

March 22, 2023 1:02AM EDT

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Ethiopia: US Recognizes Atrocities in Conflict

In-Depth, Independent Investigations Needed to Advance Justice, Redress for Victims



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on March 15, 2023. © 2023 Tiksa Negeri/Reuters

(Washington) – The United States government's recognition that atrocity crimes were committed during the more than two year-long conflict in [northern Ethiopia](#) should go hand-in-hand with backing for a UN body charged with carrying out an independent investigation, Human Rights Watch said today.

The United States government announced on March 20, 2023, that it had formally determined that war crimes and crimes against humanity had taken place in Ethiopia. The next day, however, at the

UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, the US and the European Union, among other member states indicated that the mandate of the UN [International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia](#) may not be renewed after it ends in September, regardless of the rights context. The US government should work to ensure renewal of the mandate, preserving the space for in-depth, independent investigations, while galvanizing global action to ensure credible investigations, justice, and redress.

“The US government called these atrocities what they are,” said Sarah Yager, Washington director at Human Rights Watch. “The public recognition of the immense suffering is so important to the victims, and now they need to see justice.”

In November 2020, conflict broke out in Ethiopia’s northern region of Tigray and pitted Ethiopian federal forces and their allies, including Eritrean forces, against Tigrayan forces. The fighting later spread to neighboring regions of Amhara and Afar. In November 2022, a cessation of hostilities agreement was signed by the Ethiopian federal government and Tigrayan authorities.

US Secretary of State [Antony Blinken](#), in a speech during the release of the State Department’s annual human rights report on March 20, announced that all parties to the conflict in northern Ethiopia had committed war crimes. The [State Department determined](#) that the Ethiopian defense forces, the Eritrean military and forces from the Amhara region specifically, had also committed crimes against humanity, including rape, murder, sexual violence, and persecution. He said that, “Members of the Amhara forces also committed the crime against humanity of deportation or forcible transfer and committed ethnic cleansing in western Tigray.”

Blinken said that, “those most responsible for atrocities, including those in positions of command, must be held accountable.”

Secretary Blinken’s announcement comes on the [heels of his visit to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia’s capital](#), where he discussed the need for full implementation of a [cessation of hostilities agreement signed in November 2022](#) by the main warring parties to the conflict in northern Ethiopia, and highlighted US efforts to support a transitional justice process. It also comes more than [one year after the media reported](#) that the State Department was carrying out a legal review of the crimes committed during the conflict. US Congress members have [repeatedly pressed the Biden administration](#) to publicly release the legal determination the Secretary announced on March 20.

Despite government-imposed restrictions on access and communications to the conflict-affected areas, Human Rights Watch, as well as other rights groups and journalists, have documented [killings](#), [massacres](#), [pillage](#), and [sexual violence](#) by all parties throughout the two and a half-year conflict. In April 2022, Human Rights Watch released a joint report with Amnesty International documenting the [systematic ethnic cleansing campaign against the Tigrayan population by Amhara forces and interim authorities in the Western Tigray Zone](#).

The US announcement did not call out the government's 16-month-long effective siege in making the formal determination, even though it was a clear violation of international humanitarian law, Human Rights Watch said. The UN experts, in their [first report](#), accused the Ethiopian forces of "intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare."

In a context of widespread denial by warring parties of the abuses committed during the conflict, the US State Department's announcement, while long overdue, gives the many victims who have been deliberately silenced further hope that their suffering will eventually be officially acknowledged, and that those responsible may one day be held to account, Human Rights Watch said.

As one person recently forcibly expelled from Western Tigray told Human Rights Watch: "The international community needs to see us ... Accountability is needed, there should be some answer in a court. I need justice. They need to answer for what they have done to me and my community."

The United States should urge the Ethiopian government to remove from [positions of power](#) those overseeing some of the worst and ongoing atrocities, including [three people in the Western Tigray Zone identified in the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International report](#).

This is particularly important as abuses of civilians following the November 2022 cessation of hostilities agreement continue, Human Rights Watch said. The US and other backers of the agreement should be calling for timely and public reporting on violations of the accountability provisions of the agreement, including condemnation of sexual violence, and be prepared to take concrete measures if alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity persist.

Further in-depth investigations and international scrutiny also remain vital.

Statements that suggest shutting down the UN experts group undermine progress toward accountability. While the US and other donor nations are supporting nongovernmental groups to gather information of alleged crimes, this is no substitute for the critical investigative work of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia, which has the mandate to establish the facts of alleged violations, identify those responsible, preserve evidence, and provide guidance on accountability and transitional justice.

Given the situation in Tigray and in other parts of the country, the US and other countries should rigorously evaluate the rights situation throughout the country and ensure the experts mandate is renewed in September, Human Rights Watch said. They should also press federal and regional authorities to grant the experts full and safe access to conflict-affected areas in northern Ethiopia, as well as in other parts of the country, notably in Oromia, and urge the authorities to create a conducive environment for media and rights reporting across the country, Human Rights Watch said.

"Now the United States has made public what it has known for years; that the suffering as a result of conflict in northern Ethiopia was deliberate and directed," Yager said. "These atrocities need to be met with justice if Ethiopia and its people are to see a future without these cycles of violence."

CORRECTION

We corrected a spelling error in a previous version of this press release.

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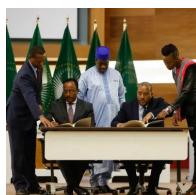
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