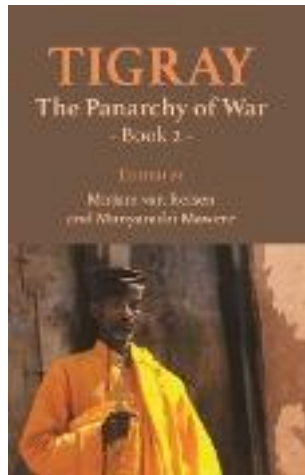


‘Everything that Held us Together is Now in
Ruins’:
Exodus and Dissatisfaction after the Peace
Agreement in Tigray: A Personal Narrative

Tom Claes

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‘Everything that Held us Together is Now in Ruins’:

Exodus and Dissatisfaction after the Peace Agreement in Tigray: A Personal Narrative

Tom Claes

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An increase in people who offer no value is akin to a gathering of hyraxes.

Abstract

This study is a journalistic reflection on a visit to Tigray at the end of 2023, a year after the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was concluded between Ethiopia and the regional state of Tigray. The author finds that the regional instability continues to persist. Ethiopian forces are stretched thin due to domestic conflicts in Oromia and Amhara, and due to regional tensions, complicating the situation further. Tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia persist. The intertwining regional security dynamics, including the civil war in Sudan, also play a critical role. The uncertainty of the regional dynamics are reflected in views on the situation at a personal level. The author describes a conversation he has with Mahlet, a hotel employee in Dallas Hotel in Mekelle (Tigray), on how the recurring violence affects each generation of her family. Mahlet contemplates fleeing to Europe, burdened by the weight of her family’s past, including her mother’s experiences during the Eritrean-Ethiopian border war and her own survival of recent conflicts. Mahlet expresses deep concern for her daughter’s future, fearing the continuation of violence. The author concludes that her poignant reflection helps to highlight the enduring cycle of conflict that has plagued Tigray and the broader region, affecting generations.

Keywords: Tigray, Horn of Africa region, cycle of violence, generational violence, Ethiopia

A coffee in the Dallas Hotel in Mekelle

‘Do you like sugar in your coffee?’ Mahlet Tsegaye asks. It is a quarter past ten in the morning in Mekelle, the capital of the Ethiopian province of Tigray. While life outside is slowly getting underway, it is still remarkably quiet in the Dallas Hotel. Women are busy doing the laundry in the courtyard. A supplier walks into the hotel through the large entrance gate, looks around for a while, and then disappears into a back room.

Mahlet has been working since eight o’clock. The 26-year-old woman carries around a tray of coffee. ‘I worked as a tour guide for years and had a nice salary’, she says while she takes a seat on one of the plastic chairs that were placed randomly in the courtyard. ‘Many tourists visited Tigray, especially to admire the centuries-old churches and mosques. But then, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and everyone stayed away. Suddenly I was out of work.’

And then the worst was yet to come. In early November 2020, a brutal war erupted in Tigray between the regional ruling party Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), and the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) and its allies. A few weeks later, the fighting reached Wukro, Mahlet’s home city. ‘You could just be shot if you opened your door’, she says in a trembling voice. ‘We were even afraid to go to our neighbors.’

One day, Mahlet heard about a woman who was raped by six soldiers. Her husband, who had to witness the horror, was so devastated that he hanged himself in front of her. It could be me the next day, she pondered. And so, she fled with her three-year-old daughter. ‘We hid in the countryside for weeks. We had no food, no light, nothing.’

Luckily, she still had some money in her bank account. However, because the banking system was down due to the war, she was unable to withdraw anything. ‘I went to the manager of the nearest bank and told him that my daughter was losing weight very quickly. He took some money out of his pocket and gave it to me. We could continue with that for a while. I was afraid I would lose my child.’

In November 2022, after two years of intense fighting, the TPLF and the Ethiopian government reached a peace agreement in Pretoria,

South Africa. Mahlet moved from Wukro to Mekelle shortly afterwards. ‘I needed a job’, she says. ‘Of course, I would much rather be a tour guide again. But do you see any tourists? Today I’m doing a lot of odd jobs at the hotel. I need the money to survive.’

Long hailed as the African tiger, Ethiopia is now struggling to pay its debts. Its economy is in tatters, hit by the coronavirus pandemic and two years of war. Inflation is hovering around 30 percent and food and fuel prices are soaring. ‘Before the war, I used to pay 25 to 30 birr (about 0.50 dollar) for a liter of petrol’, a rickshaw driver in Mekelle explains. ‘Now it is 75 birr (1.30 dollar) at the pump and 100 birr (1.70 dollar) on the black market when petrol stations run out. The price hike means I can no longer put food on the table for my wife and children.’

Life in Tigray has become unaffordable for many people. Young people spend their days on the streets or in one of the gambling dens that are springing up like mushrooms. Some people are deeply in debt. Many have still not received their overdue salaries from during the war. And work is scarce in Tigray, so bills remain unpaid.

A visit to Saint Mary’s Church in Dengelat

‘I had a good income’, Daniel says in flawless English. The smooth young man – cap, sneakers, and hoody – had a job as an IT worker in Mekelle. When war broke out, the region was cut off from all communications and he was left without work. Because he has good language skills and is socially capable, he decided to become a journalist and fixer for foreign reporters.

One of the stories he worked on as a fixer and translator was about Saint Mary’s Church in Dengelat, in northern Tigray. In late November 2020, dozens of pilgrims had gathered at the church to celebrate the Orthodox festival of Zion St Mary. As the celebrants returned from a ceremony in the church, Eritrean soldiers, according to witnesses, opened fire. They had set up camp nearby and were looking for Tigrayan fighters.

‘In a panic, people scrambled up the hill on rocky paths’, the monk of the church tells me in October 2023, when I visited Dengelat. He

witnessed the massacre from nearby. ‘People hid in the bush for days or tried to reach neighboring villages. No one dared to come down out of fear of being killed. We survived by eating the roots and stems of edible wild plants.’

Close to the church, the young farmer Hagos (alias) is sitting on a stone wall. He has just gathered the last of the straw into big bales. His work is done for the day. ‘At least 56 people were massacred there,’ he says, pointing to an open field. It is still unclear how many people died in total. ‘Six of the victims were my wife’s relatives. My mother and sister were also rounded up. They were lucky, a soldier eventually let them go. My sister has now joined the Tigrayan army.’

Before the war, Hagos used to work as a trader in the neighboring town of Adigrat. Since the age of 19, he has made at least five attempts to flee to Saudi Arabia in search of a better life. Each time he was stopped somewhere along the way. He tried to flee during the recent war but was caught in Djibouti. He ended up in a prison in the neighboring region of Afar.

It was never his dream to become a farmer, he explains: ‘This field belongs to my parents. I came back because I wanted to help them. During the attack, the Eritrean soldiers also beat my father and left him for dead. Thank God he survived. But he is disabled and can no longer work.’

Does he dream of a life elsewhere? ‘Of course I do, but that dream has been put aside. There were eight of us at home. My sister and brothers went to fight with the Tigrayan forces; one of them was killed in the war. If the others ever return home, I can go back to work in the trading business. But for now, I will stay here, there is no one else to help my parents.’

Because little was known about the massacre in Dengelat, Daniel set out to the small village in February 2021 together with two foreign journalists to find out about the details. ‘The Tigrayan authorities had called me in advance. They wanted a military convoy to escort us. But Daniel didn’t want to hear about that. ‘I wanted to be able to do independent research. Of course, the Ethiopian soldiers at the checkpoints along the way were also not happy with our presence.

They wanted to stop us from talking to people so that they could control the narrative about what happened in Dengelat.’

In the end, the three managed to reach the church on their own. But in the meantime, they had been reported to the authorities. Once he returned home to Mekelle, Daniel was lifted from his bed at night by Ethiopian soldiers.¹ He would be held for five days: three days in a military camp, and two days in a civilian prison. ‘In the camp I was interrogated, insulted, and threatened’, he explains. ‘They said they would kill me any moment. I was handcuffed on the ground and given no food or water. My passport and all other documents were confiscated and I would never get them back. Nobody knew where I was. Just because I helped foreign journalists.’

‘Tigray was unprepared for war’

For Daniel and so many other Tigrayans, the war did not come out of the blue. ‘The Ethiopian government was surrounded by people who hated the TPLF and the Tigrayans’, he says. When it was founded in 1975, the TPLF was little more than a group of rebellious students who wanted to address the structural backwardness of their region. It had no clear leader and no military experience. Moreover, especially in its early years, it was overshadowed by another rebel group: the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), led by the future president of Eritrea, Isayas.

Despite fighting the same enemy – the Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia, better known as the Derg – the two rebel groups differed in structure, military approach, and vision. Eritrea was an Italian colony until 1941 when it came under British rule. It was annexed by Ethiopia in 1952, first as a federation and then as a province in 1962.

From the outset, the EPLF sought independence from Eritrea, while the TPLF sought more rights and political power in Ethiopia. Despite their differences, the two rebel groups would prove successful

¹ Ethiopian military detains BBC reporter, translators for AFP and FT, 1 March 2021, CPJ, accessed 20 January 2024, <https://cpj.org/2021/03/ethiopian-military-detains-bbc-reporter-translators-for-afp-and-ft/>

together. In the late 1980s, after numerous military defeats and the loss of important arsenals, the Derg forces were forced to withdraw from the rebel areas. On 28 May 1991, TPLF soldiers entered Addis Ababa, less than a week after the EPLF had liberated the Eritrean capital, Asmara.

On 24 May 1993, the new flag was raised in Eritrea: the country was officially no longer part of Ethiopia. With Isayas at the helm in Asmara and Meles Zenawi of the TPLF in Addis Ababa, the future looked hopeful. But things already started to go wrong in 1998: a border dispute over agricultural land around the town of Badme degenerated into a bloody war with trenches and tens of thousands of deaths on both sides. Faced with a humiliating defeat in 2000, Isayas signed a fragile peace agreement. In practice, however, the conflict was not resolved and the border would remain closed.

In 2018, the inauguration of Abiy ended more than a quarter century of TPLF dominance, a period marked by economic growth, but also censorship and harsh repression. With the new Prime Minister, the country seemed to be making a fresh start. He opened prison gates for journalists and political dissidents, lifted censorship, formed a government with half-female ministers, and promised to liberalise the economy. He also dissolved the ruling coalition and replaced it with a unity party, the Pan-Ethiopian Prosperity Party. Most importantly: Abiy made peace with neighboring Eritrea. This surprising move earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in autumn 2019.

Though the international community thought of him as a peacemaker, out of sight of the cameras, Abiy would soon turn out to be a divider. From the moment he took office, he sidelined the Tigrayans: he cut the budget flowing to Tigray and sacked several TPLF party bosses. Moreover, not only was the TPLF targeted, but life was made difficult for the entire Tigrayan population. Bank accounts were blocked, there were arbitrary arrests and Tigrayans had to deal with a lot of hate speech. 'We were labeled as cancer, as weeds or hyenas', Daniel says.

'The problem is that the government of Tigray did not prepare well for war', he continues. 'Eritrea has been a military for thirty years. The country is trained and has enough soldiers. But us? My cousin had ten

days of military training and then went into the wilderness to fight. If you are not prepared, you should not even begin, or immediately surrender yourself.’

No future in Tigray

When Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy sent his army into Tigray, he quickly received support from troops from the neighboring Amhara region and Eritrea. ‘Every morning, we could hear drones and planes flying overhead’, a retired Non-Governmental Worker (NGO) worker in Mekelle recalls. He stayed in the city as Ethiopian soldiers cleared the streets. ‘I could not leave because I would die without medication. I have hypertension and high blood pressure. But like food and water, medicine was hard to find.’

‘Our biggest worry, says the old man, was insecurity. ‘We lived in constant fear. You never knew when you were going to die. We were lucky that our house had a cellar. Whenever we heard planes or drones, we would hide there except for my mother-in-law. She stubbornly stayed in the living room every time. She lived through three wars in her life, the last one broke her.’

The man bats his eyes and rubs his hands uncomfortably. Then he sighs: ‘I don’t see any future for Tigray. Many schools, hospitals and factories have been destroyed and looted.² Valuable parts and raw materials were taken. Everything was a target in this war. Everything that held our people together is now in ruins.’

In response to the mass atrocities, more and more young people joined the Tigrayan resistance. The mobilisation of new recruits led to the creation of a new popular fighting force: the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF). The TPLF formed the core of that army, but everyone who wanted to fight joined: students, shopkeepers, professors, and even opposition members who would otherwise not spare their criticism of the TPLF.

² EFFORT says four factories completely destroyed during war, as industries in Tigray gear up to resume production, 27 March 2023, accessed 1 April 2023, <https://eng.addisstandard.com/analysis-effort-says-four-factories-completely-demolished-during-war-as-industries-in-tigray-gear-up-to-resume-production/>

The TPLF grew from a rebel group in the 1970s and 1980s to a proper ruling party in the 1990s and 2000s. For years, there have been accusations of corruption, and the lack of accountability and responsibility. The TDF embodied the hope that the TPLF's monopoly on power could be broken once the war was over.

It turned out differently. One of the conditions of the Pretoria Peace Agreement was that an inclusive interim government would be established in Tigray. Yet the TPLF appears to be claiming all the power again. This has left many Tigrayans frustrated. 'I think everyone hoped for change', Daniel says. 'But what have our sacrifices done for us? Nothing. Even before the war, the economy had collapsed, and now the situation is much worse. Most factories have been destroyed. People have no work, and no prospects for the future. Leaving is the only option if you want to survive.'

'I now have a new passport', he continues. 'Thank God, because there is a major shortage of passports in the Ethiopian government. But I hate that mine says "Ethiopia". We have nothing in common with the rest of the country. I would like to move to Canada. Would I work in IT again? Of course, being a computer scientist is the best job you can think of.'

Migration out of desperation

Daniel is not the only one who thinks about leaving. In an interview with the Addis Standard newspaper,³ Haysh Subagadis, the head of the Youth Affairs Office in Tigray, expressed his concern about the growing number of young people migrating to the Arabian Peninsula and other African countries via various routes. He did not give exact figures, but he said 'to have received alarming reports' about this.

Rezene (alias), a guide and museum curator, is one of them. However, before the war he never thought about leaving, he explains: 'I always believed that Tigray was the best for the Ethiopian history and

³ Rising number of Tigray youth fleeing to the Arabian Peninsula amid food security challenges, limited job prospects, 16 November 2023, Addis Standard, accessed 2 February 2024, <https://addisstandard.com/news-rising-number-of-tigray-youth-fleeing-to-the-arabian-peninsula-amid-food-security-challenges-limited-job-prospects/>

culture. All Tigrayans were thinking of Ethiopians. No one was asking about self-determination before the war erupted. But now, because of the atrocities, not only from the past but also the suffering that's about to come, I only want to be Tigrayan. I think it's better to continue living together as good neighbors.'

Nowadays, many Tigrayans increasingly talk about self-determination, the retired NGO worker says. But he warns: 'If you agree to separate, you should do it in a peaceful and wise way. Ethiopia should allow us to separate, it is our right. Let me tell you a parable. A man is married, and every day he quarrels with his wife. One day he becomes very aggressive, and he shows his hatred towards her. What will be the solution? Is it a good idea to bring in another guy to rape and hit her? Will she be your wife forever? Was it a good solution to stay together? You should convince your partner that you can live separately without harming her. They should believe that the separation is for mutual interest.'

'Everyone is desperate. We have no salary, no medicines, or other necessary things to live a normal life, Rezene says. And yet, he hesitates to leave: 'It might be wiser to emigrate for work or education. But if all Tigrayans leave, our enemies would ultimately win. What they could not achieve with war, they have succeeded with the peace agreement: the region is divided, people are moving away and everyone is at a loss.'

'There are many personal challenges and challenges for our community as a whole', a young healthcare worker at Ayder Hospital in Mekelle says. 'Western Tigray is still occupied by Amhara forces. So, people cannot live there and many of them come to our hospital. Besides that, we have not been paid for almost three years. Only in the last months, the Ethiopian government is giving us our salary. That means only the salary. But we also work night shifts. Those hours are not paid.'

Many people now have debts, he says: 'During the war, we had to beg for money just so that we could eat. I still have debts for food and even for my rent. These days, there are many conflicts. People go to court to ask for their two years' rent. But let's not forget: only the rent is someone's monthly salary. So, it is not possible to pay back two

years of rent. That causes a lot of frustration among the Tigrayan community. One of my colleagues has an appointment in court over a debt of 53,000 birr [approximately EUR 860, eds.]. There are many such cases, even outside Mekelle.’

Will there be another war?

‘The economic situation is one thing,’ says Daniel, ‘but the security of the region is a completely different story. You never know when you will have to fight again. The peace agreement has not yet been fully implemented. Tigray is still not stable. There are rumors that a new war with Eritrea is brewing. And then what?’

In October 2023, Prime Minister Abiy said that he was eyeing the Eritrean port city of Assab. With the independence of Eritrea in 1993, Ethiopia lost its access to the sea. Abiy left no doubt: access to the sea is existential for Ethiopia’s survival.

‘Abiy is cheating the people’, the retired NGO worker says. ‘He has his own problem internally. He couldn’t resist war and is now fighting with the Fanos, the Amhara militias. He’s buying time by saying he will bring back the Eritrean ports to Ethiopia. Nobody believes this propaganda. He couldn’t clear the Fanos even properly, so, now he is going to fight with the Eritreans? That’s a joke.’

A war over Assab is off the table for the time being. In January 2024, the Ethiopian government signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the breakaway Somali province of Somaliland, which should give Ethiopia its long-sought access to the sea through the port city of Berbera. But this deal also creates new tensions in the already volatile Horn of Africa. Somaliland is a former British protectorate that declared independence from Somalia in 1991 but is not recognised by the international community. The port deal with Ethiopia promises Somaliland the prospect of recognition, much to the frustration of Somalia. It says its sovereignty has been violated and is eagerly seeking international support. In this way, Eritrea, as a possible ally of Somalia, comes back into the picture.

Eritrea could use the port deal with Somaliland to start a new war with Tigray. Firstly, because Eritrean President Isayas has not

achieved his goal: the complete destruction of the TPLF. Secondly, because Abiy does not have the military strength to wage a war on several fronts the timing could therefore be good. Apart from the tensions with Somalia, the Ethiopian army is already occupied with rebel uprisings in the Oromia and Amhara regions. And thirdly, because the whole regional security complex is intertwined. Many factors might influence the possibility of a new Eritrea/Ethiopia war: for example, the role of Egypt, how the alliance between Somalia and Eritrea plays out, and the possible spillover effects of the civil war that is currently raging in Sudan.

Meanwhile, lunchtime has arrived at the Dallas Hotel. Mahlet, the hotel employee and former guide, stares straight ahead, almost mechanically. Her eyes move slowly over the half-covered courtyard. 'If I get the chance, I'll go to Europe', she says, caressing her daughter's head. She has tried to recapture some of her previous life, but it is no longer the same. 'I'm thinking about my child, you know. My own mother lived in Tigray during the border war with Eritrea. Her mother experienced the battle against the Derg in the 1980s. And, I survived the last war.'⁴

She is silent for a moment. She puts the empty coffee cups on the tray and stands up. And, as she takes her daughter by the hand, she whispers: 'Every generation is torn apart by violence. Who knows what tragedy awaits my child?'

⁴ This paragraph is based on a discussion with Kjetil Tronvoll, 19 January 2024.

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Authors' contributions

The author is the sole contributor to the chapter.

Ethical clearance

Note of the editors: No ethical clearance was obtained. This article was not contributed to this book as an academic article. It was contributed on the invitation of the editors. The article was produced with respect of the ethical considerations for journalists and in respect for and recognition of the importance of journalism. All names of persons are changed.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the 'Note on content and editorial decisions'.