

'Finish Them Off': Aid Workers, Found on Battlefield, Executed by Soldiers

Three employees of Doctors Without Borders set out to rescue the wounded in a war zone in northern Ethiopia. Their fate shows the treacherous path for many aid workers in conflict zones.

By Simon Marks and Declan Walsh

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As the fight intensified in northern Ethiopia in June last year, three aid workers from Doctors Without Borders jumped into their four-wheel drive and raced across the battle-scarred landscape, searching for casualties.

Hours later they vanished. The aid workers stopped answering their satellite phone. A tracking device showed their vehicle making a sudden U-turn, then stopping. Colleagues frantically tried to locate them.

The next day they were found dead, their bullet-riddled bodies sprawled on a dusty roadside near their burned-out vehicle: María Hernández, a 35-year-old Spaniard and conflict veteran, in a bloodstained white bib with the Doctors Without Borders logo; Yohannes Halefom, a 32-year-old Ethiopian medic, face down in the dirt; and their Ethiopian driver Tedros Gebremariam, 31, lying on the road about 300 yards away.

Doctors Without Borders, widely known by its French name, Médecins Sans Frontières, immediately denounced the killings as “brutal murder” but did not identify any culprit. Now, one is coming into view.

Investigators, senior aid officials and Ethiopian soldiers interviewed by the Times said the three aid workers were gunned down by retreating Ethiopian government troops on the orders of a commander who was infuriated to find them in an active combat zone.

“He said, ‘Finish them off,’” said Capt. Yetneberk Tesfaye of the Ethiopian National Defense Force, who said he heard the command over the radio.



Capt. Yetneberk Tesfaye, of the Ethiopian National Defense Force's 31st Division, said that he witnessed the Ethiopian army's killing of three aid workers in the Tigray region.
The New York Times

The aid workers had their hands over their heads when they were shot, according to another soldier who witnessed the killings.

The brutal slaying in the northern region of Tigray, where a feud between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the leaders of the northern region of Tigray erupted into war in November 2020, attracted relatively little attention. It was yet another senseless atrocity in a bitter conflict that has been accompanied by reports of massacres, sexual assault, ethnic cleansing and other likely war crimes.

The atrocities are not just in Tigray. A gruesome video that circulated recently showed Ethiopian security forces burning alive three men, believed to be ethnic Tigrayans, in the western region of Benishangul-Gumuz. The Ethiopian government pledged to bring the perpetrators to justice.

But the killing of the three Doctors Without Borders employees underscored the specific perils facing aid workers in Ethiopia, where hunger and dislocation threaten millions even as the government seems to treat aid groups as enemies rather than allies.

Since last July, when Tigray fell into rebel control, respected aid groups have been accused of running guns to rebels, senior United Nations officials have been expelled from Ethiopia, and the government imposed a punishing blockade on the region that has cut off food supplies to five million needy people, the U.N. says.

Ethiopia is the world's deadliest country for aid workers, with 19 deaths in 2021, more than in Afghanistan, Syria or Congo, according to The Aid Worker Security Database, a compilation of data on attacks. Local employees bear the greatest risk: of the 129 aid workers who died around the world last year, only three were international staff, including Ms. Hernández.

Immediately after the Doctors Without Borders team was killed, the Ethiopian government blamed their deaths on Tigrayan rebels. The offices of Ethiopia's prime minister, attorney general and military spokesman did not respond to questions for this article.

The mission comes first

When the team from Doctors Without Borders set out on June 24 from their base in Abiy Adiy, in central Tigray, the war had taken a dramatic turn.

Two days earlier, the Ethiopian military had abandoned Abiy Adiy in the face of a sweeping Tigrayan offensive. Huge battles were erupting across the region, with significant Ethiopian losses. Tigrayan forces were pressing toward the regional capital, Mekelle.

The Doctors Without Borders team, though, was committed to its mission.

Ms. Hernández, raised in a tiny Spanish village, found her calling in her early 20s while volunteering in India at a shelter for underprivileged children. "There wasn't a single day that I didn't go to bed without a feeling of peace and joy," she later wrote to her family.



Undated photograph of María Hernández.

In 2015, she joined Doctors Without Borders, which deployed her to some of the world's toughest conflict zones: Yemen, Mexico, South Sudan, Nigeria and the Central African Republic. Ms. Hernández frequently returned to Madrid exhausted, and worried about finding the time to start a family, said Anne-Sophie Colleaux, a friend from Paris. But work came first.

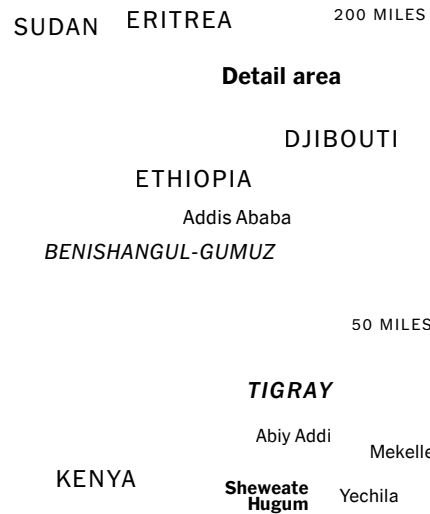
"For her, it was more important to do what she was doing," said Ms. Colleaux.

Mr. Yohannes, an easygoing medic with a quick smile, had joined Doctors Without Borders two months earlier, following a stint as medical director at a nearby hospital. He was equally dedicated to his work, his sister, Wezef Halefom, said in an interview.

Their driver, Mr. Tedros, ran a small taxi business in Tigray before snagging a coveted job with an international relief agency. His wife had just given birth to their second child, a girl. They hadn't settled on a name.

The team drove south from Abiy Adiy, passing scattered bullet casings and shellfire craters from recent fighting, said a humanitarian investigator who asked not to be named to avoid reprisals against her organization. They found casualties — six wounded Tigrayan fighters and one civilian — who were dispatched to a hospital by ambulance. The team pressed on.

Just after 3 p.m., about a mile before the village of Sheweate Hugum, their Land Cruiser came up behind an Ethiopian military convoy traveling in the same direction, according to six Ethiopian National Defense Force soldiers who were in the immediate area, and were interviewed later for this story.



By The New York Times

A spotter on the convoy reported the aid vehicle to their commander, Col. Tadesse Bekele, of the Ethiopian military's 31st Division, according to other soldiers who were listening to the radio channel. Colonel Tadesse ordered them to fire on the vehicle.



Yohannes Halefom, 32, was a medical director at an Ethiopian hospital before he went to work for Doctors Without Borders in the Tigray region.

Bullets thudded into the Land Cruiser, causing the three aid workers to jump out and take cover on the roadside, the soldiers said. A tracking device later recovered by investigators showed that it made a U-turn at 3:11 p.m., then stopped.

Colonel Tadesse ordered his troops to apprehend the aid workers and search their vehicle. But when Ms. Hernández and Mr. Yohannes began to walk in his direction, hands raised, Colonel Tadesse yelled into his radio again.

“He asked the soldiers why they were bringing the aid workers to him,” said Captain Yetneberk. “Then he ordered them to finish them off.”

Capt. Girmay Moges, positioned about 50 meters from the aid workers, said he witnessed what happened next. “Three or four soldiers killed them,” he said.

The six soldiers spoke at the main prison in Mekelle, where they were held among thousands of Ethiopian troops imprisoned since Tigray fighters captured them in June. The Times interviewed them separately, and saw no sign that they had been coerced or coached by their captors.

The soldiers said they knew that the incident reflected badly on Ethiopia's military, but agreed to speak out because they believed that it was wrong. Maj. Teshome Abera hoped someone would eventually be held to account. "The soldiers would not have taken this action if they had not been ordered to do so," he said.

But accountability is rare in Ethiopia's war. The government has charged just 60 soldiers with war-related abuses since November 2020 and convicted 16. The Tigrayan rebels, accused of similar crimes, have not charged anyone.

Video and photographic evidence from the immediate aftermath of the killings, reviewed by the Times, showed the bodies of the slain aid workers and their incinerated Land Cruiser. Soldiers said the vehicle had been deliberately destroyed with a rocket-propelled grenade.



The vehicle that the three aid workers had been riding in was deliberately destroyed with a rocket-propelled grenade, said soldiers who witnessed the incident.

The Ethiopian convoy continued south, to a town called Yechila, where it was ambushed by Tigrayan fighters. Several thousand Ethiopian soldiers were captured.

Colonel Tadesse died on the battlefield, several soldiers said. The Times was unable to confirm his death.

A baby finally gets a name

Villagers lined the road as a United Nations-led convoy transported the bodies of the slain aid workers to Mekelle. Some villagers were dressed in traditional white garb, usually reserved for religious ceremonies, in a mark of honor.

But in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's government began to treat international aid workers as foes.

In July, Redwan Hussein, a minister with responsibility for Tigray, accused aid groups of supplying weapons to the Tigrayan rebels. Soon after, the government suspended the operations of the Dutch section of Doctors Without Borders, and the Norwegian Refugee Council, then expelled seven senior U.N. officials it accused of "meddling" in Ethiopia's internal affairs. By then, Tigrayan forces were sweeping south toward the capital, Addis Ababa.

But then the war changed direction again when Mr. Abiy, aided by armed drones supplied by Middle Eastern allies, forced the Tigrayans to retreat into Tigray. Now the conflict is concentrated in neighboring Afar region, where hospitals are filled with badly injured children.

In Tigray, the humanitarian crisis is worsening. A government-imposed blockade means that just 8 percent of required food aid has reached Tigray since October, the U.N. says, putting 23,000 "severely wasted children" at risk of imminent death.

Doctors Without Borders no longer operates in Tigray, although it continues to work in other regions of Ethiopia. Its employees have been "regularly subjected to harassment, serious threats and detentions," Paula Gil, head of the organization's Spanish branch, said in an email.

The aid group said it had shared the findings of its internal investigation into the deaths of the three aid workers with the Ethiopian government.



A photograph taken by Ms. Hernández shows patients waiting for consultation at a Doctors Without Borders mobile clinic in the town of Megab, in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, in January of last year. Maria Hernandez/Doctors Without Borders, via Associated Press

But the tragedy has also raised questions about the Doctors Without Borders' security procedures. Although its frontline ethos often places its staff in greater danger than many other aid groups, several aid workers said in interviews that the organization may have taken too many risks in Tigray.

On May 25, a month before the killings, the aid group Action Against Hunger pulled its staff out of Abiy Adiy after some of its workers were detained, interrogated and beaten by Eritrean soldiers, an official with that organization said.

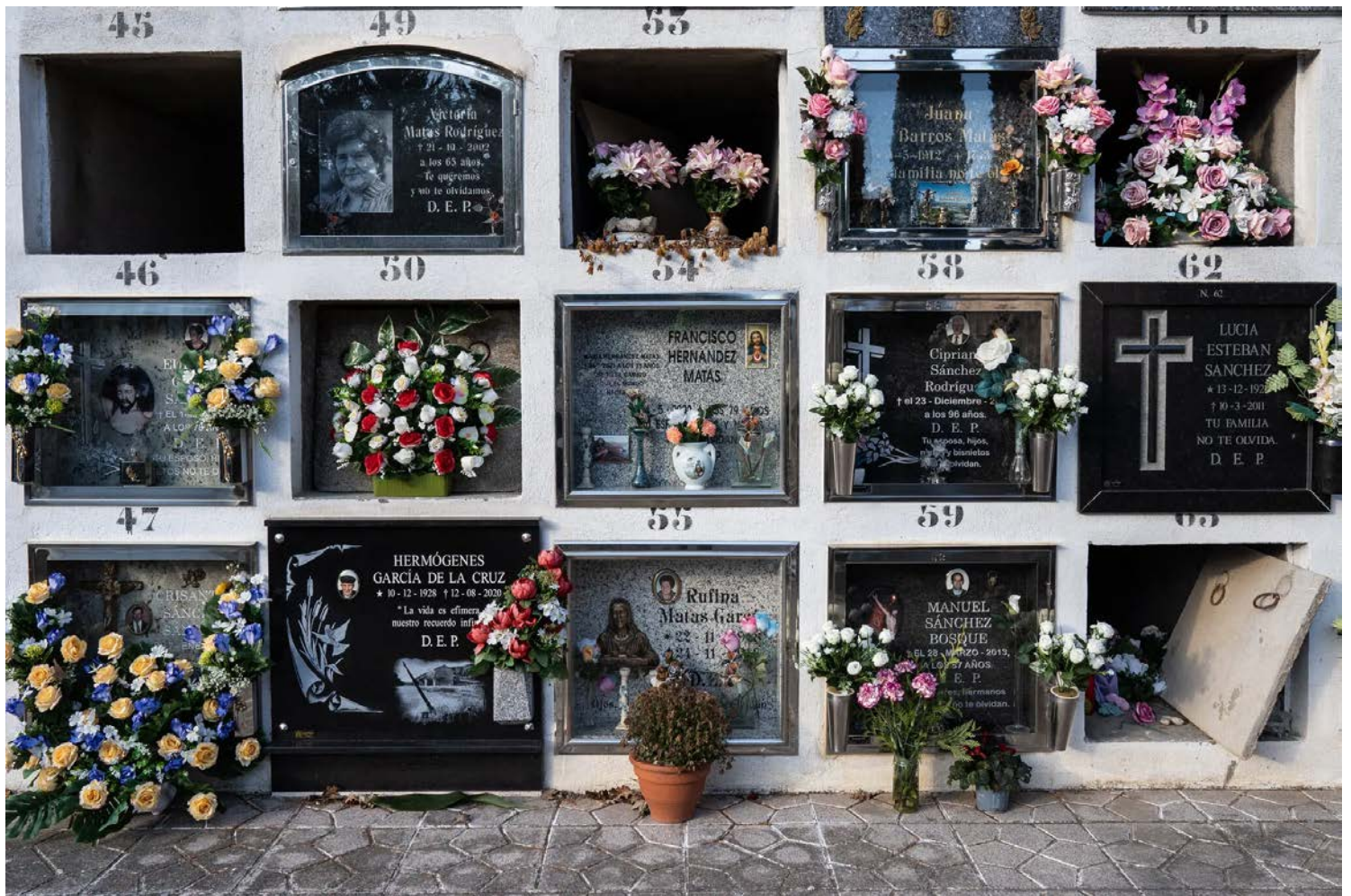
The Eritreans, who were fighting alongside the Ethiopian military in support of Mr. Abiy, "assumed they were spies," a security official with Action Against Hunger said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive issue.

Ms. Gil of Doctors Without Borders insisted that its team in Abiy Adiy had followed "strict and rigorous security management protocols."

Ms. Hernández was buried at a cemetery in Sanchotello, 110 miles from Madrid, alongside the grandparents who helped to raise her. A photo on the tomb shows a smiling young woman, looking out over the Spanish coast.

Mr. Yohannes and the driver, Mr. Tedros, were buried near their homes in Tigray. Mr. Tedros's wife decided on a name for their newborn daughter.

She called her Maria.



The tomb number 54 belonging to Ms. Hernández in Sanchoello, Spain. Simon Marks

A reporter employed by The New York Times contributed from Mekelle, Ethiopia.

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