

Power and Plunder



The Eritrean Defense Forces
Intervention in Tigray

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Acronyms

CITG	Commission of Inquiry on Tigray Genocide
EDF	Eritrean Defense Forces
EEBC	Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission
EFFORT	Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray
EHRC	Ethopian Human Rights Commission
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defense Force
TDF	Tigrayan Defense Force
TIA	Tigray Interim Administration
TPLF	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees



Executive Summary

In November 2018, the United Nations lifted sanctions on Eritrea, including a two-way arms embargo banning both the import and export of arms, after a successful campaign by Eritrea's longtime rival, Ethiopia. As Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali began to reestablish ties, having signed a formal peace agreement in September 2018, hope was high that this reset of regional relations would provide long-term security. That hope quickly faded as increasingly secret talks resulted in the military encirclement of Ethiopia's Tigray region.

In the absence of the UN's two-way arms embargo, the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) reequipped and rearmed, while its senior officers conspired with the newly configured Ethiopian security apparatus to launch the Tigray War in late 2020. The EDF played a prominent and highly problematic role in that conflict, committing atrocities in a campaign of collective punishment against the people of Tigray, at great human cost.

The Tigray War resulted in a humanitarian crisis of immense proportions. War crimes were perpetrated by all parties to the conflict, but the nature of atrocities and war profiteering carried out by the EDF was unmatched in scale and premeditation. The EDF engaged in massacres, widespread sexual violence, and systematic looting, including of Tigrayan factory machinery, medical supplies and equipment, and cultural antiquities.

Since the signing of the 2022 Pretoria Agreement that marked the end of the Tigray War, the EDF has continued to occupy territory within Ethiopia. Eritrean military commanders and their agents within Ethiopia continue to profit from a conflict economy, including through human trafficking, kidnapping, and illicit gold mining.

In the meantime, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki has emerged as the clear winner of the new status quo, as Ethiopia's fragile federal coalition continues to struggle with widespread disorder. With Russia emerging as a key military ally in the post-embargo landscape, the EDF now has few constraints on its continued rearmament. For Eritrea's leadership, the new state of "no war, no peace" is proving advantageous.

Key recommendations

- As a matter of urgent conflict prevention, the United States, European Union, United Kingdom, and other like-minded jurisdictions need to send a clear message to the Ethiopian government, the Eritrean government, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and the Tigray Interim Administration (TIA) that they will face an escalated international response and sanctions if there is a resumption of conflict.
- The US, the EU, and the UK should consider designating Eritrean Defense Forces Brigadier General Eyob Fessehaye (aka Halibay), Brig. Gen. Simon Oqbu (aka Riese Mirak), and Maj. Gen. Romadan Osman Awliya for their responsibility for human rights violations in Tigray.¹
- The UN Security Council should determine that Ethiopia-Eritrea border issues—including unimplemented components of the November 2, 2022, Pretoria peace agreement—constitute a threat to international peace and security, and it should thus establish a panel of enquiry with a Chapter VII mandate to monitor and report on the situation.



Unembargoed: The Lifting of UN Sanctions on Eritrea*

On November 14, 2018, the United Nations Security Council lifted sanctions on Eritrea.²

First imposed in 2009, the sanctions were primarily in response to reports that Eritrea was providing support to the Islamist insurgent group Al-Shabaab in Somalia in a proxy battle against Ethiopia.³ The two-way arms embargo established by the sanctions regime was intended to prevent Eritrea from both importing and exporting weapons, but it was never fully successful in stemming flows of military hardware. Between 2010 and 2018, when the embargo was lifted, UN monitors documented repeated violations in their annual reports to the Security Council.^{4, 5, 6} What's more, Eritrea ignored repeated requests by the Security Council to cooperate and, from 2011 onwards, denied UN monitors access to the country.⁷ Nonetheless, while in place, the sanctions frustrated the Eritrean leadership's persistent efforts to strengthen its defense forces and destabilize the Horn of Africa.

Eritrea's path to the lifting of these sanctions was set by its neighbor and longstanding antagonist, Ethiopia. Abiy Ahmed Ali assumed the premiership in Ethiopia in April 2018, following four years of protests against a federal government dominated by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF).⁸ Abiy represented a radically different style of leadership and politics, which many observers at the time viewed as a welcome change.⁹ Within months of taking office, he had reset relations with Eritrea.¹⁰ Reciprocal state visits soon followed.^{11, 12} In September 2018, a formal peace agreement was signed by Abiy and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki at a summit hosted by Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud in Jeddah.¹³

At the time, Ethiopia was serving a two-year term as a non-permanent UN Security Council member, having been elected to fill a seat beginning in January 2017.¹⁴ Prior to Abiy's election, Ethiopia's Permanent Mission had maintained a steadfast commitment to ensuring the continuation of sanctions on Eritrea, in accordance with the country's foreign policy at the time.¹⁵ Soon after Abiy took office, however, this policy was reversed, and the Mission began lobbying for the lifting of sanctions—even before they were due to be reviewed by the Security Council in November 2018.¹⁶

The lifting of sanctions was strongly supported by China and Russia, two of the permanent members of the Security Council.¹⁷ The other three permanent members—the United States, the United Kingdom, and France—initially supported a process of easing sanctions on the condition of greater compliance with previous UN resolutions. Eritrea's facilitation of UN sanctions monitors visiting the country and conducting investigations was considered among the most important stipulations of repeated resolutions.¹⁸

As the date of the vote grew closer and momentum gathered in favor of lifting the sanctions, Eritrea's allies pressured the Eritrean government to invite the coordinator of the UN monitoring team to a formal meeting as a gesture of cooperation with the Security Council.¹⁹ Eritrea ignored the pressure and continued to reject all Security Council stipulations, however, and in November 2018, the Security Council voted unanimously

* Reports by The Sentry are based on interviews, documentary research, and, where relevant, financial forensic analysis. In some cases, sources speak to The Sentry on the condition that their names not be revealed, out of concern for their safety or other potential retaliatory action. The Sentry establishes the authoritativeness and credibility of information derived from those interviews through independent sources, such as expert commentary, financial data, original documentation, and press reports. The Sentry endeavors to contact the persons and entities discussed in its reports and afford them an opportunity to comment and provide further information.



to lift all sanctions—despite concerns among some Member States over creating a potentially harmful precedent.²⁰

Those concerns have since proven valid. Within two years of the sanctions being lifted, an emboldened and restrengthened Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) embarked on a devastating campaign of violence in the neighboring Tigray region of Ethiopia.

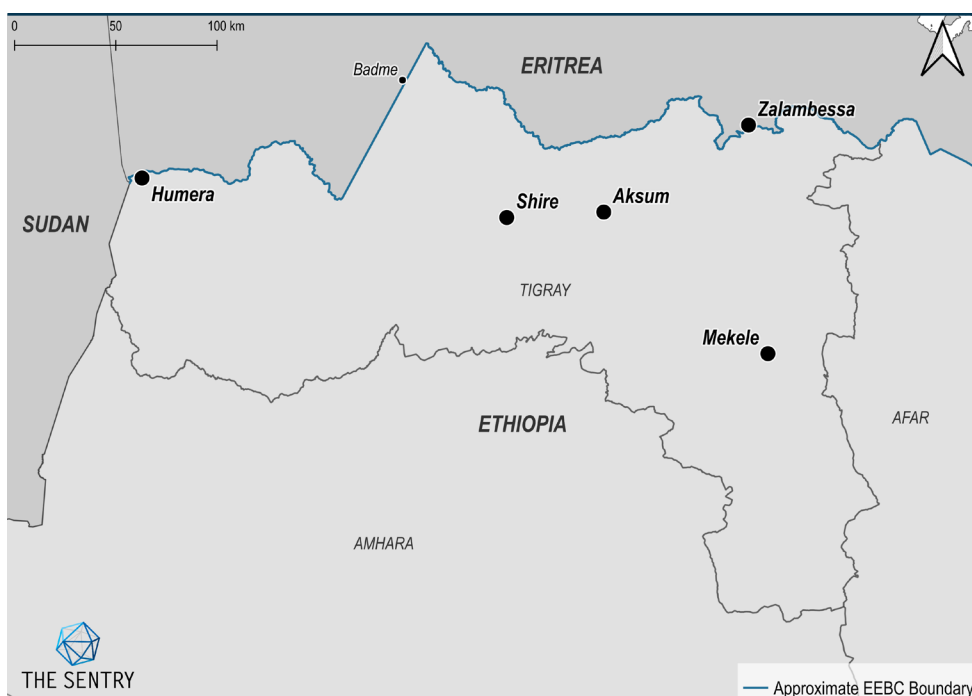


Preparing for War

Conflict erupted in Tigray on November 3, 2020.²¹ While this conflict was often framed as having been prompted by the TPLF when it attacked a Northern Command base within Tigray to capture arms,²² The Sentry has found a growing body of evidence that indicates Eritrea's leaders played an active role in planning the war, anticipating the outbreak months before the first shots were fired and working with and through Ethiopia under its new and inexperienced prime minister to punish Tigray and the TPLF.

A common cause

The Tigray region represents both the primary connection between Eritrea and Ethiopia and, historically, the deepest dividing line between the two countries. Tigray is Ethiopia's northernmost ethnic federal state, sharing its northern border with Eritrea. Its regional capital, Mekele, is significantly closer to the Eritrean capital Asmara than to the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, and there are strong communal and linguistic ties between ethnic Tigrayan communities in Tigray and the Tigrinya groups in Eritrea.²³



The Tigray region and the approximate path of the boundary between Ethiopia and Eritrea established by the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC).

Within Ethiopia, therefore, the immediate impact of the September 2018 peace agreement was most acute in Tigray. Border crossings that had previously been closed and heavily guarded on both sides were suddenly opened, briefly enabling free movement and the reunion of communities divided by national boundaries.²⁴ By April 2019, however, Isaias had ordered the reclosure of the borders, and progress toward implementation of the peace agreement had stalled.²⁵



Despite the ties between Eritrea and Tigray, Eritrea's president has long exhibited contempt for the region, and particularly for the TPLF, publicly referring to it using the derogatory Tigrinya term "Woyane."²⁶ Following Eritrea's formal independence in 1993, relations with Ethiopia under the TPLF's leadership quickly soured.^{27, 28, 29} Hatred toward the TPLF specifically, and Tigrayans generally, had festered in Eritrea's leadership since its loss in the 1998-2000 border war and subsequent refusal to implement the findings of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC).³⁰ This was then compounded by Ethiopia's role in imposing and sustaining the UN sanctions regime.³¹ In the lead-up to the war, EDF leadership were reported to have increased anti-Tigrayan indoctrination of troops and trainees at the Sawa military camp—where Eritrean youth receive training as part of their compulsory and often indefinite National Service—framing Tigrayans as the principal source of Eritreans' suffering since independence.^{32, 33}

Animosity toward Tigrayans was clearly shared among various groups in Ethiopia, particularly the Amhara, prior to the protests that led to Abiy's ascent, but it grew increasingly virulent as the demonstrations went on.³⁴ In June 2018, less than two months after assuming the premiership, Abiy himself referred to Tigrayans as "daylight hyenas" in a live television broadcast.³⁵ Isaias and Abiy thus established an alliance of convenience based on a common cause to propagate anti-Tigrayan sentiments and prevent the TPLF from returning to power.

Planning and armament

With sanctions lifted, Asmara swiftly turned to Moscow in pursuit of new military hardware.³⁶ In August 2019, during the annual ceremony for National Service graduates at Sawa, the military proudly displayed what appeared to be newly acquired Russian-manufactured 9K35 Strela-10 and S-125 Neva/Pechora surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems.^{37, 38}

Meanwhile, Isaias and Abiy started a series of reciprocal tours of important military sites in one another's countries,^{39, 40} and meetings between the two leaders grew increasingly secretive.⁴¹ Eritrean security and intelligence officials, including Eritrea's head of intelligence, Abraha Kassa Nemariam, began working



Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, center, raise arms together in celebration before a crowd in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, July 15, 2018. Photo: AP images.





Newly acquired Russian-manufactured S-125 Neva/Pechora surface-to-air missiles on parade at the Sawa military training center, August 2019. Photo: Facebook.

alongside their counterparts in both Addis Ababa and the administration of the Amhara region,^{42, 43} and Abiy began promoting officers from other ethnic groups to reduce the influence of Tigrayans within the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) leadership.⁴⁴

In a radical departure from prior practice, Abiy's military leaders began shipping weapons and personnel to Asmara directly. According to a senior TPLF official who had previously served as an ENDF officer, Ethiopian military cargo planes started flying to Eritrea from early 2020 onwards, transporting both troops and equipment.^{45, 46} Researchers monitoring the conflict and given access to historical flight data from former Ethiopian Airlines staff were also able to confirm that irregular charter flights carried soldiers and military equipment from Addis Ababa to Asmara on September 25, 2020, and October 20, 2020—prior to the outbreak of the conflict.⁴⁷

Leaked air cargo manifests and waybills showed consignments of weapons and other military supplies, including dry foodstuffs, being flown from Addis Ababa to Asmara on Ethiopian Airlines.⁴⁸ A CNN investigation matched Ethiopian Airlines flight details with those on the leaked documents to identify a Boeing aircraft that flew in the direction of Assab, in Eritrea's far south, before pivoting north toward Asmara, where its signal was lost.⁴⁹ Ethiopian Airlines staff interviewed by CNN also described being witness to and involved in the loading and unloading of military equipment bound for Asmara.⁵⁰

Amid growing awareness that large-scale conflict was imminent, many of Northern Command troops stationed near the border in Tigray who were not ethnically Tigrayan fled overland into Eritrea, taking ENDF hardware with them and joining units already deployed by air.⁵¹ An open-source intelligence expert was able to corroborate the date and location of footage posted on social media that showed the deployment of a range of ENDF hardware—including multiple Soviet-era T55 and T72 tanks, as well as newer Chinese-built Type 85/89 armored personnel carriers—the morning of November 5, 2020, in Mukuti, southwest of the disputed town of Badme, on the Eritrean side of the border.⁵²

Most of the remaining Tigrayan troops of the former Northern Command deserted and joined the region's own special forces, rechristened the Tigrayan Defense Force (TDF) when the fighting began.^{53, 54}



Screenshot from footage that shows the deployment of equipment including T55 and T72 tanks in Mukuti, Eritrea, November 5, 2020. Type 85/89 armored personnel carriers can also be seen in the footage. Source: X, @mvreisen.



Command and control

Preparations for the EDF's incursion into Tigray were commonly assumed to have been led by Chief of Staff General Filipos Woldeyohannes. Widely recognized as a close ally within Isaias' ever-shrinking inner circle,⁵⁵ Filipos was designated in 2021 by the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) for his role in the conflict in Ethiopia.⁵⁶ According to multiple testimonies, however, including from recently defected members of the EDF, the lesser-known Brigadier General Eyob Fessehayee, or "Halibay," played a more prominent role than the chief of staff in the war preparations.⁵⁷

As planning for the invasion began, Halibay, who was reportedly commanding the Eritrean Special Forces,⁵⁸ was promoted to be the head of the President's Office of Military Affairs.^{59, 60} With Filipos increasingly sidelined, Halibay assumed the principal role in coordinating the incursion, travelling frequently between Tigray and Asmara to report to Isaias.⁶¹

Brigadier General Eyob Fessehayee, or "Halibay"

Halibay is reported to have joined the Eritrean People's Liberation Front soon after the group broke off from the Eritrean Liberation Front in the early 1970s.⁶² By the late 1980s, he was serving as a division commander in the Eritrean People's Liberation Front.⁶³ In the early 1990s, Isaias reportedly imprisoned Halibay for corruption shortly before he was due to assume the post of head of internal security for the newly independent Eritrea.⁶⁴

After Halibay's release, Isaias brought him back into his circle.⁶⁵ Isaias appointed Halibay to lead a commission in charge of privatizing government housing and subsequently named him deputy commander of Eritrea's Southern region under General Omar Hassan Tawil.^{66, 67} With renewed confidence in his loyalty, Isaias duly appointed Halibay to his previously intended role as EDF head of intelligence during the 1998-2000 Eritrea-Ethiopia border war.^{68, 69}



In January 2013, Eritrean military officers seized control of the Ministry of Information, which houses the state-run Eritrean Television (Eri-TV).⁷⁰ The mutineers—reportedly including Halibay's former commander, Tawil—forced the head of Eri-TV to read an on-air statement calling for political reforms and the release of political prisoners.⁷¹ Halibay is said to have played a key role in resolving the situation and subsequently securing Tawil's arrest.⁷²

In the wake of the attempted coup, Isaias established a “military discipline committee” headed by General Teklai Kifle, or “Manjus,” who was identified by UN monitors as a key figure in weapons trafficking and human smuggling operations.⁷³ Halibay served as the coordinator between the committee and the Office of the President.⁷⁴ The committee was reported to have initiated a “Red Terror”-style purge that resulted in the arrest and disappearance of at least 800 people.⁷⁵

Preparations for the looting that later ensued also followed the EDF command structure. According to confidential analysis of the conflict shared with The Sentry by Tigrayan intelligence officials, command and control of the EDF invasion of Tigray was split between the “Western Front,” spanning from Humera near the border with Sudan to Badme, and the “Central Front,” spanning from Rama to Zalambessa and into Irob.^{76, 77} EDF leadership reportedly sent plain-clothed personnel into Tigray in the months prior to the formal start of the war.⁷⁸ These advanced reconnaissance operatives were dispatched to important urban centers throughout the Tigray region to identify sites of economic and cultural value and determine what would be needed to transport their assets back to Eritrea.⁷⁹ As confirmed by both EDF defectors and Tigrayan intelligence sources, loyal EDF veterans were tasked with coordinating these preparations with Brig. Gen. Simon Oqbu (aka Riesi Mirak) and Maj. Gen. Romadan Osman Awliya, the commanders of the Western and Central Fronts, respectively.^{80, 81}



Entry points and initial offensive paths of the Eritrean Defence Forces into Tigray in November and December 2020.

An estimated 25 divisions of the EDF entered Tigray in November and December 2020 via multiple border crossings spanning both fronts.⁸² Despite mounting evidence of the EDF's involvement in the conflict, the Eritrean government would continue to deny for months that its forces were present in Tigray.⁸³



Atrocities

The conflict in Tigray was marked by extraordinary violence. The scale and nature of the atrocities committed throughout the conflict, together with the rhetoric employed by a range of actors against ethnic Tigrayans, have led many to conclude that the conflict amounted to ethnic cleansing, even genocide.^{84, 85, 86}

While atrocities were committed by all parties in Tigray,^{87, 88} the now well-documented atrocities committed by the EDF were exceptional in their scale and brutality and included extensive sexual violence. The Aksum massacre, likely the most significant single incident of violations of humanitarian law during the conflict, is illustrative of the approach adopted by the EDF throughout.

Aksum massacre

On November 19, 2020, elements of the ENDF and EDF deployed to the outskirts of the historic city of Aksum, around 187 km northwest of Mekelle.⁸⁹ The troops shelled the city for several hours before entering unresisted. Witnesses interviewed by Amnesty International described how Eritrean troops began stopping civilians and checking their phones, summarily executing as suspected TPLF supporters those whose phones held party propaganda.⁹⁰

The events that led to the massacre on November 28-29, 2020, remain unclear, with reporting differing significantly among different actors. According to the findings of an official—yet problematic—investigation led by the Ethiopian Federal Government, an estimated 1,500 youth in the city had received basic training from the TPLF before the arrival of troops on November 19.^{91, 92} On November 27, these youth—backed by “TPLF Special Forces and militia”—revolted against the occupying force, using weapons stolen from the ENDF Northern Command, according to the official findings.⁹³ Amnesty International’s reporting, however, indicates that a relatively small number of pro-TPLF militia attacked an Eritrean base established on the Mai Koho hillside to the north of the city that morning and that a number of the city’s residents then joined the fight with rudimentary weapons, while many others cheered in support.⁹⁴

The events that followed—despite being denied by many, including Eritrea’s Minister of Information—are clearer.⁹⁵ The afternoon of November 27, more EDF units were deployed to the city to strengthen their numbers. Shortly thereafter, the massacre began.^{96, 97} Eritrean troops initially targeted young men gathered in the city center before searching households door-to-door for those in hiding.⁹⁸ When the city’s residents later attempted to retrieve the bodies of loved ones from the streets, they too were targeted.⁹⁹ The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), an independent federal state body, issued preliminary findings in May 2021 that broadly adhered to this series of events, which had been presented by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.¹⁰⁰

An accurate death toll resulting from the events in and around Aksum in late November 2020 will likely never be confirmed. As of April 2025, it remained common to find conspiracy theorists on social media claiming that the massacre never occurred.¹⁰¹ That it took place with the knowledge of the ENDF at the time is, however, beyond doubt. Indeed, in October 2024, Field Marshal Berhanu Julia—appointed chief of the general staff of the ENDF by Abiy on November 4, 2020,¹⁰² to lead the offensive in Tigray alongside the EDF—openly acknowledged the “terrible actions” of the EDF in Aksum, even while largely adhering to the version of preceding events presented by the initial investigation by the federal government.^{103, 104}



Sexual violence

Extreme sexual violence was prevalent throughout the conflict in Tigray: Rape, gang rape, torture, and mutilation were widespread. According to a study conducted for the BMJ Global Health journal, almost 10% of women surveyed in Tigray experienced sexual violence during the conflict—500 of 5,171—marking a higher incidence of rape than was seen in relatively recent periods of conflict in Sierra Leone (8%), Northern Uganda (4.2%), and Ukraine (2.6%).¹⁰⁵ The survey did not include Western Tigray or districts bordering Eritrea, where the conflict was ongoing at the time, leading the authors to claim that the findings were likely “an underestimation of the true extent of SGBV [sexual and gender-based violence] in Tigray as a result of the war.”¹⁰⁶ Human Rights Watch,¹⁰⁷ Amnesty International,¹⁰⁸ and the Commission of Inquiry on Tigray Genocide (CITG), a body established by the Tigrayan authorities in May 2022,¹⁰⁹ reached similar conclusions.¹¹⁰

While this violence was perpetrated by all parties to the conflict, “[m]ost sexual and physical violence was committed by Eritrean defence forces,” the BMJ Global Health study noted.¹¹¹ Members of the CITG told The Sentry that almost 74% of all incidents of sexual and gender-based violence they recorded prior to May 2024 had been perpetrated by the EDF.¹¹² The CITG further noted that Eritrean troops were disproportionately accountable for incidents of particularly brutal sexual violence, including captivity, rape with foreign objects, gang rape, and incidents in which women threatened with rape claimed to be HIV positive following which HIV-positive soldiers were called to commit the rape.¹¹³

The CITG member reporting on sexual and gender-based violence emphasized that blame lay with the military leaders involved in the conflict, referring to incidents in which victims reported their perpetrators claiming that they were doing less than what they had been ordered to do by their commanders.¹¹⁴ “I was born and grew up in Asmara,” the CITG member informed The Sentry. “The regime has injected this into the troops.”¹¹⁵



Mechanized Looting

From the outset of the Tigray War, the EDF engaged in large-scale and systematic looting.¹¹⁶ The scale of the looting and economic destruction wrought on northern Tigray by the EDF, particularly in late 2020 and early 2021, was unprecedented. Following extensive planning prior to the incursion into Tigray, the looting was organized and calculated both to extract as much wealth as possible and to cause maximal punitive damage to the economy to leave a lasting legacy.

The plunder of much of northern Tigray was led and directed by EDF leadership and likely disproportionately benefited Eritrea's higher-ranking officer classes, most of whom had fought alongside Isaias since the 1970s.¹¹⁷ Rank and file soldiers—the majority of whom are conscripts, forced to join often indefinite National Service before finishing their secondary education—could only loot what they could carry and hide on their persons, which would often include cash, mobile phones, and jewelry stolen from civilians or local stores during building-to-building raids.^{118, 119} Senior officers, meanwhile, used their own antiquated Italian trucks or commandeered trucks to repatriate loot.¹²⁰ As the campaign went on, they also stole many newer Japanese and Chinese vehicles from the region to maintain the flow of looted goods.^{121, 122} A medical professional who witnessed the looting told The Sentry how the EDF used crane lifts to load heavier items, such as diesel generators, onto the trucks.¹²³ Many of the region's crane lifts were then themselves looted in the conflict, according to a January 2021 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs situation report.¹²⁴

Even when Eritrean troops wore ENDF uniforms to disguise themselves,¹²⁵ they were identifiable; witnesses to the looting, including survivors of massacres, explained that they could tell EDF officers from those of other forces because they were older, spoke their own Tigrinya language though in Eritrean dialects, and were often in command of the other forces present.¹²⁶ Asked why witnesses did not document more of the looting, given that smartphones are now common throughout Ethiopia, one source claimed that “having photos on one's phone during this period was dangerous, even fatal,” adding that citizens were often stopped by armed personnel and forced to show the photos on their phones.^{127, 128} Many smart phones were also taken by anti-Tigrayan forces as loot.¹²⁹

The Zalambessa-Mekelle Looting Spree

In November and December 2020, the EDF engaged in a looting spree through Eastern Tigray, deploying from Guna Guna and surrounding areas on the Eritrean border along the Central Front through Zalambessa to Mekelle. Demonstrating the systematic nature of the looting as troops advanced from one urban center to another, the spree is illustrative of the approach adopted by the EDF more broadly in the early phase of the war.

The EDF offensive on Zalambessa began in earnest on November 13, 2020.¹³⁰ It was led by the 49th mechanized division and the 11th, 17th, 19th, and 27th infantry divisions, alongside the smaller contingents of the ENDF that had fled or been deployed to Eritrea in the preceding months.¹³¹ Troops surrounded and shelled the town from the Eritrean side of the border continuously for several hours before moving into the city, forcibly entering residential houses, looting private property, and killing civilians.^{132, 133} Following the incursion, the EDF would establish its own military administration in the town, which remained in place as of April 2025.¹³⁴





Path of the Eritrean Defence Forces' looting spree from Zalambessa to Mekele in November and December 2020.

Having secured control of Zalambessa, most of the force deployed south. Upon reaching Adigrat, both EDF and ENDF troops looted and then destroyed the town's major institutions—museums, the university, the hospital, and the Addis Pharmaceutical Company Factory, Ethiopia's largest producer of generic medicines including amoxicillin and paracetamol.^{135, 136, 137, 138, 139} In May 2021, Médecins Sans Frontières reported that approximately 20 ambulances from Adigrat and the surrounding area had been seized by "armed groups," adding that staff subsequently saw "some of these vehicles being used by soldiers near the Eritrean border, to transport goods."¹⁴⁰ A month later, the Eritrean opposition and London-based Asena TV reported that vehicles stolen from the hospital were distributed to Eritrean ministries.¹⁴¹

The looting of health facilities extended throughout Tigray. According to a former Ethiopian diplomat, the EDF looted an estimated 250 ambulances in total and often did not even bother changing the registration plates.^{142, 143} Médecins Sans Frontières itself reported that of 106 facilities visited between mid-December 2020 and early March 2021, almost 70% had been looted.¹⁴⁴ Though not attributing all looting to any one actor, the organization noted that one health facility remained in use by the EDF as a military base at the time.¹⁴⁵

The scale of the looting in Adigrat reportedly even prompted rare dissent within Eritrea from the country's clergy. Catholic Bishop Fikremariam Hagos Tsalmim was detained by Eritrean authorities in 2022, having repeatedly spoken out against atrocities committed by Eritrean forces following the raid in the city and having warned members of his diocese not to buy goods looted from Tigray.¹⁴⁶

From Adigrat, the EDF and ENDF allies advanced on to Edaga Hamus.^{147, 148} Many of Edaga Hamus' residents had already fled to the nearby Maryam Dengelat monastery, where they were joined by Orthodox pilgrims and residents celebrating the Tsion Maryam religious festival.¹⁴⁹ On November 30, Eritrean



forces opened fire on the monastery and spent the next three days killing civilians, according to multiple accounts, including a CNN investigation.^{150, 151, 152} Back in Edaga Hamus, Eritrean soldiers began the labor-intensive process of dismantling and removing equipment from the newly constructed Goda Bottling and Glass factory.¹⁵³

On the route south to the historic town of Wukro, the EDF and ENDF shelled the Al Nejashi mosque in Negash—believed to be the first mosque built on the African continent, in the seventh century—before looting its precious artifacts.¹⁵⁴ The looting of Tigray's historical and religious artifacts was also widespread. Researchers at Mekelle University's Institute of Paleoenvironment and Heritage Conservation were conducting a survey of the region's churches, mosques, museums, and archeological sites, having already visited more than 70 sites.¹⁵⁵ Items documented by the Institute as having been looted by the EDF include ancient holy books and manuscripts, hand crosses, and prayer sticks. Likely among the most valuable artifacts taken from Tigray were the ancient Aksumite gold and silver coins housed in the Aksum Archaeological Museum.

The attack on Wukro began on November 16, 2020, with drone strikes, likely launched from the Eritrean port of Assab, and air strikes led by the Ethiopian Air Force.^{156, 157, 158} Upon entering the town in late November, EDF ground forces targeted two of its major sources of employment, the Sheba Leather Factory and Semayata Dimensional Stones Factory, a granite processing facility that used modern heavy machinery imported from Italy.^{159, 160, 161} News that the factories had been looted first emerged on November 30, with reports that an estimated 200 civilians had been killed trying to defend the sites.¹⁶² After most moveable assets had been removed from each site by truck, EDF troops used explosives and lit fires to destroy equipment and facilities that could not be moved.¹⁶³

EDF troops destroyed items that weren't looted before vacating the Sheba Leather Factory.
Photo: The Sentry.



As with Wukro, the attack on the Tigrayan capital Mekelle began with airstrikes that started on November 16, 2020.¹⁶⁴ The ground assault, led by contingents of the ENDF, began on November 28.¹⁶⁵ The EDF did not arrive until December 3.¹⁶⁶ When word spread among the city's remaining residents that Eritreans were intent on looting the Ayder Comprehensive Specialized Hospital—with the muezzin of the nearby Adishhun dhun Mosque reportedly calling on Muslims and Christians alike to mobilize—roadblocks were swiftly erected around the facility to protect it.^{167, 168} Multiple contingents of forces allied against the TDF converged in Mekelle, including many of the EDF's leadership, while the EDF troops remained on the city's outskirts.¹⁶⁹



While the EDF participated in the conflict throughout Tigray, the industrial-scale looting was largely restricted to the north of the region, where the EDF was the dominant military force. In March 2021, Abiy officially acknowledged the presence of the EDF in Tigray for the first time, while also claiming that they would withdraw once Ethiopia's military were in control of the border.^{170, 171} Demonstrating its continuing autonomy in the region, however, the EDF remained in control of many of northern Tigray's urban centers until June 2021,¹⁷² when a resurgent TDF recaptured Mekelle and forced the EDF to retreat further toward the border.¹⁷³ TDF-held territories—still encircled—were then subjected to a prolonged blockade of food and humanitarian supplies with the intention of starving Tigrayan forces into submission.^{174, 175, 176} Along with other forces fighting the TDF, the EDF was implicated in the looting of food aid intended for starving Tigrayans.¹⁷⁷ During previous humanitarian crises when Tigray was blockaded, support was able to reach the region via the border with Sudan.¹⁷⁸ But by supporting the ENDF and Amhara militias in occupying Western Tigray, the EDF ensured that this supply corridor was also blocked.

The Role of UK Art Dealers

Since leaving the European Union, and having defunded institutions tasked with monitoring the trade, the UK has become a hub for the sale of stolen artifacts—including potentially from the conflict in Tigray.¹⁷⁹ In February 2022, Hagos Abrha Abay, a Tigrayan academic currently based at the University of Toronto, started posting screenshots of artifacts for sale on eBay and other e-commerce sites.¹⁸⁰ In an interview with *The Times* published soon afterwards, Hagos claimed that the artifacts were likely being smuggled via Sudan to dealers in Europe and the US.^{181, 182}

A UK-based online auction house, TimeLine Auctions, has recorded an “eye-popping” surge of sales in Ethiopian artifacts from late 2020 onwards, often with very scant information given for the items' provenance.^{183, 184, 185} An individual tracking the sales of these items at such auction houses indicated to *The Sentry* that the silence from the Ethiopian Embassy has not gone unnoticed, and they questioned whether it indicated complicity in the trade.¹⁸⁶ The Embassy has, in the past, intervened when it discovered looted items for sale.^{187, 188, 189} TimeLine Auctions has a history of selling historical artifacts subsequently identified as potentially having been looted from conflict zones.^{190, 191, 192}

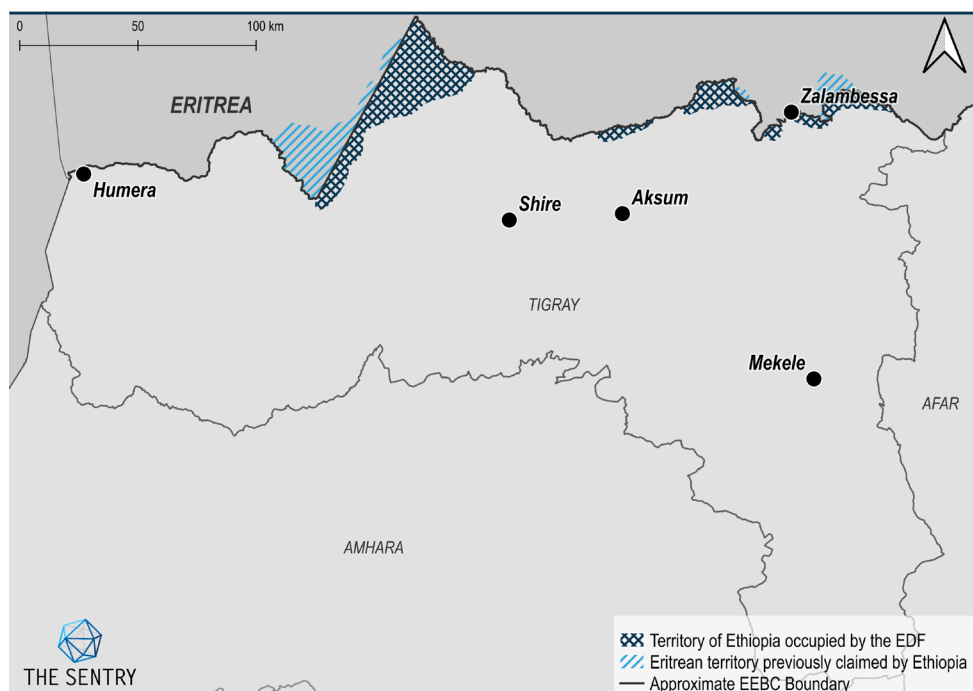
In response to a request for comment by *The Sentry*, TimeLine Auctions stated that it has always operated in full compliance with the laws of the UK and any other jurisdictions in which it has conducted business. TimeLine Auctions also stated that it has not been presented with credible evidence, nor has it been contacted by any authority or organization, suggesting involvement in the sale of looted items. TimeLine Auctions further stated that all of the lots for sale have been vetted by qualified professionals and that the company adheres to strict provenance requirements.¹⁹³



New Cross-Border Opportunities

Efforts toward establishing a ceasefire began in mid-2021, although the EDF ignored them and continued to attack Tigrayan forces whenever it could.^{194, 195} By this point, relations between Isaias and Abiy had all but fallen apart, prompted in part by the withdrawal of the ENDF from much of Tigray months earlier.¹⁹⁶ In an apparent final bid to destroy the TPLF in late August 2022—by which point Ethiopia’s newly acquired combat drones shifted the balance of power sharply in its favor—the EDF begrudgingly joined with the ENDF once more and reinvaded Tigray, carrying out air and artillery strikes on major urban centers before sending in ground troops.¹⁹⁷ Isaias had prepared for the assault by launching a mass mobilization drive in the preceding months, targeting draft evaders, army deserters, and reservists: “primarily men aged 50 through to 60.”^{198, 199}

In the particularly brutal period of fighting that followed, the EDF and ENDF recaptured Adwa, Aksum, and Shire in October 2022.²⁰⁰ Just as the EDF and ENDF were preparing to reenter Mekelle,^{201, 202} the November 2, 2022, Pretoria Agreement between the Ethiopian government and TPLF was reached.²⁰³ Still committed to achieving the original objectives of the offensive into Tigray, Eritrea opposed the process.^{204, 205} With the signing of the 2022 Pretoria Agreement, however, Eritrean forces were expected to fully withdraw from Tigray.²⁰⁶ Unwilling to sustain the campaign unilaterally and conscious that the terms of the agreement would oblige the ENDF to side with the TDF, Isaias choose to retreat and consolidate control over the borderlands.²⁰⁷ In February 2024, Asmara insisted that Eritrean troops were “inside Eritrean sovereign territories with no presence in Ethiopian sovereign land.”²⁰⁸ The reality on the ground was very different. Based on multiple sources, The Sentry mapped the continuing presence of Eritrean troops within a 10 km buffer zone south of the previous de facto border and well beyond the areas allocated to Eritrea by the EEBC.²⁰⁹



Map of control along the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission-designated boundary as of late 2024.



This new de facto border established by the EDF has presented it with various new cross-border opportunities for illicit activities, particularly with regard to the rapidly growing gold trade and the already established sesame sector in Western Tigray, still occupied by ethnic Amhara forces. The reconfiguration of the border and the closure of refugee camps established to manage the steady flow of Eritreans fleeing their country have also led to new cross-border human smuggling dynamics. These opportunities have been broadened by the near collapse of what was previously a robust governance structure in Tigray.²¹⁰

The gold trade

Tigray's illicit gold trade presents an illustrative example of the new dynamics at play along the Ethiopia-Eritrea border. Lying at the southern end of the Arabian-Nubian Shield, Tigray is endowed with significant reserves of gold and other mineral resources.²¹¹ Gold exports have provided a critical source of foreign currency earnings for Ethiopia.²¹² With illegal markets offering significantly more profit than the official trade, however, the scale of gold smuggling was prodigious,^{213, 214, 215, 216} although shortly before the conflict, official exports were growing rapidly as the National Bank of Ethiopia started setting more competitive prices and began welcoming more external investors in the sector.²¹⁷

In Tigray's North Western zone, several major mining firms acquired exploration licenses between 2019 and 2020,²¹⁸ even as the country faced growing ethnic violence and internal displacement. Sun Peak Metals Corp, for example, began exploration in Tigray in 2018 in a joint venture with Ezana Mining Development PLC, a TPLF-associated subsidiary of the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT).^{219, 220, 221, 222} Sun Peak, established in Vancouver in 2016,²²³ is closely tied to former Canadian firm Nevsun Resources Ltd, which led the development of Eritrea's mining industry in the 2010s through its gold, copper, and zinc mine at Bisha.^{224, 225} The president and CEO of Sun Peak, Greg Davis, and the vice president for exploration and geology, David Daoud, were both part of Nevsun's technical team during the discovery of Bisha.^{226, 227}

By 2024, the situation in Tigray had changed irrevocably. With parts of Tigray still under the control of the EDF, including multiple areas officially licensed for exploration by the federal government's Ministry of Mining in 2023 and 2024,^{228, 229} competition over gold had grown increasingly complex and violent.²³⁰ According to the Tigray Land and Mining Bureau, an estimated \$75-80 million worth of gold was being produced and diverted to the black market annually.²³¹ While at least some of that gold was thought to be sent south to Addis Ababa for onward export, a July 2024 Reporter article identified the route to Asmara via Adiyabo—in the far north of the North Western Zone—as one of the primary smuggling routes, with the town of Shire serving as the “primary hub for contraband gold trade in Tigray.”²³² Corroborating the Reporter article, an administrative official told The Sentry that the route from Shire to Badme via the EDF-occupied village of Gemhalo was the most popular for smuggling gold into Eritrea.²³³ Without specifying routes, sources operating in the region agreed that significant amounts of gold produced in the region at the time were leaving Ethiopia through Eritrea.^{234, 235}

According to a Tigrayan administrative official, EDF officers based in the Shambuko subzone of the Gash Barka region were particularly involved in the trade.²³⁶ In territories still under the control of the EDF, they used their own soldiers as well as local farmers and laborers to mine for gold, giving the manual laborers 20-30% of the proceeds.²³⁷ In the territories beyond EDF control, including in Shire, they used a network of civilian brokers, including many with whom they also partnered in human smuggling.²³⁸



Over the course of 2024, the situation reportedly deteriorated significantly, exacerbated by internal conflict within the Tigray Interim Administration (TIA), according to a representative of a foreign mining company operating in the region.²³⁹ This contributed to creating a volatile environment at mining sites.²⁴⁰ At least some of the speculation regarding the divisions within the TIA and the illicit gold trade concerns UAE-based businessman Dawit Gebregziabiher, who has formal gold mining interests in the Ethiopian gold sector through his company Dawit Gebregziabiher Abreha DBA Gold Mining Enterprise.^{241, 242, 243, 244} According to a researcher investigating the illicit gold trade, during the conflict, Dawit was reported to have procured weapons—paid for in gold—on several occasions on behalf of the TDF.²⁴⁵ Dawit is also acknowledged, however, as a long-time advocate for stronger ties between Tigray and Eritrea and reportedly has a personal connection with Isaias.²⁴⁶

Interviews with various sources indicated that a broad range of actors have been involved in the trade, including a number of senior TDF officers, fighters loyal to them, and a growing number of Chinese nationals.²⁴⁷ Artisanal miners told The Sentry that in areas beyond the control of the EDF, Chinese nationals were working alongside the TDF officers, importing, operating, and repairing industrial extractive equipment.^{248, 249} Miners have also reported that some groups were using increasing volumes of harmful chemicals to process the alluvial deposits.^{250, 251, 252} The only known Chinese firms with declared stakes in the region at the time were Zijin Mining Group Co. Ltd and Tibet Huayu Mining Co. Ltd.^{253, 254, 255} In 2019, Zijin acquired a majority stake in the Bisha gold, silver, zinc, and copper mine in Eritrea from Nevsun,^{256, 257} demonstrating further ties between established Eritrean mining operations and the still nascent industry in Tigray.²⁵⁸ Both Zijin and Tibet Huayu have operated in partnership with East Africa Metals, another Canadian firm with links to Nevsun and Eritrea, via its Ethiopian subsidiary Tigray Ethiopia Holdings Inc.^{259, 260, 261}

The sesame trade

In Tigray's Western zone—still controlled by Amhara regional forces and the Fano militia, an Amhara ethno-nationalist insurgency, as of April 2025—the EDF is also reported to be involved in the lucrative trade in sesame, often referred to as “white gold.”^{262, 263} Competition over control of the sesame trade in Western Tigray involves a range of actors, including Eritrean forces, with “indications that shipments of sesame and other goods from Amhara-controlled Western Tigray/Welkait to Eritrea have been used as payment in kind for Eritrean forces' protection, training and support of Amhara Fano militias,” according to a recent Chatham House publication.²⁶⁴ The dependence on Eritrean military support to facilitate the illicit trade, the report continues, enables EDF officers engaged in the trade to impose financial terms that are “vastly in their favour.”²⁶⁵ The report corroborates research conducted in 2022 that found that “illegal sesame trading is surging, with sesame from Tigray winding its way to the markets of neighbouring Eritrea without passing through customs authorities.”²⁶⁶ The same report found that “sesame profits from illegal trading grease the hands of those who provide security, finance, or permissions along the chain from production to market.”²⁶⁷

New human smuggling dynamics

Eritreans began fleeing Eritrea in droves long before the outset of the Tigray War, with Ethiopia being just one of several exit routes,^{268, 269} and the conflict did little to stem the tide of Eritrean refugees arriving in Ethiopia.²⁷⁰ Data from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicates that while the overall population of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia fell from approximately 181,000 to 158,000 between 2020 and 2021 during the first phase of fighting, it grew again in the following years to approximately 170,000 in



2024.²⁷¹ This was despite continuing instability in Ethiopia and, more importantly, the destruction of Tigray's two northern UNHCR-run camps in Tigray and frequent attacks on the region's two southern camps.²⁷² Indeed, the number crossing into Tigray was likely far higher than that indicated by UNHCR data, given the attacks on the camps, UNHCR's prolonged absence from the region,²⁷³ Ethiopia's decision in April 2020 to end automatic asylum to Eritreans entering the country,²⁷⁴ the forced repatriation of many Eritrean refugees by the EDF,²⁷⁵ and deportations of Eritrean refugees by Ethiopian authorities.²⁷⁶

The absence of the formal UNHCR-managed refugee camps and the increased presence of Eritrean actors aligned with Asmara in Tigray have created new opportunities for the EDF to exploit the country's refugees, even after migrants have crossed the border. The role of Eritrea's military in migrant smuggling—facilitating the exit of Eritrean nationals otherwise banned from leaving the country—before the conflict is well documented.^{277, 278} According to a regional Tigrayan official, migrants currently pay between \$2,000 and \$4,000 to reach Ethiopia, with negotiations determined by individuals' financial means, their urgency for leaving, and whether they are known to have any family members in the diaspora.^{279, 280} While the locations of the border crossings have changed, the procedures employed remain similar to those used before the conflict. Previously, however, the destination for most of those crossing the Eritrea-Ethiopia border was the refugee camps, where they would be registered by the UNHCR and receive basic services. Since the onset of the war, migrants have instead increasingly made their way to urban centers, with Shire again serving as a hub for the region.^{281, 282, 283} Upon reaching their destinations, many of these migrants are tracked down by Eritrean agents working with the very same EDF officers who facilitated the border crossings. These agents will then often kidnap the migrants and hold them for ransom.^{284, 285}

A Tigrayan official from the North Western Zone shared evidence of Eritrean nationals involved in the kidnappings after family members of one migrant based in the United States contacted regional security services.²⁸⁶ The family provided details of the bank account into which they were instructed to transfer an additional \$4,000 to secure their relative's release.²⁸⁷ The officials traced the account to an Eritrean national who had spent a decade as a refugee, but who appeared to be serving as an agent for a network of Eritrean commanders involved in the smuggling of migrants.²⁸⁸

As Tigrayan officials grew increasingly wary of bank accounts opened by the Eritrean agents at branches in Tigray—complete with all required identity documentation, such as photos and copies of ID cards—smugglers began to adapt their tactics. To avoid investigation by Tigrayan authorities, the Eritrean smuggling agents began opening accounts at bank branches in Addis Ababa, which would then lead to delays in tracing the individuals involved and complicate the process of locating them.²⁸⁹



Post-Incursion Eritrea

While the lifting of UN Security Council sanctions on Eritrea may not have caused the Tigray War, it strengthened the EDF, enabling it to engage in some of the worst excesses of the conflict—massacring and raping ethnic Tigrayans and plundering the region’s infrastructure and resources. That the EDF engaged in such violence just two years after the arms embargo was lifted without Eritrea having acceded to a single provision set forth in multiple Security Council resolutions should come as little surprise. If the imposition of sanctions had had little impact on the approach the Eritrean leadership adopted to regional peace and stability, their lifting only encouraged Isaias to double down.

Unlike every other actor involved in the turbulence of the region over the past five or so years, and despite the loss of countless Eritrean soldiers in the conflict, the EDF has emerged stronger rather than weaker. The rebuilding of Eritrea’s armed forces has continued since the signing of the Pretoria Agreement. Investments appear to have been made in solidifying Eritrea’s new interpretation of the border, avenging what is perceived as Ethiopia’s annexation of its sovereign land by over-correcting and occupying parts of Tigray.^{290, 291, 292} While Ethiopia’s northern border defenses have been looted or destroyed, satellite imagery clearly shows the significant fortification of Eritrea’s southern borderlands over the past few years.²⁹³



Satellite image of what appear to be newly installed S-125 quadruple launchers and a P-18 early warning radar near Salai Dairo, approximately 14 km south of Asmara, May 2024. Source: Google Earth.

The EDF also continues to train the Amhara ethno-nationalist Fano insurgency, ensuring that the prospects for resolution in Western Tigray remain slim.^{294, 295} Training camps have been established near the Humera border crossing for a militia that, having previously fought alongside the ENDF against the TDF in Tigray, now arguably represents the greatest threat to Abiy’s administration and any national-level peace-building initiatives.^{296, 297}

While the TPLF may have survived the conflict, it is now wracked by internal divisions.²⁹⁸ In just a few years, Tigray has shifted from having what was likely the strongest bureaucracy and economy among Ethiopia’s federal regions to displaying characteristics typical of Africa’s most persistent conflict zones.²⁹⁹ The devastation of Tigray contributed to the fracturing of the region’s politics, resulting in new resource-driven internal conflicts. There has been an accompanying surge in illicit activities, with a range of state actors now partic-



ipating in various cross-border criminal networks alongside elements of the same EDF that it fought just a few years ago.

Eritrea's role in undermining regional peace and security led to the initial imposition of UN sanctions in 2009.³⁰⁰ Today, with sanctions lifted, Eritrea is rebuilding its military, bolstering its defenses, and continuing to destabilize its neighbors. It should be expected to continue to do so if the status quo remains unchanged. In the current global political environment, efforts to reintroduce UN sanctions on Eritrea would almost certainly prove futile. Some opportunities exist, however, to counter the continuing threat posed by the EDF against the people of Tigray, the broader region, and, indeed, most of Eritrea's own citizens.



Recommendations

As evidenced by this report, the same actors who orchestrated the last war are now on the precipice of resuming conflict with the same cast of characters. As a matter of urgent conflict prevention, the United States, European Union, United Kingdom, and other like-minded jurisdictions need to send a clear message to these actors—the Ethiopian government, the Eritrean government, the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), and the Tigray Interim Administration (TIA)—that they will face an escalated international response and sanctions if there is a resumption of conflict. These actions should be swifter, stronger, better coordinated, and more comprehensive against networks of officials, companies, and enablers.

US, EU, and UK

The US, the EU, and the UK should consider designating Eritrean Defense Forces Brigadier General Eyob Fessehayee (aka Halibay), Brig. Gen. Simon Oqbu (aka Riese Mirak), and Maj. Gen. Romadan Osman Awliya for their responsibility for human rights violations in Tigray.³⁰¹

In order to reduce the international trade in antiquities stolen from Tigray, the UK and the US, among other jurisdictions, should consider adopting legislation similar to EU Regulation 2019/880 regarding the import of cultural goods. In addition, the US Department of the Treasury’s Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) should not delay further in fully implementing Section 6110 of the Anti-Money Laundering Act of 2020, which requires the agency to issue proposed and final rules concerning filing requirements for trade in antiquities, and Congress should fully fund these financial intelligence unit efforts.

UN

The UN Security Council should determine that Ethiopia-Eritrea border issues—including unimplemented components of the November 2, 2022, Pretoria peace agreement—constitute a threat to international peace and security, and it should thus establish a panel of enquiry with a Chapter VII mandate to monitor and report on the situation.

Alternatively, the secretary-general should establish a panel of enquiry with a Chapter VI mandate to monitor and report on unimplemented components of the Pretoria Agreement, particularly in relation to ongoing border issues stemming from the ruling and demarcation by the EEBC.

International Criminal Court

The Office of the Prosecutor for the International Criminal Court should open an investigation into Eritrean Defense Forces Brigadier General Eyob Fessehayee, or “Halibay,” and any other culpable parties for atrocities in Tigray, including attacks against civilians, sexual and gender-based violence, and pillage.

Gold industry

Multinational banks, refiners, and jewelers should conduct enhanced due diligence on gold from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the UAE to ensure that it is not contributing to armed conflict. The London Bullion Market Association should alert its member companies to the increased risk of conflict gold from these three countries.



Ethiopia

The financial intelligence unit (FIU) in Ethiopia should conduct investigations into the illicit activity described in this report. Following any such investigations, the FIU should issue appropriate advisories and alerts related to Eritrean smuggling agents. Issuing advisories to ensure banks are aware of these concerns is a first step in both preventing such transactions in the future and conducting additional investigations that can lead to the filing of suspicious activity reports.



Endnotes

- 1 The relevant authorities include Global Magnitsky sanctions and Executive Order 14046 in the US, the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime in the EU, and the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations 2020 in the UK.
- 2 United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 2444 (2018) Adopted by the Security Council at its 8398th meeting, on 14 November 2018," S/RES/2444 (2018), November 14, 2018, available at: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2444.pdf
- 3 Al-Shabaab was engaged in a conflict with pro-government forces, African Union peacekeeping forces, and Ethiopian forces in Somalia at the time. Eritrea's refusal to withdraw troops positioned on the border with Djibouti following a brief border conflict one year earlier was also cited among the reasons for imposing sanctions. See:
United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 1907 (2009) Adopted by the Security Council at its 6254th meeting, on 23 December 2009," S/RES/1907 (2009), December 23, 2009, available at: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/673859/files/S_RES_1907%282009%29-EN.pdf
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- 4 The first Monitoring Group report focused exclusively on Eritrea, including reported efforts by the Eritrean government to procure equipment to maintain its air force and the reported involvement of senior military in arms trafficking to Sudan. See:
United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 2002 (2011)," S/2012/545, July 13, 2012, available at: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Somalia%20S%202012%20545.pdf>
- 5 United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 2244 (2015): Eritrea," S/2016/920, October 31, 2016, available at: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2016_920.pdf
- 6 United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 2385 (2017): Eritrea," S/2018/1003, November 9, 2018, available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1652109?ln=en&v=pdf>
- 7 United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 2385 (2017): Eritrea," S/2018/1003, November 9, 2018, available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1652109?ln=en&v=pdf>
- 8 The TPLF was established as a rebel movement against the former Derg regime, which was ruled by Mengistu Haile Mariam. Upon toppling the Derg, the TPLF took power through the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) alliance. See:
Tom Gardner, *The Abiy Project: God, Power and War in the New Ethiopia*, London: C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd., 2024.
- 9 Tom Gardner, *The Abiy Project: God, Power and War in the New Ethiopia*, London: C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd., 2024.
- 10 In June 2018, Abiy Ahmed formally accepted the findings of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission on the border demarcation between the two states. See:
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- 11 United Nations, "UN Chief Welcomes 'First Concrete Step' in Normalizing Eritrea-Ethiopia Relationship," June 28, 2018, available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/06/1013412>



- 12 Al Jazeera, "Ethiopia's PM Abiy Ahmed in Eritrea for Landmark Visit," July 8, 2018, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/7/8/ethiopias-pm-abiy-ahmed-in-eritrea-for-landmark-visit>
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- 15 In November 2017, Ethiopia's then-permanent representative to the UN expressed full support for the renewal of the sanctions regime. See:
United Nations, "Extending Arms Embargoes on Somalia, Eritrea, Security Council Adopts Resolution 2385 (2017) by 11 Votes in Favour, 4 Abstentions," November 14, 2017, available at: <https://press.un.org/en/2017/sc13065.doc.htm>
- 16 UN Press, "Sanctions Committee Chair Briefs Security Council on Somalia, Eritrea Developments as Delegates Air Views Concerning Peace in Horn of Africa," July 30, 2018, available at: <https://press.un.org/en/2018/sc13440.doc.htm>
- 17 Both Russia and China consistently abstained from votes to extend the Eritrea sanctions regime. While China was not assertive in its position on Eritrea during Security Council meetings, Russia's ambassador to the UN made the country's position clear following the lifting of sanctions, stating, "We have long said that the international restrictions against Eritrea were irrelevant." See:
UN Security Council, "The Situation in Somalia," S/PV.8398, November 14, 2018, available at: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_pv_8398.pdf
- 18 Following the lifting of sanctions, France's ambassador to the UN was vocal about the country's position, despite voting in favor, noting, "We believe that the Security Council still has legitimate demands with regard to Eritrea. First and foremost, the Eritrean authorities must cooperate with the Council, given that the Panel of Experts on Somalia has not been able [to] visit Eritrea since 2011." See:
UN Security Council, "The Situation in Somalia," S/PV.8398, November 14, 2018, available at: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_pv_8398.pdf
- 19 In a statement to the Security Council in July 2018, a representative of the Eritrean Permanent Mission to the United Nations decried the "preconditions" set by some members of the council. In the end, the members settled for a brief meeting in New York between the coordinator of the UN monitors; a senior advisor to Isaias, Yemane Gebreab; and Kazakhstan's ambassador to the UN at the time, Kairat Umarov, who served as the chair of the Somalia/Eritrea Sanctions Committee. See:
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- 22 Center for Preventative Action, "Conflict in Ethiopia," available at: <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ethiopia> (last accessed March 11, 2025).
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The Sentry meeting with the Commission of Inquiry on Tigray Genocide, May 2024.
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- 241 Dawit is the brother of TPLF executive committee member Fetlewek Gebregziabiher, or “Monjorino,” who, along with TPLF chairman Debretsion Gebremichael, is broadly recognized as representing the hardline anti-PP faction of the TIA. Dawit was also, however, a shareholder of the Raya Brewery, a company co-founded by General Tsadkan Gebretensae who, along with the former president of the TIA, Getachew Reda, represents the pro-PP faction of the TIA. See:
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