



As a Tigrayan, I Choose Peace over War, Accountability over Impunity

By Mehari Taddele Maru



It has been almost three months now since the government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) signed the Permanent Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) to end Ethiopia's Tigray war that has led to over [600,000 deaths](#). The Biden administration described the agreement as a [momentous step](#), while the European Union extolled [the courage](#) of the parties in signing the deal.

The Tigrayan population has endured the worst possible [atrocities](#) during the two years of the war in Ethiopia. One would expect the people to be jubilant about this much-touted breakthrough to silence the guns. In Tigray, on the ground, the deal has been met with cautious optimism and hope for a return to normalcy. People like me who have extended family in Tigray, and have seen the war stretch out over more than 700 days, have also breathed a sigh of relief.

Since it began on 4 November 2020, the civil war in Ethiopia has reopened old wounds and created new ones. For over two years, the population in Tigray has come under siege and suffered weaponised starvation. Tigrayans in other parts of Ethiopia have been discriminated against and have been subjected to arbitrary and unlawful [detention](#). By 2021, the detentions had reached what could be described as an industrial scale, and the discrimination continues to this day; Tigrayans have been living in dread every day of their lives.

I am Tigrayan. I come from a family that have been victims of war. This is the third war that has been fought in Tigray in my lifetime. It is [genocidal](#) in nature and in its level of ambition, and by far the most devastating of any that I have witnessed. The United Nations International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE) [reported](#) “widespread acts of rape and sexual violence against Tigrayan women and girls. In some instances, the attackers expressed an intent to render the victims infertile and used dehumanizing language that suggested an intent to destroy the Tigrayan ethnicity.” Like the overwhelming majority of Tigrayans, my entire family and I vehemently opposed this war on Tigray since the beginning.

With the experience of the brutality of civil wars deeply rooted in my childhood memories of Tigray, my first response to the war was a [call](#) for the immediate cessation of hostilities, and the commencement of a negotiated end to the war. Peace was, and still is, what I, like many Tigrayans, crave.

The harrowing experiences Tigrayans have suffered at the hands of both the Ethiopian and Eritrean armies and Amhara forces for well over two years have brought back painful memories of my childhood. In the 1980s, Tigray was at the centre of a [protracted civil war](#), with the situation worsened by the 1984 Great Ethiopian Famine. My family, like thousands of others, was brutalised by the Ethiopian military regime and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). I was barely seven years old when I experienced catastrophic violations of human rights first-hand. My father and my maternal grandparents were attacked both by the government and by rebel groups and became the victims of forced disappearance by the TPLF. They disappeared, and I never saw them again. They are presumed to have been killed by the TPLF.

On several occasions over the past three decades, my family, individually and collectively, have submitted written and oral demands for redress to high-ranking officials of the TPLF and the government of Tigray. These requests have received no response. Instead, the disappearances have been dismissed as an unfortunate mishap that occurred during a revolt.

So, I empathise with those who, like me, have suffered and continue to suffer due to the civil war waged in various parts of the country.

Double victimisation

The persecution of Tigrayans who like myself live outside Tigray is harrowing, and it is happening both on and offline.

As if that were not enough, the state has sponsored a slander campaign in the media, directed at the Tigray elite and other people deemed to be supporting the Tigrayans’ just cause. They have falsely accused me of being a member of the TPLF and of working in the security sector in the previous Ethiopian government. The army of anti-Tigrayan trolls continues with their coordinated character assassination. At one point, hundreds of tweets were posted within a few hours making false allegations that I am an “agent” of the TPLF. The allegations and the formulation of the tweeter character assassinations were the same, only posted from different, newly created Twitter accounts by media networks that are notorious for attacking Tigrayans. It has even been alleged that a think tank was [established](#) so that I could head it up and be an advisor to the former government.

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There have been previous attempts by some media outlets to incite public outrage against me and

encourage attacks on my person. Extremist nationalists such as the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia, Ethiopia Satellite Television (ESAT), and its splinter group, Ethio-Media 3600, both based in the US, have churned out fabricated [reports](#) to assassinate my character. These media outlets are the same ones that called for Ethiopians to “dry the sea and catch the fish” where the sea refers to the people of Tigray while the fish refers to TPLF and the Tigrayan elite, and later publicly called for the mass detention of Tigrayans in concentration camps. They do not care for the truth. They are hell-bent on [attacking](#) Tigrayans from all walks of life. No-one is spared, not even His Holiness Abune Mathias, the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

It is important to set the record straight. I have never been, nor am I now, a member of any political party. I have never been a government official. The closest I came to being in government was when I served as director in the office of the president of Addis Ababa University. My career, spanning more than two decades, has been spent working in inter-governmental institutions, universities and think tanks.

In principle, though, it is my right to join any political party, including the TPLF. My decision not to join a party or serve in government is both personal and political. As a member of one of the families that have suffered double victimisation in the previous and current civil wars, I decided that my extended family’s quest for justice should not be misused to seek unjust revenge and unworthy political ends.

Unsurprisingly, Ethiopian politics is a pit of hatred and resentment. Political positions are defined and hardened by endless cycles of vendetta and reprisal. In a political campaign to delegitimise the previous government, all outspoken persons of Tigrayan origin and other critical voices have been the target of orchestrated character assassination, often based on fictitious stories.

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These character assassination campaigns are in essence part of a bigger political picture in Ethiopia and its longstanding deep-rooted problems, part of what [Francis Deng](#) calls a “war of visions”; a struggle for the nature and future of the Ethiopian state.

The bigger picture

Ethiopia faces, on the one hand, the scenario of loose multi-national federalism, where power rests in the hands of the constituent units, not with the centre. This scenario demands not only greater devolution of power and more autonomy, but also confederal arrangements, self-determination, and even, where necessary, independence from the country. As seen with the Tigrayan forces and with Oromo resistance, this scenario is a tangle of a war of survival, a defence against a predatory state, and a quest for self-determination and self-rule. Historically, Ethiopia has [mismanaged](#) its response to wars of resistance, as seen in the 1961-1991 Eritrean war of independence, which caused the fragmentation of the Ethiopian state and led to the secession of Eritrea.

On the other hand is the scenario of centralisation, the basis of which is to reclaim the quasi-unitarist powers that have been - at least *de jure* - dismantled over decades. This scenario brings back memories of Ethiopia’s highly contested history of forcible assimilation, ethnic domination and neglect of the periphery. The same unitarist style of governance, albeit retaining some vestiges of decentralisation, is what is now in the making, feeding on the extreme nationalism, quasi-imperial ambitions and military adventurism that have led to wars with far-reaching consequences for human security and state integrity. Proponents of this scenario are determined to secure and monopolise power through whatever means available. When convenient, they employ constitutional norms such

as elections with no real competitive platforms; when necessary, they use unconstitutional, brutal, oppressive means, including waging genocidal war on those who resist. This is a vision of the old Ethiopian state that is inherently undemocratic, antagonistic to multiculturalism, and even fascistic. With the help of Eritrea's Isaias Afwerki and his troops, these forces of centralisation and of power consolidation are the authors and owners of the current wars in Ethiopia.

Human security vs national sovereignty

The war of November 2020 is narrated as a war for the survival and the security of the population in Tigray on the one hand, and that of sovereignty and state integrity on the other. It morphed into a patriotic resistance that turned civilians into combatants. The sheer number of [armies](#) and [forces](#) engaged in the war on Tigray attests to the scorched-earth policies of the military operation. They came with massive force to [wipe](#) Tigrayans off the map. It was a clear campaign of [ethnic cleansing](#) and extermination of the Tigrayan people and their [identity markers](#). Several international organisations, including the [UN](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#), have established that ethnicity-based war crimes, crimes against humanity and elements of [genocide](#) have been committed in Tigray by the armies of Ethiopia and Eritrea, and by Amhara forces. Even the US [government](#) has confirmed that the ethnic cleansing of Tigrayans is ongoing. Thousands of Tigrayan [women](#) have been raped. Millions of Tigrayans remain displaced and systematically starved; tens of thousands have been extrajudicially killed through indiscriminate shelling and bombing. The conflict in Tigray has taken an unimaginable human toll since it first erupted in November 2020, and Tigray has been under a brutal siege for more than three years. According to Ghent University, as many as [500,000 Tigrayans](#) have been killed in the war or have died from starvation. From the outset, the war has been marked by brutality and a stark disregard for civilian life.

The Tigrayan population remains largely in a communication blackout, allowed only a trickle of the essential public services necessary to sustain life. Humanitarian aid had been systematically blocked off and diverted, and still remains little compared to the need. Industries, factories and infrastructure have been destroyed. UNESCO-registered and other heritage sites, such as [religious](#) and cultural buildings, have been pillaged and desecrated.

For the Ethiopian, Amhara and Eritrean forces, sovereignty is an absolute weapon, and a licence to wage genocidal war in the name of territorial integrity. However, under international law, sovereignty has long been construed to be a responsibility to protect. The sovereignty of the Ethiopian state has not only failed to protect civilians all over the country, but it has been used as a weapon to exterminate Tigrayans, particularly as the hostile Eritrean army and the Amhara forces were invited to participate in the war and occupy parts of Tigray.

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Resistance wars for survival can only end when the security of the populace is guaranteed. Robust mechanisms to ensure the security of all people facing a perpetual threat from state and non-state actors are vital to prevent a relapse of war and sustain peace.

The civil wars in Tigray and in other parts of the country have created bad blood, not only between current generations, but also for generations to come. Peaceful coexistence should be possible, but only if there are independent investigations to establish the truth, and mechanisms to guarantee justice and that such a genocidal war does not break out again in the future. For the sake of sustainable peace, perpetrators should be held to account, and justice delivered to the victims.

In pursuit of national dialogue

A war of scenarios can be resolved only through a comprehensive and all-inclusive dialogue and negotiations. The first step towards this would be recognition that there can be no military solution to wars such as the one in Tigray or the on-going ones in Oromia and other regions, and that sustaining peace requires justice for the victims. In this spirit, I am one of the many Ethiopians who have repeatedly [called](#) for truth, justice, dialogue and reconciliation in Ethiopia as the only way to a [peaceful](#) resolution to never-ending conflicts. Since 2011, I have written and presented several [proposals](#) for an all-inclusive national dialogue. Previous governments have been unwilling to heed these calls.

In 2020, without an inclusive national dialogue, the federal government postponed the elections and extended its term of office and those of the regional governments. I vehemently [opposed](#) the decision. I also supported Tigray's [decision](#) to conduct its elections within the constitutional timeframe, despite the federal government's decision. Furthermore, I strongly condemned the use of force by the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments against regional states, including Oromia, Somali and Tigray.

Raising my voice against oppression has meant that my family is once again facing peril.

My life has come full cycle, but I remain unbowed. More than anything, my childhood experience has influenced my keen interest in protecting human rights, addressing displacement, and promoting human security measures in general. I refuse to be a prisoner of my family's loss. I refuse to become accusatory and embittered. I avoid a life of self-pity. Crucially, the experience has fuelled my determination to try to help bring about a political governance that is protective of human rights in Ethiopia, and in Africa as a whole. This commitment was amply reinforced during my early years at Addis Ababa University as a Student Union president and subsequently at the universities of Harvard, Oxford and Giessen, and now leading a programme that [trains](#) young African leaders at the European University Institute. I struggled, until eventually I formulated a personal philosophy of life centred on a commitment to establishing human rights-protective governance systems and eradicating poverty. This philosophy is based on the maxim of Mahatma Gandhi: "An eye for an eye makes us all blind."

I have concluded that those who have lived through catastrophic events have two paths to choose from: the unprincipled, vicious life of a "villain-victim", or the worthy life of a "hero-victim". I chose the latter: to use my horrendous childhood experiences for the greater good and contribute to a peaceful country and a more peaceful continent. I will do what I can to put an end to situations in which children are compelled to grow up parentless in an environment of conflict and violence.

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Desmond Tutu once said, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." In the same way, no one should be allowed to remain neutral in choosing between war criminals and victims, war and peace, justice and impunity. I side with victims over war criminals, I choose peace over war, justice over impunity.

"And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation", said Elie Wiesel in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in Oslo. He added, "We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages

the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must - at that moment - become the centre of the universe.”

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