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Eritreans are being sacrificed in the Ethiopian civil war

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The suffering of Eritrean refugees in Tigray has been largely hidden from coverage of Ethiopia's current conflict. At the same time, a military intervention waged by the Eritrean state can only benefit the country's ruling elites. Signs the war may be protracted reinforce the need for both countries to pursue a relationship that works for all people in the region, not one used for political advantage.

Eritrea has been ruled by President Isaias Afwerki's grip for decades, preventing the development of alternative institutions. He micro-manages Eritrea and nothing happens in the country without his permission. 'By his word he could kill them, have them tortured, have them rescued again, have them rewarded. Life and death depend on his whim', [wrote psychoanalyst Eric Fromm](#) about the Soviet Union's ruthless ruler Josef Stalin. This description fits Eritrea's strongman well, who kills, imprisons and tortures anyone at will.

Evidence has been mounting for months showing the extent of [Eritrea's involvement in Ethiopia's civil war](#) and the gamble Isaias Afwerki is making with the lives of Eritreans. In this war, which pits the federal government against rebellious regional leaders in the northern Tigray region, Afwerki is treating Eritrean lives as disposable once again. He has already depopulated Eritrea of its youth who have been [fleeing the country](#) in droves to

become refugees all over the world, and he is using soldiers who are often **underage and conscripted** into indefinite military service against their will.

What is glaringly missing from the discourse is that Eritreans are also dying in Tigray, in a war that is not theirs. Authorities repeat the official line: **'We are not involved'** or simply try to confound anyone who listens. Despite the overwhelming evidence, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is also echoing this lie, directly contradicting **statements from his own general** and his political appointee, the Tigrean Dr Aregawi Berhe.

Afwerki has a history of involving Eritreans in conflicts and wars as far as the **Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and Sudan**, although nowhere near the current scale in Ethiopia. It is now clear that the Eritrean dictator is working towards his own grandiose ambitions of becoming a regional hegemon and, by doing so, plunging Eritreans into internal Ethiopian affairs.

Nevertheless, the current situation in Ethiopia is not about Eritrea – at least, it should not be. It is about a moment of truth for the future of Ethiopia as a state. For Afwerki, however, this is a personal vendetta against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the regional government of the embattled northern region which led a 1998-2000 border war after decades of rivalry.

Soon after Abiy Ahmed assumed power in April 2018, he signed a peace overture with his Eritrean counterpart. The so-called peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia under Ahmed has been of considerable personal benefit to Afwerki but with little to show for Eritrea as a nation.

In fact, Eritreans know very little about this 'peace accord'. For almost 20 years, Eritreans were told that the impasse was caused by the TPLF refusing to accept the border set by **the Hague verdict**. But the deal has been shrouded in secrecy, and as soon as Ethiopia's federal government turned against the TPLF, the border dispute all but disappeared, paving the way for an unholy alliance with a common goal: to annihilate the Tigrayan leaders.

Eritrean soldiers, **airspace, ports and land** are now reportedly at Abiy's disposal. Ethiopian troops are freely roaming across Eritrea and using the country as a conduit **to regroup and stage attacks** on the rebellious northern region. The presence of Ethiopian troops in Eritrea is traumatic for Eritreans considering their experience of war. There are deep worries among the local population that their sovereignty earned with the sacrifice of generations of Eritreans might be in the process of being undone by Afwerki.

To make matters worse, a few news reports and governments are now implicating Eritrean troops in the **looting and human rights violations** reported in Tigray. These claims need to be viewed with caution before they are properly investigated, as the TPLF has mobilised teams of social media activists waging disinformation campaigns blaming Eritreans for a variety of crimes. It is important to keep in mind that common criminals broke out or were set free with the onset of the war.

In the 1998-2000 war, the **TPLF targeted Eritreans** in Ethiopia by uprooting, confiscating Eritrean property and deporting people. Tragically, these kinds of violations leave lasting enmities. The other victims are **Eritrean refugees who have been in Tigray** after fleeing the dictatorship, who have **become prey for Afwerki**. Younger refugees are being forced to return to Eritrea where they will undoubtedly be subjected to extreme cruelty.

The silent suffering and starvation of Eritrean refugees in Tigray is largely hidden from the world. Eritreans are fighting a war from which no Eritrean benefits except Afwerki, his close guard and Abiy Ahmed. There are signs that this war will be protracted and a quagmire for the Ethiopian leader despite his promise of a short 'law and order' operation. Will Eritreans continue to die for a war they have nothing to gain and everything to lose? No one knows.

We do know Eritreans do not need war. They need an elected government, properly defined borders in accordance with the law and a stabilised relationship with an Ethiopia reconciled with itself.

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