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Security Threats in the Humanitarian Crisis in Ethiopia

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The humanitarian crisis caused by the prolonged conflict in Ethiopia from 2020 to 2023 has created multidimensional insecurity. Previous studies have examined the conflict's impact on economic and food security, but few have analyzed all seven dimensions of Human Security as defined by the UNDP (1994). This study aims to explore the impact of the conflict on economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security. Using a descriptive exploratory method with a qualitative approach based on library research, data were collected from academic literature, international reports, and credible media sources. Data were analyzed using the Human Security framework. The findings show that economic blockades and damaged infrastructure have caused economic crises and mass starvation. The healthcare system collapsed due to a lack of medical access and supplies, while environmental degradation worsened living conditions. Additionally, sexual violence as a military strategy caused psychological trauma and threatened the security of individuals and communities. Political instability further deepened social divisions, creating widespread insecurity across all levels of society. This study offers a comprehensive analysis of how the prolonged conflict affects multiple dimensions of human life in Ethiopia.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Conflict, Humanitarian Crisis, International Organizations, Human Security.

Introduction

A humanitarian crisis is a condition of extreme suffering experienced by individuals or groups on a large scale, in which human welfare and safety are severely threatened. In international classifications, crises may arise from natural disasters or complex emergencies, such as armed conflicts. One of the most severe ongoing humanitarian crises is occurring in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, where a prolonged conflict between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has persisted. Since political tensions escalated on November 4, 2020, the conflict has caused widespread suffering among civilians due to violence, infrastructure destruction, and obstructed access to humanitarian aid.

The conflict began with an attack by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) on a federal Ethiopian military base in Gondar, as well as assaults on Eritrean territory,

a key ally of the Ethiopian government. In response, the Ethiopian government, through the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), conducted airstrikes in several cities, including Mekelle, Adigrat, and the Tekeze Dam (Pellet, 2021). These retaliatory attacks by the ENDF in Mekelle and at the Tekeze Dam caused extensive damage to the Tigray region, affecting critical infrastructure, public buildings, and residential areas. This devastation forced many civilians to flee to areas such as Shimba, Histats, Mai Aini, and Adi Harush seeking safety and protection (Plaut, 2021). Approximately 5.2 million of Tigray's 5.7 million inhabitants require emergency food assistance, with over 400,000 individuals facing famine-level hunger (Quintanilla et al., 2014).

The literature on Ethiopia's humanitarian crisis often addresses Human Security partially, lacking a comprehensive perspective. Falhan Hakiki (2020) emphasizes the impact of the food crisis on the economy, health, and education sectors but does not connect these issues to the underlying armed conflict. Meanwhile, Pragi Laksono (2022) examines mediation efforts in Ethiopia's protracted conflict but fails to explore the conflict's implications for all dimensions of Human Security. Similarly, Puspita et al. (2022) highlight the significance of sexual violence as a military strategy in the conflict but do not integrate this issue into a holistic Human Security framework. Thus, a significant gap persists in the literature regarding how the conflict in Ethiopia generates a humanitarian crisis that simultaneously threatens all seven dimensions of Human Security.

This study addresses the research question: What are the forms of threats to Human Security within the context of the conflict in Ethiopia? It focuses on analyzing the various threats that have emerged from the ongoing conflict in the country. The central argument of this research is that the protracted conflict in Ethiopia poses serious threats to multiple dimensions of Human Security. These threats encompass economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political aspects, which are interconnected and exacerbate overall insecurity in Ethiopia. These seven dimensions not only endanger the daily lives of the population but also undermine social and economic stability, necessitating a holistic approach that prioritizes the protection of affected individuals and communities. Consequently, the humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia demands greater attention from the international community to formulate comprehensive and sustainable solutions.

Human Security Analytical Framework

The concept of Human Security was arguably foreshadowed by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his 1941 address to Congress, in which he asserted that individuals should enjoy freedom of speech, freedom of worship, and freedom from fear (Obete, 2021). The 1994 Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is widely recognized as the foundational document for the formal articulation of this concept. According to the report, two core battles must be won to ensure peace: the fight for security against fear and the fight for economic stability against want. The term “security” has often been criticized for its traditional focus on protecting the state from external threats. To ensure true security, human life must be placed at the center, and protection should not be dictated solely by national interests. According to the UNDP, there are seven core dimensions of Human Security: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security (Juntunen, 2010).

The concept of Human Security has sparked debates among scholars and practitioners, with critics arguing that it is overly broad, vague, and potentially overlapping, which may undermine human rights. At the 2005 World Summit, the United Nations General Assembly defined Human Security as a “right.” In the 2012 UN Secretary-General’s report to the General Assembly, a shared understanding emerged, defining Human Security as freedom from fear, want, and indignity. Freedom from fear entails protecting individuals from violence by foreign states, their own governments, or other actors. Freedom from want encompasses protection from economic, social, and environmental hardships. Freedom from indignity refers to protection from violence perpetrated by other individuals (Justika, 2022).

Human Security, as defined by the UNDP, involves two critical aspects: first, protection from chronic threats such as hunger, disease, and repression; and second, protection from sudden and disruptive events that disturb daily life in the home, workplace, or community. The Human Security Commission defines it as “the protection of individuals from both violent and non-violent threats. It is a condition characterized by freedom from pervasive threats to people’s rights, safety, or lives” (UNDP, 1994).

In this study, threats to Human Security are categorized into two main types: (1) sudden and unexpected threats, such as turmoil, armed conflict, and social instability, that disrupt everyday life; and (2) chronic threats, such as hunger, malnutrition, disease, and oppression. These categories illustrate that Human Security entails not only the

absence of conflict but also comprehensive protection of human life under various circumstances.

According to Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Anuradha M. Chenoy, Human Security emphasizes the protection of individuals from a wide range of risks that can endanger physical health, psychological well-being, dignity, and overall quality of life. It encompasses not only survival but also the right to a dignified life and respect for human rights. Thus, a secure environment is one that is stable, ensures predictability, and allows individuals to exercise control over their decisions and future without interference from external threats (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007).

Human Security represents an ideal condition envisioned by the UNDP, in which all seven dimensions are fulfilled across diverse aspects of life. However, the reality in many parts of Africa, including Ethiopia, presents a stark contrast. Rather than achieving Human Security, human insecurity prevails, characterized by widespread and acute threats to daily life. The seven dimensions of Human Security remain largely unmet due to intersecting crises involving hunger, poverty, armed conflict, and social instability, all of which hinder the realization of a secure and prosperous life in the region.

Each of the seven dimensions of Human Security—economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political—faces distinct threats. This study identifies that human insecurity in Ethiopia is closely linked to these seven dimensions, particularly due to the ongoing civil war, which has led to severe consequences, including sexual, physical, and psychological abuse; looting of property; destruction of health infrastructure; disruption of economic activity; and pressure from political instability. Political security, in this context, generally refers to the protection of human rights and freedom from political intimidation or repression (Brilianti, 2020).

The Human Security approach employed in this research is not merely a theoretical framework but a practical tool for understanding and addressing the multidimensional threats currently facing Ethiopia. This framework provides a valuable lens for identifying risks across the seven dimensions of Human Security, enabling the study to assess the crisis's broader impact, particularly aspects often overlooked in traditional conflict analyses.

Discussion

The Civil War Between the Ethiopian Government and the Ethnic Party TPLF

In the history of Ethiopian governance, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was established as a small guerrilla group in northern Ethiopia in February 1975. Its initial movement was ethno-nationalist, aiming to ensure the inclusion of the Tigrayan people in Ethiopia's governance. Following the establishment of a socialist military regime by the Derg government in 1974, numerous groups became disillusioned with its centralized and authoritarian rule (Berhe, 2004). The Tigray region held significant importance for the Ethiopian state. When the TPLF overthrew the Derg regime militarily, dissatisfaction with the regime's economic stagnation sparked resistance from various groups. Consequently, these groups collaborated to form the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition comprising several ethnically based parties, including the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front), ODP (Oromo Democratic Party), ADP (Amhara Democratic Party), ANDP (Afar National Democratic Party), and SEDP (Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Party) (Nugraheni, 2017).

The conflict between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian government, which escalated in 2018, was rooted in political instability and ethnic tensions under the administration of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn. Public unrest, particularly among the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups, ultimately led to Hailemariam Desalegn's resignation. On April 2, 2018, the Ethiopian parliament elected Abiy Ahmed, leader of the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP), to succeed Hailemariam as Prime Minister (Pellet, 2021). During his tenure, Abiy Ahmed initiated the formation of a new political entity, the Prosperity Party (Pellet, 2021). He transformed the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) into this new party. However, the TPLF opposed this transformation, prompting Abiy to restructure the coalition under the new name, incorporating four of the former EPRDF parties. His administration aimed to unify the nation and shift from conservative economic policies by implementing liberal economic reforms and expanding opportunities for the private sector. The TPLF rejected the proposed coalition, arguing that the ethnic federalism model adopted since 1991 was more effective in managing Ethiopia's deep-rooted ethnic divisions. The TPLF contended that this model had significantly contributed to the country's economic growth, whereas the Prosperity Party's liberal outlook conflicted with the TPLF's preference for state-led economic

development. Consequently, the people of Tigray began opposing the federal government, fearing that their regional autonomy was threatened.

The conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region began with growing disagreements between the federal and regional governments, particularly after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed refused to hold national elections and formed a new political party. After one year of Abiy Ahmed's leadership, parliamentary elections were held to determine his continuation as Prime Minister. However, in September 2020, the Tigray regional government independently conducted local elections, which Debretsion Gebremichael of the TPLF won. These elections proceeded despite the federal government's postponement, citing concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic. This defiance escalated tensions between the Tigray regional government and Abiy Ahmed's administration (Justika, 2022). In response, Abiy cut federal funding to the Tigray leadership, deeming the elections illegal and unconstitutional. The TPLF interpreted this action as a "declaration of war."

The underlying tension stemmed from ideological and political differences between the TPLF and the federal government regarding the country's future political direction. When the federal government halted budgetary disbursements to Tigray, tensions escalated further, prompting the Tigray regional government to withhold tax revenues owed to the federal government. In early November, the federal government invoked its constitutional authority to launch a national intervention through a military offensive in the Tigray region. According to the federal government, this intervention was triggered by an alleged TPLF attack on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) stationed in the Tigrayan capital. The regional authorities were reportedly unable to withstand this offensive, while the TPLF viewed it as an effort to preemptively weaken their military capabilities across the region (Fessha, 2020).

This conflict has inflicted immense suffering on civilians, including sexual violence, mass killings, looting, abductions, and the displacement of millions. Moreover, the Ethiopian government cut off telephone and internet networks in Tigray, preventing the media from reporting the situation on the ground. This has adversely affected approximately six million people in the region and hindered the delivery of humanitarian aid from external actors (Fessha, 2020). The United Nations reported over 500 cases of rape in Tigray, including incidents in clinics, attributed to social stigma and inadequate health services, which made it difficult for victims to report these incidents. Survivors stated they were raped by members of the armed forces, who were supposed to protect

them rather than cause harm. Some men were even forced to rape their own family members under threat of violence if they refused. The UN has urged immediate action to address the widespread sexual violence and rape cases in Tigray (Bedaso, 2021).

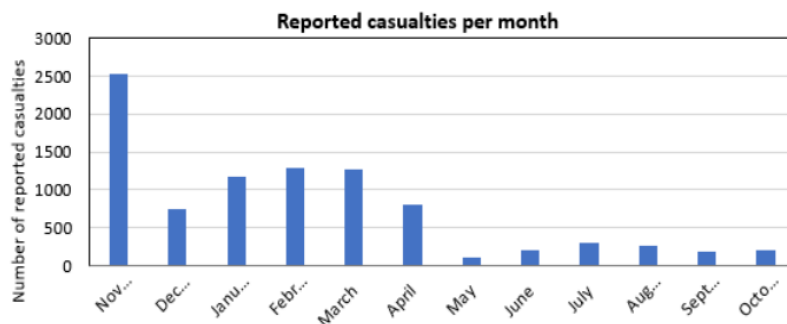
The conflict between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray region, rooted in a power struggle and calls for political reform that escalated in November 2020, has forced thousands into displacement. A major contributing factor is the severe food shortage and the Ethiopian government's decision to restrict access to Tigray, including telecommunications such as landline and internet services, which has made it difficult to obtain accurate information about the situation. Many areas remain inaccessible, hospitals rely solely on generators for electricity, and food prices have skyrocketed due to scarcity. The conflict has intensified further with the involvement of Eritrean forces, who have a history of animosity toward the Tigrayan ethnic group from the period of previous Tigrayan leadership in Ethiopia. Allegations suggest that the Ethiopian government has collaborated with Eritrean troops to suppress the Tigray movement, particularly given Ethiopia's history of prolonged conflict with Eritrea under Tigrayan rule (IDN TIMES, 2021).

After Ethiopian federal troops gained control of Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region, the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) blocked access to Tigray, significantly hindering media coverage and humanitarian aid efforts. By December 2020, tensions began to ease, allowing humanitarian aid to enter the region and enabling civilians trapped in Mekelle to begin leaving the city. As a result of the conflict, many Tigrayan civilians—particularly women and children—fled to neighboring countries, experiencing trauma, exhaustion, and an urgent need for assistance. The resulting humanitarian crisis threatens human well-being, stemming from both natural causes and human actions, manifesting in issues such as limited access to clean water, food insecurity, and inadequate shelter. Humanitarian intervention becomes essential when crises are prolonged and endanger fundamental human rights. A humanitarian crisis is defined as a situation in which the health, safety, and well-being of a community or group are severely threatened (Emmanuelar, 2015). In military contexts, sexual violence has been used as a weapon to terrorize specific groups, often leading to genocidal consequences (Sari et al., 2022).

In early 2020, the Ethiopian government officially designated the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) as a terrorist organization. The conflict has resulted in hundreds of thousands of casualties and triggered the worst famine-related crisis globally in the past

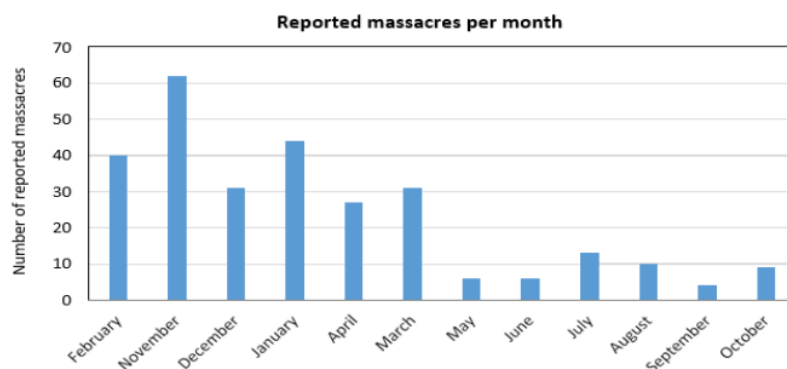
decade. Moreover, the conflict between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray region has spilled over into neighboring areas, such as Amhara and Afar.

Graph 1 - victim reports



Source: Tigray: Atlas of the humanitarian situation.

Graph 2 - number of victims of the killing of Tigrayan people by the Ethiopian Nations Defense Force



Source: Tigray: Atlas of the humanitarian situation.

Graphs 1 and 2 present monthly data from February 2020 to October 2021, showing approximately 283 deaths and between 6,542 and 12,346 victims resulting from the conflict. The war between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) resulted in 4,490 recorded acts of violence and 478 incidents, leading to between 8,946 and 16,291 victims by the conflict's end. On November 2, 2022, a peace agreement was signed between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael. The agreement included nine key provisions and comprised a preamble and 15 articles, beginning with the objectives of the agreement, followed by

general principles guiding the ceasefire. Article 13 mandates that both parties implement the agreement in good faith and refrain from actions that may undermine it (African Union, 2022).

An estimated 5 million people have been affected by conditions such as drought in the Amhara and Tigray regions. In Amhara, crop failure has left approximately 3.4 million people in need of agricultural assistance due to attacks on farms and disrupted agricultural activities caused by the ongoing conflict. In the Afar region, malnutrition rates remain high, with over 130,000 pregnant and breastfeeding women requiring urgent support. The unstable security situation continues to hinder the expansion of humanitarian operations in hard-to-reach areas, restricting the movement and access of aid workers and convoys, particularly in rural regions (OCHA, 2023).

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This crisis poses a serious threat to human survival, particularly due to transnational crimes, such as human trafficking, the illegal drug trade, and irregular migration, as well as environmental and public health challenges, including infectious diseases, natural disasters, and climate change (Sagena, 2019).

Threats to Ethiopia

The civil war has generated numerous threats within the framework of Human Security. Consequently, threats to Ethiopian society have become increasingly apparent. These threats can be analyzed based on the seven dimensions of Human Security:

Economy: Freedom from poverty and the challenge of securing basic needs remain critical threats facing the Ethiopian population. According to Cepheus, an Ethiopian research firm, defense spending has quadrupled, reaching 14.9% of the national budget, making it the second-largest expenditure in Ethiopia after debt servicing.

This dramatic increase in military expenditure has significantly reduced the government's capacity to fund poverty alleviation efforts. The war, which ended with a ceasefire in November 2022, resulted in incalculable financial losses, the full extent of which may never be known. The government acknowledged that the conflict could potentially lead to the deaths of up to three million people in northern Ethiopia (Budget et al., 2022).

Food Security: Food insecurity remains a major challenge in Ethiopia, a country already grappling with a widespread food crisis. The outbreak of war introduced new threats, particularly affecting the agricultural sector, which was the most severely impacted by the conflict. Agriculture accounted for 59% of total losses due to looting, disruption of planting activities, and acts of vandalism. These included the "killing and looting of livestock, destruction of crops in the fields, and theft of harvested produce" (The New Humanitarian, 2023).

Health: Before the war, the Tigray region had a three-tier health system. The first tier consisted of 712 health posts, 233 health centers, 29 primary hospitals, and 16 general hospitals. The second tier provided secondary care through general hospitals. The third tier offered tertiary care through specialized referral hospitals. During the war, the functionality of hospitals and health centers declined significantly. Of the 228 health centers assessed in the region, only 40% were fully functional, while the rest were non-functional, partially functional, or of unknown status. Of the 40 hospitals evaluated, 14 were non-operational, nine were partially functional despite severe limitations, and only six were fully operational. Moreover, the whereabouts of 90% of the 280 ambulances operating before the war remain unknown (BMJ Global Health, 2021).

Environment: The conflict has emerged as one of the greatest threats to the environment, resulting in infrastructure damage estimated at \$22.7 billion and a productivity loss of \$6 billion, equivalent to 26% of national income. Examples of infrastructure damage include hospitals, schools, and other social infrastructure, which account for 21% of the total destruction (BMJ Global Health, 2021). Additionally, climate change poses a serious threat to quality of life. It also constitutes a crisis that leads to disaster-induced displacement, disrupting or halting activities across multiple sectors, particularly the economy and social life (Hasanah et al., 2023).

Personal Security: Physical violence, threats to safety, and sexual assault experienced by vulnerable Ethiopian communities during the conflict present serious and ongoing threats. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

released a detailed report based on an analysis of 36 incidents of sexual violence involving 106 women and girls, committed by 144 perpetrators between November 2020 and March 2021. The study found that 39% of victims reported being raped inside their homes, and 33% experienced gang rape. Additionally, 44% of victims were raped by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers, 33% by Amhara militia, 6% by a combination of Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers, and 11% were unable to identify the perpetrators (BMJ Global Health, 2021).

Community: A conflict that initially stemmed from tensions between the Tigrayan ethnic group and the Ethiopian government has become a direct threat to the Tigrayan people themselves. Investigations conducted by the BBC revealed that Tigrayan civilians were targeted in what appears to be a campaign of ethnic cleansing in the conflict-affected northern region of Tigray. In an interview, a 23-year-old Tigrayan trader told investigators that he was beaten and left to die in Rawyan by members of the Amhara special forces, who stated, “We will erase you from this land. This land is ours. This is the Tigrayans’ last chance to leave this area” (BBC, 2022).

Politics: The protection of human rights for the Tigrayan ethnic group is under serious threat due to a campaign of ethnic cleansing rooted in political tensions involving the Tigrayans, who once dominated Ethiopia’s central government. These political frictions have escalated into a fratricidal conflict, placing the human rights of the Tigrayan people in a precarious position due to political pressure. Individuals in Tigray interviewed by Reuters reported that an increasing number of people were being arrested in the capital. A healthcare worker, who stated he was detained in a compound-style building on the southern outskirts of Addis Ababa, said that approximately 300 Tigrayans, including a lawyer, as well as his friends and family, were being held there (Paravicini et al., 2021).

Based on the Human Security framework, the prolonged conflict in Ethiopia poses serious threats to all seven dimensions of Human Security as defined by the UNDP. Economically, the increase in defense spending, reaching 14.9% of the national budget, has significantly reduced allocations for poverty alleviation, thereby worsening the population’s overall welfare. The food crisis has deepened due to the war’s devastating impact on the agricultural sector, which has suffered 59% losses from looting and crop destruction. The collapse of the healthcare system, with only 17.5% of health centers operational, highlights a failure to provide basic health protection. Individual security is gravely threatened by the use of sexual violence as a military strategy, leaving survivors with long-lasting trauma. The environment has also suffered from the conflict, with

infrastructure damage amounting to \$22.7 billion and climate change further deteriorating the quality of life. Furthermore, the conflict has endangered community security through ethnic cleansing campaigns targeting Tigrayan civilians. Political tensions have compounded the crisis by undermining human rights and social stability. These widespread impacts underscore the urgent need for a Human Security approach that prioritizes the protection of individuals across all aspects of life.

Conclusion

This study confirms that the protracted conflict between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF has created a multidimensional crisis with severe implications for Human Security. Based on the seven dimensions of Human Security outlined by the UNDP (1994)—economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security—the findings reveal that the conflict in Ethiopia has not only led to infrastructure destruction and political instability but has also affected the lives of more than 20 million people directly impacted by the war.

The food crisis stands out as one of the most pressing threats, with millions facing hunger and malnutrition due to economic blockades and disrupted supply chains. The collapse of the healthcare system, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has intensified the humanitarian crisis, increasing mortality rates and limiting access to essential medical services. Meanwhile, the use of sexual violence as a military strategy has severely undermined personal security and human dignity, reaffirming that Human Security encompasses not only survival but also the right to live a dignified and meaningful life.

This research also finds that political instability, rooted in the power struggle and ideological tensions between the TPLF and the central government, has contributed to social fragmentation and waves of displacement, further deteriorating both personal and community security. Although international organizations have provided humanitarian assistance, limited access and a lack of legal interventions have left many victims without adequate protection.

In conclusion, this study underscores that the pervasive human insecurity in Ethiopia is a direct outcome of the protracted conflict, necessitating comprehensive and long-term solutions grounded in a human-centered approach.

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