Monitoring Social Media Conversation: The Conflict in Ethiopia, National Dialogue and Negotiation among Parties to the Conflict
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CENTER FOR ADVANCEMENT OF RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY (CARD)
Disclaimer

This report is produced as part of the CARD’s Social Media Monitoring Project under its Media Literacy Program. The project is aimed at creating an understanding of social media conversations on the conflicts in Ethiopia, negotiations between parties to the conflicts, and the National Dialogue. The project receives technical and financial support from CARD’s partners.

Table of Contents

Disclaimer .......................................................................................................................... 2
Executive Summary ......................................................................................................... 3
Highlighted Issues .......................................................................................................... 5
Contexts and Developments .......................................................................................... 12
Viral Issues ..................................................................................................................... 16
Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 19
Acknowledgement .......................................................................................................... 20
Executive Summary

- On March 24, 2022, the **Federal Government** announced that they have declared a humanitarian truce in the northern Tigray region. The government said that the truce will substantially improve the humanitarian situation on the ground and pave the way for the resolution of the conflict in northern Ethiopia without further bloodshed. The government of Tigray on the other hand said they will do everything to make sure that the “cessation of hostilities” succeeds. **Tigray External Affairs Office** said “We call on the Ethiopian authorities to go beyond empty promises and take concrete steps to facilitate unfettered humanitarian access to Tigray.”

- On March 11, a short video clip containing a footage of federal and regional security forces and regional militia burning a man alive has widely circulated across social media platforms. This was also reported by several international media outlets. In the video, soldiers dressed in the Ethiopian military uniform and uniforms from regional security forces are seen to throw a breathing human being into a fire. The video caused widespread anger among social media users, particularly on the part of Tigrayan social media users.

- US draft bills **H.R. 6600** and **S.3199** aimed at “*Ethiopian stabilization, peace, and democracy*”, have caused controversy among social media users in Ethiopia. There have been social media campaigns for and against the bills. On March 23, 2022, The Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) has called on Ethiopians, foreign nationals of Ethiopian origin and friends residing in home and overseas to protest against the bills.

- On March 18, Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Abune Mathias gave an interview to Tigrai Media House (TMH) about the act of burning a man alive. In the interview, the patriarch expressed his grief, and he mentioned that he was not able to get much of that opportunity to condemn the act.

- On March 6, **Wazema Radio** reported that our people were killed in the shootout and more than a dozen others were wounded in Mota town, in East Gojjam Zone of Amhara Regional State, following the arrest of a local leader of the Fano militia by government security forces. According to Wazema’s report, there was a confrontation between the Fano militia members and regional security forces in the town as the latter tried to stop an ongoing military training for Fano members.
On March 11, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) published a 110 pages report on human rights abuses in the Afar and Amhara regions in September and December of 2021. The report says at least 346 civilians have been subjected to unlawful and extra-judicial killings by all parties to the conflict. In areas that were under their control, “OLF-Shane” also reportedly committed targeted killings of government officials and their family members, as well as civilians they accused of supporting the government. ENDF, Amhara Special Forces, Fano, and other militias also reportedly committed unlawful and extrajudicial killings of and caused physical injuries to civilians they suspected of supporting Tigrayan Forces or “OLF-Shane”.
Highlighted Issues

During this reporting period, various conversations concerning the war in northern Ethiopia and related human rights abuses continue to dominate social media conversation. The current crises in the Amhara region, specially the issues of disarming the Fano militia and reported clashes between government security forces and Fano militia in different towns of region circulated widely across social media platforms. At the same time, issues related to the US congress bill H.R. 6600 - Ethiopia Stabilization, Peace, and Democracy Act remains controversial. Apart from these, the short video containing a footage of Ethiopian security forces burning a man alive has raged many and went viral on social media.

On March 11, a short video clip containing a footage of federal and regional security forces and regional militia burning a man alive has widely circulated across social media platforms. This was also reported by several international media outlets. In the video, soldiers dressed in the Ethiopian military uniform and uniforms from regional security forces are seen to throw a breathing human being into a fire. The video caused widespread anger among social media users, particularly on the part of Tigrayan social media users. The security personnel seen in the video are heard using an ethnic slur “Junta”, a word that is usually used to refer to ethnic Tigrayans, against the man they were burning alive.

Figure 1: A screenshot taken from Kassa Hailemariam’s Twitter account
In a statement, the Tigray Government said the act was an extension of the “Tigray genocide”. The statement says “Amhara expansionists and their cronies carried out the killings [...] However, this barbaric massacre would not stop our struggle”. On the other hand, the Ethiopian Government Communication Service said “the act is extremely horrific and inhumane, and Ethiopian government will no longer tolerate those who endanger the lives of innocent people.” In a statement presented by the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), the Ethiopian Government Communication Service indicated that the killings took place at the Metekel zone of the Benishangul Gumuz Region.

At the same time, Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) released a report regarding the issue on March 13, 2022. According to the report, the killings took place after government forces responded to an attack from local militants the day before, which reportedly killed 20 government security personnel and three civilians. The following day, government forces conducted widespread searches and intercepted a bus transporting Tigrayans who had just been freed from detention.

“*The government security forces have the Tigrayans dropped off the bus saying ‘you are the one who provided the information and have the attack carried out’ and continued the search where it has been reported that they found a walky-talky, different photographs, and more than 40,000 birr. Then, the government security forces beat the suspects and began asking for more information.*

“*Government security forces shot and killed 10 people, including two Gumuz ethnic members who protested the act, after one of the [Tigrayan] suspects said ‘we have a hand in the attack; we have people in the place called Bamza and Gilgel Beles’.***

“The bodies of those individuals were taken by security forces to a nearby forest and burned. Another Tigrayan found hiding in a government security vehicle nearby was then taken away and burned alive” says the report. EHRC has confirmed that the victim to burning to death was an ethnic Tigrayan. The report asked for the Ethiopian military, Amhara region special police forces, and SNNP Regional special forces, that have presence in the area, and other individuals to investigate and hold those responsible accountable. EHRC
In reaction to report, Getachew Reda, the advisor to the president of Tigray, criticized EHRC’s report saying:

“The EHRC’s report on the gruesome murder of Tigrayans in Benishangul is a classic case of adding insult to injury. There is little in the way of moral outrage: it’s about blaming the victims & explaining away the cannibals’ crime by way of insinuations.”

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Figure 2: A tweet from Hailu Kebede, a member of Tigray opposition party, Salsay Weyane Tigray

@Daniebekele’s @EthioHRC is now incriminating the Tigrayans who were burnt alive in Metekel, that they were militants/Informants who had a military radio. In this statement the commission said they were detainees just released from C. camps with a permit to go to their villages.

1:41 PM · Mar 13, 2022 · Twitter for Android

157 Retweets 4 Quote Tweets 148 Likes

On March 18 Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Abune Mathias gave an interview to Tigrai Media House (TMH) about the act of burning a man alive. In the interview, the patriarch expressed his grief, and he mentioned that he was not able to get much of that opportunity to condemn the act.

“They are burning a man alive now. Burning a human being as if he was a firewood horrible and heartbreaking. The misdeeds committed in Tigray are numerous and tragic. Earlier, 800-1000 people were shot dead in Axum and 154 priests were killed at Mariam Dengelat church. Around 120,000 women are reported to have been raped. So many individuals were killed by a drone strike on the markets. The country is hurt but not prosperous. The goal was to destroy the Tigrayans, but the damage is happening to all.”

Abune Mathias, Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

In response to the Patriarch’s message, Advisor to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Daniel Kibret said the Patriarch is getting his information only from Tigrai Media House. In an interview with
ESAT, Daniel says the timing of the Patriarch’s remark is intended to support the campaign to get H.R.6600 pass in the US Congress. He also stated that the Patriarch has made numerous efforts to prompt the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the Ethiopian government react to his negative remarks. Daniel also mentioned that what Abune Mathias said about the government banning medicine from entering Tigray region is untrue. Many social media users including Getachew Reda criticized Daniel kibret’s interview with ESAT TV.

US draft bills H.R. 6600 and S.3199 aimed at “Ethiopian stabilization, peace, and democracy”, have caused controversy among social media users in Ethiopia. There have been social media campaigns for and against the bills. On March 23, 2022, The Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) has called on Ethiopians, foreign nationals of Ethiopian origin and friends residing in home and overseas to protest against the bills. MoFA Spokesperson, Dina Mufti told the State Media Ethiopian Press Agency (EPA) that concrete efforts of Ethiopians living at home and abroad are crucial to block the ill-conceived resolution that will otherwise harm the peace and development of the country. The spokesperson further highlighted that the U.S. clearly knows that Ethiopia unwillingly entered conflict with TPLF and the intention of the Biden Administration initiating such a malicious bill is to support the TPLF’s cause. He added that the bill would halt the envisaged national dialogue process and the country’s move towards peace and stability. The spokesperson also said that the bills harm efforts that have been executed to ensure peace and stability in the Horn of Africa.

![Figure 3: Twitter trends against the two bills](image-url)
Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, Demek Mekonnen, also called on the Ethiopian Diaspora to protest the bills during a virtual meeting with Ethiopian Diaspora Community leaders and community representatives based in the United States. On March 26, 2022, Ethio-Americans staged a protest in San Francisco against the bill.

The Fano, a militia group in the Amhara region, has been fighting alongside the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) in the war on Tigray. On January 28, 2022, the Ethiopian Intelligence Chief, Tesmegen Tiruneh announced, that all necessary measures would be taken against informal armed groups. Many Fano supporters criticized Temesgen’s statement on social media. The Amhara Regional Government later announced that they do not intend to disarm Fano but rather they will organize it more.

On February 27, 2022, a newly trained commandos graduated in Majete town, north of Shewa zone and Dessie town of the Amhara region. Eskinder Nega, the leader of Balderas for True Democracy Party (Balderas) attended the graduation ceremony in Majete town where he said, “they should always take the message of Brigadier General Tefera Mamo”. Eskinder added “I promised to fight alongside the Fano if the TPLF comes again. We have less confidence in the Ethiopian Defense Forces (ENDF) or Amhara Special Forces (ASF); we only rely on Fano.”
On March 07, Mereja.com reported that the Ethiopian Military killed Amhara Popular Force coordinator named Mezgabu and 17 Amhara civilians in Mota East Gojam Zone.

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State, following the arrest of a local leader of the Fano militia by government security forces. According to Wazema’s report, there was a confrontation between the Fano militia members and regional security forces in the town as the latter tried to stop an ongoing military training for Fano members. According to the report, similar incidents happened in Ginde Wein, Yejube, and Bebiwugn woredas of the Amhara regional state.

In addition, Mereja.com reported that five members of Fano militia group were killed by regional security forces on March 14.

Figure 7: Screenshot taken from Mereja.com
Contexts and Developments

Several developments have emerged with regards to the war in the northern part of Ethiopia and talks related to the conflict. On March 24, 2022, the Federal Government announced that they have declared a humanitarian truce in the northern Tigray region. The government said that the truce will substantially improve the humanitarian situation on the ground and pave the way for the resolution of the conflict in northern Ethiopia without further bloodshed.

The government of Tigray on the other hand said they will do everything to make sure that the “cessation of hostilities” succeeds. Tigray External Affairs Office said “We call on the Ethiopian authorities to go beyond empty promises and take concrete steps to facilitate unfettered humanitarian access to Tigray.”

These two statements from both governments have been circulating across different social media platforms and international media outlets.

Figure 8: A tweet from secretary of state Antony Blinken
On the flip side of this, there have been conversations about “humanitarian blockade” in Tigray. On March 16, 2022, Director General of the World Health Organization, Dr Tedros Adhanom, called Ethiopian and Eritrean forces to “end the blockade” imposed on the region in a press conference in Geneva. DR Tedros warned that that six million people “sealed off from the outside world” for 500 days in Tigray are facing an unparalleled health crisis. Ethiopian Government Communication Service rejected Dr. Tedros’s remarks, calling them untrue.

On March 23, 2022, Government Communication Service, announced that more than 20 trucks carrying food and fuel to Tigray last week have returned due to hostilities created by Tigrayan forces. Whereas many Tigrayan social media users claim that Afar Region President Awal Arba in cooperation with the Federal Government are blocking aid to Tigray. It is to be recalled that on February 24, the president of the Afar region vowed not to allow the passage of aid towards Tigray. On February 27, Getachew Reda, TPLF Spokesperson, blamed the federal government for not settling issues with Afar region to allow UN aid trucks access to Tigray and warned that their forces may “seek a solution somewhere else.”
On March 23, Afar Federalist Diaspora Coordination Committee tweeted a translation of Awal Arba’s message regarding the passage of aid to Tigray.

"For Tigray, the Abala-Mekelle road is its only eye sliding in mud is not for one-eyed person, the Serdo-Mekelle road is their oxygen, if juntas were for the people of Tigray they would not have stated the war against afar and blocked the road there is no way that we allow aid to reach Tigray. They too know that."

Figure 10: A screenshot taken from TPLF spokesperson Getachew Reda Twitter account

Amhara State Government Communication Affairs Head Gizatchew Muluneh announced 11.6 million people in the region have been affected by the war. He said that there are 263,000 displaced people in the region. He said this is affecting not only the economy.

On March 17, 2022, The New York Times reported that the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) is responsible for killing of three staff members to doctors without borders (MSF) on June 24, 2021. The Spokesperson of the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Ambassador Dina Mufti rejected the claim, saying "New York Times report baseless" and argued that “soldiers cited in the report were captives and that they could be coerced by the TPLF".
MSF East Africa
@MSF_EastAfrica

Yesterday, the New York Times published an investigation into the killings of our colleagues Tedros Gebremariam, María Hernández and Yohannes Halefom in Tigray, #Ethiopia, on June 24, 2021.

Read our response:

Figure 11: A Tweet from doctors without border (MSF)
Viral Issues

On March 11, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) published a 110 pages report on human rights abuses in the Afar and Amhara regions in September and December of 2021. The report says at least 346 civilians have been subjected to unlawful and extra-judicial killings by all parties to the conflict. In areas that were under their control, OLF-Shane also committed targeted killings of government officials and their family members, as well as civilians they accused of supporting the government. ENDF, Amhara Special Forces, Fano, and other militias also reportedly committed unlawful and extrajudicial killings of and caused physical injuries to civilians they suspected of supporting Tigray Forces or OLF-Shane. The Commission said the human rights violations it documented "may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity" and called for an impartial and credible criminal investigation.

On March 14 State Department of Education Samuel Kifle (Dr) announced the passing points for grade 12 national examination. Due to the conflict in Ethiopia, Examination was administered in two rounds on different regions. At the same time, the number of subjects taken in these two rounds was different and as a result different passing marks were accordingly set.

On March 17, Amhara Media Corporation reported that a disproportionately large number of students failed the exam in the Amhara region.

Among 411 students who took the university entrance exam in Quara wereda of Amhara region, only 19 students passed the exam.

Figure 12: A screenshot taken from Quara Communication Office’s Facebook Page
Amhara media corporation reported on March 19, 2022, that Amhara State University Forum called for changes on the passing mark for the exam. The Ministry of Education stated that although the test correction was done in automated manner and technical problems encountered were corrected.

On March 4, 2022, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) demanded the Federal Police Commission and the National Intelligence and Security Service for the immediate release of the Chairman of the opposition Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) Dawud Ibssa from house arrest. The Board has confirmed that the opposition leader Dawud Ibssa has been on house arrest since 02 April 2021.

Human Rights watch reported on March 24, 2022, an armed drone killed at least 57 civilians and wounding more than 42 others in the town of Dedebit on January 7, 2022.

"Airstrike on Camp for Displaced people is Likely War Crime. The Ethiopian government should carry out a prompt, thorough, and impartial investigation of the apparent war crime and appropriately prosecute those responsible. Because of widespread abuses by all sides to the conflict in northern Ethiopia, foreign governments should impose a moratorium on arms sales and military assistance to the warring parties."
Human Rights Watch (HRW) also said the Ethiopian drone struck the Dedebit school compound three times, killing and maiming displaced Tigrayans, mainly older people, women, and children, as they slept in plastic-sheeted tents and a school building.

On March 19 Tom Gardner, correspondent to The Economist tweeted that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Tigray Leader Debretsion Gebremichael (Dr) held a phone conversation for the first time since the war started. Following the widespread circulation of this claim on social media platforms, Ethiopian Media Authority issued a letter on March 23 to warn Tom Gardner about the tweet he shard on his Tweeter Account.

“The EMA has discovered that this claim about a sensitive national issue shared on your personal social media account was not properly sourced or supported by the appropriate authority.”

Similarly, Getachew Reda twitted that there was no phone conversation between leaders.

Figure 13: A tweet from Getachew Reda
Conclusion

Several Controversial issues related to the conflict in part of Ethiopia and the negotiation between parties to the conflict continue to control the social media atmosphere. The video showing the security forces burning a living human has shocked social media users. Patriarch Abune Mathias’s interview and the subsequent response from Daniel Kibret, advisor to Prime Minister Abiy, was a source of controversy that divided social media users into two sides. Some consider the Patriarch a mere advocate of one ethnic group and support Daniel kibret’s response, while others condemn the latter and stand in support of the Patriarch.

Although both the Federal government and the Tigray government seem to indicate that an understanding has been reached between them to temporarily halt clashes, many social media users doubt the sincerity of the apparent understanding between the parties. Many Tigrayan social media users remain in doubt about whether humanitarian aid will in fact enter Tigray.

Tom Gardner’s tweet on the alleged phone conversation between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Tigray Leader Debretsion Gebremichael has caused confusion among social media users. Many believe the phone conversation has indeed taken place and consider it as a precursor to the peaceful resolution of the conflict. Whereas others believe that the information is simply fake given both parties to the conflict said the conversation never happened. Nevertheless, the situation in northern Ethiopia remains volatile. The next few weeks will be crucial in determining which pathway the parties to the conflict will choose, de-escalation or a major war.
Acknowledgement

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