not forgotten. This is particularly the case for the less-than-acceptable camp conditions in Jarra.

The empirical findings of this research could be used to inform a number of policy recommendations. The first recommendation concerns the need for a more supervised international distribution of humanitarian aid. That will help to ensure that the aid distribution is depoliticized while prioritizing those individuals and groups in need as much as possible – and not be conditional on family contributions to the fighting or on supporting the “one in five” network. Based on the inefficiencies of the humanitarian distribution system in Tigray to date, the international humanitarian community should work with the National Disaster Risk Management Commission – an agency that has long-served (and is well-known to) the food-stressed and vulnerable communities of Tigray. An independent humanitarian monitoring and verification team should also be deployed on the ground to ensure that, wherever possible, aid is distributed in a fair, equitable and comprehensive manner.

A second policy recommendation is for the international community to support the technical and logistical requirements of a sufficiently in-depth and considered national dialogue process – one that represents a permissive space and a conducive environment for such discussions in Tigray. These discussions must involve (and, within Tigray, be led by) grassroots and community-based organizations as well as all political opposition groups, including those groups that were forced to leave Tigray. Based on the region’s longstanding culture of vanguard politics, national dialogue facilitators must support discussions focused on the people’s voice in democratic politics and the rationale and optimal outcomes of the various roles played by the people in democratic, people-led politics. These discussions should feature the sharing of “good practice” from other regions of Ethiopia as well as other federal systems made up of diverse populations. To bring grassroots Tigray-based groups into contact with other regional communities – and based on estimates that some two million out of six million-plus Tigrayans live outside of Tigray – it may also be necessary for some elements of these national dialogue discussions to take place outside of the Tigray region.

Given the international narrative on Tigray, there is a strong need for further research on the voice and aspirations of the ordinary people. The interna-

tional community should also avoid placing too much weight on the narrative emanating from the regional capital of Mekelle, which has regularly been assumed to have represented the voice of the majority of Tigrayan people. The ongoing harsh threat of US sanctions on the country should also be reassessed to consider the realities on the ground as well as critically needed ongoing research. The development of a separate “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” process to support the healing of communities and to facilitate intra- and inter-community social bonding is critical. In parallel to this, and based on the prominent divisions amongst some Tigray-based political groups, and between these groups and other national political parties, a political reconciliation process should take place that facilitates political dialogue between the groups. A moderate group of younger voices from the TPLF should be encouraged to participate in this process with a view to bringing democratic stability to the region.

At the time of writing, the occupation of TPLF fighters in the Afar regional state and the Wag Hemra area of Amhara is ongoing, and therefore no imminent, lasting peace settlement on the horizon. The Tigrayan population continues to be “sieged” by the TPLF’s aspirations to continue fighting. The international community should call on the TPLF to undertake a complete withdrawal from Afar and Amhara, and cease its arms procurement, armed activity, and aggressive deployment of fighters to border areas. The federal government should work with the wider international donor community to ensure that the needs of the approximately 16,000 Tigrayan IDPs in both the Awash Basin and Jarra IDP camps are supported. Victims in IDP camps across the wider Amhara and Afar regions must also be supported. International relief, which is focused only on Tigray to the disadvantage of the victims in Amhara and Afar, risks creating resentment and undermining prospects for a lasting peace. This support must go beyond basic food, water and shelter and also include psycho-social support for the many traumatic experiences endured by the Afar-based captured/surrendered fighters, particularly the youth. Whatever peace settlement ensues should also include provisions for the safe, secure and supported return of Tigrayan IDPs back to Tigray.

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Endnotes

- 1 The following milestone dates characterizing the conflict in northern Ethiopia to date are significant dates for the analysis in this paper: Between November 2020 and June 2021, a federal government-led interim regional government in Tigray was in place; between July 2021 and November 2021, TPLF fighters invaded areas in both Afar and Amhara regional states; and, from December 2021 onward, TPLF fighters re-invaded Afar and have occupied a number of Afar's northern communities.
- 2 See, for example, the interview with TPLF Spokesperson, Getachew Reda on BBC's *Hardtalk* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdwLG7Nkngw>, CNN's interview with TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8S8-YQDTmY> and press statements issued by the TPLF-led Tigray External Affairs Office at <https://twitter.com/TigrayEAO>.
- 3 It should be noted that a pro-Ethiopia unity "digital army" also exists but was much slower to mobilize than their TPLF cyber opponents who were posting the #TigrayGenocide prolifically within hours of the November 3, 2020 TPLF attack on the northern command outposts.
- 4 The concept of "one in five" characterizes a closely monitored mobilization and socially controlled intelligence system, which cascades down to the household level with "one" in every group of "five" monitoring, reporting on and influencing the activities, movements and thinking of the group.
- 5 It is important to note that the freedoms across individuals within this group are also limited and those who refuse to join the cause, or express views which depart from the TPLF narrative, face consequences.
- 6 Interviews with Ethiopian government officials report that, between July 2021 and December 2021, "out of 1338 UN aid trucks, 1016 (76%) did not return from Tigray."

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