



WHO Neutrality in a Time of Crisis at Home: The Case of Dr Ghebreyesus

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Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus was [re-elected](#) to serve a second five-year term as the Director-General of the World Health Organization at the 75th World Health Assembly on 24 May 2022. Dr Ghebreyesus is from Ethiopia's Tigray region and he has been condemning the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments, as well as non-state actors in Ethiopia such as the Amhara militia, for the comprehensive humanitarian [blockade](#), [total siege](#), [systematic rape](#), [mass killings](#), [total destruction of health facilities](#), and [killings of humanitarian and health workers](#), and other [atrocious](#) acts committed in Tigray and against its people. There are, however, [critics](#), especially from the Ethiopian government, that claim that he is abusing his mandate as the head of a UN organization. This raises the question to what extent high-ranking UN officials should stay neutral when it comes to conflict and crises in their home countries.

Mandate and watchdog

As the Director-General of the WHO, Dr Ghebreyesus' statements on the catastrophic humanitarian and medical condition of the people of Tigray and his call on the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments to lift the siege and humanitarian blockade are legitimate and within the purview of his mandate. It is important to understand the context of Dr Ghebreyesus' statements. Dr Ghebreyesus has the responsibility of upholding WHO principles, which include the recognition that the "health of

all peoples is fundamental to the attainment of peace and security and is dependent on the fullest cooperation of states and individuals” and that “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition.”

The war on Tigray started at a time of the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, and disrupted the efforts of the people of Tigray to prevent and contain the spread of the disease and mitigate its significant health and socio-economic-political impacts. Citing the COVID-19 pandemic as the reason for the move, on 31 March 2020, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) [postponed](#) the scheduled 29 August 2020 legislative elections indefinitely. However, other [voices](#), including the Government of Tigray, have condemned the decision as a corona-clouded power grab.

The war on Tigray, referred to by the Ethiopian government as simply “law and order enforcement” against a few leaders in Tigray, turned out to be a well-planned total war against the people of Tigray that involved significant forces from foreign countries, including Eritrea and Somalia. Several reports by humanitarian organisations and investigations by human rights organisations and international media have repeatedly concluded that the gruesome mass atrocities committed against Tigrayans constitute war crimes, [crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing](#) that may amount to [genocide](#). This is consistent with Ethiopian officials’ openly stated intent to erase Tigrayans. In February 2021, four months after the war started, they even shared their intentions with [Pekko Havvisto](#), Finland’s Foreign Minister and EU Envoy to Ethiopia. “When I met the Ethiopian leadership in February, they really used this kind of language, that they are going to destroy the Tigrayans, they are going to wipe out the Tigrayans for 100 years, and so forth.

Despite the Ethiopian government declaring unilateral humanitarian ceasefires twice, first [on 28 June 2021](#) and then [on 24 March 2022](#), together with their Eritrean allies, Ethiopian forces have maintained the siege sealing off Tigray from the rest of the world and imposing “[a de facto humanitarian aid blockade](#)” as stated by the UN in July 2021. The siege involves a complete shutdown of telecommunications, transportation, electricity, and the banking system with the result that workers’ salaries cannot be paid, people with savings cannot access their money, and the Tigray diaspora cannot send remittances to help their families and friends in Tigray. Even aid agencies working in Tigray were denied cash and fuel and many were forced to halt their humanitarian operations.

By March 2022, 16 months since the start of the war, it was reported that an estimated [half a million Tigrayans](#) have been killed. Of those, close to 200,000 lost their lives by starvation, which is being deliberately used as a weapon of war, while another 100,000 civilian Tigrayans died from lack of access to basic medical care. The allied Ethiopian and Eritrean forces deliberately destroyed, damaged, and looted food production and supply chains and the [entire health system](#). It is now close to 20 months since the war started and more Tigrayans have died from deliberate starvation, denial of medical care, torture, extrajudicial killings in the liberated part of Tigray, [in western and other parts of Tigray still occupied by Ethiopian federal, Amhara, and Eritrean forces](#) and in [internment camps](#) in many parts of Ethiopia.

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The Ethiopian government and its allies are indeed working against the core UN charter and instruments including universal human rights such as the right to life, freedom of movement, right to food, right to health, and right to humanitarian aid. The people of Tigray are now denied the

enjoyment of a standard of health services that they attained after decades of a hard, consistent and holistic effort to attain primary health care. The WHO sent critical medical supplies to all conflict-affected regions of Ethiopia but while the consignments to the [Amhara and Afar regions arrived at destination without problems, those destined for Tigray have been deliberately blocked by Ethiopian authorities and their allies](#) from reaching people who are being deliberately starved and denied access to basic medical supplies.

It is within this context that Dr Ghebreyesus is speaking out and calling for the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments to stop weaponizing access to food and medical supplies. Speaking at the inauguration of his second term, [Dr Ghebreyesus](#) said:

“I am humbled by the opportunity provided by the Member States to serve a second term as WHO Director-General”. He added, “This honour, though, comes with great responsibility and I am committed to working with all countries, my colleagues around the world, and our valued partners, to ensure WHO delivers on its mission to promote health, and keep the world safe and serve the vulnerable.”

Dr Ghebreyesus is therefore acting in line with his mandate to be a voice for the voiceless victims. Dr Ghebreyesus is impartial in that, under his leadership, the WHO has also been dispatching critical medical supplies to the Afar and Amhara regions; the UN system has a watchdog that oversees the impartiality of UN officials. Moreover, the UN also has an Office of Internal Oversight Services, which investigates misconduct and violations by UN officials and submits reports and recommendations to the UN Secretary-General.

The Ethiopian government did lodge a complaint to [the WHO Office of Compliance, Risk Management and Ethics \(CRE\)](#) and to the WHO’s Executive Board, alleging misconduct and calling for the removal of Dr Ghebreyesus from office claiming that he was using the office of the Director-General to further his personal political interests. This is part of the campaign that the Ethiopian government has been waging against all Tigrayans—attacks and witch-hunts against Tigrayans that lack any credibility. UN peacekeeping troops of Tigrayan origin deployed in Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan faced similar attacks which led the UN to treat them as prima facie refugees in need of protection.

Neutrality

In his 2021 book titled [Perilous Medicine](#), Professor Leonard Rubenstein describes the debate within the humanitarian and donor community about the role of neutrality in aid work, which can be extrapolated to the UN’s high-ranking officials.

[Neutrality](#), one of the four principles of UN humanitarian practice (humanity, impartiality, and independence), is about not taking a position on one side or another in a conflict. When undertaking humanitarian and other UN operations in zones of armed conflict, UN officials are expected to remain neutral, avoiding taking sides or showing favouritism. In contrast, impartiality is maintaining non-discriminatory positions towards individuals and groups of people in a conflict needing humanitarian assistance. However, neutrality should not mean that UN officials have to remain tight-lipped and passive when any of the warring parties are massacring and deliberately starving a civilian population and denying them access to life-saving assistance because of their ethnic origin, gender, nationality, political opinions, race or religion. As long as aid workers (or in this case UN officials) maintain impartiality, Professor Rubenstein questions if maintaining neutrality vis-à-vis a warring party or parties is even morally ethical, especially when they attack or deny civilians humanitarian assistance because of their identity, as is the case with [ethnic Tigrayans](#).

The WHO, led by Dr Ghebreyesus, has been impartial in its medical aid delivery to all ethnic groups affected by the civil war in northern Ethiopia. While neutrality has been interpreted as not taking sides, it does not require Dr Ghebreyesus to be indifferent to the suffering of millions civilian Tigrayans when the [Ethiopian government and its allies blatantly discriminate against them and deny](#) them access to vital international medical assistance because of their ethnicity.

In her article [Neutrality vs impartiality: What is the difference?](#), Carol Devine of Doctors Without Borders says, “Neutrality is not the same as staying silent. It’s nuanced and even controversial. MSF reserves the possibility to speak in public about massive human rights violations and crimes of humanity, including genocide.” A misguided interpretation of neutrality can lead, as it did in Rwanda, to catastrophic and regrettable tragedies. When civilians are facing crimes against humanity, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and genocide as is still happening in Tigray, taking no action using neutrality as excuse is against the fundamental values and mandates of the UN human rights and international humanitarian law.

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It is important to be aware of the unfortunate conflation of neutrality with the duty of impartiality. Indeed, former UN Deputy Secretary-General Louis Frechette is [cited](#) saying, “The UN cannot be impartial between those who respect international, humanitarian, and human rights laws and those who grossly violate them.” In 1999, former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan [said](#), “In the face of genocide, there can be no standing aside, no looking away, no neutrality - there are perpetrators and there are victims, there is evil and there is evil’s harvest.”

The UN and its highest officials must not choose inaction under the pretext of observing neutrality especially where genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, weaponised rape, and starvation are taking place. The heads of UN organizations including Secretary-General Antonio Guterres need to join Dr Ghebreyesus in speaking up and acting against the continuing ethnic cleansing, siege and humanitarian blockade of millions of civilian Tigrayans.

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