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### **UN urged for independent probe**

As western governments and right defenders continue to mount pressure against the Ethiopian government over the ongoing crisis in Tigray, Human Rights Watch reports Eritrean armed forces massacred scores of civilians, including children as young as 13, in the historic town of Axum in Tigray region in November 2020.

The latest report was released yesterday from the organization's Nairobi office a week after the other New York-based rights organization, Amnesty International, published almost a similar report in a similar fashion. Headquartered in New York, HRW revealed that Ethiopian and Eritrean forces indiscriminately shelled Axum, killing and wounding civilians particularly on November 19.

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In the meantime, the report also urged the United Nations to probe war crimes as well as possible crimes against humanity.

“The United Nations should urgently establish an independent inquiry into war crimes and possible crimes against humanity in the region to pave the way for accountability,” the report

After Tigray militia and Axum residents attacked Eritrean forces on November 28, Eritrean forces, in apparent retaliation, fatally shot and summarily executed several hundred residents, mostly men and boys, over a 24-hour period,” the report said.

“Eritrean troops committed heinous killings in Axum with wanton disregard for civilian lives,” the reports brief statement quoted Laetitia Bader, Horn of Africa director at Human Rights Watch as saying.

“Ethiopian and Eritrean officials can no longer hide behind a curtain of denial, but should allow space for justice and redress, not add to the layers of trauma that survivors already face,” Bader added.

The report which also mentions the Amhara regional forces as one of the allied forces to the Ethiopian military [ENDF] along with Eritrean troops, further pointed out that the alleged attacks in the holy city of Axum followed weeks of fighting between the stated allied forces against forces affiliated with the region’s former ruling party, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF).

HRW claimed that its latest finding is based on the evidence it solicited after interviewing at least 28 witnesses by phone and victims of abuses and their relatives in Axum between December 2020 and February 2021, while it has also examined videos of attacks and their aftermath.

Survivors consistently identified Eritrean troops by the vehicles bearing Eritrean license plates, their distinctive uniforms, the spoken dialect of Tigrinya, and their plastic “congo” shoes, worn by Eritrean forces since the liberation struggle, the report added.

On November 19, after Tigrayan forces and militia withdrew from Axum, Ethiopian and Eritrean forces began shelling the town around 4 p.m., continuing into the evening. It further said “The next day, witnesses saw Ethiopian and Eritrean forces indiscriminately shooting at civilians, including in the town’s Saint Mary’s hospital.”

The report, which also quoted unnamed residents of Axum, went on to highlight how the military forces pillaged for about a week. In the meantime, HRW said it was able to confirm from “several” residents who spoke to it that they saw Ethiopian forces participate, while most said the soldiers just stood by and watched.

“It was painful,” the report quoted the account of an unnamed resident as saying.

“I thought the Ethiopian military stood for Ethiopia and its people...but they did nothing as Eritrean forces looted and killed. They just kept silent,” the same informant said as quoted in the report.

Quoting other witnesses including students, the report further went on to highlight the survivors’ accounts including “The horror of Eritrean soldiers moving through the town, going

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“Crimes against humanity include murder and other unlawful acts committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack on a civilian population,” the report concluded noting that the late November attacks were documented by media organizations, as well as by Amnesty International, while the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission also began investigations.

HRW further noted that it provided its findings to the Ethiopian and Eritrean government officials on February 18 but has not received any response.

Last week, especially following Amnesty International’s report [released on February 26], the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia announced that it would thoroughly investigate events in Axum and expressed “readiness to collaborate with international human rights experts.”

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