FAMINE VOICES

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Famine in Tigray:

Hunger and Humiliation

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The **Famine Voices** project brings together people with diverse viewpoints and experiences. We provide a platform for a wide range of people to share experiences and perspectives, bringing people from affected communities, social scientists and historians, food security specialists, lawyers and policymakers into conversation. We hope to inform the UN-accredited Integrated food security Phase Classification (IPC) initiative, the legal definition of starvation crimes, and the wider public debate on famine and how to prevent it.

Learn more about the Famine Voices project on our website: worldpeacefoundation.org

Introduction

The Tigray war, famine and genocide are almost forgotten or invisible in international discourse. Despite the enormous scale of suffering and the far-reaching consequences for Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa of the war waged between 2020-22, there has been little international attention to the disaster, and even less aid to enable the region to recover. The survivors feel they have been violated twice, first in the acts of violence and deprivation themselves, and second in the erasure that has followed.

Within this overall muting of voices on Tigray, there is a story that has been silenced entirely. That is the story of urban hunger. The realities of starvation among Tigray's city-dwellers, previously people who were middle-class, did not register in stories, images or statistics.

Tigray's townspeople—its salaried civil servants, its skilled workers, its professionals, its intellectuals, its pensioners—went hungry during the war and famine. We don't have the data for food insecurity, malnutrition and mortality to be able to assess whether they did better or worse than those who are conventionally most at risk during food crises, such as poor villagers and internally displaced persons (IDPs). And if we did have the data, the numbers would not speak to one of the most important elements of the experience of starvation, which is humiliation. The loss of dignity, the collapse of reputation and self-respect, the feelings of dehumanization, are not incidental to the experience of famine. They are central to it. And this experience was inflicted, in a deliberate, sustained and even celebrated manner, by the leaders of the Federal Government of Ethiopia.

War, Starvation and Siege

The Tigray war broke out in November 2020. From the earliest days it was marked by large-scale and systematic destruction and looting of social and economic infrastructures. Industries, farms, irrigation systems, food stocks, crop fields, orchards, food storage facilities, and businesses across Tigray were looted and destroyed. Beyond the physical damage, occupying forces actively obstructed farmers from tilling and planting their land.

Within six months, this had driven Tigray into mass starvation. In famines caused in large part by natural calamity and economic crisis, the worst-hit communities are the poorer, more remote locations. On this occasion, the evidence points to the reverse. Places along the roads were devastated because they were accessible to the invading forces, while those in hard-to-reach mountains and escarpments were cut off from essential services but less exposed to direct destruction.

The systematic destruction and looting of social and economic infrastructure were followed by a complete siege, elements of which largely remain in place to this day. The Ethiopian government and its allies imposed a full-scale blockade on Tigray. Banks were shut down, and the bank accounts of ethnic Tigrayans—both within the region and nationwide—were frozen. The movement of people, goods, and humanitarian aid to and from the region, but also within Tigray, was brought to a near complete halt. A particularly interesting dimension of the siege is that it did not involve just a blockade of the region's borders, but also the deployment of warfare tactics such as drone attacks, which made civilian movement and commercial activities within the region incredibly difficult. Market centers and transport vehicles were systematically targeted by drones and aerial bombing campaigns. The siege also involved the total shutdown of communications and blockade of access to the media. The multilayered siege left Tigray almost entirely cut off from the outside world, with commercial and humanitarian supplies deliberately obstructed for most of the period. This resulted in widespread deprivation, suffering and death, much of which has received little documentation or recognition.

The war also caused large-scale and systematic displacement of people. Most Tigrayans faced displacement at least once to escape the killings during the war. Long-term displacement disproportionately targeted populations from the fertile western and southern regions of Tigray—areas known for their surplus crop production that fed the Tigrayan food market, which were coveted for annexation by Amhara Region. These communities were forcibly pushed into the less productive central highlands, where host communities themselves faced severe food shortages due to the relentless looting and destruction campaign.

The starvation in Tigray over the past five years should be understood within this context. The intent to starve the population was evident both in statements made by officials and in the actions taken during and after the war. Indeed, in its 2023 report, the UN-mandated International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE) rightly concluded that the Ethiopian government and its allies used "...starvation of the civilian population as a method of warfare, including by pillaging and destroying, removing, or rendering useless objects indispensable to their survival."

Urban Deprivation: The Starvation No One Saw

The limited humanitarian narrative during the Tigray siege has overwhelmingly focused on rural famine and the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs). While these stories are both tragic and important, they do not represent the full scope of suffering. Largely absent from both aid frameworks and scholarly attention is the acute yet silent starvation that gripped urban professionals—civil servants, schoolteachers, university faculty, salaried workers reliant on bank accounts, and pensioned retirees. In urban centers such as Mekelle, Adigrat, and Shire, these middle-income groups were among the first to be impacted by the siege, yet they remained invisible in the humanitarian response.

Unlike rural residents who, despite the systematic looting and destruction, often have access to land, livestock, or informal food networks, urban professionals depended almost entirely on monthly salaries and modern banking infrastructure. When the war began and the region was besieged, the whole ecosystem they depended on collapsed. Salaries ceased without warning, banks were closed and accounts frozen, telecommunications shut down, and, critically, these sections of the population were overlooked by humanitarian actors who assumed that their pre-war economic status shielded them from the unfolding crisis. The limited aid targeting mechanisms that existed prioritized rural malnutrition and displacement, thereby systematically excluding these salaried but now destitute populations.

Prior to the war, these professionals had led stable and relatively predictable lives. Their incomes enabled them to pay for school tuition, rent or mortgage payments, household goods, and modest support for extended family members. Their economic activities were built on trust in institutional systems—particularly the banking sector—which became entirely inaccessible under the siege. With no physical assets like land or livestock to fall back on, these individuals found themselves in an economic freefall. What followed was physical deprivation and profound psychological distress, as many experienced hunger for the first time under conditions that offered no formal recognition of their suffering.

Pensioners—often urban residents with savings in banks and dependent on the monthly retirement salary, but no physical assets—also plunged into destitution. What made this even

more painful was the institutional silence that followed. Aid targeting mechanisms prioritized those already categorized as vulnerable—IDPs, rural malnourished children, and camp populations. Urban professionals, who had previously led stable lives, were presumed to have resources or resilience—despite the fact that their livelihoods had evaporated overnight.

We (Tigrayans including the co-author of this piece, Birhan) lived through this. We witnessed it daily. Before the war, many of us had predictable lives. Our salaries covered children's tuition, house rent, groceries, and modest support for family. We paid for goods and services through banks we trusted. We planned our futures. And then, we could not even find food for the next meal.

The following quote from a conversation with a Tigrayan resident of Mekelle captures broader sentiment among Tigrayans about this paradox:

> *"Our suffering can't be photographed. Our children didn't have flies on their faces, couldn't wear ripped clothes, couldn't see the bones out. But they were starving in silence, let alone to eat what they used to, they couldn't even eat once. It's kind of new world to them, the transition of from 'please eat, if you eat you have a reward,' to 'if you didn't ask for food you have a kiss reward.'"*

Survival, Shame, and Dignity

What makes this hunger particularly difficult to address is its quiet nature. It doesn't lend itself to the optics of humanitarian crisis—no skeletal figures, no dusty camps, no dramatic photos. And because it unfolds behind closed doors, often in homes that still retain signs of former stability.

One of the first moments that truly shocked Birhan—one that she still carries—happened as she was walking past Daero School in Mekelle, shortly after visiting a group of IDPs during the height of the siege of Tigray. There, she saw a man, likely in his late 40s. He wore clean pants, spoke politely, and there was a quiet dignity in both his posture and speech. From the way he dressed and held himself, it was clear he had once belonged to the middle class, perhaps even someone from a professional background.

But he was begging!

Not in the way we are used to seeing in times of famine—this was different. He wasn't standing on a street corner asking everyone for help. He had selected me specifically. After she asked about his situation, he explained—gently, and after some hesitation—that he didn't live in the area. He had come from another neighborhood where he was known. Here, where he was less likely to be recognized, he had started to beg.

But even in that, he was calculated. He told me that the only reason he approached her was because she looked young and, based on my path from the IDP area, he assumed she might understand what he was going through. He was not begging everyone who passed. He didn't go door to door. It was one person at a time—carefully chosen—someone who might be safe, someone who wouldn't shame him, someone who wouldn't recognize him.

The shame was layered and immense. It wasn't just about needing food—it was about being seen, about collapsing in front of others, about choosing who would witness your downfall. The mental and emotional energy behind that single act of asking for help was enormous. Each interaction was preceded by an internal calculation: Will this person recognize me? Will they judge me? Will they understand? Will they give me something?

This encounter made it painfully clear that starvation in urban areas often wore clean clothes—and that begging, for some, was an act of strategy, exhaustion, and immense courage. As time went on under the siege, this became the new normal. His story mirrored what I saw everywhere: people finding ways to suffer quietly, without completely losing their dignity.

- Begging became strategic. It was not done loudly or openly. People didn't stand on streets with outstretched hands. Instead, they studied the faces around them—approaching only those they hoped wouldn't recognize them, or strangers they thought might be kind.
- Those who begged changed neighborhoods entirely, walking long distances just to beg in unfamiliar places where their former students, neighbors, or colleagues wouldn't see them. There was no randomness to this. Every act of asking was filtered through layers of fear, shame, and calculation.
- Selling personal belongings became inevitable. Homes were sold, often far below market value. Furniture—sofas, dining tables, beds—were traded for a few days' worth of food. Refrigerators and televisions were carried out of houses to buyers who knew the desperation behind each sale. Even wedding gold, once symbols of love and family legacy, was sold for prices so low it couldn't even feed a household for a week.
- Some took up manual labor. You could find former university lecturers hauling goods or unloading trucks. Government employees, who once sat behind desks, swept roads or cleaned small shops. It wasn't about pride anymore—it was about survival. But even in that, there was pain: to be seen by former students or community members, now in a role so far from their education and status, often deepened their shame.
- Relocation became another tool for survival. People moved out of their home neighborhoods (*sefers* in Tigrigna) into areas where they could not be identified. This was a retreat from recognition. they were hiding themselves. Starving in silence felt easier than being seen starving by someone who once respected them.

Another story that has stayed with Birhan since is that of a PhD student who had returned to Tigray for what was meant to be a short visit, just before the war erupted. When the siege was enforced, he suddenly found himself trapped—cut off from travel, international support, and most critically, access to his bank account. In an instant, his academic journey was frozen, and he was forced into survival mode. With no savings accessible, no income, and no external aid, he began taking up daily labor jobs—hauling goods, cleaning streets, and doing whatever he could to feed his family.

As the situation deteriorated, he, his wife, and their two young children were forced to abandon their home and move into a makeshift shelter—a plastic tent—in a distant neighborhood where no one knew them. They chose this location deliberately, to escape the gaze of former colleagues, friends, and students. He did not want to be seen in his new reality.

Even after the war paused, he did not return to academia.

The Collapse of Social Networks

Urban middle-class communities—once woven from shared schooling, salaries, and routines—began to unravel. Hunger isolated people. Friends stopped calling. Neighbors stopped visiting. Everyone was suffering silently. There was shame in asking, and shame in admitting you couldn't help. This erosion of everyday connection culminated in moments of painful disorientation—when even familiar faces became unrecognizable. For example, months had passed before Birhan saw a colleague that was a university lecturer like herself. When they met again, Birhan didn't recognize his face for a moment as he had lost more than weight—he had lost himself.

This loss of recognition—both literal and symbolic—signals a deeper disintegration of identity and mutual care. This was the intended and stated purpose of the war in the first place. In crises, social capital is often assumed to provide a safety net, but in this case, shared shame and equal vulnerability to an extent severed the very networks that once upheld community resilience.

Psychological Repercussions and Identity Collapse

Hunger during the Tigray blockade did more than empty stomachs—it dismantled identities and rewrote lives. For many urban professionals, the loss of income and institutional collapse led to an existential crisis. They could no longer provide for their families, could no longer teach in classrooms, could no longer speak with authority or dignity in their communities. The roles that once defined their sense of self evaporated.

Among educators, the shame was particularly acute. Many teachers did not return to schools after the blockade—not because they had lost interest or commitment, but because they could not face the students who once respected them. The silence in classrooms mirrored a deeper silence inside—the silence of broken purpose.

In other cases, the desperation to feed one's family drove individuals to take up arms—not out of political ideology, but as a last resort for survival. Some joined the Tigray resistance forces because families of fighters were more likely to receive assistance or food. The following quote from a conversation with a Tigrayan young man who joined the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) captures the agonizing calculus behind such decisions repeated by many during that time. He said,

> *"It's hard to look at your child's face when you've fed them nothing for days. If I joined the resistance, maybe someone would help them."*

As the hunger intensified, it also became common to hear about and witness people committing suicide. Many did so inside their homes, but others in public squares, in what seems their last resort to tell the world of their despair.

Personal Reflection by Birhan: Rewiring of Priorities

> *Before the war, my daily life reflected stability and forward planning—I routinely organized shopping lists, maintained modest savings, and even considered future travel. However, the blockade and ensuing humanitarian crisis in Tigray radically altered not only my material circumstances but also my worldview. Today, I no longer think in terms of weeks or months; I plan for the next 24 hours. Food, once a mundane part of life, has become central to my sense of survival and identity.*
>
> *I have developed a profound respect for those individuals who came to mind and who, during the worst periods of scarcity, offered me food without hesitation. Such acts, though small in material value, became acts of profound solidarity and dignity. Now, I cannot discard food, nor can I take a simple piece of bread for granted. I hesitate when someone offers me a meal—not out of pride, but because hunger has forced me to reevaluate what it means to receive, to ask, and to survive. The experience has rewired my priorities—perhaps permanently, or perhaps until the emotional memory of hunger fades.*

Yet, what strikes me most is the absence of our experience in the academic and humanitarian discourse. Across the various reports, food security analyses, and post-crisis studies I've reviewed, I have yet to find one that meaningfully captures or represents what urban professionals like myself experienced during the blockade.

Why Was the famine in Tigray Invisible?

While the invisibility of the famine in Tigray in general can be attributed to the fact that this all happened under a full-scale blockade that prevented the world from access to primary data on the ground, the structural design of humanitarian assessment tools that prioritize indicators such as crop failure, loss of livestock, disrupted rural livelihoods, and malnutrition rates among children under five, are also partly to blame. These tools are ill-equipped to capture urban-specific forms of deprivation, such as banking exclusion, sudden loss of salary, or asset-liquidation-based coping mechanisms. Moreover, sociocultural factors—like the desire to maintain dignity and the reluctance to beg publicly—further concealed the severity of our condition from outside observers. Such instruments also fail to grasp the broader genocidal context within which starvation like the one in Tigray unfold.

The Tigrayans' experience represents a blind spot in both scholarly literature and humanitarian practice: the starvation of urban, bank-dependent, salaried populations who suffered quietly, with dignity, and outside the expected indicators and parameters. Until frameworks evolve to include these nuances, hunger of such kind will remain unaddressed and unnamed.

This to an extent shows the depth of the problem in Tigray. At the height of the siege in the summer of 2022, a group of French journalists who work for Arte TV smuggled themselves into Tigray and published a documentary detailing the depth of suffering in the few areas outside Mekelle that they were able to visit. During a webinar following their return to Europe, one of the journalists who was a member of the crew that produced this documentary, told the story of how they felt when they arrived in Tigray. He said,

> *"When we crossed the border [from the Afar region] and cruised onto the highlands, it sort of felt like we arrived in Switzerland—tranquil and orderly. Walking on the streets of Mekelle, one couldn't see that this was a besieged war zone. The real impact becomes visible when one ventures into the countryside and smaller towns where the health system has been decimated and everything including food storages were destroyed and looted."*

The invisibility of the famine partly explains the failure of the UN system in responding to the crisis. However, while the failure of UN agencies in Ethiopia to respond to the famine in Tigray can be attributed to their inability to collect evidence confirming the existence of famine,

a more problematic issue is their flawed approach of using the absence of evidence as evidence of absence.

One example of this is the former regional director of the World Food Programme, Stephen Were Omamo, who wrote a book discussing the technicality of the lack of data as a reason not to declare a famine. In his book, Omamo argued that famine was not visible during visits to the region. He claimed that the absence of "clinical death" records—indicators in famine determination—meant there was no famine in the region. When the Famine Review Committee of the Integrated food security Phase Classification (IPC) mechanism published a report in July 2021, warning that famine would undoubtedly occur within months unless there was a ceasefire and humanitarian access, the Ethiopian government expelled the IPC. There was no IPC follow-up. Omamo equated the absence of data with the absence of famine. He wrote:

> *"Dying of hunger?! [...] I called trusted staff in Tigray and asked them to do some informal checking. Was there any famine? Were people arriving at food distribution sites in very bad shape. Were there any stories of people dying of hunger? [...] There was no evidence at all of anyone dying of hunger. None. Zero."*

Omamo's book was widely being shared by Ethiopian regime officials including the Prime Minister who on social media praised it saying,

> *"Balanced accounts of any particular situation are essential. Steven W. Omamo's book, written as former Country Director of @WFP, provides this needed balance as he shares untold stories of the real drivers of negative narratives about Ethiopia during the conflict in the North."*

The truth is, by the end of the two-year war and siege, even those who had once been relatively well-off had exhausted their resources, having been compelled to share whatever they possessed with the displaced and others in need. A middle-income resident of one of Tigray's major towns recounted how he and his family had extended their limited provisions to those in need—primarily displaced individuals but also others in need—as the town's population had more than tripled over the course of the conflict. However, by the end of the siege, he and his family had become destitute, no longer able to feed themselves.

A farmer in Nebelet, central Tigray, interviewed by Tigray Television, sums up the challenge as follows: "During the last few difficult years, we survived by sharing with each other whatever we had. But now we have nothing left to share. Who can support whom? None of us has anything left to share." In Nebelet, as in many of the drought affected areas of the region, people are abandoning their homes and moving to other areas in search of food.

The Situation Today: How Famine Remains Invisible

One of the major problems with the existing mechanisms for determining the conditions of life in conflict settings is their temporal focus, which limits our lens to the period during and immediately after an armed conflict. In situations where the end goal of a war is the extermination or weakening of targeted populations, the signing of a ceasefire or peace agreement does not mark the end of the use of hunger and food as weapons.

In Tigray, over a million IDPs remain displaced nearly five years after fleeing their homes in Western and Southern Tigray—districts along the borders with Eritrea—as well as from other parts of the country. In peaceful protests by IDPs in Mekelle on June 11, 2025, protesters could be heard saying, "we are dying by a silent war".

Despite the signing of a ceasefire agreement in November 2022, the social and economic infrastructure that was destroyed and looted during the war have largely not been restored and the conditions of the region's civilian population remain dire. Farms that replenished the Tigrayan food market have dried up or remain under the control of outside forces and factories that employed thousands of workers remain non-functional. Civil servants, and others whose workplaces were dismantled have not been able to return to work. Nor have they been compensated for the years of lost income following the start of the war.

Moreover, the siege on the region largely remains in place and the Federal Government has been quick to impose restrictions on the import of commercial and humanitarian supplies to the region whenever political tensions escalate. In recent months, there have been reports documenting periods when trucks transporting commercial supplies were prevented from entering the region. Recent reports also reveal that federal authorities ordered a ban on fuel supplies to the region, bringing economic activity and trade to a near-complete halt. These disruptions and blockades appear to be the regime's strategy for strangling Tigray—ultimately aiming for its destruction, which was the stated goal of the campaign from the outset.

Starvation, Dehumanization and Genocidal Intent

Anyone seeking evidence for genocidal intent by Abiy Ahmed and prominent members of the Federal Government has no shortage of material to draw upon. Government officials repeatedly used dehumanizing language to describe Tigrayans, referring to them as "weeds," "cancers," "monsters," and other terms that framed them as threats needing to be "wiped out," "exterminated," "surgically removed," or "weeded out." Pekka Haavisto, Finland's former Foreign Minister and the European Union's Special Envoy to the Horn of Africa during the early stages of the Tigray war, testified in the European Parliament saying: "when I met the Ethiopian leadership in February [2021], they used this kind of language—that they are going to destroy

the Tigrayans, they are going to wipe out the Tigrayans for 100 years..." Daniel Kibret, a senior advisor to the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, made inflammatory remarks that underscored the genocidal nature of the war. During a televised speech to a cheering audience at the height of the war and siege, Kibret suggested that the wombs of Tigrayan mothers were "cursed" and needed to be "cleansed." He declared:

> *From now on, we must ensure that people like them are not born under any conditions [...] There should be no land in this country that can sustain this kind of weed. People like them should not be born in this country ever again. They must be erased not just from institutional registers but also from peoples' consciousness, from peoples' hearts, from historical records, they must be erased.*

Indeed, Gedu Andargachew, Abiy's Foreign Minister at the time and now in exile in the United States, recently confirmed that this was the goal. In an interview, he confessed that Abiy once told him he had "crushed the people of Tigray so they would never rise again." And in an interview in June 2021, PM Abiy Ahmed Ali said he will not repeat the mistake of the Derg regime (in reference to the time of the infamous 1984-85 famine) allowing humanitarian assistance into Tigray.

The Ethiopian government knows that it cannot starve every Tigrayan to death. What it can do, and has done consistently and to terrible effect, is to demoralize and dehumanize Tigrayans. The impact of starvation is not confined to the biological experience of hunger. It is also the psychological experience of humiliation, trauma and helplessness, and the social experience of losing the values that make human life meaningful.

There is no data for us to compare the food deprivation, malnutrition and mortality of urban dwellers, including professionals, alongside rural people and IDPs. There's certainly a need for better food insecurity indicators for townspeople. But that's not the most important point. What's key is that the experience of famine is one of humiliation as much as it is of hunger. And that humiliation by hunger was used by the Federal Government against all Tigrayans, and perhaps most deliberately against the people such as professionals, civil servants, skilled workers, pensioners and intellectuals.

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