

**Investigation into
Grave Human Rights Violations in Aksum City
Report on Preliminary Findings**





Investigation into Grave Human Rights Violations in Aksum City Report on Preliminary Findings

Introduction

In its January and February, 2021 reports on the human rights situation in Tigray, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC/the Commission), indicated that it has received reports of loss of lives, bodily and mental injury, instances of gender-based violence, looting and other human rights violations, including in areas of Tigray which it has not been able to access yet. EHRC also stated that it will continue to remotely monitor the human rights situation including in parts of Tigray that remained inaccessible at the time and that it will inform the public of its findings in due course. Citing an ongoing investigation into grave human rights violations in Aksum, its latest communication on February 26, 2021 further reported that it obtained preliminary evidence on destructions caused in the course of the military offensive in Aksum and the killings of unknown number of civilians by Eritrean soldiers.

The Commission has since then deployed a rapid investigation mission to Aksum from February 27 to March 5, 2021. Previous attempts by EHRC to access the city were impeded by the security situation and related issues. The rapid investigation mission spoke to survivors, 45 families of victims, eyewitnesses and religious leaders in the city. It also conducted a focus group discussion with over 20 residents of the city and spoke with local Kebele officials as well as medical personnel of Saint Mary and Aksum Referral Hospitals. The mission also obtained material evidence including video, audio and photographs, from families of victims and relevant authorities. The Commission wishes to state that the full investigation will be informed by discussions with all relevant military and civilian authorities, including with the city's mayor and deputy mayor, whom it was unable to reach during this mission.

As this preliminary finding report on grave human rights violations shows, EHRC gathered evidence about the death of more than one hundred victims in Aksum. EHRC is still in the process of verifying several more victims whose address and/or photographs are yet to be established and/or identified, including investigating additional allegations of human rights violations in rural towns in the environs of



Aksum city. Number of civilian fatalities and other casualties cited in this preliminary finding report are not final and only represent those the Commission was able to verify at this stage of the investigation.

This report also does not include investigations into allegations of gender-based violence and other human rights violations which, along with comprehensive recommendations, will also form part of the final investigation report. Names and photographs of victims mentioned in this report are shared with the consent of families; while some names and photographs have been withheld or changed. The process of collecting relevant information and response on some grave violations alleged to have been committed by some members of the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) is still ongoing and will also be included in the final report.

About Aksum City

Aksum, in Central Zone of Tigray Region, is located 190 km north of Mekelle and 132 km south of Adigrat. With a population estimated at around 67,000, Aksum is famous for its many tourist attractions and the Aksum Obelisks, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

During the period covered by this preliminary report, and especially from November 18 to 29, Aksum was hosting internally displaced persons (IDPs) from other affected parts of Tigray and visitors from other parts of Ethiopia, there to attend the annual Orthodox Christian celebration of Lady Mary of Zion, marked on November 30.

Civilian casualties related to the war (November 18 to 24, 2020)

Starting from November 18, members of the former administration of Aksum city began fleeing the city. Residents say they heard heavy artillery and gunfire all around the city, nearby rural areas and recounted how the area was ‘rocked’ by military air strikes. The gun fire went on until the next day; November 19.

“Residents and IDPs began leaving in droves seeking shelter elsewhere”. Heavy artillery and military air strikes on November 18, caused “civilian casualties and property destruction.” Residents say that in *Hatsebo (Morer)*, a rural town in the outskirts of Aksum, for example, 10 people were injured following military air strikes in the town on November 18, 2020. Five of them died instantly and a sixth person, a priest, died while receiving treatment in hospital. The latter information is also confirmed by hospital staff who treated the injured. Residents also say “The injuries of the five people who died on the spot was such that it was impossible to identify them before they were buried.” In Aksum, around a neighbourhood called ‘Damo



Hotel', military airstrikes on November 18, hit the residence of Woynareg Reda, a well-known woman in Aksum city, killing her and three members of her family.

The number of people taken to St Mary and Aksum Referral Hospital with physical injuries (to the arms, legs and other body parts) is "significant". The hospitals' medical staff have told the Commission that 10 of the people brought in with physical injuries on November 18, have died. "One 70-year-old woman's face was severely disfigured with the loss of her jaw and had to be fed with a tube. She died a few days later." The Commission has seen photographs of the woman's injuries.

Starting from November 19, ENDF and Eritrean soldiers were seen entering the city. St Mary and Aksum Referral Hospital staff say that they were forced to flee from the areas and their duties because of the heavy fighting. Those who decided to stay behind say that some members of ENDF and Eritrean soldiers looted the hospitals. Saint Mary Hospital staff recount how "on November 19, some members of ENDF and Eritrean soldiers came into the hospital. They looted the hospital's pharmacy and other medical equipment and destroyed the ones they did not need. They shot a man in bed in the emergency ward. Eritrean soldiers were insulting the staff ethnic based slurs." Aksum Referral Hospital was also looted by some members of ENDF and Eritrean soldiers four times over several days. They also looted one of the Hospital's wings that was set up and equipped at high cost to serve as a Covid-19 treatment centre. Eyewitnesses say the Eritrean soldiers even took the hospital beds and mattresses. The Commission was shown a video recording showing the damage the centre sustained.

"Many people died for lack of adequate treatment" because of the looting of drugs and medications. For example, on November 20, a young woman in labour was brought to Saint Mary Hospital. She had lost a lot of blood. She died because there were not enough medical professionals and she could not get the treatment she needed. Two of three women brought to the hospital from Wuqro Maray, a town about 17 km from Aksum, "with injuries from heavy artillery" died for similar reasons. Hospital staff say that the two women died for lack of diabetic medicines which were all looted by Eritrean soldiers". The hospital's records obtained by EHRC show that between November 18 and 20, a total of 41 people died in both hospitals from physical injuries, blood loss and from lack of adequate medical treatment. Hospital records also show that 126 people were brought in with medium to heavy physical injuries (bone fractures, injuries to the head).

Furthermore, the hospital's medical staff believe that "several people may have died without being taken to health facilities", citing the body of an as yet unidentified man



who was found with bullet wounds in a sewer on November 19, around a neighbourhood of Aksum known as “Samuna Fabrika”.

Another man, since identified as a staff member of an Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporations (Telecommunications) branch office in Adwa, who had come to Aksum to visit family, told hospital staff who treated him that “on November 19, when the car he was in reached a place called ‘Dayesus’, members of ENDF opened fire and he was injured.” They said he screamed for help and begged for his life to be saved prior to his death. The car that brought him to Aksum was taken by members of ENDF. Hospital staff also said family members collected his body on November 21. A family member and an eyewitness said, however, “Soldiers had warned residents not to collect bodies of the dead that day. So when soldiers came and started firing shots, family members had to flee. A few came back later and were able to collect his body and bury him at a church”.

Damages to civilian property

The Commission visited some of the neighbourhoods of Aksum to assess the extent of damages to civilian property. For example, Berana, a privately owned hotel, has sustained heavy damages. The hospital’s owners told the Commission that “ENDF was targeting another hotel nearby owned by a TPLF general. But instead, they hit our hotel, which has nothing to do with the TPLF general. They fired at the hotel’s windows and shattered them. Then, they went into the hotel and destroyed most of what was inside.” The hotel was still not operational at the time of the Commission’s visit. The hotel’s owners have also shown the Commission a letter they received from the local interim administration attesting to the “fact that the hotel had sustained an unfortunate level of damage” and photographs showing the level of damage sustained.

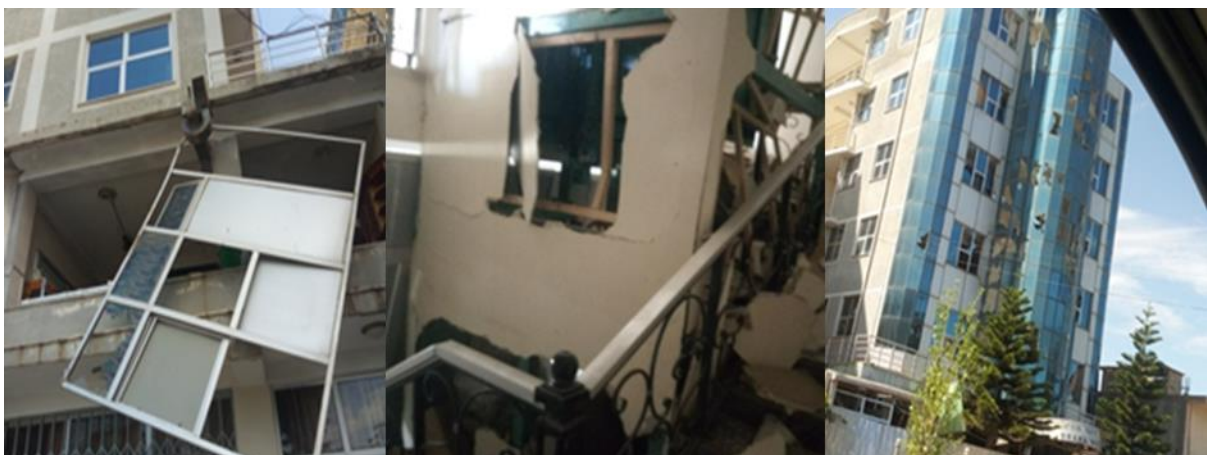




Figure 1 Berana Hotel

In addition, residents say “privately owned mobile shops, clothes shops, edible oil, food aid reserves and government offices were all looted by Eritrean soldiers”. The breakdown of law and order also allowed other individuals to take part in the looting.

“On November 24, Eritrean soldiers went into the administrative office of Aksum Tsion Church and took a Toyota car belonging to Abune Meqarios. They also stole all the four tires of another car belonging to the office (Code 5, plate number 02223) and the internal digital system of the car.” The church’s staff said they “have informed the relevant ENDF authorities but, at the time of the Commission’s visit, were yet to receive a response.”

Attack on Civilians by Eritrean Soldiers (November 25 to 29, 2020)

On November 25, members of ENDF were seen to be leaving Aksum and on November 26, residents said they could not see any “soldiers moving around the city”. On November 27, however, “a large number of Eritrean soldiers began coming into Aksum”. “They took up posts in three different locations of the city: ‘Maye Kuho’; ‘Samuna Fabrika’ and ‘Tsele’a’ . On November 28, 2020, we started hearing heavy gun fire all around the city.”

Most of the residents the Commission talked to say they do not know the reason why the heavy shooting began. Others gave varying explanations. Some say, “armed local militia started shooting at the Eritrean soldiers and that the angered soldiers began firing at civilians”. Others said, “Eritrean soldiers tried to loot Aksum Tsion Church and when angered residents tried to prevent it the Eritrean soldiers began shooting at civilians”. Other sources of the Commission said “some residents joined local militia to attack Eritrean soldiers and the Eritrean soldiers retaliated with vengeful attacks, killing civilians and especially targeting men.”

One local resident told EHRC that “On November 28, I was about to leave Saint Michael’s Church when I heard gunshots. Then I saw young children who looked like they were under 18 years old and carrying sticks and knives, running towards Maye Kuho, a hill not far from the Church. Shortly after, I saw Eritrean soldiers coming from a nearby road known as ‘Adwa Exit’” .



On November 29, residents tried to recover bodies of people killed on November 28, but Eritrean soldiers prevented them by firing gunshots. The Eritrean soldiers were saying “your people will not be buried before our soldiers are buried.” Fearing for their lives, residents who had come to recover the bodies fled. They were only allowed to come back for the bodies on November 30.

Those who participated in the coordination of the burials said “bodies were left lying on the streets of the city for close to three days and hence some were difficult to collect because parts of them were dismembered by animals or because they were in an advanced state of decomposition.” For example, “the body of one man (name withheld) identified as a resident of Aksum city and who was killed around Kaleb School was partly eaten by hyenas. We only found his head and an arm. We buried him along with other victims whose body parts were also missing. In another area, we also only found the heads of four more victims with missing bodies.” Residents also told the Commission “that they were forced to cover/wrap the bodies in cement bags and other packaging bags and to transport them in manual carts. We buried them in mass graves in Arba’etu Ensesa Church, Enda Michael Church, Endayesus Church and other churches”. Witnesses identified 9 churches where victims are buried, 7 in Axum and 2 in outskirts of the city. The Commission visited two mass graves in Arbaetu Ensesa and Endamichael Churches and obtained some photographs from residents.

Several residents recount how “on November 28, one man, identified as a staff of the Aksum branch of Commercial Bank of Ethiopia (name withheld), left his house around 5:00 p.m. to get food but when he reached an area known as ‘Abenet Hotel’ was caught by Eritrean soldiers who shot him first on one leg and then on his chest and killed him”. “A tank drove over the deceased’s body which was left lying on the street until the next day November 29, crushing the body from the waist down and cutting off his arm and leg” says an eyewitness who saw the state of the body.

Other families of victims and eyewitnesses have told the Commission “Muluberhan Gebremedhin (Wedi Gonyo), 38 years old, was killed in front of his pregnant wife and children; Mekonnen Temi’a was killed in front of his children; Guash Mekonnen, 38 years old and a veterinarian, was dragged out of his house and was killed in front of his son who was crying; Bitwoded Tadesse Kebede 51 years old, was shot in the neck and chest and killed while trying to collect bodies of other victims (it was not possible to inform his family so he was buried along with others); Mulugeta Te’ame (Wedi Wukro) was shot three times and killed on November 29, around 8:00 am in the morning during a similar attempt to recover bodies of other victims.”



Members of his family told the Commission “Mulugeta Fisseha, a 14-year-old child, who witnessed his mother, Techawit, getting killed by Eritrean soldiers, was shot while trying to run towards her”. Residents also recount how “a young man called Ephrem Alem and two of his friends were shot on their way to Ephrem’s house to celebrate the baptism of his new-born son. Only one of them survived. Another young man, Berihu Gebrerufael was at home celebrating his son’s first birthday when Eritrean soldiers came and dragged him and four other people out of the house and killed them.”

“Eritrean soldiers went into the house of another man Berhane Gebreegzabher Abraha, 70 years old, “dragged him out of there along with his two sons, Shishay and Mekonnen, and took them to a nearby water tanker where they made them lie on the ground. The soldiers shot all three of them in the head and killed them” says an eyewitness. “Lisaneworq, his son Biniam Lisaneworq and his daughter’s husband, ‘Memhir’ Ghirmay, were all killed inside Lisaneworq’s house by Eritrean soldiers” say members of the family the Commission spoke to.

“On November 28, Eritrean soldiers who went into two adjacent residential houses, in an area of Aksum city known as “Seattle Cinema”, found two residents whom they confirmed could not speak Tigrinya and let them go, while they dragged the remaining residents, out of their compound and shot them dead. They also killed one Tegen Bahta whom they found sleeping in his room.” The Commission visited the said compound and the room where Tegen Bahta was said to have been killed including the mattress which appeared to have been soaked with blood.

The Commission also talked to residents who said they have been detained by Eritrean soldiers. On November 29, Eritrean soldiers “rounded up a large number of the city’s young men and took them in areas known as ‘Meshelam’ and ‘Zero Zero’. They remained detained the whole day inside a pit until their release in the evening. The Eritrean soldiers told them ‘Tomorrow, Aksum Tsion celebration is also marked in Eritrea so we will let you go and bury the dead today’”. Eyewitnesses say “Eritrean soldiers who were rounding up young people found a young man inside the compound of Saint Mary Church. When they asked him to get up, he explained that he had a disability and could not move an arm and a leg. ‘Should we kill you then?’ the soldiers smirked and the young man replied ‘yes kill me!’. So the soldiers shot and killed him.”

Residents also say that “although the November 30 Aksum Tsion holiday was marked within the Church’s compound, they have been saddened that the media did not report the state of grief the city was in.”



The Commission also visited survivors who sustained physical injuries during the attack. One man explains what happened to him as follows “On November 28, around 10:00 a.m. in the morning, Eritrean soldiers rounded me and other young men from our houses and the streets and took us to an area known as Megabit School. They shot me three times, but I survived. Others who were with me all died.” The Commission has verified a detailed list of names of victims which it obtained from this survivor and seen the physical injuries he sustained.

Another survivor says he went looking for his son whom he was told was killed when Eritrean soldiers caught him and shot at him and six other people who were with him. All six of them died but he was only shot on the leg; so, pretending to be dead he waited for the soldiers to leave. “On November 28, around 10:00 a.m. in the morning, I was walking towards an area near the Aksum Stelae, when I came upon ‘close to 15 Eritrean soldiers’. They shouted at me to ‘come’ but I ran away and kept running even though they shot at me many times. I was hit on the back and was bleeding but I did not stop running” recounts another survivor. He has shown the Commission said bullet wounds.

“On November 28, I decided to leave Aksum city and join my family in a nearby rural town. I had just gone past Saint Michael Church when I came upon Eritrean soldiers who were hiding inside the cemetery of the Church. They shot at me and hit me on the right leg and the left thigh. Another bullet hit my left arm. People who found me bleeding carried me home. It is only three weeks later that I decided to seek medical help in Aksum Referral Hospital.”

In addition to physical injuries and loss of civilian life, the attack also caused damages to civilian residences and religious institutions. “On November 28, from 8:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., an unknown number of Eritrean soldiers went into the cemetery of Saint Michael’s Church and were shooting directly at the church to destroy it. They shouted “hit it’ in Tigrinya and shot at the church all day” said eyewitnesses. On November 28, the residential building where Aksum University Medical Doctors stayed was deliberately and selectively targeted and shot at. The Commission has obtained images showing the extent of damage on both buildings.



Figure 2 Saint Michael's Church

Residents deplored the perceived inaction of members and authorities of ENDF who were in the city during the attack on November 28, which they say has worsened the extent of the damage. Residents and church officials say however that a month after the November 28 attack, on December 23, an attempt by Eritrean soldiers to enter Aksum TSION Church to loot it was foiled by the combined efforts of members of ENDF and residents.

Information collected during this preliminary investigation confirm that during the two days of November 28 and November 29, grave violations of human rights were committed and that in Aksum, over one hundred residents including visitors from other parts of the country who came to mark the annual Aksum TSION celebration and internally displaced persons from other parts of Tigray, were killed by Eritrean soldiers. As the residents, families of victims and eyewitnesses described to EHRC, “civilians were killed in front of their children, spouses and mothers.” Eritrean soldiers went door to door asking women “where their husbands or children were” telling them “to bring their sons out if they have any” and asking questions in Tigrinya and shooting at civilian men they dragged out of houses and caught on streets even as the men pleaded saying they were not armed. Families of victims and eyewitnesses identified the attackers as Eritrean soldiers by their distinct Eritrean Tigrinya accent, by the uniforms and shoes they were wearing and a distinct cultural marking on the face of some of the Eritrean soldiers.”

These widespread human rights violations are not ordinary crimes but grave contraventions of applicable international and human rights laws and principles, marked by intentionally directed attacks against civilians who were not directly taking part in the hostilities and including intentional looting, destruction and appropriation of property not justified by military necessity (including religious institutions and health facilities). As these grave human rights violations may amount to crimes against humanity or war crimes, it underscores the need for a comprehensive investigation into overall human rights situation in Tigray region.



Damages related to the enforcement of curfew rules

Authorities imposed a curfew in Aksum which curbs vehicle and pedestrian movement between 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. Action taken by security forces on people seen on streets during curfew hours has caused loss of life and physical injuries. On January 19, 2021, around 7:30 p.m., Teklay Seyoum, was caught outdoors by soldiers who started chasing after him when he tried to run. He went into Aksum TSION Church compound, but the soldiers followed him inside and shot him dead inside the Church's premises. The Commission has also obtained information that, on January 25, two as yet unidentified people were killed in a similar manner; one of them around The Ark Hotel and the other around Megabit Primary School.

On January 22 around 6:30 p.m., Berha Reda, 35 years old, was returning home with a friend after work when he was shot on his doorstep by soldiers wearing ENDF uniforms. Berha had to undergo a 6-hour long surgery at Aksum Referral Hospital first and then referred to Ayder Referral Hospital for a second surgery on the jaw to treat the extensive injury he sustained on the face. He has lost sight on both eyes from the injury and has trouble breathing. He has shown the Commission photographs of his injuries.

Another man, identified as a security guard head of Aksum University, who is said to have returned to his post along with other colleagues following a call by the University, was killed in a controversy with soldiers while three of his colleagues were severely beaten up by the soldiers.

The Commission is highly concerned that actions taken by security forces to enforce the curfew continue to cause loss of life and physical injuries with the use of disproportionate measures including lethal weapons to enforce curfews and ensure security of the city. EHRC urges for an immediate stop to such disproportionate measures and use of non-lethal weapons as necessary. Investigations into human rights violations related to the application of curfew regulations together with reply of the security authorities will be included in the full investigation report.



Recommendations

- In accordance with the commitment of the federal government for the joint investigation into all allegations of all human rights violations in Tigray Region by the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), all relevant authorities should facilitate and provide appropriate enabling environment and full cooperation for the investigation,
- The Commission also urges for the immediate start and strengthening of the rehabilitation efforts and provision of humanitarian assistance to the families of victims and affected persons and communities,
- Health facilities should be given particular attention for their full rehabilitation and resumption of full services,
- The use of disproportionate measures by security forces that put the security and safety of civilians at risk must be stopped immediately.