



Ethiopia

Events of 2023

A 28-year-old survivor of sexual violence poses for a portrait in the cooking training center of the Daughters of Charity in Mekele, Tigray region, northern Ethiopia, November 2, 2023.

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Keynote





The Human Rights System Is Under Threat: A Call to Action



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The human rights situation in Ethiopia remained precarious, with government security forces, militias, and non-state armed groups responsible for systematic abuses, with impunity remaining the norm.

In August, clashes between the Ethiopian military and militias in the Amhara region escalated, resulting in hundreds of civilian deaths and injuries, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, and displacement. In response, the federal government passed a sweeping state of emergency for the region, but in practice, its provisions have been applied throughout the country.

A November 2022 cessation of hostilities agreement between the federal government and Tigrayan authorities, two of the main warring parties to the conflict in northern Ethiopia, ended active fighting in the Tigray region. However, serious rights abuses against civilians in Tigray continued throughout the year, notably in Western, Northwestern, and Eastern Tigray Zones.

As of September, there were 2.9 million internally displaced people in Ethiopia due to conflict and over 141,000 Ethiopian refugees and asylum seekers in neighboring countries, [according to the UN Refugee Agency \(UNHCR\)](#).

Journalists, civil society organizations, and outspoken public figures faced an increasingly hostile and restrictive reporting environment.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in Ethiopia faced online harassment and physical attacks. The Addis Ababa Peace and Security Administration Bureau said it was taking action “against institutions where homosexual acts are carried out,” such as hotels and other businesses, following massive online reporting. Consensual same-sex relationships are outlawed and carry a penalty of up to 15 years in prison.

Government efforts toward accountability for past and ongoing abuses, including atrocities carried out during the conflict in northern Ethiopia, have been [inadequate and lacked transparency and independent oversight](#).

Conflict in Northern Ethiopia

Since the November 2022 cessation of hostilities agreement, human rights abuses have continued in Tigray.

Months after the truce, Eritrean forces in Tigray committed [rape and sexual violence](#), including [sexual slavery](#), against Tigrayan women and girls, [extrajudicial executions](#), [abductions](#), and pillaged civilian property in areas they occupied. In May, Eritrean forces [blocked](#) a humanitarian mission from entering two villages where [reports of rape, looting, and destruction of property continued](#). That same month, Eritrean forces [reportedly hindered the work of the African Union](#) Monitoring, Verification, and Compliance Mechanism (AU-MVCM), established to oversee the implementation of the truce.

In Western Tigray Zone, local authorities, Amhara regional forces, and militias known as “Fano” [continued an ethnic cleansing campaign and forcibly expelled Tigrayans](#) in November 2022 and January 2023. [Reports](#) of detentions and expulsions of Tigrayans from the zone continued through August.

In March, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and the United States Agency for *International Development (USAID)* [suspended food aid](#) to Tigray after reports emerged that food aid was being “diverted and sold in the local markets.” The agencies extended the suspension to all of Ethiopia in June after an [investigation](#) uncovered “[a widespread and coordinated](#) scheme” by federal and regional government actors to divert food assistance.

Reports of [hunger-related deaths increased in June](#), as the pause severely restricted access to food for an estimated [20 million people requiring food assistance](#), with people in displacement and refugee camps particularly impacted. In October, WFP and USAID resumed food aid to refugees while maintaining the suspension of assistance to other food-insecure populations.

Abuses by Security Forces and Attacks by Armed Groups

In April, the security situation in the Amhara region deteriorated following the federal government's decision to integrate regional police forces into the federal military. On April 9, two Catholic Relief Services staff members were shot and killed.

In August and September, heavy fighting was reported in and around cities and towns throughout the Amhara region, resulting in hundreds killed and injured, including children and refugees, and damage to civilian property and infrastructure such as hospitals. On August 29, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) found that at least 183 people had been killed in fighting since July. Government security forces also arrested individuals during house-to-house searches in the Amhara region.

On August 5, Ethiopia's parliament declared a sweeping state of emergency in the Amhara region that could be extended to any part of the country as deemed necessary. The emergency declaration grants the government far-reaching powers to arrest criminal suspects without a court order, impose curfews, ban public gatherings, and carry out searches without a warrant.

In February, government security forces responded to unrest following a split within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewohedo church, resulting in killings and arrests as protesters gathered in Shashemene, Oromia.

The government relaunched its counterinsurgency campaign against the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) in May after the collapse of peace talks in April. Reports of attacks against the population in Oromia, including Oromo and Amhara communities, continued through August. In June, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said the fighting damaged critical infrastructure, including healthcare centers and water systems.

In March, Oromia authorities demolished homes and businesses in Shegar city, a newly formed area near Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, rendering scores of residents in the area homeless. Security forces reportedly beat and shot individuals that protested the demolitions.

In September, Somali civilians in Qololji displaced persons camp in Ethiopia's Somali region died as a result of clashes involving security forces from the Oromia and Somali region.

Freedoms of Expression, Media, and Association

Civic space continued to erode in the country, with the federal government tightly controlling the environment for reporting on critical issues.

Authorities harassed and detained critical voices, forcing journalists, opposition members, and civil society activists into silence or exile.

On January 5, Ethiopian police arrested and forcibly disappeared for several hours four Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) staff members—three human rights staff members, Daniel Tesfaye, Bezuayehu Wondimu, and Bereket Daniel, and their driver Nahom Husen—who were investigating cases of forced evictions outside Addis Ababa. On January 12, an Oromia court released the four staff on bail.

Since the August state of emergency declaration, mass arrests of ethnic Amharas have been reported in the Amhara region and in Addis Ababa. In early August, federal police arrested Christian Tadele, an opposition member of parliament and outspoken critic of the ruling party and the government's actions in the Amhara region; Yohannes Buayelew, a member of the Amhara regional council; and Kassa Teshager, a member of Addis Ababa city council. Christian Tadele and Kassa Teshager were initially held incommunicado.

Between April 3 and 18, Ethiopian authorities arrested eight journalists who had reported on the deteriorating situation in the Amhara region. In August, authorities arrested three more journalists following the state of emergency declaration. In early September, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission visited detainees held at Awash Arba military camp in the Afar region. Detainees included political figures, such as Christian Tadele, Kassa Teshager, and Sentayehu Chekol, and journalists, such as Abay Zewdu.

In September, police in Tigray region beat and arrested opposition leaders and supporters calling for demonstrations against the interim administrations led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) after authorities refused to authorize the demonstrations.

The federal government repeatedly restricted access to the internet and social media. In Tigray, after years of a prolonged internet shutdown in the region, phone and internet access slowly resumed.

In early February, authorities restricted access to social media platforms after protests broke out in the Oromia region following tensions in the Ethiopian Orthodox church. Authorities disrupted mobile internet at least twice as fighting intensified in the Amhara region.

Due Process and Fair Trial Rights

Ethiopia's federal and regional authorities exerted control over certain judicial processes, with investigative authorities routinely appealing or ignoring court decisions in cases involving critics of the government or opposition figures.

Ethiopian authorities continued to arbitrarily detain seven Oromo Liberation Front figures held since 2020 despite multiple judicial orders directing their release.

Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers

Public reports began to emerge in June that Ethiopian security forces had rounded up and arbitrarily detained Eritrean refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers in Addis Ababa and other parts of the country. Ethiopian authorities stopped registering newly arriving Eritrean asylum seekers in March 2020.

A group of independent UN experts [condemned Ethiopia's](#) summary expulsion of hundreds of Eritreans at the end of June and urged authorities to end further arbitrary arrests and deportations of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants.

Eritrean refugees in Alemwach camp in the Amhara region also faced attacks by unidentified armed men following the outbreak of fighting in the Amhara region.

The suspension of UN and USAID food assistance operations severely limited access to food for many of the over [900,000](#) refugees and asylum seekers hosted by Ethiopia as of mid-2023, including Sudanese refugees who arrived since the outbreak of conflict in Sudan in April.

Accountability and Justice

Meaningful accountability for past and present serious abuses, including those committed during the conflict in northern Ethiopia, was lacking.

Following the November 2022 cessation of hostilities agreement, the Ethiopian government committed to implement a national transitional justice policy framework to ensure accountability, truth, reconciliation, and healing. In January 2023, the Ethiopian government [released a draft "Policy Options for Transitional Justice" \(Green Paper\)](#) as a starting point for public consultations. The government began seeking public input in February, including in the Amhara region and parts of the Oromia region still affected by fighting. In September, the second report of the UN-mandated International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE) found that the government "failed to effectively investigate violations" and "initiated a flawed transitional justice process."

Political [opposition groups](#), [civil society groups](#), Ethiopian [human rights experts](#), and consultation participants criticized the draft policy document, pointing to its focus on the principle of [sovereignty](#), and the lack of inclusiveness of the consultations. They also questioned the timeliness of the discussion while fighting was ongoing. In Tigray, participants reportedly raised [concerns](#) about the document's failure to address Eritrean forces' accountability.

The government continued its campaign against independent rights scrutiny when, in March, it [threatened](#) to introduce a resolution at the UN Human Rights Council prematurely terminating the ICHREE's mandate. The government also refused to cooperate with and resisted the work of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Commission of Inquiry on Tigray, whose [investigation ended](#) in May [without the release of a public report on its findings and recommendations](#).

Key International Actors

In January, the French and German foreign ministers traveled to Ethiopia and [pressed](#) for accountability for widespread abuses committed during the two-year armed conflict as a condition for the European Union to normalize its relations with the government. In March, the US and EU member states folded to Ethiopia's threats to prematurely end the ICHREE mandate, agreeing to refer to ICHREE's forthcoming September report as its "final" one. In October, the EU, which previously led the resolution establishing the commission in December 2021, failed to introduce any draft resolution at the UN Human Rights Council session that would either renew ICHREE's mandate or maintain international scrutiny of the human rights situation in Ethiopia.

The EU's Foreign Affairs Council adopted [conclusions in April](#) reaffirming the importance of accountability; however, it set the [bar for EU's future engagement with Ethiopia low](#), including by failing to call for Ethiopia's cooperation with ICHREE, and overlooked the lack of progress on key requests, including on justice, that the EU made early in the conflict. In October, the [EU announced](#) a €650 million aid package for Ethiopia [that had been suspended in late 2020 due to the outbreak of conflict in Tigray](#) as a step toward normalizing relations.

In March, the US government [formally recognized that atrocity crimes](#), including war crimes and crimes against humanity, were committed during the conflict in northern Ethiopia. Three months later, President Joe Biden's administration [notified Congress](#) in June that it believed the Ethiopian government was no longer engaging in a "pattern of gross violations of human rights," allowing the country to qualify again for US and international loans and other financial assistance.

In September, the US [renewed](#) a 2021 executive order that established a sanctions regime on individuals and entities responsible for human rights abuses in northern Ethiopia. To date, it has [only sanctioned Eritrean entities and individuals](#).

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