



TIGRAY TIMELINE: January 2022 – Current Famine as weapon of war



Compiled by Peter Danssaert
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Photo: Demonstration in Geneva, 16 March 2021

In May 2021 [CNN reported](#) that Eritrean troops in coordination with the Ethiopian military were blocking aid deliveries to parts of Tigray not under Ethiopian government control. In an exclusive interview with Reuters a senior UN official alleged that starvation was being used as a weapon of war. [U.N. humanitarian coordinator Mark Lowcock](#) told Reuters that Eritrean forces were “trying to deal with the Tigrayan population by starving them.” The United Nations Acting Humanitarian Coordinator for Ethiopia warned that the [de facto humanitarian aid blockade](#) of Tigray potentially put an estimated 5.2 million people, or 90 percent of the population across the Tigray region at risk. The UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator called the famine “[man-made](#)”, and it could be “remedied by the act of [Ethiopian] government”. The humanitarian aid blockade was maintained by the Ethiopian government throughout the remainder of 2021. In addition, the Horn of Africa was hit by severe drought.

January 2022: At the beginning of 2022 the Tigray Emergency Food Security Assessment, by the World Food Programme, found that 83 percent or 4.6 million people of the total Tigray population were food insecure. Forty percent of Tigrayans were suffering an extreme lack of food, after 15 months of conflict. Across northern Ethiopia’s Tigray,

Amhara, and Afar regions it was estimated that 9.4 million people were in desperate need of humanitarian assistance (WFP (2022): [“Severe hunger tightens grip on northern Ethiopia”](#), 28 January 2022; WFP (2022): [Emergency Food Security Assessment: Tigray Region, Ethiopia](#)). The UN Secretary-General called for lifting the humanitarian blockade imposed on Tigray

by the Ethiopian Government (United Nations (2022): "[Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General](#)", 19 January 2022).

7 January 2022: The Ethiopian government released six former leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and leading Oromo and Amhara politicians from prison in support of the upcoming "National Dialogue". The move sparked much criticism from Amharan politicians who, according to Africa Confidential, fear a premature peace and lose the claim on western Tigray (Africa Confidential (2022): "[Prisoners' release sparks war cries](#)", 21 January 2022; Africa Confidential (2022): "[Rivals set out their minimum conditions](#)", 18 March 2022).

[Dedebit IDP camp](#) was hit by a [Turkish-made drone](#) strike killing 59 civilians and 30 injured. On 3 January a drone strike on a flower mill in the town of Mai Tsebri killed 17 women and wounded dozens.

25 January 2022: The regional Government of Tigray announced that their armed forces were "compelled to take robust actions to neutralize the threat", posed by Afar forces and "Eritrean mercenaries", to humanitarian operations (Tigray External Affairs Office (2022): "[Press Statement on Current Developments](#)", 25 January 2022).

UN reported that [since the start of 2022](#), at least 108 civilians were killed by drone strikes.

8 February 2022: The Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) and its counsel Debevoise & Plimpton LLP, as well as the

Pan-African Lawyers Union (PALU) submitted a complaint against Ethiopia before the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights for serious and massive human rights violations against Tigrayan civilians. The complaint alleged that Ethiopia was responsible for a wide range of human rights violations under the African Charter, including military targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure; mass and extra-judicial killings; gender-based sexual violence; arbitrary arrest and detention; mass displacement of civilians; destruction of property, foodstuffs, and religious and cultural heritage sites; ethnic discrimination; and enforced information blackouts (Legal Action Worldwide (2022): "[LAW and Partners File Landmark Case Against Ethiopia for Human Rights Violations in Tigray](#)", 8 February 2022).

16 February 2022: Amnesty International accused Tigray forces of murder, rape and pillage on Amharan civilians (Amnesty International (2022): "[Ethiopia: Tigrayan forces murder, rape and pillage in attacks on civilians in Amhara towns](#)", 16 February 2022).

17 February 2022: The Government of Tigray responded to Amnesty International's accusations: "The Government of Tigray reiterates that Tigray's Army does not condone the deliberate targeting of civilians... If our investigation finds that Tigrayan fighters have in fact deliberately targeted non-combatants, the Government of Tigray will bring the perpetrators to justice... It is our belief that only an independent investigation by an impartial international body can get to the bottom of all of

atrocities... The Government of Tigray, therefore, fully cooperate with the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia as it undertakes its independent investigation into any and all atrocities committed during the war on Tigray.” (Tigray External Affairs Office (2022): [“Response to Amnesty International's report on the alleged human rights violations in Amhara towns”](#), 17 February 2022).

24 February 2022: Russia escalated its war with Ukraine. The Ukrainian Black Sea ports were put under Russian blockade. Several millions of metric tons of grain became stuck in silos in the Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea. According to the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Russia and Ukraine together represented 53 per cent of the share of the global trade in sunflower oil and seeds, and 27 per cent

of the share of the global trade in wheat. Between 2018-2020, “Africa imported \$3.7 billion in wheat (32 per cent of total African wheat imports) from the Russian Federation and another \$1.4 billion from Ukraine (12 per cent of total African wheat imports). The corresponding imports of wheat from the two countries by the least developed countries were, respectively, \$1.4 billion (29 per cent) and \$0.5 billion (10 per cent). A look at specific African countries, including some least developed countries, reveals a far higher degree of dependence for many on wheat imports from the Russian Federation and Ukraine than these overall percentages. As many as 25 African countries, including many least developed countries, import more than one third of their wheat from the two countries, and 15 of them import over half” (UNCTAD (2022): [The impact on trade and development of the war in Ukraine. UNCTAD rapid assessment](#))

Fig 1. Wheat exports to Ethiopia in metric tonnes.

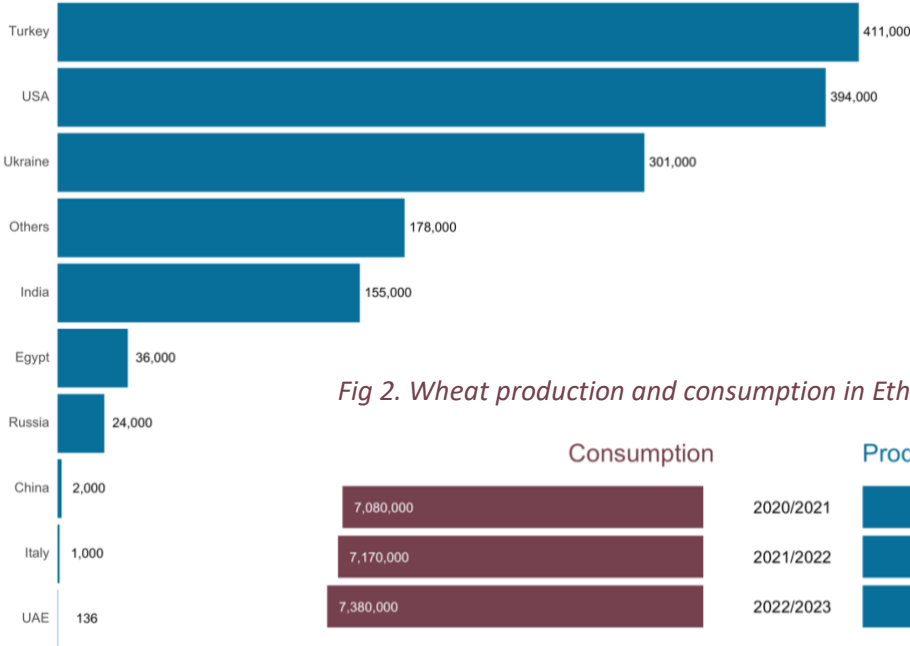


Fig 2. Wheat production and consumption in Ethiopia in metric tonnes.

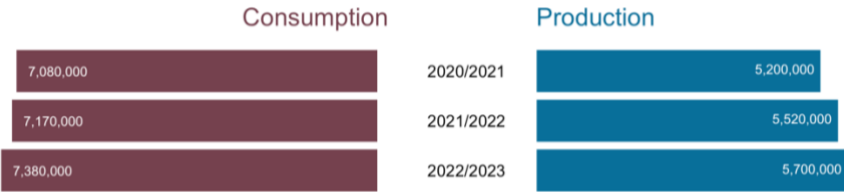
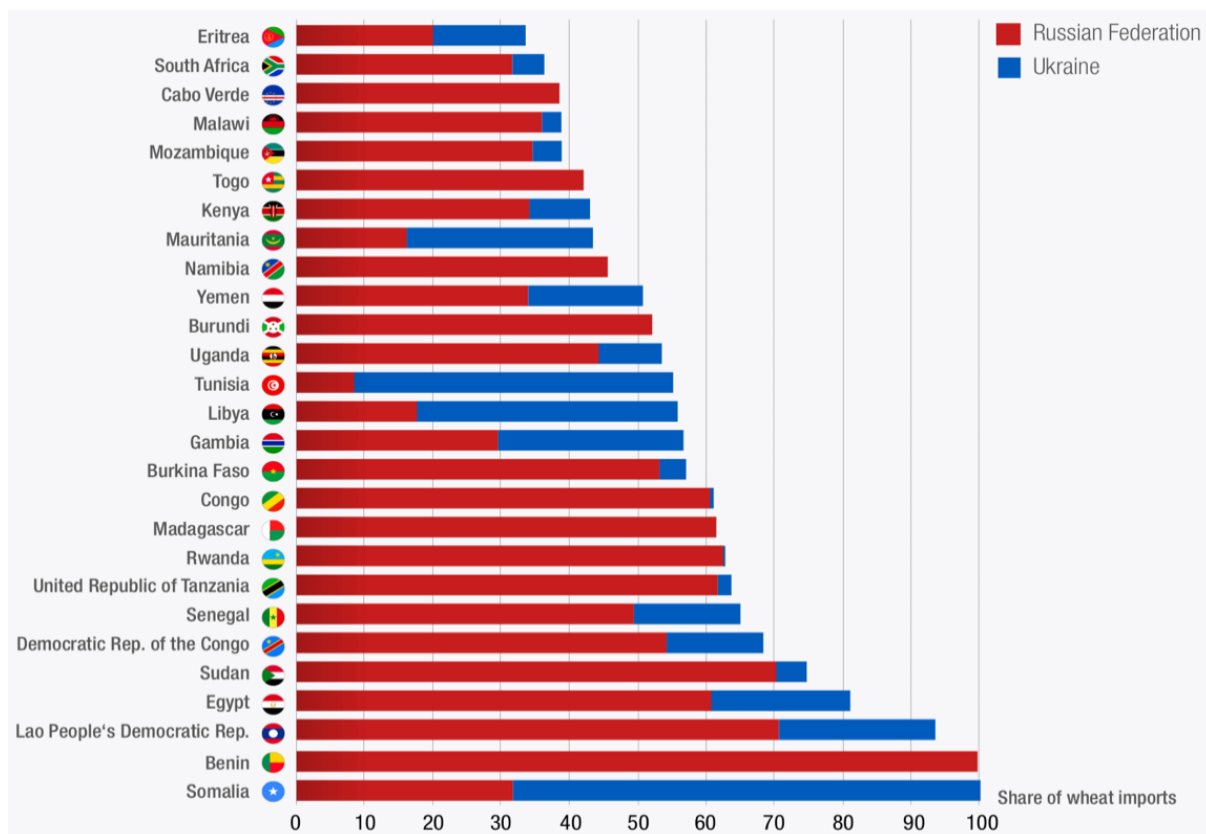


Fig 3. Wheat dependence in African and least developed counties (percentage)



Source: UNCTAD calculations, based on data from the UNCTADstat database (accessed 4 March 2022).

The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) estimated some 283 million people worldwide were facing food insecurity at the start of 2022. That number was estimated to rise to 345 million in 2022. This figure includes the estimated effects of the war in Ukraine of 47 million people (WFP (2022): [Acute food insecurity. Numbers explained](#)). The steepest rise of people facing starvation was expected in sub-Saharan Africa. According to an FAO-WFP forecast report for the second half of 2022 six countries were of the highest concern and these face catastrophic conditions: Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen. Other hunger hotspots of very high concern with deteriorating critical conditions are: Burkina Faso, Chad,

the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Sudan and Syria (WFP and FAO (2022): [Hunger Hotspots. FAO-WFP early warnings on acute food insecurity: June to September 2022 Outlook](#)).

The WFP estimated that in 2021 all over Ethiopia 18 million people required food assistance (WFP and FAO (2022): [Hunger Hotspots. FAO-WFP early warnings on acute food insecurity: June to September 2022 Outlook](#)). As of **30 March 2022**, it was estimated that more than 9 million people needed food assistance in northern Ethiopia. As of **June 2022**, the estimate increased to 13 million people due to increased food insecurity: 4.8 million in the Tigray Region, 1.2 million in

the Afar Region and over 7 million in the Amhara Region. In Tigray 83 percent of the population were food insecure and struggled to find enough to eat on a daily basis (OCHA (2022): [Northern Ethiopia – humanitarian update: situation report](#). 7 April 2022; OCHA (2022): [Ethiopia - humanitarian update: situation report](#). 27 June 2022).

The shortfall in supplies for maize and wheat also caused price hikes for these food commodities. Moreover, Russia's critical role in global oil and gas markets led to energy price rises making transport and the production of fertilizer, agricultural products and food more expensive (WFP (2022): [Acute food insecurity. Numbers explained](#); UNCTAD (2022): [Maritime trade disrupted. The war in Ukraine and its effects on maritime trade logistics](#); World Bank (2022): [Commodity Markets Outlook. The impact of the war in Ukraine on commodity markets](#)).

On 22 July 2022 Ukraine, Russia and Turkey under supervision of the United Nations signed the [Black Sea Grain Initiative](#) to facilitate the export of grain, foodstuffs, and fertilisers from Ukraine. Russia and United Nations signed a separate Memorandum of Understanding to facilitate the export of Russian fertilizer. On 30 August the United Nations' first chartered ship carrying Ukrainian grain for Ethiopia docked in Djibouti.

11 March 2022: A video emerged on social media showing Amharic-speaking Ethiopian security forces in uniforms dragging a severely beaten Tigrayan man to a smoldering pyre and burning him alive. The atrocity occurred on 3rd March

in the northwestern region of Benishangul Gumuz (Tghat (2022): [Ethiopian Security Forces Burn Tigrayans alive, talk about Cannibalism](#)", 12 March 2022; Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (2022): [Benishangul-Gumuz Region: Extrajudicial killings by government security forces](#)", 13 March 2022; Reuters (2022): [Ethiopia pledges action after video shows uniformed men burning civilians alive](#)", 12 March 2022).

24 March 2022: The [Ethiopian government declared](#) "an indefinite humanitarian truce effective immediately" to help hasten the delivery of emergency aid into Tigray. In response to the federal government's declaration, the [Tigrayan leadership said](#) on the same day that they were committed to the cessation of hostilities, provided that adequate and timely humanitarian assistance reached Tigray.

31 March 2022: Ethiopia at the UN General Assembly's Fifth Committee failed to block the financing of the [International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia](#). The Commission is mandated to investigate allegations of violations and abuses of international human rights law and violations of international humanitarian law and international refugee law in Ethiopia committed since 3 November 2020 by all parties to the conflict. The introduced draft resolution by Ethiopia was rejected by 66 votes against, 27 in favour and 39 abstentions. Angola, Burkina Faso, China, Eq. Guinea, Eritrea, Mali, Russia, Syria, and Zimbabwe were some of the States that voted in favour. Ethiopia's delegate said that her Government did not recognize the

mechanism established by the Council and would not grant access to Ethiopia as it does not promote human rights, was “clearly political” and an abuse of the multilateral system “in the hands of the mighty” ([Fifth Committee, 12th plenary meeting – United Nations General Assembly, 76th session](#) (First part of the resumed session), 31 March 2022; Reuters (2022): [“Ethiopia pushes to block U.N. funding for abuse inquiry”](#), 31 March 2022).

1 April 2022: A humanitarian convoy consisting of 20 trucks of food and nutrition supplies and one fuel tanker entered Tigray. It is estimated that 4,675 metric tons of food commodities or 115 trucks on a daily basis are necessary to cover the humanitarian needs in Tigray. In addition, an estimated 200,000 liters of fuel are required per week for humanitarian operations in the region. Early May 2022 OCHA reported that since 1st April a scant 6,400 metric tons of food were brought to Mekelle (OCHA (2022): [Ethiopia - Northern Ethiopia Humanitarian Update Situation Report](#), 12 May 2022).

In the wake of the Tigray conflict inter-communal violence spread elsewhere in Ethiopia. Early April the Ethiopian Federal government launched [a renewed counter-insurgency campaign](#) against the Oromo Liberation Army resulting in widespread human rights abuses, including summary executions and arbitrary detentions (see also “An Oromo rebellion constrains Abiy”. *Africa Confidential*, Volume 63, Issue 9, 29 April 2022).

5 April 2022: Amnesty International and

Human Rights Watch released joint report [“We Will Erase You from This Land: Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing”](#). Amhara security forces and their allies are accused of having perpetrated a campaign of ethnic cleansing against Tigrayans in western Tigray. The report states that the documented violations, which include unlawful killings, rape and mass detention, amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity and were committed “with the acquiescence and possible participation of Ethiopian federal forces”.

2 May 2022: The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission is investigating a video shared online that appears to show Ethiopian government forces abusing and shooting a boy they accused of being from the embattled Tigray region. (Reuters (2022): [“Ethiopia rights body investigating uniformed fighters filmed abusing boy”](#), 2 May 2022).

17 May 2022: The [Military Framework Agreement](#), signed 18 August 2021, between Turkey and Ethiopia was approved by the Ethiopian parliament. The agreement provides for military training by Turkey, exchange of military intelligence, defence industry cooperation ... (Borkena (2022): [“Ethiopia’s parliament nodded to military cooperation with Turkey”](#), 17 May 2022). In August 2021 Ethiopia and Turkey also signed a [“Military Financial Cooperation Agreement”](#). Not much is known about this agreement. Most likely the agreement includes financial arrangements by Turkey for the procurement of Turkish weapons by Ethiopia.

8 June 2022: The former UN undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs, Mark Lowcock, said that Ethiopia had managed to block a declaration of famine in the Tigray region in 2021 through heavy lobbying. The [Telegraph reported](#) that the lack of a formal declaration of famine forced humanitarians to use euphemistic phrases like “famine-like conditions”, which in turn dulled the international outcry to the humanitarian crisis. He told the Telegraph that starvation was being “used as a weapon of war” in the conflict.

14 June 2022: Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed asserted his willingness to consider holding negotiations with the TPLF.

8 July 2022: The [Ethiopian Human Rights Commission submitted a report](#) on the human rights situation in Ethiopia to the Ethiopian Parliament. The Commission concluded that all parties to the Tigray conflict have committed serious international human rights and humanitarian law violations against civilians. The report also detailed violence and IHRL/IHL violations in almost all regions of Ethiopia.

20 July 2022: Al Shabaab launched offensive against Ethiopia's Somali region.

8 August 2022: The [Globe and Mail reported](#) on various cases of sexual violence and torture on Tigrayan men committed by Amhara militiamen.

24 August 2022: The brittle truce between the Ethiopian government forces and the TPLF was shattered when fierce

fighting erupted between the combatants. On 26 August an air strike by the Ethiopian air force hit a children's play area in Mekelle killing several people, including children.

11 September 2022: The Tigray People's Liberation Front announced [via Twitter](#) it was prepared to abide by an immediate cessation of hostilities and to participate in a peace process under the auspices of the African Union. The Chairperson of the African Union (AU) Commission [welcomed the announcement](#) by the Regional Government of Tigray of its commitment for a peaceful resolution of the conflict as well as its willingness to participate in an African Union-led peace process.

19 September 2022: The [United Nations International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia](#) presented its first report ([A/HRC/51/46](#)). The experts concluded:

§34. ENDF soldiers committed widespread extrajudicial killings, rapes and other forms of sexual violence, and looting during the seven-month period stretching from 28 November 2020 to 28 June 2021. ENDF personnel also used civilian objects for military purposes and restricted access to medical treatment.

§44. The Commission finds reasonable grounds to believe that Tigrayan forces killed civilians and persons rendered hors de combat, raped, looted, and damaged or destroyed civilian infrastructure and property in Kobo and Chenna in late August and early September 2021.

§70. The Commission finds reasonable grounds to believe that the ENDF, EDF, and

Fano have committed 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 dehumanising language that suggested an intent to destroy the Tigrayan ethnicity. Tigrayan Forces have also committed acts of rape and sexual violence, albeit on a smaller scale.

§84. The Commission finds reasonable grounds to believe that the Federal Government and allied regional State governments have implemented a widespread range of measures designed to systematically deprive the population of Tigray of material and services indispensable for its survival, including healthcare, shelter, water, sanitation, education and food.

§85. On the basis of its factual findings, the Commission has reasonable grounds to believe that the parties to the conflict in Ethiopia have committed serious violations and abuses of international human rights law and international humanitarian law:

§97. ... [T]he Commission has reasonable grounds to believe that members of the ENDF committed the following war crimes: violence to life and person, in particular murder; outrages on human dignity, in particular humiliating or degrading treatment; intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population and civilian objects; pillage; rape; sexual slavery; sexual violence; and intentionally using starvation

of civilians as a method of warfare. The Commission has reasonable grounds to believe that Tigrayan forces committed the same war crimes, with the exception of sexual slavery and starvation of civilians as a method of warfare, regardless of the scale of violations. Regarding the EDF, the Commission finds reasonable grounds to believe that it committed the war crimes of violence to life and person, in particular murder; outrages on human dignity, in particular humiliating or degrading treatment; rape; sexual slavery; and sexual violence.

*§98. The Commission also has reasonable grounds to believe that ENDF members committed extrajudicial killings, rapes, and sexual violence as part of a widespread attack directed against the civilian population of Tigray. Accordingly, the Commission has reasonable grounds to believe that **the Federal Government has committed the crimes against humanity of murder, torture, and rape and sexual violence**. Moreover, the Commission has reasonable grounds to believe that **the Federal Government and allied regional State governments have committed and continue to commit the crimes against humanity of persecution on ethnic grounds and other inhumane acts** intentionally causing great suffering or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health based on their ongoing denial and obstruction of humanitarian assistance to Tigray.*

Further reading

Ethiopia Peace Observatory: <https://epo.acleddata.com>

[The Weaponization of Food](#) | 27 July 2022 | FPIF

[Global Hunger: The Ukraine Effect - Conflict and Hunger](#) | 30 June 2022 | Insecurity Insight

[Maritime Trade Disrupted: The War in Ukraine and its Effects on Maritime Trade Logistics](#) | 28 June 2022 | UNCTAD

[Commodity Markets Outlook: The Impact of the War in Ukraine on Commodity Markets](#) | 26 April 2022 | World Bank

"Insurgents take on the state on all fronts". Africa Confidential, Volume 63, Issue 9, 29 April 2022.

"Military Tactics Dominate". Africa Confidential, Volume 63, Issue 1, 7 January 2022.

Special Issue - Starvation in International Law. Journal of International Criminal Justice, Volume 17, Issue 4, September 2019.

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