

Unworthy Victims of the CNN Squad: the Afars and Amharas of Ethiopia under the TPLF invasion

By Getachew Adem

Summary of Events

On a dark and gloomy night of November 3, 2020, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) suddenly attacked several northern military bases of the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF). High ranking military officials from the Tigray region betrayed the ENDF to coordinate and lead the attack. By its own admission, TPLF carried out an attack with a lightning speed to demobilize and disable the Northern Command of the ENDF. TPLF's calculation was that a disabled Northern Command will pave an easier and faster way to march to the capital city, Addis Ababa. TPLF's calculated attack was aimed to regain the power it lost when Prime Minister (PM) Abiy Ahmed was elected three years ago. The TPLF had been in control of Ethiopia for nearly three decades. After the TPLF attack, the Ethiopian Government was left with the only option of bringing the perpetrators to justice, and consequently declared the "rule of law operation" in the Tigray region.

To the shocking surprise of the TPLF plotters, the ENDF was able to mobilize the army, defend the North Command and foil the attack. Within few weeks of operation, it controlled the capital city of the Tigray region, Mekelle, as well as most parts of Tigray. Most leaders of the TPLF were captured or killed and the rest run into hiding. On June 28, 2021, the Ethiopian Government declared a unilateral cease fire on the basis of not aggravating the conflict, allowing farmers to work on the planting season and facilitating humanitarian aid. Following the cease fire, the ENDF was fully withdrawn from the Tigray region. The TPLF refused to accept the cease fire vowing to spread the war into the rest of Ethiopia with a vengeance towards the Amhara people. As a result, the TPLF invaded the nearby Afar and Amhara regions controlling an area equivalent to the Tigray region and an estimated population of over 5.7 million people are affected.

When the ENDF controlled the Tigray region, TPLF as well as the Tigray diaspora started an organized allegation of 'Tigray genocide' and 'war crimes' against the ENDF. The allegations include massacre, and using hunger and sexual violence as a weapon of war. The government assured Ethiopians and the international community that those who participated in any atrocities will be held accountable. Hence, some members of the army involved in sexual assault and killing of civilians were charged and convicted. On the other hand, Ethiopians also allege that TPLF forces carried out widespread massacre, rape, killing of civilians, intentional destruction of infrastructure and looting throughout the areas controlled in the Afar and Amhara regions. In addition to the thousands of Amharas and Afaras massacred by the TPLF, the planned destruction of farmlands, health facilities and schools were particularly notable as they bar millions of people access to food, school and health facilities once the cloud of the war settles down. From the town of Haik, Dessie and Kombolcha, deep in the Amhara region of South Wollo, the author has a firsthand account of the flood of displaced people and atrocities committed in the North and South Wollo areas. Unlike the Ethiopian Government, TPLF has never took action to respect human rights and to bring its members involved in the killing of civilians to justice.

On November 3, 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Commission and Ethiopian Human Rights Commission released a joint report of their investigation of the atrocities committed in the conflict. The report disproved the allegation of the 'Tigray genocide' and found violation of rights in the region by all parties involved in the conflict. On November 10, Amnesty International released the result of an

investigation in the town of Nefas Mewcha, Amhara region. The investigation found Tigrayan rebels raped, robbed and beat several women during an attack in the town. As the Human rights commission and Amnesty international investigations were limited in scope and area, current atrocities committed and being committed by the TPLF in South Wollo, North Shewa and Afar areas were not addressed. TPLF was engaged in a widespread human rights violation, summary execution of civilians, looting, destruction of property etc. in the areas it controlled recently.

The atrocities being carried out by the TPLF are full of vengeance against the Amhara and Afar people and are incomparable in magnitude and scope to the allegations against few individuals in the ENDF. The current marching of the TPLF in the Amhara and Afar regions displaced over 2.7 million people and about 3 million Amharas and Afars were estimated to live under the TPLF control in the Afar and Amhara regions. The Amharas and Afars under TPLF are subjected to daily searches under gunpoint, left with no access to electricity, water, telecommunication and health facilities. The humanitarian situation in the TPLF controlled Amhara and Afar regions are far worse than the situation in Tigray.

CNN Media Coverage

As international news media outlet, CNN has covered the main events of the conflict between TPLF and the Ethiopian Government. The table at the end of the article shows the titles, dates of publication and the authors of the CNN coverage over a period of four months, end of June to beginning of November 2021. In our analysis, the articles were critically examined and classified into three sentiment tendencies – negative about the Government of Ethiopia, positive towards the Government and neutral reporting. Although classifying the articles into three buckets could be subjective and controversial, a fair assessment was done. The assessment was also made less subjective as the majority of the reporting during this period focused on conflict, war, food aid and human rights. There was no CNN reporting on Ethiopian social life, crime, entertainment etc.

Briefly, the majority of the articles focused on alleged atrocities committed by ENDF, failures of PM Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopian Airlines transporting weapons, air strike against Tigray, rebels surrounding Addis Ababa and US threatening sanctions. Out of the thirty-nine articles published in the period from June 28 to November 5, 2021, thirty articles (77%) are critical and negative about the Ethiopian Government, two articles (5%) favor the Government, the remaining seven articles (18%) are neutral. Based on a thorough assessment of these coverages, we find that the majority of the CNN report is focused on negative aspects of the Ethiopian Government. Most Ethiopians believe that CNN is biased in its reporting and consider it as an advocate for the TPLF. This article objectively assessed this belief.

Here are some reasons that CNN introduced bias towards its coverage of the Ethiopian conflict.

1) *Bias by omission and exaggeration*

The first question to ask about the CNN coverage is – does it reflect a fair view of the reality on the ground? The answer for this question is a resounding NO. The reality on the ground and the world that the CNN coverage depicts are wide apart. CNN reporting by and large omitted any negative aspects of the TPLF. In contrast, any little progress made by TPLF is emphasized and exaggerated. For example, CNN never reported or reported with little emphasis the following negative aspects of TPLF.

- The war was started by TPLF attacking the ENDF bases and killing thousands of soldiers.

- Getachew Reda, spoken man of the TPLF, vowed to spread the war in the Afar and Amhara regions with a vengeance towards the Amhara and Afar people – this is more than inciting violence. CNN heavily focused on PM Abiy Ahmed’s mobilization of Ethiopians to defend their cities as inciting violence.
- TPLF is using aid food for its combatants and aid trucks for transporting combatants.
- The human and economic cost due to the TPLF invasion of the Amhara and Afar regions is far worse than any atrocities or air strike committed by ENDF.
- About 5.7 million Amharas and Afars are either displaced or estimated to live under the TPLF control without access to water, electricity, communication, health services etc.

CNN is fixated on Tigray blockade and genocide while the war and all atrocities are being carried out by TPLF on the Amhara and Afar regions. There is a wide and exaggerated coverage of the Tigray air strike and limited casualties but CNN never mentioned about the hundreds of civilians killed by TPLF shelling of artillery in cities from Wuchale to Debre Sina in the Amhara region and from Bati to Chifra in the Afar region.

Based on Herman and Chomsky’s classical western propaganda system, people in a favored actor or state (here, Tigrayans under TPLF) are considered as worthy victims and those in unfavored state (Amharas and Afars under TPLF invasion) are considered as unworthy victims. The evidence of worthiness is measured by the extent of attention provided to atrocities committed against Tigrayans and a deafening silence about the widespread atrocities committed against Amharas and Afars.

2) *Bias by source deflection*

CNN uses reporters or producers on the ground, and various credible and official sources to report what they say without a critical examination. The ground reporters and producers are often unnamed behind safety reasons. The credible and official sources are not also independent and are highly partisan. However, they are made to appear highly legitimate sources and thereby the information is credible. CNN used this approach in various articles to legitimize the reporting and deflect the readers away from the actual source of the information.

An example of an article for this approach is the article published on July 3, 2021 entitled “Food and fuel running out in capital of Ethiopia's war-torn Tigray region”. This article uses unnamed ground producer, UN, Oxfam, US ambassador and other aid agencies as credible sources. The Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ethiopia's Ambassador to the UN are also used as sources on the last two paragraphs. Disregarding the independence of the perceived credible sources, the heart of the article lies with the unnamed ground producer. The unnamed producer reported that food and fuel is running out in the Capital city. Obviously, the ground producer will not have the capability to make the research to assess the availability and demand of food and fuel throughout the city. However, the ground producer is used as a credible source to deflect the actual source of the data (most likely TPLF official) or the entire information is fabricated.

3) *Bias by vilification*

About 15% of the CNN articles in the period examined were engaged in vilifying Ethiopian Airlines and PM Abiy Ahmed. Ethiopian Airlines is the largest airline in Africa and a proud for Ethiopians. PM Abiy Ahmed has also a popular backing in Ethiopia. CNN articles mostly frame the conflict in terms of PM Abiy

Ahmed's personalities to create vilanity. In contrary to the interest of most Ethiopians, CNN focused on the destruction of the reputation of these important figures.

4) *Bias by repetition*

The alleged atrocities by ENDF, alleged transport of weapons by Ethiopian airlines and TPLF closing in Addis Ababa are some of the articles which had a repetitive coverage. The repetition tries to create a perception that these issues are widespread and much more important than they really are.

5) *Bias by conflict of interest*

The word 'squad' is used to refer to various groups from a small group of military personnel to a group of Democratic members of the US House of Representatives. In this article, the squad is used to refer to few CNN reporters led by the Sudanese journalist and London based CNN correspondent, Nima Elbagir. Elbagir was a primary or a coauthor for about 26% of the articles examined and her articles are classified as 100% negative sentiment about the Government of Ethiopia. Elbagir is originally from Sudan – a neighboring country where Ethiopia has contentious issues related to the Grand Renaissance Dam, Al Fashaga border area, training of TPLF members in Sudan etc. She has repeatedly expressed on twitter her support for the Sudanese government and her attachment to Sudan. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that Elbagir has a personal interest in the Ethiopian reporting to act impartially.

6) *Bias by photos and use of language*

As most of the articles are negative towards the Government of Ethiopia, so do are the photos and captions. However, the photo selections are not as bad as the articles in terms of impartiality. Similarly, the titles and the use of language to describe PM Abiy Ahmed, ENDF, atrocities committed etc. create a perception quite different from reality.

7) *Bias by style of questioning*

The style of questioning Government of Ethiopian and TPLF officials is distinct. Ethiopian Government officials are asked in adversarial and confrontational way whereas TPLF officials are asked in a friendly manner without confrontation. A good example for this is the interview carried out on November 9, 2021 by Becky Anderson. The interview for Ms. Bellene Seyoum (press secretary of PM Abiy Ahmed) was hostile with frequent interruptions and Becky showing facial expressions of disagreements. On the other hand, the interview for Getachew Reda (Spokesperson of TPLF) was friendly with softball questions and nods of agreements. The photos and video clips aired during the interview also favor TPLF's view. In addition, the titles of the video interviews released are very telling of this distinct treatment. Ms. Seyoum's interview was labeled as "Ethiopia's leader said he would bury his enemy. His spokeswoman doesn't think it was incitement to violence" and Mr. Reda's interview was labelled as "TPLF spokesman: Ethiopian prime minister has never been interested in peace".

Why CNN is biased?

Ethiopians are not the first people to accuse of CNN's reporting as biased. CNN was highly criticized and accused of its pro-America and anti-China stand. It was also accused of spreading falsehood and propaganda during Zimbabwean 2008 election as well as its attempt to sway public opinion in favor of direct American aggression against Iran and Syria in 2011. The primary purpose of CNN is not to be a voice for the voiceless or to promote democracy and global justice but to optimize profit and satisfy

liberal interests. Consequently, there is a fair chance for what Boyed-Barrett called it as “buying out” of journalists by government authorities, intelligence organizations, special interest groups and wealthy individuals. Particularly the influence of intelligence agencies on Western journalists to promote their national interests is well documented. For example, based on a 1977 study by Bernstein indicated that over 400 American journalists secretly carried out assignments for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). A declassified CIA report also admitted that CIA agents routinely persuaded reporters and journalists to change, delay or remove stories that could have adversely affected US’s national security interests.

Conclusion

Based on our analysis of CNN articles covering the Ethiopian conflict over a span of four months, we conclude that the articles are not fair and balanced. Most of the articles are negative about the Government of Ethiopia and they favor and advocate the TPLF side. CNN articles used various strategies to pursue the biased reporting of the Ethiopian conflict. The lack of impartiality can be attributed to optimizing profit and satisfying liberal interests.

Table: CNN Ethiopian Conflict Coverage during the Period Jun2 28 to November 5, 2021

Title	Publication Date	Authors
Armed groups join forces in Ethiopia in biggest threat yet to embattled Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed	November 5, 2021	Eliza Mackintosh
State Department establishes task force on Ethiopia as conflict rages	November 5, 2021	Jennifer Hansler
The crisis in Ethiopia is deepening. Here's what's happening.	November 5, 2021	Interview with Tsedale Lemma
Ethiopia crisis deepens as nine groups form anti-government alliance	November 5, 2021	Eliza Mackintosh and Ed Upright
Ethiopian rebels edge closer to Addis Ababa, as fears grow over all-out war	November 4, 2021	Eliza Mackintosh and Ed Upright
Ethiopia is at war with itself. Here's what you need to know about the conflict	November 3, 2021	Eliza Mackintosh
Rebels threaten Ethiopian capital as UN slams atrocities committed in Tigray conflict	November 3, 2021	Eliza Mackintosh
Ethiopia announces state of emergency as Tigrayan forces gain ground	November 2, 2021	Bethlehem Feleke
Ethiopia on verge of losing access to lucrative US trade program over human rights violations	November 2, 2021	Jennifer Hansler
Ethiopia says Tigray forces killed 100 youths in key town; TPLF denies claim	November 2, 2021	Reuters
Facebook knew it was being used to incite violence in Ethiopia. It did little to stop the spread, documents show	October 23, 2021	Eliza Mackintosh
Mekelle struck, residents flee Amhara as Ethiopia battle intensifies	October 22, 2021	Reuters and Bethlehem Feleke
Fresh airstrikes hit capital of Ethiopia's war-torn Tigray region	October 20, 2021	Bethlehem Feleke, Katie Polglase and Gianluca Mezzofiore

Three children killed in airstrikes on Ethiopia's Tigray region, UN says	October 19, 2021	Gianluca Mezzofiore, Bethlehem Feleke, Barbara Arvanitidis and Sharon
Capital of Ethiopia's Tigray region hit by airstrikes, eyewitness and local forces say	October 18, 2021	Bethlehem Feleke, Barbara Arvanitidis and Gianluca Mezzofiore
Ethiopia committing 'possible genocide' in Tigray	October 7, 2021	Interview with Rep. Michael McCaul
US warns it could sanction Ethiopia after CNN reveals airline ferried weapons during Tigray war	October 7, 2021	Nima Elbagir, Gianluca Mezzofiore, Katie Polglase and Eliza Mackintosh
Ethiopia used airlines to transport weapons during Tigray conflict	October 6, 2021	Nima Elbagir
Former US Envoy: 'Unconscionable' what's happening in Ethiopia	October 6, 2021	Interview with J. Peter Pham
Ethiopia used its flagship commercial airline to transport weapons during war in Tigray	October 5, 2021	Nima Elbagir, Gianluca Mezzofiore, Katie Polglase and Barbara Arvanitidis
Ethiopian parliament confirms Abiy Ahmed as prime minister	October 4, 2021	Reuters
UN Secretary-General rebuffs Ethiopia's demand for senior UN officials to leave the country	October 2, 2021	Eliza Mackintosh and Richard Roth
Ethiopia to expel UN officials amid fears of Tigray famine	September 30, 2021	Bethlehem Feleke and Eliza Mackintosh
Where is the outrage for Ethiopia?	September 29, 2021	Isha Sesay, Masai Ujiri, Gbenga Akinnagbe and Liz Agbor-Tabi
Biden signs executive order authorizing new Ethiopia sanctions amid reports of atrocities	September 17, 2021	Jennifer Hansler, Nima Elbagir and Betsy Klein
CNN uncovers evidence of torture, detention and execution in Tigray	September 9, 2021	Nima Elbagir
From Nobel laureate to global pariah: How the world got Abiy Ahmed and Ethiopia so wrong	September 6, 2021	Eliza Mackintosh
Men are marched out of prison camps. Then corpses float down the river	September 5, 2021	Nima Elbagir, Katie Polglase, Barbara Arvanitidis, Gianluca Mezzofiore, Laura Smith-Spark
Sexual violence against women and girls in Ethiopia's Tigray region amount to war crimes, Amnesty says	August 12, 2021	Nima Elbagir and Lauren Kent
UN fears for revered Christian and tourist site in Ethiopia that goes back 900 years	August 6, 2021	Sara Dean, Forrest Brown, Errol Barnett and Thomas Page

Tigrayan fighters reportedly seize control of UN World Heritage Site in Ethiopia	August 6, 2021	Richard Roth, Michael Conte and Sarah Dean
At least 30 bodies float down river between Ethiopia's Tigray and Sudan	August 3, 2021	Story by Reuters
UN says food aid in Ethiopia's war-torn Tigray region will run out Friday as 400,000 people face famine	July 30, 2021	Rob Picheta, James Briggs and Larry Madowo
Ethiopia's Tigray forces enter neighboring Afar region, Afar says	July 20, 2021	Story by Reuters
Food and fuel running out in capital of Ethiopia's war-torn Tigray region	July 3, 2021	Nima Elbagir and Richard Roth
Ethiopia is at war with itself. Here's what you need to know about the conflict	June 30, 2021	Eliza Mackintosh
Rebels in Tigray reject calls for ceasefire after Ethiopian government forces withdraw from regional capital	June 29, 2021	Eliza Mackintosh, Bethlehem Feleke and Vasco Cotovio
Ethiopia's government announce ceasefire as Tigrayan troops retake region's capital	June 28, 2021	Bethlehem Feleke, Richard Roth, Kristina Sgueglia, Vasco Cotovio, Nima Elbagir
Video of Ethiopia massacre shows soldiers documenting executions	June 28, 2021	Nima Elbagir