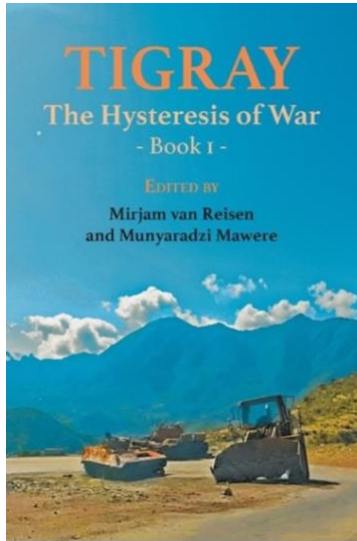


Famine as a Weapon in the Tigray War and the Siege

Znabu Hadush Kahsay

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The list of figures in colour can be found here: https://raee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Figures_Tigray.-The-Hysteresis-of-War-Volume-1-1.pdf

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Famine as a Weapon in the Tigray War and the Siege

Znabu Hadush Kabsay

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There is no limit for dictatorship.

Abstract

This study examines whether or not the famine in Tigray was a deliberate act of war, based on a conceptual framework drawing on Messer (1991), Kaldor (2013) and Mundy (2017). In 2021, allegations surfaced that famine was weaponised against civilians in Tigray. The research identifies pathways leading to deliberate famine, including decreased agricultural production, market disruption, displacement, and food aid blockage, resulting from: loss of access to land; destruction of agricultural capital; loss of labour supply; disruption of transportation networks; loss of income; and blockage of humanitarian aid.

The Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA) Situation Reports on the Horn of Africa, which reported on the Tigray war, indicated early warnings of famine, including deaths from starvation, lack of clean water, malnutrition, and inadequate food in camps for internally displaced people (IDP). Despite warnings, the Ethiopian government and Eritrean troops exacerbated the crisis, deliberately destroying food sources, looting, and hindering farming. This research highlights the deliberate use of hunger and famine as tools of warfare, causing severe starvation. The blockade of humanitarian aid, refusal of permits, and prevention of needs assessments exacerbated the situation. The study concludes that all pathways to deliberate famine were employed, underscoring the intentional use of famine as a weapon in the Tigray conflict.

Key words: Tigray war, Ethiopia, Eritrea, famine, hunger, weapon of war, humanitarian aid, siege

Introduction

To allege that famine is used as a weapon of war is a grave allegation. Deliberate use of famine, sometimes also termed as hunger crimes, refers to starving targeted civilians as a means to achieve a political or military goal (Conley & De Waal, 2019). Deliberate starvation reduces a population's access to food, water, and the means to provide essential care, aggravating morbidity and mortality (Conley & De Waal, 2019). After successful reduction of the use of starvation as a weapon over the last 30 years, the tactic of starving besieged civilians as a tool of warfare appears to be on the increase (United Nations Security Council, 2018). The United Nations (UN) declared starving civilians as a war crime in 2018 in Resolution 2417, which establishes the need for the protection of civilians in countries subject to armed conflict from deliberate famine and food insecurity (United Nations Security Council, 2018). However, the literature shows that deliberate starvation continued to be considered a war tactic, as documented in Mali, Southern Sudan, Yemen, and Syria (Lucas, 2020).

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) describes the level of food insecurity in five phases; minimal (none), stressed, crisis, emergency, and famine (catastrophic). Famine is defined as an extreme deprivation of food and a situation in which starvation, death, destitution and extremely critical levels of acute malnutrition are or will likely be evident. According to the IPC, famine is the fifth and the last classification in the level of food insecurity. A situation is often declared as a famine when 20% of households face an extreme lack of food, 30% of under-five children suffer from acute malnutrition and two adults in every 10,000 people die outright from starvation or due to the interaction of malnutrition and disease (IPC, 2019, 2022). Globally, it is estimated that one third of individuals are hungry and the number of people in famine situations has dramatically increased from 27 million in 2019 to 41 million in 2021 (Solidarités International, 2021).

Before the war in Tigray, most of the population in Tigray was considered food secure. In October 2020, 57% of the population in Tigray had adequate food and another 30% had minimally adequate food (IPC, 2020, 2021; FAO, 2019). However, just six months after

the war broke out (from November 2020 through May 2021), the proportion of individuals in the crisis phase has increased from 10% to 34%, the proportion in the emergency phase from 2% to 31%, as well as the proportion in famine phase from zero to 6% (IPC, 2020, 2021). A recent study also shows that 85% of households in Tigray (excluding the Western Zone) are food insecure while the experience of moderate or severe household-level hunger increased from 3.3% during pre-war to 36% after the war broke out (Weldegiargis *et al.*, 2023).

Accordingly, this research asks the following question: *Does the empirical data support the claim that famine was used as an instrument of war in Tigray?*

Problem statement

Famine-induced starvation is human-made and preventable through governmental decisions. The deliberate use of starvation in the context of warfare has been raised over the last three decades (Global Rights Compliance & World Peace Foundation, 2020; Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018). Deliberate encircling and indiscriminately starving civilians in Southern Sudan contributed to the death of about 383,000 people between 2013 and 2018 (Lucas, 2020). Deliberate starvation of civilians in besieged areas was also documented in Syria (Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2018).

Conley and De Waal (2019) state that the deliberate use of famine as a weapon in war may relate to instances of mass killing, controlling a population by reducing their capacity to resist, gaining territorial control, flushing out a population, or punishment of a population. The deliberate use of famine as a weapon of war exacerbates the potentially devastating consequences in terms of health, social and livelihood aspects. The health consequences are especially imminent in settings with limited access to health care and to life-saving interventions (Seal *et al.*, 2017).

Famine phenomena in the Horn of Africa have been identified as the primary driver for a range of negative health consequences such as

nutritional deficiency disorders, infection and economic consequences, such as a reduced productivity (Dugassa, 2019).

Literature shows that a declaration of famine enables timely response and better decisions at global, regional and local level for the famine. In May 2021, the IPC reported that Ethiopia scored high in the number of people in famine situations with 350,000 people in a catastrophic phase in Tigray and neighbouring regions, which is the highest after the 2011 famine in Somalia (IPC, 2021). Hence, the IPC called for a declaration of famine in Ethiopia for subsequent action. However, The Ethiopian federal government refused the report and a committee named “IPC Famine Review Committee” was activated in July 2021 by IPC Global Steering Committee to verify the plausibility of the IPC classification. The committee confirmed the determination of famine by the IPC classification based on the high number of individuals in a phase of famine (increased to 400,000 in July 2021) and the risk factors related to the ongoing siege and conflict in Tigray. However, the committee suspended a declaration of “famine” explaining the situation as follows:

...due to the highly dynamic nature of this conflict-driven crisis into account, it is impossible to determine a ‘most-likely scenario’ for the near or medium-term future.
(IPC Famine Review Committee [IPC FRC], 2021, p. 5)

The situation has caused concern regarding the need to address the ongoing man-made suffering in Tigray by mobilising global resources in a concerted effort.

Reports (Inza, 2022, Global Rights Compliance, 2022) have claimed that the famine in Tigray is deliberate to use starvation as warfare. As part of this, the UN’s International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia has revealed that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the federal government of Ethiopia has used starvation as a method of warfare (Human Rights Council, 2022). However, evidence in supplementing and detailing the nature of the intentional use of famine as a warfare is not adequately documented.

Theoretical framework

Considering deliberate famine as a weapon as a means of gaining advantage in a conflict or contest could be implemented across variety of approaches. It often involves an active targeting of livelihoods and sources of food. The current study adopted concepts of considering famine as a weapon from Messer (1991), Kaldor (2013) and Mundy (2017) and established a theoretical framework from these concepts.

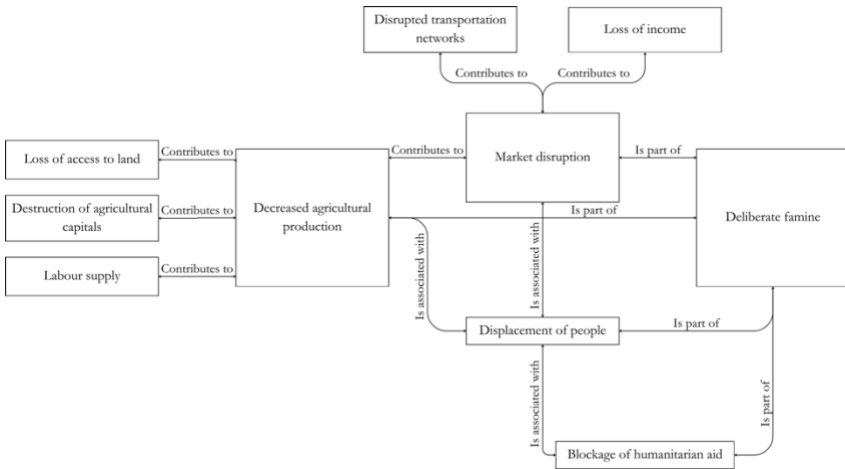


Figure 6.1. Theoretical framework

(Adapted from Messer, 1991; Kaldor, 2013; and Mundy, 2017)

Combining the concepts from the above documents indicates that famine as a weapon of war can be used in four pathways:

- Decreasing agricultural production,
- Disruption of markets
- Displacement
- Lockage of food aid

These pathways result from:

- Loss of access to land
- Destruction of agricultural capital
- Loss of labour supply
- Disruption of transportation networks
- Loss of income

- Blockage of humanitarian aid

A deliberate famine is the result of these factors producing a pathway to deliberately block access to food. Furthermore, Kaldor highlights the consideration that in making the ecological environment unfavourable to living, people will be displaced from the place where their economic sources are based (Figure 6.1).

Methodology

The data source of the current study is the Situation Reports on the Horn of Africa which were published by Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA). The almost daily EEPA Situation Reports on the Horn of Africa record the key political developments in the Horn of Africa and recorded the key events of the Tigray war since it began. The EEPA Situation Reports were sent to diplomatic missions, and distributed on social media and it was published by various outlets, and therefore there was an ability to access the information sent out in the reports.

The EEPA Situation Reports are based on local sources, media and international media, and was often a basis for media to do further investigation on issues raised in the reports. The EEPA Situation Report could be regarded as an early warning system; not claiming that all information published could be absolutely verified is published what the editors deemed reliable as a basis for further investigation and research.

Given that the EEPA Situation Report was published in Belgium, while Tigray was under siege, it provides a clear barometer of the type of information that was communicated outside Tigray, despite the blockade. It also provides a good record of what information was available for the international community to respond to. Apart from the fact that the media and communication blockade in itself can and perhaps should be seen as a factor that played a role in the development of famine as a weapon of war, a blockade that the EEPA Situation Report attempted to circumvent, the reports do also give clear evidence of the information that was available at the time – in real time, on the development of the famine in Tigray – and its potential causes.

As the Situation Reports encompassed a wide range of issues related to the war in Tigray, the reports were disaggregated by sub-topics. The researcher only extracted the entries directly related to the war and famine in the region. The EEPA Situation Reports investigated covered five subsequent months since the war broke out (November 2020 to March 2021). The overall set of Situation Reports on which the current study is based is freely available for reuse at the website of EEPA.

The extracted Situation Reports were imported to Atlas' qualitative software (Scientific Software Development GmbH) for coding and labelling analysis. After repeated reading and re-reading, similar codes were categorised and thematically re-grouped to let them inductively emerge to themes and sub-themes. Subsequently, findings were organised in logically connected and non-repetitive themes.

Results

The current study aimed to analyse the five months of Situation Reports from 18 November 2020, to 19 March 2021. The following themes emerged out of the review of said reports. The findings were categories in five main themes and sixteen sub-themes. The main themes were revolving around:

- Concerns and calls for action on the looming famine
- The famine was evident
- Deliberate blockage of humanitarian assistance
- Deliberate blockage of basic Services and infrastructure, and
- Deliberate destruction of food sources

Table 6.1 sets out main themes and sub-themes identified in the data.

Table 6.1. Summary of the themes and sub-themes regarding the deliberate use of famine as warfare in Tigray war, 202

Theme	Main themes	Sub-theme
Theme I	Concerns regarding the famine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Estimated number of people in need of humanitarian assistance
Theme II	Information about the famine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deaths attributed to starvation • Visitors' witness on people not eating for days • Fleeing to IDP camps for daily food • No Food at the IDP centres • Eating leaves to survive • Severe acute malnutrition/wasting
Theme III	Humanitarian assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refusal of permits • Preventing a critical need Assessment for Food • Preventing food and supplies from reaching people • Denial and hiding of the looming famine by authorities
Theme IV	Deliberate siege	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blockage of medical supplies • Destruction and looting of Health facility • Blockage of bank, Telecommunication, and electricity service • Denial to access safe drinking water
Theme V	Deliberate destruction of food sources	

Theme I. Concerns regarding a famine

Concern about famine in Tigray was identified almost immediately after the onset of the war. Following the break-out of the war, there was a sudden closure of all services including banks, telecommunication and transportation. In the first four weeks, the restrictions imposed on movement, the difficulties to access savings, the absence of fuel and the run out of consumables (foods and goods) were part of the challenge in responding to the basic consumption needs of the people in Tigray. Both the loss of income and the shortage of food due to transport being blocked provoked concerns.

As soon as the federal Ethiopian troops controlled Mekelle City in November 2020, the federal government imposed a curfew for everyone to be at home from 6pm every day. The insecurity that followed, a situation in which extrajudicial killings were perpetrated, the absence of security, and the looting of food supplies from shops, immediately endangered access to food for the civilian population in Tigray. Due to the siege, which included a blockade on media and closure of the Internet, concerns about how the population would have access to food was not transmitted. It took more than a month and a half before the urgent need for humanitarian assistance came to the attention of the global community. The human suffering associated with food shortage appeared in the UN Security Council for the first time on 15 December 2021, raised by German delegate. The German delegate called for full and immediate humanitarian assistance for Tigray. However, the Council did not give adequate attention to the issue at that time (EEPA, 2020, SR 26, Ref. number 602).

At the same time, the Belgian journalist Stijn Vercruyssen (VRT) found a way of entering Tigray and making a (secretly shot) report; he addressed the concern of extreme food shortages in Tigray (EEPA, 2020, SR 34, Ref. number 813). Concerns were also raised at the Flemish Parliament in Belgium, which asked for urgent diplomatic action with regards to the conflict in Tigray to avoid famine (EEPA, 2020, SR 22, Ref. number 497).

In January 2021, more warning reports about the looming famine were raised within the international community. At the end of

January, a Government of France statement also addressed the continued risk of famine in Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 72, Ref. number 1761). In late January and early February 2021, the Washington Post stressed the report from the Early Warning Systems Network regarding the looming famine in Tigray and a substantial proportion of the people requiring emergency food (EEPA, 2021, SR 59, Ref. number 1453).

Parts of central and eastern Tigray are likely in Emergency Phase 4, a step below famine. (EEPA, 2022, SR 59, Ref. number 1455)

In line with the above, the Catholic Bishop of Adigrat Zone of Tigray, sent out an appeal for solidarity with the population of Tigray (dated 5 January 2021) stating food items and basic life-saving medicines had run out in Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 56, Ref. number 1359).

A grave concern was raised that a substantial proportion of the Tigray people were suffering from hunger and starvation, and this became especially clear after the visit of the EU Special Envoy to the Horn, Haavisto, to Tigray, when the EEPA Situation Report documented:

Tigray is being confronted with a potential famine, where 2.3 million people need urgent access to supplies. Ethiopian troops are making access difficult and restricting access to water and aid, including that of the UN. (EEPA, 2021, SR 86, Ref. number 2157)

In February, the looming famine in Tigray had started to deepen and it was reported that more geographic areas in Tigray were entering phase 4 level of food insecurity, the most severe stage of a looming famine (EEPA, 2022, SR 77, Ref. number 1871).

Estimated number of people in need of humanitarian assistance

The UN OCHA published the prediction on the estimated number of people in urgent need of humanitarian assistance which jumped to two million over the two-week period from the start of the war (EEPA, 2020, SR 5, Ref. number 94) and the predicted number hit a 4.5 million point after just two months (at January 8, 2021) (EEPA, 2021, SR 58, Ref. number 1404). This figure (4.5 million persons) was frequently reported in reports, calls for action and early warnings to call for actions to avoid a deadly famine.

In January 2021, the Washington Post covered in its news that hundreds of thousands might starve to death and 4.5 million people need emergency food assistance – out of a population of 6 million people in Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 59, Ref. number 1453). Furthermore, in early February, the then Chief for the World Food Program (WFP) stated that 4.5 million people in Tigray were in need of humanitarian assistance, of which 2.6 to 3 million persons needed immediate assistance of food aid. The WFP chief underlined that children, pregnant and lactation women continued to be starving in Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 79, Ref. number 1934).

Theme II: Information about the famine

In January 2021, three months after the war broke out, accounts from the region started to report indicators of famine. Deaths attributed to starvation, visitors' witness reports communicating that people were seen not to be eating for days, and that people were fleeing to IDP camps to be able to access daily food consumption, the lack of food at the IDP centres for people arriving at the centre, that people were eating leaves of trees and shrubs to survive, and Severe Acute Malnutrition/wasting in the margin were reported (EEPA, 2021, SR 82, Ref. number 2016; EEPA, 2021, SR 91, Ref. number 2293; EEPA, 2021, SR 102, Ref. number 2656).

The following themes were identified from the analysis:

- Death attributed to starvation
- Visitors witness reports
- Reports of people in search of food fleeing to IDP camps
- The lack of food in IDP camps
- Reports on people eating leaves for survival
- Reports on severe acute malnourishing and bodily wasting.

Deaths attributed to starvation

Figures on deaths due to starvation were reported from January 2021 onwards. As a tip of the iceberg, in January, five families had been found dead due to starvation in Irob, the Eastern part of Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 61, Ref. number 1483), while the then interim administration Bureau of Social Affairs in Tigray reported his office's witness regarding the death of 10 individuals in Gulomekeda Woreda

in Eastern Zone and the death of three children in the Adwa Woreda in Central Zone primarily due to starvation (EEPA, 2021, SR 65, Ref. number 1582). In addition, reports in February 2021 disclosed that many more individuals were dying from hunger in the Northwest, Central, and Eastern Zones of Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 77, Ref. number 1873). A report from Red Cross explained the evidence of starvation as:

“Many, many severe cases of malnutrition” state Red Cross, “emaciated” people who managed to escape rural areas still inaccessible in the fourth month of fighting. Displaced civilians reaching camps near major towns have skin on their bones and appear very malnourished. (EEPA, 2021, SR 82, Ref. number 2016)

In February 2021, the evidence of starvation of civilians in Tigray was clear, and it was also apparent that this crisis was a serious one.

Lack of access to safe drinking water

Lack of access to safe drinking water was a problem reported immediately since the onset of the war in Tigray. It was documented in relation to the destruction of water sources including the damage to reservoirs around major cities, looting water trucks, and security concerns to fetch water. In January 2021, MSF stated the critical shortage of clean water in Tigray related to the war as “The people (in Tigray) have very limited access to food, clean water, shelter, and healthcare.” (EEPA, 2021, SR 54, Ref. number 1314). It was reported that the Ethiopian troops deliberately acted to block access to water:

Tigray is being confronted with a potential famine where 2.3 million people need urgent access to supplies. Ethiopian troops are making access difficult and restricting access to water and aid, including that of the UN. (EEPA, 2021, SR 86, Ref. number 2157)

Some reports mentioned that the people in some towns of the Tigray were left to use rivers as a source of drinking water. A report stated the critical shortage of water and the security concern it created to fetch water from rivers in Adigrat, the head quarter of the Eastern Zone of Tigray as:

In Adigrat, water shortage is forcing people to drink from rivers. Fearing attacks, some are hiding in caves. (EEPA, 2021, SR 77, Ref. number 1873)

The security situation made it dangerous to access rivers to fetch water.

Visitor's witness reports

In February 2021, members of the global community who visited Tigray created an opportunity to speak out about the lack of communication on the famine in Tigray. Just four months after the war broke out, the desperate need for food in Tigray overwhelmed visitors from the global community. This is evidenced by the level of emotion and the impact visits had on foreigners as they saw an enormous need for food. The president of the Red Cross is one of the visitors who expressed emotion after he observed that no food, no water, no medicine, or drugs were available for the people in Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 90, Ref. number 2263). The same month, the Chief of Save the Children US witnessed that he had found people in Tigray who had not eaten food for days:

Since arriving in Axum, Central Tigray in early February, Save the Children has met families who have not eaten for days. (EEPA, 2021, SR 91, Ref. number 2293)

The situation on the availability of food and necessities was so dire that it created emotional appeals by those in a position to visit the region and see the situation in real life.

Fleeing to IDP camps for food

In the fifth month of the war, from late February through late March 2021, the people not displaced from their homes remained locally contained/quarantined with no food, medicine, water, or fuel. Associated Press reported it:

Skinny, hungry, fleeing threats of violence, thousands of people who have been hiding in rural areas of Ethiopia's Tigray region have begun to arrive in the community of Shire. 5000 arrived between last Wednesday and Sunday. (EEPA, 2021, SR 102, Ref. number 2653)

A Dutch director of Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) explained:

The people arriving (at camps) are in very bad conditions... very exhausted, dehydrated, and skinny and it is becoming a desperate situation very quickly. (EEPA, 2021, SR 102, Ref. number 2654)

This situation prompted people to flee to the internal displacement centres to look for daily food. Hungry, skinny, and dehydrated persons had started to arrive at the camps for food assistance.

IDP centres running out of food

It was unfortunate that the people fleeing to IDP centres were not getting the food they had hoped to receive there. The Situation Report captured that refugees in Tigray were deliberately forced to live in overcrowded camps and conditions, which posed further vulnerability to infections. UN OCHA has repeatedly sent out alarms as early as December 2020 to warn that food rations for displaced people in Tigray had run out and they called for an urgent call for unconditional and safe humanitarian access to Tigray (EEPA, 2020, SR 23, Ref. number 528). Due to the siege, this access to support the population with food was denied.

Eating leaves for survival

In March 2021, reports captured evidence of the deliberate deprivation of food after hearing from newly arriving people in IDP camps. The newly arriving people survived by eating leaves available in the forest since they left their homes and hidden in the forests for security concerns. Aid workers exposed that they found people spending their time in forests and they had been eating leaves after they finished the seeds they had put aside for planting (EEPA, 2021, SR 102, Ref. number 2655). The aid workers also uncovered that they had heard many accounts of refugees hiding in remote villages. The people, afraid to be found, were at risk of being cut off from any assistance (EEPA, 2021, SR 107, Ref. number 2794). After visiting the Shire with the International Rescue Committee, Madiha Raza witnessed:

People are starving! There is a severe issue of access to food. One interviewee told me that she survived on just leaves for a month while she hid in a forest. (EEPA, 2021, SR 102, Ref. number 2656)

The situation in the rural areas was dire.

Severe acute malnutrition and bodily wasting

The increasing incidence of the proportion of under-five children with severe acute malnutrition is also a reliable indicator of famine.

The proportion had sharply risen from 7% before the war (4 November 2020, to 10% on 29 January 2021 (EEPA, 2021, SR 70, Ref. number 1713). Reports at this time repeatedly mentioned that the international classification for food security in Tigray showed to approach the margin of level 4, just one step before it was classified as a catastrophic situation.

Theme III: Humanitarian assistance

The following three sub-categories were identified to look at (i) the deliberate blockage of humanitarian assistance mainly food and medicine, (ii) extra-mile efforts to destroy food sources (iii) intentional blockage of other basic services including fuel, electricity, bank, and telecommunication.

Refusal of permits

For at least four months, federal government authorities withheld permissions to provide humanitarian assistance in Tigray. The UN agencies reported that the permission granted by the federal authorities was frequently put down to simple “paperchase” permission.

An official from the Red Cross stated the situation with emotion that lack of clearance prevented his institution from reaching people in Tigray with food for months:

There is no clearance for the humanitarian flights of the Red Cross!! We are ready! We have loaded our cargo! However, we cannot send medicine, drugs, and food!! The elderly and children are in desperate need of food. (EEPA, 2021, SR, 90, Ref. number 2266)

No aid entered the region from November to mid-January and humanitarian organisations expressed their concern to the federal authorities that they could not ask regional offices to go without food, and, as people were starving, they were in great trouble especially as they could not even feed their staff (EEPA, 2021, SR 58, Ref. number 1410).

Preventing critical need assessment for food

As part of the humanitarian response, agents needed to conduct a rapid need assessment for foodstuff. However, the issue suffered

from frequent and deliberate obstruction by security authorities. In one reported instance, a UN agency was blocked from carrying out the critical needs assessment for food in Tigray by refusing to give security clearance. The US House Foreign Affairs Committee responded to reports that a UN convoy came under fire as:

[...] the situation on the ground is getting worse. Lack of security protections and opaque approval processes are blocking critical humanitarian assessment teams. (EEPA, 2020, SR 23, Ref. number 519)

The lack of clearance for the implementation of needs assessments further impeded the possibility to address the famine.

Preventing food and supplies from reaching people

Blockage of conveyances and trucks to prevent food from reaching displaced people was commonly reported by aid agents (EEPA, 2020, SR 23, Ref. number 519). The US House Foreign Affairs Committee called not to politicize humanitarian aid:

We call on the Government of Ethiopia to ensure safe and unfettered humanitarian access without delay. Humanitarian aid cannot be politicized. (EEPA, 2020, SR 23, Ref. number 518)

The physical blocking of food aid transports and transport of humanitarian assistance resulted in further obstacles to the delivery of much-needed aid.

Denial and hiding of the looming famine by Ethiopian authorities

In contrast to the reports generated on the hunger and starvation in Tigray, the starvation was denied by the then Ethiopia's Disaster Commission spokesman [Debebe Zewdie] in January 2021, when he stated that there was no starvation in Ethiopia (EEPA, 2021, SR 62, Ref. number 1525). The reports that government officials were denying the looming famine provoked a first allegation that famine was used as a weapon of war in Tigray.

The Economist reacted to the government's statement about the horrific reports on the evident starvation in Tigray:

Ethiopia's government appears to be wielding hunger as a weapon as the Tigray region is being starved into submission along with the horrifying accounts of ethnic killings, mass rapes, and starvation. (EEPA, 2021, SR 63, Ref. number 1530)

While the concern for a looming famine was continuously reported, the analysis emerged that support mechanisms to prevent the famine were intentionally blocked by the Ethiopian government.

Theme IV: Deliberate siege

The Situation Report also captured blockage of other basic services including medical supplies, bank service, telecommunication and fuel, health service, and access to safe drinking water, which all are directly related to food.

Blockage of medical supplies

The deliberate obstruction of medical supplies to Tigray was frequently reported. Just to mention a few, the US House Foreign Affairs Committee stated in early December 2020 that medical supplies and other desperately needed humanitarian aid were blocked by the Government of Ethiopia from reaching displaced populations (EEPA, 2020, SR 23, Ref. number 519). In addition, journalist Stijn Vercruyse (VRT) – who entered Tigray despite the block of media into the region, warned about the lack of medicines including for Eritrean refugees residing in Tigray on December 2020 (EEPA, 2020, SR 34, Ref. number 813). A representative of the Red Cross discussed the critical shortage of medicines and drugs in Tigray in February (EEPA, 2021, SR 90, Ref. number 2263). The Catholic Bishop of Adigrat (Tigray), sent an appeal on 5 January 2021, that basic life-saving medicines had run out in Tigray including for refugees residing in the region (EEPA, 2021, SR 56, Ref. number 1359).

Destruction and looting of health facilities

Reports suggested that the destruction of health facilities and looting of the facilities were deliberately executed. In December 2020, the then-head of the Bureau of Health of the interim government installed by the Ethiopian government confirmed that the Wukro and Adigrat hospitals (both in the Eastern Zone of Tigray) were destroyed and all materials were looted (EEPA, 2020, SR 37, Ref. number 874). In December 2020 the arrival of looted cars, diagnostics, and pharmaceuticals in Asmara (Eritrea) was confirmed (EEPA, 2020, SR 19, Ref. number 424). On 5 January 2021, 78% of the health facilities in Tigray were reported to be destroyed, and 265 of the 291

ambulances in Tigray were either stolen or destroyed (EEPA, 2021, SR 46, Ref. number 1111). At the same time, the UN also revealed that the health facilities outside the cities were not operational and those in cities were in a critical shortage of supplies (EEPA, 2021, SR 47, Ref. number 1141). Furthermore, three months after the war broke out, MSF teams reported that between 3 and 4 million people in Tigray had been left to live without health services. (EEPA, 2021, SR 54, Ref. number 1319)

Blockage of banks, telecommunication, and electricity service

The deliberate blockage of basic services including banking services, telecommunications, and electricity services considerably contributed to the famine in Tigray. It inflated the price of the food supplies in Tigray. The absence of telecommunications and a bank system considerably interfered with the efforts of aid workers to organise humanitarian response while the absence of bank services blocked many from access to their savings or benefiting from support from relatives abroad. (EEPA, 2020, SR 27, Ref. number 642)

Theme V: Deliberate destruction of food sources

An impressive number of entries related to a scorched earth tactic with possible food sources being destroyed and destruction of farming resources with the effect of limiting the productivity of the farmers. The Ethiopian National Defence Force, Eritrean Defence Forces and Amhara special forces, and non-formal Amhara militants were reportedly engaged in burning crops in the farm and house, mixing seeds to make them unusable, cutting fruit trees, stealing and slaughtering domestic animals. In addition, mixing food items with sand was deliberately executed in Tigray to punish the people. Alex De Waal revealed that he had received reports that Eritrean and Ethiopian troops cut down the Mango orchards at Adebay and Tseada on the Zamra River in south-central Tigray (EEPA, 2021, SR 97, Ref. number 2489). He also added that this amounts to the crime of using starvation as a weapon:

It's not a massacre, a mass rape or torture. But chopping down those fruit trees is evidence of the war aims of the leaders in Asmara and Addis Ababa. (EEPA, 2021, SR 97, Ref. number 2490)

While the Washington Post also exposed that the troops deployed in Tigray were burning crops and stealing cattle (EEPA, 2021, SR 70, Ref. number 1715), reports in December also confirmed that looted food items arrived in Asmara in Eritrea, along with other looted cars, equipment from universities, diagnostics, pharmaceuticals and factory equipment including a textile factory (EEPA, 2020, SR 19, Ref. number 424).

Discussion

The indicators of the use of hunger and starvation as a weapon of war in Ethiopia's Tigray are well documented (Clarfield *et al.*, 2022; Paravicini & Houreld, 2021; Inza, 2022). According to the report by the IPC (2021) 352,000 individuals in Tigray were experiencing catastrophic starvation conditions in June 2021 with 70% of the population in Tigray in crisis or worse with people in one-third of the households eating only one meal per day (Phase 3 or above).

The delivery of humanitarian assistance was deliberately blocked. Other reports from Tigray and elsewhere have also shown the blockade of aid trucks with humanitarian aid (Devi, 2021; Gesesew *et al.*, 2023). The national government's attempts to deliberately hide the looming famine, to refuse to act on the early warnings, and to play paper-chasing deals to stop humanitarian access weigh heavily given the clear indications of a looming famine. The lack of support is compounded by a deliberate attack on aid workers, blocking and looting aid trucks, and suspension of non-governmental emergency workers (Gesesew *et al.*, 2023). Persons flocking to camps as they were in critical need of food did not find adequate support available at the IDP camp sites. A study by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) showed that 575 IDP sites were identified in Tigray and that half of the households in the majority (93%) of the IDP sites had never received food assistance since they arrived in the camps (Mesfin & Gebremariam, 2023).

Unlike conventional famine, which can be prevented or addressed by the mobilisation of global resources in response to the early warning indicators, famine which is deliberately hidden by government authorities is difficult to address. In Somalia, the aid and humanitarian

assistance made available dramatically increased after a catastrophic famine had been declared (Maxwell, 2019). Intentional blockage by warring parties in delivery of humanitarian assistance has persisted as a main challenge (Schwendimann, 2011).

Concerted efforts are hardly possible when governments are not willing to address the disaster. As information on the Tigray war was blocked, warnings for the looming famine were hardly available. In contrast to the international laws which prohibit starving of civilians, reservation to interfere with the nation's "sovereignty" delay the efforts to define and address the looming famine. Moreover, the prohibition of deliberate starvation is less monitored and amounts to war crime only when perpetrated by state parties (D'Alessandra & Gillett, 2019).

In famine situations access to health care services is critical to provide lifesaving treatment increases (Dean *et al.*, 2020; Garber *et al.*, 2020; Seal *et al.*, 2017). The health system in Tigray was as it seems purposefully destroyed with medical equipment being looted, and health facilities were used as military camps while health care workers were attacked (Gesese *et al.*, 2023; Tigray Health Bureau, 2022). Basic services including vaccination services were denied for children under-five, malnourished children left untreated, and women who gave births unattended by skilled care providers (Tigray Health Bureau, 2022, Gebregziabher *et al.*, 2022; Gesese *et al.*, 2021; 2023). In addition, the war led people with chronic conditions to discontinue regular check-ups (Weledegebriel *et al.*, 2023). While access to basic services in protracted areas is generally difficult (Garber *et al.*, 2020), the consequences of deliberate denial of access to basic services were enormous in the context of a looming famine.

In addition, there was a massive allegedly purposeful destruction of water sources. With an estimated 19,159 rural and 715 urban water sources in Tigray, the coverage for safe drinking water was 61% in 2020. However, 50% of the water sources of the coverage were destroyed, according to a report by the Tigray Bureau of Water and Natural Resources. It was found that 36 ongoing projects aimed at improving the water coverage in Tigray were deliberately targeted, looted, and destroyed (Mesfin & Gebremedhin, 2023). Another study

in early 2022 showed that the war reduced the water coverage in Tigray by 50%, putting a considerable population at risk due to inadequate and unclear safe drinking water (Shishaye *et al.*, 2023).

In May 2021, the Addis Standard addressed the then deputy head of the Tigray interim administration's statement regarding a campaign to stop farmers in Shire, Tembien, and Hawzen from their routine farming activities as well as the deliberate obstruction of seeds from entering Tigray (Addis Standard, 2021). In addition, a study on the farm situation indicated that the shortage of farming tools, oxen, fertiliser, seeds, and manpower in Tigray severely affected their farming ability and that farms cultivated late and left land uncultivated. The study indicated the lower yield of major cereal crops (wheat and barley) because farmers had consumed the seeds when hiding from warfare (Ghebreyohannes *et al.*, 2022).

Similarly, deliberate destruction of crops in the fields or food stocks, killing of livestock, and blocking of food and aid supplies for the civilian population were observed in Somalia, North Nigeria, and the Lake Chad region, conflicting parties (Lucas, 2020). This might imply the need to intensify the monitoring and accountability mechanisms on governments or parties regarding the deliberate use of starvation as warfare (United Nations Security Council, 2018).

At present, the long-term effects of the deliberate destruction of food sources along with the deteriorated economic activities, shortage of rainfall, temporary termination of food aid in Tigray, people are suffering from hunger. (World Food Programme, 2023) A study conducted in August 2023 also verified that more than 1300 individuals in Tigray died of starvation since the ceasefire agreement was reached in November 2022, while many more were left at grave concern of starvation (The Associated Press, 2023)

Conclusion

This study looked at whether or not the famine in Tigray was the result of a deliberate set of actions amounting warfare. In 2021, it was alleged that famine was used as a weapon of war against the civilian population in Tigray. This research investigates this claim.

The literature describes how a series of actions constitute together a pathway to deliberate famine. The key factors are the following:

- decreasing agricultural production,
- disruption of markets and
- displacement, and
- blockage of food aid

These pathways result from:

- Loss of access to land
- Destruction of agricultural capital
- Loss of labour supply
- Disruption of transportation networks
- Loss of income
- Blockage of humanitarian aid

To establish the use of famine as weapon of war it must result from a deliberate policy on the combined pathways. This study investigated the pathways and the causes of problems based on policy decisions by the parties partaking in the war in Tigray.

The review of the EEPA Situation Reports showed that calls and concerns about a looming famine were reported since the onset of the war. The threat of famine was high and indications were reported related to:

- Incidences of death due to starvation
- Lack of access to clean drinking water
- Reports by visitors to the region
- People in need of food fled to IDP camps – where food provisions were inadequate
- Reports that people were surviving on leaves
- Reports of acute malnutrition

It can, therefore, be concluded that the famine was reported and that the situation was known to the Ethiopian government, who led the war actions. The international media warned in 2021 that 4.5 million people out of the 6 million people in Tigray were suffering from the lack of access to food.

Not only were the indications of famine neglected, but there appears to have been a concerted effort to terminate food production in the Tigray region. The EEPA Situation Reports repeatedly warns of the destruction of food sources, looting and slaughtering of domestic animals, and preventing access to agricultural inputs as well as not allowing farmers from ploughing their farms. These acts were deliberately executed to reduce access to food by the people in Tigray. Eritrean troops hindered farmers from ploughing their farms in Atsbi (Eastern Tigray). The findings highlight that a significant portion of those impacted were highly vulnerable, facing severe starvation.

Consequently, the study underscores the deliberate use of hunger and famine as tools of warfare in the Tigray conflict, aimed at decimating the community. The war directly resulted in loss of access to land; destruction of agricultural capital; loss of labour supply and disruption of transportation networks. Moreover, the siege relating to media, communications, banking services, and many other services, compounded the isolation, driving up prices and causing a loss of income. Due to the large number of internally displaced people, farmers lost access to their land and food production declined further. The continuous threat of attacks and the ongoing insecurity further contributed to the displacement of the population.

While the situation mounted to a humanitarian crisis, the aid to support the civilian population was blocked in various ways:

- Lack of access to support including from relatives
- Refusal or delay in granting permission to humanitarian actors to provide much-needed support and blocking their work
- Refusal of permits for humanitarian transports to the region to bring in food and essential items such as medicines
- Apparent prevention of needs assessments

The Situation Reports by EEPA captured strong evidence of deliberate blockage of humanitarian assistance including: (i) refusal of permit entry of humanitarian support, (ii) preventing critical needs assessment for food, (iii) obstructing food and supplies from reaching people, and (iv) denial of the evident famine.

The denial of the problem of hunger the looming famine and the blocking of pathways to address these issues was further compounded by the destruction of medical health facilities and looting, attacking of health workers, and occupation of facilities by military.

In summary, this study finds that all of the pathways towards deliberate famine were used in the Tigray war. This underscores the egregious concern of the deliberate nature in the use of famine as a weapon of war.

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Author's contributions

The author conceived the study, designed the theoretical framework, analysed the data, drafted first draft, and approved the final manuscript.

Ethical considerations

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Tilburg University Identification code: REDC 2020.139 titled “Cultural Dimensions of Meaning-making and Agenda-setting”.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the ‘Note on content and editorial decisions’ (Book 1).

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