

Starvation Crimes as War Vs Democracy in Tigray by Professor Alex de Waal (Executive director of the World Peace Foundation) and Hasan Pandor (SOAS) (12 July 2021)

The UK Government must take action to prevent the Ethiopian Government from using [starvation as a weapon of war in Tigray, north Ethiopia](#). It should also **support the legitimate aspirations of the Tigrayan people, whose self-sufficiency has been [strategically destroyed](#)**. With 900,000 Tigrayans [already starving](#), and [over 5 million](#) on the brink of famine, **it is the [world's worst hunger crisis in a decade](#)**. Last month, the head of US Agency for International Development, Samantha Power described the famine findings as “[terrifying](#)”; yet, Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed continues to oversee the systematic and relentless [weaponization of starvation](#) whilst claiming “[There is no hunger in Tigray](#)”.

Under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the coalition of the Ethiopian National Defence Force, Amhara regional forces and Eritrean Defence Force are committing starvation crimes. Classed as a war crime, starvation as a crime [encompasses](#) ‘destroying, removing or rendering useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population’. This includes water, food, sanitation, medicine, maternal care for children and all means of livelihood and sustenance. Coalition forces have [not only blocked supply lines](#), burned grain stores, and ordered farmers not to till their fields, but they have also systematically sought to destroy every aspect of the Tigrayan’s economy: no shop, farm, or industry has been left unblighted. As Executive director of the World Peace Foundation, I ([Professor Alex de Waal](#)) conclude that “[they simply do not want Tigrayans to stand on their own two feet again](#)”. On April 2 of this year G7 Foreign Ministers released a [statement](#) calling for the Ethiopian government to respond to their concerns about the violence committed against Tigrayan nationals, and the deprivation of food. However, June has passed and the land remains untilled. It is too late for most crops to be planted this year. Tigrayans are thus extremely dependent on food aid for the next year.

This constitutes a devastating reversal of what Tigrayans have achieved in making their [drought-prone region famine-resistant](#) since the 1980s. The Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) – who won militarily in 1991 and led a coalition under the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front for the next 27 years – launched immensely successful collective projects to rehabilitate the land and support farmers. Due to their system, Ethiopia averted a possible nationwide food crisis in 2015-16 that drought and harvest failure would otherwise have triggered. **In May, Abiy Ahmed declared the TPLF a terrorist organisation**, rendering all its supporters terrorist sympathisers – including those who provide humanitarian assistance to civilians.

However, at the end of June, the Tigray Defence Force [defeated](#) the Ethiopian National Defence Force and took control of most of Tigray. As a result, Abiy declared a unilateral ceasefire. However, rather than being a prequel to comprehensive negotiations, **this seems to have been a [ruse](#) to rearm while maintaining the use of hunger as a weapon by besieging Tigray**. Also, the Eritrean Defence Force remains a threat. The UK Government must build on the [Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office’s July statement](#) and work with partners to:

- **end the blockade of humanitarian access**
- **support projects to return Tigray to a situation of long-term food security**
- **investigate war crimes and ensure that they are prevented.**

Visit our website for further briefings (<https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/cop/>). If you would like a personal briefing or clarification on any of the issues raised here, please contact the author at alex.deWaal@tufts.edu. Do contact Professor Alison Scott-Baumann and her team for further briefings and access to other experts as150@soas.ac.uk. *The views expressed in SOAS ICOP Briefings are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of SOAS.*