

EXCLUSIVE

Hundreds massacred in Ethiopia even as peace deal was being reached

Soldiers from neighboring Eritrea went house to house killing villagers in Ethiopia's Tigray region, witnesses say

By [Katharine Houreld](#), [Meg Kelly](#) and [Stefanie Le](#)

Updated March 1, 2023 at 4:08 a.m. EST | Published February 28, 2023 at 1:13 p.m. EST

NAIROBI — Just days before a deal to end the war in Ethiopia's Tigray region, soldiers from neighboring Eritrea last fall massacred more than 300 villagers over the course of a week, according to witnesses and victims' relatives.

Eritrean forces, allied with Ethiopian government troops, had been angered by a recent battlefield defeat and took their revenge in at least 10 villages east of the town of Adwa during the week before the Nov. 2 peace deal, witnesses said, providing accounts horrifying even by the standards of a conflict defined by mass killings of civilians.

The massacres, which have not been previously reported outside the Tigray region, were described in interviews with 22 relatives of the dead, including 15 who witnessed the killings or their immediate aftermath. They spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

The survivors are only now willing to talk: As long as Eritrean troops remained close by, villagers were cowed into silence. Once the soldiers finally pulled back in late January from much of Tigray, witnesses and relatives began to give accounts like the following: A toddler killed with his 7-year-old brother and their mother. Elderly priests shot in their homes. A nursing mother shot dead in front of her young sons. Family members beaten back as they clung to fathers and sons being taken to their deaths.

Residents of the village of Mariam Shewito who had fled the violence said they returned from the bush to find the doors of their homes swinging open, the floors inside black with blood and the air heavy with the stench of death. Others searched for brothers and husbands among half-eaten corpses on a mountain where scores were executed and left to wild animals.

Satellite images first provided by Planet Labs and reviewed by The Washington Post show that at least 67 structures in the area, mostly in household compounds, were severely damaged during the time that witnesses said the killings happened. Additional imagery provided to The Post by Maxar Technologies shows military vehicles matching witness descriptions of Eritrean vehicles, less than three miles from where the massacres took place.

Mariam
Shewito

TIGRAY

Mariam Shewito

ETHIOPIA

Kumro

Locations of destroyed buildings

A2 HIGHWAY

Military vehicles spotted

0.5 MILES

Satellite image © 2022 Planet Labs PBC

THE WASHINGTON POST

The agreement between the Ethiopian government and Tigrayan rebels brought about a cease fire in a two-year war that had made northern Ethiopia one of the deadliest places in the world. But the deal did not address the status of Eritrean troops. Neither the Ethiopian nor Eritrean government has made any public statement on how Eritrean soldiers who perpetrated mass killings like the most recent one near Adwa could be brought to justice.

Joint investigations by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, whose head is appointed by parliament, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights have documented crimes against humanity and war crimes carried out by all sides up until June 2021. The head of the EHRC, Daniel Bekele, said they had identified many other incidents requiring investigation and they would be dealt with under a transitional justice mechanism.

The U.N. International Commission of Human Rights Experts, a separate body, also documented war crimes by all sides, and said the government and its allies may have committed crimes against humanity. In January, the Ethiopian government asked the United States to support its bid to terminate the commission, calling its work “highly politicized.”

Eritrea, a heavily militarized one-party state often dubbed “the North Korea of Africa,” has consistently denied committing war crimes. On Feb. 9, President Isaias Afwerki told a news conference that such allegations were “fantasy ... lies and fabrication.” Eritrean Information Minister Yemane Gebremeskel did not respond to requests for comment on the killings near Adwa.

A senior official working with Ethiopia’s Justice Ministry did not specifically address the killings but said it would be seeking public input around the country, including in six places in Tigray, on issues such as accountability and redress for abuses during the war.

War arrives on their doorstep

The civil war erupted in November 2020 when Tigrayan fighters seized federal military bases across Ethiopia’s northern region, claiming an attack by government forces was imminent. The Eritrean military entered the conflict almost immediately to help fight against its longtime enemy, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). The TPLF had dominated Ethiopian politics for nearly three decades, but its power was curtailed after Abiy Ahmed became prime minister in 2018.

During two brutal years of fighting, the conflict largely passed by many of the tiny villages outside of the northern town of Adwa.

But on the morning of Oct. 25, the war arrived on the doorstep of 92-year-old Gebremariam Niguse in the village of Mariam Shewito. The Eritreans and Tigrayan forces had been fighting for days in the surrounding area. The Tigrayan troops had taken territory and inflicted heavy losses on their foes before abruptly pulling back, leaving civilians exposed to Eritrean troops, villagers said.

“We were too close to the road,” one of Gebremariam’s relatives recounted bleakly. “We were the first house they came to.”

The Eritreans shot Gebremariam dead in the compound of his home. They also killed his son, two daughters, a son-in-law, daughter-in-law and 15-year-old granddaughter, relatives and witnesses said. The daughter-in-law, Tsige, had her 5-month-old baby on her back when the soldiers arrived, one relative said. The soldiers told her to untie the baby and set it down, then shot her dead in front of her 10-year-old son and his four younger brothers, according to the relative. The boys stayed with the bodies of their parents, too terrified to leave, for a night and a day, the relative said.

The soldiers continued their slaughter deeper into the village, gunning down many people in or near their homes, witnesses and relatives said. The victims included 15-year-old Samson Gebreyohannes Legesse, who sold eggs to save up for the university; an elderly priest who was shot in the chest and discovered in his living room by his son clutching a cross; and another priest killed along with his son and grandson.

The killing in Mariam Shewito continued for three days as soldiers went house to house, witnesses said. At least 140 people were killed, according to a tally of names provided by survivors. While some men were killed with their families, others were taken, tied up and marched to a mountain called Gobo Soboria, where they were shot dead. When the soldiers came for a man named Hagos Gebrekidan, his 10-year-old son clung to him, crying, until the Eritreans pulled him off and took Hagos away, a witness said.

One man said he was hiding on the mountain, but a group of soldiers found him. He was marched past groups of bodies with their hands bound behind their backs before he broke free and ran. He was shot but survived by tumbling into a ravine and hiding under some bushes, he said. He tried to stanch his bleeding for hours with his shirt while listening to the Eritrean soldiers just above looking for signs he was still alive.

Another man from Mariam Shewito, in his 60s, said that eight soldiers came into his house and demanded to know where his children were. When he said they were not home, they shot him and looted the house, down to the bedsheets.

“They came to check if I was dead twice, but when they kicked me, I just played dead,” he said. Eventually, he crawled into the forest and met a small girl, begging her for help. Neighbors tore up some women’s clothes to bandage his wound and, lacking medicine, smeared honey on it. For four days, they took him into their house late at night but returned him to the forest before dawn, fearing soldiers would discover him in their home and kill them all, he said.

Satellite imagery collected by Maxar Technologies on Oct. 27 shows at least 25 vehicles — identified by three analysts as military vehicles — either stopped or moving very slowly less than three miles east of Mariam Shewito. Survivors said Eritrean vehicles were in the area at the time.

Less than two miles farther to the east, largely confined to an area just south of Mariam Shewito Church, more than 60 structures were severely damaged by Nov. 1, according to a review of satellite imagery provided by Planet Labs.

Oct. 25, 2022

Nov. 1, 2022

When the Eritreans finally left Mariam Shewito on Nov. 1, the villagers emerged from hiding and searched for their loved ones. Survivors found that many of the bodies had been partially eaten by animals. Some bodies still had faces; others had identity cards in their pockets. Others were just limbs. Yohanis Yibalh, a taekwondo enthusiast who drove a motorcycle taxi, was seen being marched away; only part of his body was found, a relative said.

One woman said she lost her husband and 11 other relatives. When she discovered her husband in his distinctive white and gray shirt and coffee-colored trousers it was so late in the afternoon that there wasn't enough time for a proper burial. She and two other women scraped soil over his body to protect it from hyenas, she said.

She recalled her husband was a kind man who always brought home treats for their three children. When asked for her fondest memory of him, she hesitated, then offered, "Every day was special."

Horrors on all sides

As Tigray emerges from the war, few places have been left unscathed, and no side is blameless.

Residents, rights groups and journalists have documented frequent mass killings of civilians, systematic gang rapes and sexual slavery by Eritrean soldiers.

Ethiopian government troops have also been blamed for repeated war crimes and other atrocities. The Ethiopian government has said it has arrested more than 50 of its own soldiers for crimes that included rape and killing civilians, but the trial records and identities of the soldiers have never been made public. Ethiopian prison guards also killed scores of Tigrayan detainees at a camp near Mirab Abaya in November 2021, and at least seven other locations, according to an exclusive report in The Post, citing witness accounts.

Tigrayan fighters have also been credibly accused of war crimes, including the rape and murder of Eritrean refugees living in their region and the forcible recruitment of young people into their ranks by jailing relatives if they refused. When Tigrayan forces pushed into the neighboring regions of Afar and Amhara, residents reported hundreds of rapes, looting and the killing of civilians. Early in the war, a Tigrayan youth militia in a town called Mai Kadra killed hundreds of mostly Amhara laborers. The TPLF leaders have denied these allegations, saying in particular their group did not carry out killings in Mai Kadra.

While the Ethiopian government has extensively documented crimes committed by Tigrayan fighters, it has not yet conducted such detailed investigations into crimes against Tigrayan civilians.

Many of those left behind are glad for the November cease fire. But survivors are living surrounded by the dead.

“We want the world to hear what happened,” said a woman who reported losing seven close relatives in the massacre near Adwa. “We want people to know what happened to our families.”

Too many to mourn properly

The week of slaughter by Eritrean soldiers extended well beyond Mariam Shewito to villages including Geria, Adi Bechi, Adi Chiwa, Mindibdib, Kifdimet and Kumro, according to lists of victims shared with The Post and cross-checked by reporters. Some of the lists were neatly typed; others were scrawled on notepaper or recited over the telephone.

In Kumro, between 35 and 40 villagers were killed, one woman said. “They were hiding, but the old ones stayed in their houses. They thought they would be safe,” she said. Her 11-year-old son found his grandfather’s body, she said. The soldiers had burned the thatch that covered the stone houses, the fodder for their livestock, even the beehives, she said.

In Rahiya, Eritrean troops killed a teacher named Letemichael Fisseha Abebe with her 7-year-old son and another aged 20 months, a relative said. Her husband Dawit Weldu, also a teacher, was killed four days later in nearby Endabagerima along with his brother, a construction worker, the relative said.

A local official in Endabagerima said at least 80 people were killed there. Residents said many were buried at a famous monastery nearby. Some of the dead were families from outside the area that had come to take nearby holy waters, said a resident. No one knew their names.

At least 48 people were killed in the village of Geria, according to lists provided by two survivors. The victims included seven Muslims, many farmers, a 65-year-old mentally ill woman and a priest.

At least 34 of the victims were buried in Abune Libanose Church near Kumro, said a woman who attended a mass ceremony for the dead at the end of November. “The mourning was bitter for us. Some people didn’t come because they were afraid,” she said, her words tumbling out. “We didn’t know who to cry for. Your father, sister, mother, brother?”

Families gathered in groups to exchange condolences, she said. Some mourners had lost so many relatives they weren’t sure which group to stand with.

Individual condolences would have taken hours, even days, so representatives from each group would murmur “Tsinat Yihabkum” — “may God give you strength” — to another family’s group, then move onto the next one.

There were no priests to wave incense or perform the traditional ceremony of fithat on the bodies. She said they were all among the dead or mourning.

Kelly and Le reported from Washington.