

“Human Rights Are Not for Black Peoples”: Understandings of International Human Rights Discourses by Young Adults in Tigray during War and Genocide

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ABSTRACT

In November 2020, a war broke out between the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigray region in northern Ethiopia. This two-year period of extreme violence resulted in between 800,000 – 1 million Tegaru deaths, a communications blockade, sexual violence and starvation used as weapons of war, and an Ethiopian

government imposed siege around Tigray to prevent entry of humanitarian aid. This study co-designed by three Tegaru researchers and one non-Tegaru researcher explored the experiences of young Tegaru adults, aged 18–25, during the early stages of the war. The findings in this paper are from semi-structured one-on-one interviews held in August/September 2022 with nine men and nine women and follow-up one-on-one interviews in January/February 2023, all of whom were living in the Tigray capital city of Mekelle. Participants shared their experiences related to the violence, siege, and blockade imposed by the Ethiopian government during this period. Notably, most participants expressed strong condemnation of the actions taken by the international community, especially given the discrepancy as to how the international community responded to the Russia – Ukraine War which began in February 2022, 15 months after the conflict and genocide against Tigray began. Using the colonial matrix of power as a theoretical framework, this article shares Tegaru understandings of the international community's response to the war and genocide in Tigray and Tegaru demands that international organizations and nation states put into action the human rights discourses they purport to support, demonstrating a desire for a universal practice of international human rights, one that does not privilege groups based on race or wealth. In not living up to these claims of the universality and neutrality of international human rights, international organizations and western nation states illustrated that human rights remains the domain of one particular subset of peoples, those with Eurocentric systems of knowing and being, who are seen as the true inheritors of the earth. These logics then destroy all other ways of knowing and being (Mignolo, 2007), and such acts become a production of invisibility wherein Tegaru lives are considered dispensable.

Introduction

On November 4, 2020, a war broke out between the Federal Government of Ethiopia and Tigray government/Tegaru peoples. Tigray is a region situated in the north of Ethiopia and shares a border with Eritrea to the North and Sudan to the West. The government of Ethiopia was supported by the Eritrean government in what was at first described as a “law and order operation” (Khorrami, 2021) by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed but was in reality a campaign that targeted all Tegaru peoples in what many experts now call genocide and campaign of ethnic cleansing.



The war on Tigray has resulted in a devastating humanitarian crisis, including widespread human rights abuses, mass displacement, sexual violence and famine (Wedgegebriel et al., 2024). Over five million people continue to require urgent humanitarian aid, yet starvation has been weaponized as a tool of war. One of the most alarming aspects of the Tigray crisis is the systematic denial of aid. Reports indicate that Ethiopian and Eritrean forces imposed deliberate blockades, preventing humanitarian agencies from delivering essential supplies. Of a population of seven million people, estimates indicate that between 800,000 and 1 million people were killed between November 2020 and the signing of a peace agreement in November 2022, up to 14 percent of Tigray's population (Weldemichel, 2024, 2025). Since then, Tigray and its people continue to be mired in a humanitarian and political crisis. A report by New Lines Institute (2024) found that the human rights abuses in Tigray were a violation of Common Article 3 of the Geneva Convention, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948 and that war crimes violated international humanitarian law, and in particular Article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

This article draws on interviews conducted with young Tegaru peoples living in Mekelle City, the capital of Tigray, in August/ September 2022 and follow-up interviews in January/February 2023, both during the war and soon after the signing of a Peace Agreement in November 2022. This article shares Tegaru insights of the role of the “international community” and human rights discourses and law as related to the war against Tigray and its people. The participants also draw comparisons to the early international response to the Russia–Ukraine War, arguing that the differing responses to Ukraine as opposed to Tigray points to anti-Blackness and racism within the international order that dehumanizes Black peoples, and in particular, those in Africa. It is important to note that the participants did not begrudge the extensive international and western support afforded to Ukraine and Ukrainians, but expressed frustration that Black lives were deemed dispensable, thus highlighting a racial and geopolitical hierarchy within which the system of international human rights is structured.



Literature Review

The war on Tigray began in November 2020, resulting in a devastating humanitarian crisis. Despite the urgency of the humanitarian crises, the international response has been significantly weak. The Tigray war has resulted in widespread human rights abuses, mass displacement, and conditions of famine. Over five million people required urgent humanitarian aid, yet starvation was weaponized as a tool of war (Berhane, 2023; UN OCHA, 2021; Miller, 2024; Amnesty International, 2021; Annys et al., 2021). One of the most alarming aspects of the Tigray crisis is the systematic denial of aid. Reports indicate that Ethiopian and Eritrean forces imposed deliberate blockades, preventing humanitarian agencies from delivering essential supplies, which resulted in catastrophic consequences (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023; Anys et al., 2021; Kahsay, 2024; BBC, 2021; Geremedhn & Hafte, 2024; Amnesty International, 2021; Miller, 2024; The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2022).

During this time, another major international crisis broke out. The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia represents one of the “largest and fastest refugee movements witnessed in Europe since the end of World War II” (Ociepa-Kicińska & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022, p. 1). This invasion prompted remarkable actions from the international community, with the United Nations (UN) at the forefront among various responding agencies. Several studies highlight how the UN mobilized its vast resources and networks to tackle the complex crisis, while other international organizations and regional bodies provided crucial yet supplementary assistance (Atnadu & Halidu, 2023; Khairova et al., 2024; Martin, Wu & Yakymova, 2023; Ociepa-Kicińska & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022; Pellicciari, 2022, 2023).

As Martin, Wu, and Yakymova (2023) point out, the “international humanitarian response to the Russian Federation’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine was immediate” (p. 1). On February 24, 2022, the UN allocated \$20 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund to facilitate life-saving humanitarian interventions. By the end of the year, the Ukraine Flash Appeal, which was coordinated by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), raised \$3.73 billion to provide emergency shelter, essential supplies, and cash assistance to millions of displaced and vulnerable individuals. Key UN



agencies played important roles in implementing this response. While the UNHCR prioritized emergency housing and protection for displaced populations, aiding millions with shelter and essential items, UNICEF focused on the needs of children through healthcare, education, and access to clean water. The World Health Organization (WHO) supplied critical medical resources. Additionally, the World Food Programme (WFP) addressed food insecurity, worsened by disruptions to agricultural production and trade due to the war, while the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) ensured access to reproductive health services for women and girls (Atnadu & Halidu, 2023; Pellicciari, 2022). Support for Ukraine continues as the war enters its fourth year, with ongoing assistance from the UN and other international humanitarian organizations.

Despite these two conflicts having overlapping timelines, international responses differed significantly. Schenkenberg et al.'s (2024) evaluative report and Annys et al. (2021) highlight that only a fraction of needed aid reached Tigray, with less than 10% of requested assistance making it through during the peak of the crisis, addressing less than a quarter of those in the most severe need (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023). Furthermore, aid workers faced extreme restrictions, arrests, and violence while attempting to access affected populations (Food Cluster, 2021), and the UN OCHA disclosed 131 humanitarian violations perpetrated by the allied forces in 2021. On the other side of the world, since February 2022, international actors have allocated over \$100 billion to support Ukraine, with \$20 billion designated for humanitarian efforts. In contrast, less than \$2 billion has been mobilized for Tigray, failing to meet even half of the required humanitarian assistance (Geremedhn & Hafte, 2024; Kahsay, 2024; The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2022; UN OCHA, 2021).

On the other hand, diplomatic responses to the situation in Ukraine have varied considerably, with the United Nations swiftly condemning Russia's invasion and the General Assembly adopting a resolution that demanded an immediate withdrawal while citing violations of the UN Charter (UN Press, 2022). However, the passage of binding resolutions was hindered by Russia's veto power in the Security Council and the abstentions of key states like China and India (Atnadu & Halidu, 2023). Beyond the UN framework, NATO and the EU took on a strategic role,



focusing on military aid, logistical support, and economic sanctions to undermine Russia's war efforts while ensuring the stability of global energy and food supplies (Khairova et al., 2024). This underscores the UN's effective leadership in addressing the crisis in Ukraine, successfully coordinating humanitarian and diplomatic responses.

In contrast, in Tigray, international actors remained largely silent, even after Ethiopia expelled UN officials under unfounded accusations of interference (Plaut & Vaughan, 2023; Woldemichel, 2025). The disparity in aid stems from geopolitical priorities rather than humanitarian needs (The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2022; Miller, 2024). Humanitarian aid is fundamentally defined as urgent, impartial, and principled assistance for those affected by crises; the reality, however, is often more complex. Kahsay (2024) describes the core principles of humanitarian aid as saving lives, alleviating suffering and upholding human dignity regardless of race, nationality, or political beliefs, which is often challenged by political interests, geopolitical priorities, logistical constraints, and systemic inequities. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs (2022) argues that the international response to Ukraine demonstrates that rapid mobilization of aid is possible when there is political will. However, the global community's lack of attention to Tigray raises critical ethical questions: Are Tigrayan lives valued less by the global community? Has the prioritization of geopolitical and ideological interests overshadowed the humanitarian responsibility to protect all civilians equally? Such an outcome represents a catastrophic failure of the international humanitarian response and implies systemic biases in global aid support and distribution. This, in turn, calls for action that humanitarian aid should be provided based on need rather than political considerations.

In a nutshell, the international response to the wars in Ukraine and Tigray highlights a significant disparity in attention and intervention. The conflict in Ukraine prompted swift and substantial support from Western nations, including military aid, financial assistance, diplomacy, and extensive media coverage, largely due to its geopolitical implications for Europe (Wilson Center, 2022). In contrast, the Tigray war, despite being one of the deadliest conflicts with severe humanitarian consequences, was met with relative neglect by the global



community (Plaut, 2024; The Guardian, 2022). Analysts argue that this imbalance reflects a racial and geopolitical hierarchy that undervalues African crises (Daily Maverick, 2022; The Elephant, 2022). Even more troubling is the focus of the western world on the Ukraine war has influenced world decision-making and public opinion regarding the war in Tigray. Such selective humanitarianism exposes troubling inconsistencies in how the world responds to human suffering based on location and perceived strategic importance (AEI, 2022; New Eastern Europe, 2022).

Theoretical Framework - The Colonial Matrix of Power

Historically, colonialism refers to the practice of domination over a people, their knowledges, their culture, and the appropriation and exploitation of their wealth, labour and natural environment. Referring to previously colonized peoples and/or lands as existing in *peripheral zones*, Grosfoguel (2002) states that they “remain in a colonial situation even though they are no longer under a colonial administration” (p. 205). These ongoing colonial situations and the perpetuated inequalities are referred to as *coloniality* (Bhambra, 2014; Quijano, 2000). Maldonado-Torres (2016) concurs, stating that “while colonization was supposed to be a matter of the past, more and more movements and independent intellectuals, artists, and activists are identifying the presence of coloniality everywhere” (p. 1). As examples of the ubiquitousness of coloniality, Maldonado-Torres (2007) points out that it “is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day” (p. 243). This article speaks to the experiences of Tegaru peoples in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, a land that is considered to have never been colonized by European or western powers despite attempts by the Italians to do so. However, despite this history, the response of the international community to the war and genocide in Tigray can best be understood as a function of the colonial matrix of power.



The colonial matrix of power framework emerged from the conceptualization and theorization of Aníbal Quijano's (2000, 2007) work on the coloniality of power. Mignolo (2023) describes the colonial matrix of power as a “machine ... [which produces] ... injustices and inequalities” (p. 43). As an organizing principle, the colonial matrix of power is founded on the ideas of race and racial classifications (Walsh et al., 2021), and such practices of control, exploitation and domination have become naturalized as “objective” and “scientific” notions (Quijano, 2000). Mignolo (2007) proposes that the colonial matrix of power framework can be used to uncover and analyze the relationships of power and inequalities that exist in all societal structures. For this paper, three dimensions of the colonial matrix of power – the coloniality of power, the coloniality of knowledge and the coloniality of being – will be operationalized to understand the failure of human rights discourse during the war and genocide in Tigray.

Coloniality of power – the foundational concepts underpinning the coloniality of power are domination, control and management of “... labor, sex, subjectivity, and authority” (Fúnez Flores, 2024, p. 17). Germana (2014) suggests that with the process of colonization, there emerged a model of power that allowed the colonizers to imagine themselves as superior, the future, and modern, to name themselves white, and to imagine colonized peoples as inferior, backwards, and worthless, and name them according to their skin colour (De Lissovov & Bailón, 2019). This binary of racial superiority/inferiority became core to sustaining the model of power exerted by the colonizers (Quijano, 2000). Not only were colonized people naturalized as inferior due to their skin colour, their cultures, traditions, knowledges, and beliefs were also made inferior in the same way (Mignolo, 2021).

The domain of coloniality of knowledge refers to the epistemic dimension of the colonial matrix of power. The concept uncovers how knowledge is classified and hierarchized and to analyze how Western produced knowledge has come to be made legitimate, superior and universally accepted and how all other knowledge systems have come to be considered inferior and prescientific (Mignolo, 2007). The promotion and domination of a single world view (or a hegemonic episteme) reinforces and privileges concepts such as universalism, neutrality and delocalized knowledge (Walsh, 2018). The current Eurocentric systems of knowledge and



knowledge production impose themselves as the only true ways of knowing the world. Concurrently, these logics almost always violently marginalize, subalternize, and destroy all other forms of knowledge, especially those of formerly colonized, and/or of Indigenous peoples (Mignolo, 2007). Not only are knowledges held by formerly colonized and Indigenous peoples erased from existence, the knowledge bearers are also subjected to the same violent marginalization, destruction, and erasure processes.

Conceptualization of the coloniality of being developed as a response to questions around the impact of coloniality on colonized and Indigenous peoples' lived experiences (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). In conceptualizing this dimension of the colonial matrix of power, Maldonado-Torres (2007) encourages reframing Descartes' foundational philosophical principle – *cogito, ergo sum* (*I think, therefore I am*) – to expose its underlying assumptions and connections to coloniality of being. He states that Descartes' principle is better interpreted as: "I think (others do not think, or do not think properly), therefore I am (others are not, lack being, should not exist or are dispensable)" (p. 253). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) concurs and suggests that Descartes' principle creates divisions by placing people into *zones of being* (those that can think, therefore, should exist) and *zones of non-being* (those that cannot think, therefore, should not exist). The zone of non-being (Fanon, 1961/2004) is a psychological space where oppressed and marginalized peoples are regarded as sub-human objects, where they are not allowed to have a voice or be fully human, and, where they are denied the right to exist as human beings. Essentially, the coloniality of being addresses colonized and Indigenous peoples' identities as human and promotes the notion that if peoples' humanity is in doubt, then they do not have to be viewed as human. This logic formed the basis for the displacement, eradication, and genocide of many colonized and Indigenous peoples around the world, as these peoples were not considered fully human and, therefore, were dispensable (Wynter, 2003).

All dimensions of the colonial matrix of power framework interact and are intertwined, and they work together to uphold and to perpetuate the logics of coloniality, and the underlying logics of racial distinction in present society, including how human rights discourses and law operate as an extension of violent



colonial relations of power grounded in white supremacy and Eurocentric systems of knowing and being. The colonial matrix of power framework exposes the logics of coloniality which continues to violently oppress formerly colonized, Indigenous, and marginalized peoples.

Methodology: A Qualitative Case Study

The study used a qualitative case study methodology to explore the lived experiences of young people in Tigray, focusing on their understanding of the international responses to the war and genocide in the region. A case study design is suitable for this research, as it enables an examination of complex social phenomena within their real-world contexts. According to Yin (2003) and Baxter & Jack (2008), a case study methodology is most appropriate when the aim is to answer “how” and “why” questions; when the researcher cannot manipulate participants’ behaviour; when an understanding of contextual conditions is essential; when the researcher cannot manipulate participants’ behaviour; when an understanding of contextual conditions is essential; and when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined. As such, the case study methodology provides a holistic and nuanced perspective, allowing for an in-depth understanding of participants’ lived experiences with the international responses to the war and genocide in the Tigray region.

Methods

This research was co-designed by the research team, which consisted of three Tegaru researchers and one non-Tegaru researcher. Purposeful sampling was employed to recruit participants who met the age criteria (18–30 years old) and had lived experiences relevant to the study’s focus who were living in the Tigray capital city of Mekelle. This approach ensures that the research includes diverse yet relevant perspectives, enhancing the depth and contextual richness of the findings. Data collection was carried out in two phases with all interviews conducted in Tigrinya and translated into English by the Tigray based research team. Phase one of data collection involved one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 18 (nine men and nine women) participants in August/September 2022. Phase two of data collection involved follow-up one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 13



participants in January/February 2023 to validate preliminary findings from phase one and expand previous responses. The two-phase approach was employed to observe how young peoples' lived experiences had evolved in response to the changing circumstances of the war between the interviews conducted in phase one and those of phase two (Caruana et al., 2015).

It is important to highlight that the first phase of interviews occurred amidst heavy fighting, as Ethiopian government forces and allied Eritrean government were waging a genocidal campaign against Tigrayans. While the capital of Tigray, Mekelle City, had been freed from the Ethiopian government and their allies in June 2021, large parts of Tigray remained under the control of occupying forces. Despite a communications siege, news still reached those in Mekelle City about the atrocities committed by occupying forces in other parts of Tigray. The participants detailed their understanding of the international response to the war and genocide in Tigray against the backdrop of the region remaining under siege, severe restrictions on the movement of goods and people, and the ongoing shutdown of banking, communication, power services, and humanitarian aid. Follow-up one-on-one interviews occurred approximately two months after the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (COHA) between the Ethiopian Federal Government and Tigray Regional Government in Pretoria, South Africa, in November 2022.

Participants

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF PARTICIPANTS

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Interview 1	Interview 2
Abiy	23	Man	X	X
Hiluf	25	Man	X	
Kindeya	24	Man	X	X



Samuel	23	Man	X	X
Sebhat	25	Man	X	X
Getachew	25	Man	X	X
Mesfin	25	Man	X	
Eyasu	23	Man	X	
Kiflom	21	Man	X	X
Fetahawit	22	Woman	X	
Fekerte	19	Woman	X	
Fana	22	Woman	X	X
Tibelts	24	Woman	X	X
Genet	25	Woman	X	X
Elsa	21	Woman	X	X
Haven	22	Woman	X	X
Selam	19	Woman	X	X
Zahra	24	Woman	X	X



Data Analysis

The study utilized a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify and interpret patterns within the data. The analysis revealed that several participants articulated their experiences related to the siege and blockade imposed by the Ethiopian government during the war and genocide. Notably, most participants expressed strong condemnation of the actions taken by the international community concerning the war and genocide in the Tigray region, especially given the discrepancy as to how the international community responded to the Russia–Ukraine War, which began in February 2022, 15 months after the conflict and genocide against Tigray began.

Findings

Phase one of our data collection with 18 Tegaru youth gave us a broad understanding of the experiences of Tegaru youth from November 2020 until September 2022, when the first one-on-one interviews were conducted. As a result of these interviews, we identified six themes that illustrated the magnitude of the violence Tegaru experienced and that contributed to how Tegaru interpreted the international community's response.

Indiscriminate Killing of Tegaru

The level of violence and devastation in Tigray is unprecedented, and it may be one of the most violent conflicts of the 21st century thus far. Estimates indicate that anywhere between 800,000 and 1,000,000 Tegaru were killed by occupying forces through direct violence, starvation, human-made famine, and lack of access to medical care and medicines. While the government of Ethiopia initially claimed that the November 4, 2020 incursion of Ethiopian forces into Tigray was a law and order operation and denied the presence of Eritrean government forces, the scale and nature of the attack quickly demonstrated that Ethiopian and Eritrean government forces had entered Tigray with the purpose of subjugating Tegaru and occupying all of Tigray. The participants in the study shared their experiences with the occupying forces from the first days of the war until the removal of the Ethiopian government forces from the majority of Eastern and Southern Tigray in



June 2021. Western Tigray, which accounts for 40% of Tigray, still remains under occupation and has been ethnically cleansed of Tegaru. Northern Tigray was under the control of Eritrean forces until the signing of COHA in November 2022, with reports that Eritrean forces continue to control parts of northern Tigray. It is within this context that the participants shared their experiences.

Speaking to the initial outbreak of fighting on November 4th, 2020, Kindeya noted:

For the first time I heard gun fire for a long time after midnight, and I asked to my friends who were on duty as well; they told me Tigray special force and federal defense force based in 'Quiha' (seven km away from Mekelle) were fighting. I just got scared and went to my house to sleep. At dusk, I tried to call to friends but the network was disrupted. I think that was the first incidence of war. I think the gunfire that lasted from midnight until the dusk was the turning point to open war between Tigray Special Forces and federal defense forces since the fighting spread to other [military bases of federal defense forces outside of Mekelle. ... Drone and jets were dropping bombs in the city indiscriminately that I was so horrified that I could not be able to resume working.

Hiluf shared a similar memory.

All of the sudden, the joint forces had launched firing of heavy weaponry from the vicinity of Mekelle and were dropping ammunition in different parts of the town. The residents of the city had begun running away in exodus unconsciously wherever their legs took them to save themselves. At the time, we were not observing the direction from which heavy weapon was fired, but we were observing where it was dropped. I did not flee to somewhere; I remained in Mekelle despite heavy weapon fire continuing.

Unlike Hiluf, Abiy did flee, revealing

We fled bare hands merely to save our life. And so, the caves where we lived for three days were uninhabited by people. Consequently, we lived with



nothing to eat and drink for three consecutive days. As we could not bear the hunger and thirst, we went out of the caves and walked to the nearby villages. ... Over the next few days what I encountered was shocking; the enemies' soldiers were investigating and searching moving around house to house to find out ex-officials and militias. But the soldiers did not find the ex-officials and militias. Instead, they loot their houses and shoot whomever they find in the houses... I encountered a surprise attack launched by [Tigray Defense Forces] on enemy soldiers while they were moving towards Abi Adi town in a convoy. On the spot, so many soldiers of the enemies were killed and wounded. Consequently, the [enemy] soldiers began shooting arbitrarily whomever they met along the way so that I turn my back and run away till I lost my sense and got breathless in dread.

Additionally, according to Abiy

enemy soldiers were arresting and killing the youth in the town under suspicion of links to TDF. Many more innocent youths and individuals were arbitrarily killed and jailed indefinitely. The residents of Abi Adi were pursuing a life in excruciating distress.

While the initial fighting began in Mekelle, the capital city of Tigray, it soon moved to more rural areas of Tigray as the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) had moved outside of the capital to regroup after the Ethiopian government claimed victory at the end of November 2020. During this time, the most intense fighting and killing happened in the rural areas of Tigray where some of the participants had either been when the war started or where they had run to in the hopes of escaping the violence. However, the villages turned out to be even less safe than Mekelle City.

The villages were subject to destruction as a battle ground. Even more in the village the prohibited chemical weapon known as phosphorus was used to attack under the suspicion that TDF fighters had infiltrated. As a result, domestic animals were completely vanished. (Gere)



The accounts of the violence being inflicted by the Eritrean and Ethiopian government forces travelled throughout Tigray. Genet shares her experience of being forced to travel to Mekelle as the rural areas were incredibly unsafe and there was a lack of food and water available, forcing those who had the resources and courage to try to make their way to Mekelle.

I saw along the way to Mekelle for the first time tanks and cannon, I had never seen in my own eyes except in movies and pictures of the 17 years armed struggle. As the minibus gets close, the tank was pointed towards us as if to fire, that I was so horrified out of mistrust and suspicion of the joint forces' soldiers. Anyhow, I arrived safely to Mekelle without encountering incidence of raping and killing of any sort. I got to our house to find families who had been scattered to different places coming together once again... But as I reflect over myself, I realized that my fear emanated from the true nature of federal forces soldiers who were reputed for torturing, killing and raping of innocent civilians. (Genet)

As the experiences of the participants illustrate, the occupying forces were engaging in the indiscriminate killing of Tegaru, targeting not only the Tigray military but also civilians, a violation of international human rights law that was seemingly ignored by international human rights organizations.

Destruction of Health Facilities and Limiting Access to Medicine

The siege around Tigray, the blockade against humanitarian aid into Tigray, as well as the destruction of medical facilities had severe consequences for Tegaru. Gere explained that the Ethiopian federal government had declared a siege and blockade around Tigray, stopping the movement of people and all goods.

The siege and blockade has affected the life of all people in Tigray in different ways. For instance, with regard to lack of medicine; many patients of chronic diseases were dying. I would imagine the death of patients due to lack of medicine equates to deaths of war. (Gere)



Elsa concurred,

According to my experience, lack of medicine severely affected kids and elders, who are susceptible to communicable disease most often than not. In [existing] public health centers, a patient goes through diagnosis, and yet is told to get medicine from private pharmacies, the price of which is expensive if at all it is available. In the same way, elders are susceptible to death if they infected with communicable diseases especially those who had chronic diseases such as high blood pressure, kidney disease and coronary disease. An elder, who was living next to our house, died from a chronic disease.

Sole and Feve reiterated these points and added that for many the only option may be medication that was close to the expiry date or had already expired. Selam also shared that all medicine has sharply increased in price due to limited supplies: “my sister is diabetic, for a single piece of insulin the price is five hundred birr My families could not afford to purchase insulin to my sister.” Lack of access to medication and health facilities was a major issue for Tigrayans, especially given the numbers of people, in particular civilians who were harmed by occupying forces. As Fre noted, “The war has affected each and every household’s life It is so distressing to meet friends every day because we share the same story of misery and challenges.” The planned and deliberate destruction of health facilities and limiting of access to medicines is a violation of the right to health and other health-related human rights which are legally binding commitments written into the 2005 Montreal Statement on the Human Right to Essential Medicines.

The Attempted Silencing of Tegaru: Communications Blackouts

Since the outbreak of the war in November 2020, the Ethiopian Federal Government has imposed a communications blackout in Tigray. This blackout, with periods of respite in Mekelle City, severely impacted individuals by cutting off access to telephone, internet, electricity, and banking services. This isolation heightened the humanitarian crisis, making survival even more difficult.



Participants described the distress caused by the blackout. Genet recalled, “Phone call was disrupted, since communication network and electric power cable lines were destroyed by heavy weapons. I had had no access to information about Mekelle for some time while I was in the village.” Similarly, Kindeya stated, “There is no means of communication service, banking service and sustainable electric power. As a result, I do not have access to communicate with my sisters who are living in Addis Ababa and overseas.” Limited communication was possible through non-governmental organization-facilitated voice messages, but even this became unsustainable. Zara noted, “So far, I have the opportunity to voice message transfer to families only once in a year; afterwards, I never had access to obtain information.” Fana added, “NGO staff that used to help us have transferred to other places, and so we do not have access to communication.” Some were forced to travel long distances to make calls. Selam shared, “Many people traveled to Alamata to make a phone call, but the accommodation and transportation cost to go there is very expensive, beyond my capacity.” Eyasu described the despair of not knowing the fate of loved ones: “Those who used to live with us here left for their village because they have no food to eat nor work. Their well-being and whereabouts remain unknown due to the communication blockade.”

The blackout also had severe emotional and social consequences. Mesfin explained, “This was a horrific experience that has affected me psychologically. Sometimes when I wake up in the morning, the noisy sound of jets haunts me.” The disruption extended to major life events, as Mesfin also shared, “My wedding ceremony failed, so in its stead, I organized a ring ceremony. Except for a few family members, none of my best friends could attend.” Similarly, Zara described funeral disruptions: “Burial ceremonies were carried out during the night, attended by only a few people, as relatives and friends did not hear of the loss due to lack of communication.” The blockade also had life-threatening consequences. Mesfin recounted, “My uncle, who was diabetic, died of lack of insulin. I was informed a week later. Had there been communication, I wish we could have rescued him.”

However, following the peace agreement in November 2022, communication services began to return. Zara expressed relief: “Following the peace agreement, I have the opportunity for full access to communication since the internet reopened.



I traveled to Addis and was able to meet different people.” Genet confirmed the return of funeral traditions, stating, “The funeral processions are being conducted according to the traditional rites.” Additionally, Kindeya emphasized access to international responses, noting, “I now have the opportunity to follow the international community’s response to the war and genocide in Tigray.” The communications blackout in Tigray had devastating consequences, cutting people off from their families, worsening psychological trauma, and disrupting social and economic life. The restoration of communication has provided some relief, but the scars of prolonged isolation remain. It is important to note that in 2016, the UN declared that it considers access to the internet to be a human right, making an addition to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As such, internet shutdowns, the cutting of telephone lines and disconnection of power grids all constitute violations of human rights law. As the participants shared, the loss of access to communications had profound health impacts, thus supporting the necessity of access to communications systems as a human right.

Starvation as a Weapon of War and Genocide

All participants agreed that “starvation served as a weapon of war.” Genet noted that many families were “living a life of emotional distress and despondence. In most cases families’ living standard of basic life-sustenance is lowered to one or two meal per day.” Feve remarked, “In my lifetime, I never thought of getting starved and food shortages. And yet currently the cost of food items is a burning issue and daily concern of our family.” Selam also mentioned the dire food shortages as well as the high cost of food that was available: “the cost of food in the market so high. My families are trying out all means to cope with the pressure of living; minimizing intake, mixing teff with wheat to make Injera and so on.” Sole revealed

Lack of food threatens our survival so that we are dying out before the actual death. I am dependent on my families for living, and yet my families are always complaining about the rising cost of living. As a result, I had food sometimes in some of my families and move to others in search of food. As



energetic and young I would have worked but there is no job opportunity as a consequence of the war.

These are not easy admissions for the participants to make, given that these are young men and women who had not experienced such dire circumstances previously. Sole's words demonstrate the feelings of powerlessness many young people in Tigray were feeling as those in power made decisions that violated Article 11 of the International Covenant of Economic Social and Cultural Rights – the right to food as well as Article 54 of the Geneva Convention that explicitly forbids the starvation of peoples during times of war and conflict.

Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War and Genocide

Over 120,000 Tegaru have reported to have been targets of sexual violence over the course of the war (Weldemichel, 2025). Despite the communications blockage, this information was carried throughout Tigray, and women, in particular, were increasingly hesitant to go out in public for fear of occupying forces use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and genocide. Within the Tigray context, it has been contended that sexual violence was a tool of genocide. A number of the women participants, in particular, noted their fears of being sexually violated by Ethiopian and Eritrean government occupying forces.

Fetahawit confessed that she and other young women were advised to "not wear clothes that attract attention for fear of sexual violence" and would wear traditional clothes that covered their features as the occupying forces "were arbitrarily arresting youth and raping girls" as part of a military and government sanctioned instrument of war. In August 2021, Amnesty International (2021) reported that forces aligned with the Ethiopian government were employing "rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, sexual mutilation, and torture" as weapons of war against Tigrayan women and girls. It classified the atrocities as part of a "strategy to terrorize, degrade, and humiliate" victims and the Tegaru peoples at large. Zahra points out that Tegaru women university students in Mekelle which was considered relatively safe compared to other areas of Tigray were targets of Ethiopian government forces.



At the time of the interim government, command post proclaimed a curfew. If I am arrested for breaching curfew due to absence of taxi either I will be killed or raped. Although classes were resumed, it was under such threat and risk of life. I used to stay even the night in campus during the exam times to study and to be on time. Although we were allowed to stay in campus until 9:00 pm, while 6:00 pm is the curfew, for students who are Tegaru it was risky while others were free of risks of what so ever. Some time it was scary to speak in Tigrigna and to listen to Tigrigna music free of any influence.

As Zahra illustrates, it was not only her gender that makes her a target but her Tegaru identity. The scourge of sexual violence was so widespread that most Tegaru were filled with trepidation of it happening to themselves, family members, friends, and neighbours.

I remember what my mother wished out of anxiety and emotional distress of soldiers' evil and malign deeds. She said to us (her children), 'I wish I would have put you back in my womb to shield you from the atrocities of soldiers.' After a while I realized my mother's remorse for giving birth because of predators that prey on human beings. For my mother, human misery and arbitrary loss of life had evoked hatred to motherhood. (Tibelts)

The use of sexual violence was meant to create fear among Tegaru but also had a more nefarious purpose as shared by the participants. The use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and tool of genocide are in direct violation of the Geneva Convention of 1949 and the Rome Statute. Yet despite this, there has been almost no avenues for justice for the peoples of Tigray who suffered extensive sexual violence.

Human Rights Are Not for Black Peoples

Despite the communications blackout during phase one of our interviews, the participants in this study very clearly articulated their frustration with the international community's response to the war in Tigray and also made comparisons of how the international community had responded to the war in



Ukraine. Abiy's statement on the response by the international community, by which he referred to the United Nations, African Union and global North nations speaks to the disappointment and betrayal felt by Tegaru over the inaction as they were being killed.

It is disappointing that the international community failed to respond to the war on Tigray. The international community had ample evidence to prove mass killings and mass raping inflicted as a result of the war on Tigray. But the international community showed a lack of concern for humanity. I held the international community in contempt and disparaged them for their lack of concern for humanity. The international community is racist in favouring the war on Ukraine. They were quick and urgent in response to the war on Ukraine; arranging safe passage for displaced people; arranging corridors for unfettered access for humanitarian assistance and even supplying artillery to Ukraine. Although the worst cases of the humanitarian crisis were inflicted on Tigray, the international community overlooked us (Phase 1, Abiy)

These sentiments by Abiy are shared by all the participants. Genet questioned why the UN Security Council was able to impose sanctions on Russia but not Ethiopia or Eritrea who were committing crimes against humanity in Tigray.

In Tigray peoples are suffering from starvation; at least the international community should have compelled the Ethiopian government to arrange a humanitarian assistance corridor to save human beings from death of starvation... The European Union and US have taken concrete action through humanitarian assistance and other supports to Ukraine. If I am not mistaken UN security council has imposed sanction on Russia. But the UN general assembly has conducted meetings a number of times, and yet it took no concrete action to stop genocide on Tigray and to ensure unfettered access to humanitarian assistance. Under this circumstance, Tigray has been cut off from the rest of the world for two years now.



Fre concurred,

When it comes to war on Tigray, the UN and its member states sit for a consecutive three to four day discussion coming up with concern statements without action. But when it comes to war on Ukraine, they come up with urgent and immediate concrete action.

Sole shared that in his opinion “international organizations are intervening to exacerbate the war than to find a lasting solution to end the war.” Gere argues that statements of concern without direct action make those nations and international organizations complicit in the war, contributing to the “mass starvation” happening. Fana notes that the lack of action for crimes against humanity was not due to a lack of evidence despite the communications blackout, but because they had no intention of saving Black lives.

The participants provided considerable remarks connecting the response to the war against Tigray by international organizations as well as nation states in the global North spoke to ongoing racism within the international order and with regards to who seems to be deserving of human rights. Kindeya described it as a “discriminatory approach” to human rights. Tibelts was disparaging in her criticism of international actors.

Since my childhood I used to consider US, Canada and Europe as the most developed, superior in their thinking and rule of law consciousness. ... I now realized that US, Canada and Europe are racist, inferior of their thinking and typical features of moral and cultural decadence. The people of Tigray had trusted the international community intervention to stop mass starvation, mass killings and mass raping. But it is shocking that the international community has failed to give concrete action to war on Tigray. It has been two years since the Tigray people are cut off from the rest of the World and suffering from starvation. US, Canada and Europe have superiority of moral and cultural value over others; ... the fact is they are racist, ... I am witnessing the international community’s urgent and quick response to the war on Ukraine, and it is based on color segregation. (Tibelts)



Fre concurred, stating “We are ‘Tegaru’ in black skin that we are out of the international community’s eye sights” and added, “And so, the AU, UN along with western countries will not prevent and safeguard black people’s human right from abuse by the dictators of the region.” Tibelts further contends that the international community “condemns Black life to death through mass starvation while concerned for white life to rescue.” These responses to the international community’s devaluation of Black lives was made all the more transparent as the participants could see the difference in the response to Russian aggression against Ukraine and the lack of support despite the war against Tigray having started almost two years previously. As Fana pointed out,

In these two years of war, hundreds of thousands of lives wouldn’t have been lost if they had acted. They have the data, evidence, and the power. All they need is the political will to stop the war. ... Right now, they ought to influence the implementation of the peace agreement. Situations are getting worse in many villages of Tigray. There is famine everywhere, and rapid humanitarian responses are required. Generally speaking, I would say they failed to respond to humanity as we had expected, and I am unsatisfied with their actions.

In effect, the lack of action by international organizations and nations speaks to an unwillingness to use the limited systems in place, such as through the United Nations and African Union, to stop the loss of life of Tegaru, despite the constant demands from Tegaru to put into action the human rights discourses and laws that such organizations and states claim to stand for. For the participants in this study, the primary reason for this unwillingness can be attributed to their identity as Black peoples who are therefore seen as unworthy of life, especially in comparison to white Ukrainians.

Discussion: Grounding International Human Rights within the Colonial Matrix of Power

In sharing the voices of the 18 participants of this study, we are attempting to demonstrate the experiences of Tegaru from November 2020 as their experiences



tell us of the horrors that they survived. The indiscriminate killing of Tegaru by Ethiopian federal government forces, Eritrean government forces and other allied militias, accompanied by the deliberate destruction of health facilities and limiting access to medicines, a communications blackout, and the use of starvation and sexual violence as weapons of war for two years led Tegaru to understand that the international community, including the United Nations, African Union, and western nation states had failed to intercede at every level; the violence was allowed to continue unabated and at a level that few could imagine in the twenty-first century. While Tegaru see the actions of the Ethiopian government as an act of coloniality in order to gain power over Tegaru peoples and lands as well as Tigray's vast mineral resources, they recognize that the complicity of the international community is a result of being seen as inferior due to their skin colour, cultures, traditions, knowledges, and beliefs (Mignolo, 2021). In referring to the international community, the participants are speaking about both western nation states that have imbued themselves as a global moral authority as well as the African Union. As Na'im (2021) points out, international organizations such as the UN were founded by colonial powers and their inability to step in to stop human rights violations is a result of the very structures that created the system, one in which "the international human rights framework and its norms and institutions have already been shaped and conditioned by Western liberal values and institutions"(p. 104) and which are founded with a system of coloniality that allows some humans to be elevated over others (Escobar, 2012). While the AU has been lauded for wanting to find "African solutions to African problems," like the UN it is organized through member states, made up of 55 sovereign countries in Africa. It has, therefore, also been shaped and conditioned by Western liberal values that position the state as an arbiter of good governance. As such, like the UN, the AU has not created the mechanisms from which to counter internal violence within its member states, when that violence is being orchestrated by the government in power. Additionally, within the Ethiopian context, Tegaru peoples who have lived in Tigray since time immemorial are not considered to have decision-making powers regarding the resources of those lands. This can be partly attributed to how the language of Indigeneity is taken from global North contexts and does not fit into many global South contexts, once again illustrating the ways in which the promotion and domination of a single world view – a hegemonic episteme –



reinforces and privileges concepts such as universalism, neutrality and delocalized knowledge (Walsh, 2018).

Numerous reports from international organizations and limited peer review articles substantiate the claims of the research participants – claims that western powers and organizations such as the United Nations and African Union were very aware of the situation in Tigray. As the participants all shared, the Tegaru diaspora had also been extremely vocal from the start of the war in pushing for an international response from western and African nation states, in particular, to force a ceasefire. Yet, their calls were not heeded. As the participants point out as well as The Chicago Council on Global Affairs (2022), rapid mobilization of aid is possible when there is political will as was the case for Ukraine. Tegaru were essentially placed into a zone of non-being (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015) wherein the crimes against humanity and genocide being committed against them were not heard as they contend that they were regarded as sub-human objects, denied the right to exist as human beings and seen as dispensable (Wynter, 2003). As Fana notes, the lack of action for crimes against humanity was not due to a lack of evidence despite the communications blackout, but because they had no intention of saving Black lives. Tegaru were deemed worthless due to their supposed racial inferiority (Germana, 2014; Quijano, 2000). Vincent Jones et al. (2024) argue that the documented anti-Black discrimination against Black peoples attempting to flee Ukraine at the start of the Russia-Ukraine war demonstrates how Black peoples living in Ukraine were also rendered invisible as the safe exit of white people from Ukraine was prioritized. In this way, in both Ukraine and Tigray, “the cognitive empire reproduces the coloniser’s model of the world across space and time” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023, p. 2259) as exemplified through which lives are deemed worthy and which dispensable. This rendering of inferiority is a colonial construct that the African Union also upholds through the creation of a system of governance that did not consider the limitations of the Westphalian state, especially within the African context where national borders are the creation of European colonialism and the scramble for Africa.

Tegaru, both in Tigray and in the diaspora, were demanding that international organizations and other nation states put into action the human rights discourses



they purport to support, demonstrating a desire for a universal practice of international human rights, one that did not privilege groups based on race, wealth or geography. In not living up to these claims of the universality and neutrality of international human rights, international organizations and western nation states illustrated that human rights remain the domain of one particular subset of peoples, those with Eurocentric systems of knowing and being, who are seen as the true inheritors of the earth. And as Mignolo (2007) points out, these logics then destroy all other ways of knowing and being; in the case of Tigray, this was “achieved” through a genocide that killed 14% of the population, erasing peoples’ ways of knowing by erasing the people themselves from their very existence. Additionally, despite having knowledge of the degree of the crimes being committed in Tigray, Weldemichel (2025) argues that the unwillingness to “acknowledge or recognize the experiences and realities” (p. 2) of peoples speaks to how such acts become a production of invisibility wherein some lives become, in the words of Butler (2016), grievable and others dispensable. Those whose lives and losses are unnoticed and unacknowledged are made to be invisible and as Weldemichel (2025) contends, this production of invisibility is epistemic; it is a form of reworlding to sustain and reproduce an “epistemologically colonised modern world” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023, p. 2248).

Conclusion and Implications

In early January 2021, when mobile telephone networks were briefly reconnected in Mekelle city in Tigray, two of the co-authors – one located in Canada and the other in Mekelle – discussed what it would take to stop the violence in Tigray. The Mekelle based co-author shared that Tegaru were waiting for Joe Biden to be sworn in as President of the United States in the hopes that a change of government in the US would result in pressure on the Ethiopian government to find a different solution. Those hopes were in vain as the violence only intensified. This speaks to the ways in which creating an international system to ensure just lives based on Euro-western models has placed peoples outside of the realms of power at the mercy of institutions and governance structures that were not built to ensure justice and well-being of those who have been deemed dispensable. Structures founded through a system of coloniality of power, knowledge and being are incapable of even acknowledging that Tegaru lives are grievable, indispensable and



deserving of just futures. And an inability to acknowledge that Tegaru lives matter results in the structures of the very organizations meant to safeguard peoples becoming complicit in their dehumanization. In effect, the experiences shared by Tegaru reinforce Na‘im’s (2021) call for a “people-centered drive to the protection of human rights ... where people define and live by their own conception of human rights” (p. 88), one that is driven by their own epistemic and ontological realities. Future research will need to consider how human rights laws can be adjudicated without centring the nation state construct in the protection of peoples from human rights violations and the potential development of a framework for international human rights grounded in localized understandings of justice and clear guidelines for recourse for those whose rights are being violated within a system that does not afford power to the entity(ies) responsible for human rights violations but to peoples, all of whom are deserving of just futures.

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