

CNN's Biased Reporting on Ethiopia's Conflict Screams for an Independent Investigation

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In April 2021, a former US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs confide to me in an email message that he has been “warned that the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) is financing some journalists who are making the Tigray situation look much worse than it is.”

Whether TPLF is financing international journalists to systematically vilify the Ethiopian government is difficult to verify. But one thing is for sure. CNN persistently peddles false narratives about genocidal crimes and the use of rape and starvation as weapons of war, knowing full well they are unsubstantiated. Evidently, CNN also has a hear-no-evil, see-no-evil, speak-no-evil policy when it comes to atrocities committed by the TPLF.

This is not to say Ethiopian forces have not been accused of atrocities. A joint UN and Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) report has documented both Ethiopian and TPLF forces have committed “serious abuses and violations of human rights” and there are “reasonable grounds to believe that a number of these violations may amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes.”

The laxity of CNN’s adherence to strict code of journalistic conduct and lack of impartiality in its coverage of Ethiopia’s war cannot be reviewed in isolation. To have a grasp of the full picture, one needs to pay close attention to TPLF’s sophisticated misinformation campaign that is aided by international media consultants and lobbying powerhouses.

How TPLF deceived Amnesty International serves as a classic case of the power of misinformation. On 26 February 2021, Amnesty International issued [a report](#) on atrocities committed in Axum, a historic city in the Tigray tribal land based on “41 survivors and 20 witnesses with knowledge of the events.” The report stated: “Eritrean troops fighting in Ethiopia’s Tigray state systematically killed hundreds of unarmed civilians in the northern city of Axum on 28-29 November 2020, opening fire in the streets and conducting house-to-house raids in a massacre that may amount to a crime against humanity.”

Mr. Deprose Muchena, Amnesty International’s Director for East and Southern Africa characterized the evidence as “compelling and points to a chilling conclusion.” Not long after, on March 17, Joanne Mariner, Director of crisis response for Amnesty International, investigating war crimes, repudiated the “compelling evidence” as “[incorrect as to the date and as to the circumstances.](#)”

When 41 survivors and 20 witnesses narrate the same story to the minute details that proved to be false, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the story was scripted and rehearsed for international organizations consumption.

One would think CNN could learn from Amnesty International’s humiliating lesson. Sadly, watching CNN’s reports on the current conflict in Ethiopia is witnessing a gross violation of basic journalistic code of conduct. TPLF exaggerated if not fabricated claims are taken on face value and peddled to the international public without verification, triangulation, or circumscription of the report as unverified by independent parties.

Far from verification and circumscription of unsubstantiated claims, CNN eagerly takes every accusation against the Ethiopian government to build a narrative of “[evidence of a methodical campaign, one which bears all the hallmarks of genocide as defined by international law.](#)”

In some cases, CNN resorts to shenanigan fraud, elevating unsubstantiated claims as an additional piece of evidence to complete its genocidal claim jigsaw puzzle. In one case, CNN used bullet castings that family members of Tigrayan victims sent to it as material evidence of genocide. To give credence to the story, CNN sent the alleged evidence to forensic experts for analysis and got confirmation that the bullet casings were from weapons that [“the Ethiopian government would use.”](#)

The fact that Ethiopian and TPLF forces use the same weapons, and the bullet castings could be from TPLF was of no concern to CNN. There was no confirmation that the castings shelled the bullets that killed the alleged victims. This, too, was of no concern to CNN.

To thicken the plot, the use of rape [as a weapon of war](#) was alleged based on one interview a CNN reporter had with a Tigrayan doctor. The doctor alleged Tigrayan women were being raped to force them to “change their [ethnic] identity” as part of the Ethiopian government’s campaign of ethnic cleansing. According to the CNN reporter, the doctor believed that the reported rapes were not a result of “ill disciplined” soldiers, but rather a systemic use of rape as a weapon of “cleansing of the bloodline” of Tigrayans. According to CNN’s report, every woman and girl who was being raped was told the act was to humiliate her and make her change her identity.

The CNN reporter went on to say: “This is what gives this a hallmark of genocide. That is what gives this a hallmark of ethnic cleansing rather than just an unfortunate consequence of war.” Once the story of “cleansing of the bloodline” of Tigrayans was framed the next step was inflating the number of rape victims.

The doctor told CNN that the total number of rapes that were “reported” to him were “less than 10.” However, he “suspects” the number is “potentially in thousands” in the area he was operating. His “suspicion is based on the injury [he was] presented with.” It defies logic how the doctor extrapolated the number of rape victims to thousands based on the severity or the nature of the wounds of less than 10 rape victims he examined.

What makes the whole thing ludicrous is the assertion that CNN’s report is substantiated by its “extraordinary team working inside Tigray.” CNN does not have office in Tigray. It is well known that TPLF was established by the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT). Leaders of MLLT [fancied themselves as followers and later heirs of Enver Hoxha](#), the supreme leader of Albanian Communism. Their manifesto makes it clear that they chose Enver Hoxa’s genre of communism because of its strict control of not only over party members but also over the general populace. Given TPLF’s total control of every aspect of life in Tigray, CNN’s “extraordinary team” can only come from TPLF recruited or controlled locals. We have a case of the accuser investigating the accused on behalf of CNN.

In a total rebuke of CNN’s unprofessional if not commissioned report, *Foreign Policy* brought to light a leaked telephone conversation transcript in which several UN officials who are stationed in Ethiopia agreed there was [no evidence](#) to substantiate rape being perpetrated as a weapon of war.

The UN Representative for African Union (AU) and UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) characterized such allegations as [“media hype.”](#) Similarly, the UN Population Fund (UNPF) representative found it [“very sensationalist.”](#) She added: “I have woken up to messages from journalists that they are going to go out with a report on how Safe Houses that are supported by the UNFPA, where we protect women and girls that have been victims of sexual violence ‘have been raided by armed forces’ in Ethiopia. I do not know any safe houses that have been raided by anyone.”

Another systemic accusation that CNN repeated many times is the [“deliberate blockade of food,”](#) putting the people of Tigray at risk of “mass starvation.” To the contrary, [a joint UN and Ethiopian](#)

[Human Rights Commission report](#) “could not confirm deliberate or willful denial of humanitarian assistance to the civilian population in Tigray or the use of starvation as a weapon of war.”

Furthermore, CNN took proactive steps, using unnamed “experts” to criminalize a perfectly legal action by the Ethiopian government. In one case it accused the Ethiopian government of [violating international aviation law](#) for allegedly using Ethiopian Airlines planes to transport military personnel and armaments.

CNN’s own [aviation experts](#) unequivocally rejected CNN’s assertion. They emphasized the Ethiopian government owns the Ethiopian Airlines and can decide whether to use it for civilian or military purpose. They went further to note countries around the world routinely use their Airlines for military purposes in time of emergency or war.

CNN did not have to consult experts on this. They could have googled it. [According to the Smithsonian Magazine](#), During the World War II, American airlines (aircraft, cargo, and personnel) not only “worked closely with the military to further the war effort,” they were also “placed under the control of the Air Transport Command.” Unlike the Ethiopian Airlines that is owned by the government, American airlines were privately owned.

The World War II was not an exception. During [the Iraq war](#) 10 private airlines and 14 cargo carriers were contracted to fly troops and equipment to Iraq and neighboring countries. This, CNN does not even need Google. CNN itself was touting the militarization of the airlines as patriotic duty. In one report the headline read: “[Military and civilian worlds meet at airport](#).” The message was “You may not like the war but do like the warrior.”

There is no plausible explanation for CNN’s zeal to damage the Ethiopian airlines other than TPLF official advocate’s publicly expressed desire to destroy the Airlines and [have its membership with Star Alliance revoked](#).

CNN’s transgressions do not stop with peddling false and fabricated claims against the Ethiopian government and its business interests as shown with the Ethiopia Airlines. Its deafening silence about atrocities committed by TPLF is far worse in terms of ignoring potential crimes against humanity.

When the war was fought in Tigray proper, CNN gave a blanket coverage to the atrocities committed by Ethiopian forces, often sensationalizing and exaggerating it. After TPLF became the aggressor in June 2021 and the war moved from Tigray to Amhara and Afar regions, CNN adopted a hear-no-evil, see-no-evil, speak-no-evil policy. Simply put, CNN’s zeal to accuse the Ethiopian government of genocide is matched by its devotion to turn a blind eye to TPLF’s gross atrocities.

TPLF’s crime against humanity in the Amhara and Afar region is documented by the Amnesty International as “[despicable acts that amount to war crimes and defy any iota of humanity](#).” The [Organization for World Peace](#), reported TPLF’s crimes against humanity includes using “child soldiers for the purpose of human shields against attacks.”

Article 36, section 1d of [Ethiopia's Constitution promulgates](#) that children shall "be protected against exploitative practices, and not to be permitted to engage in any employment which would prejudice [their] health, education or well-being." [The minimum age](#) for voluntary or compulsory recruitment to join the military cohort in Ethiopia is 18.

The President of Tigray and Chairman of the TPLF Debretsion Gebremichael is on the record, announcing every Tigrayan “[starting from children](#)” will fight in the war. TPLF spokesperson Getachew

Reda justified recruiting 17 years old children, stating “[these are children whose parents have been subjected to untold suffering](#)” in the hands of Eritrean, Ethiopian and Amhara forces. A captured TPLF military leader put the age range of TPLF fighters between 14/15 to 64/65. Even worse, he acknowledged, of the 1400 forces he was leading, [800 were armed and 600 were unarmed](#). These are children used as human shield.

Between 1988 and 2004, when Joseph Kony of the Ugandan Lord’s Resistance Army used 30,000 Ugandan child soldiers, CNN was at the forefront of the media condemning Kony as a “[Brutal warlord](#).” In 1995, CNN characterized ISIS’s use of child soldiers in Iraq and Syria as “[stomach churning](#).” CNN’s lack of reaction to TPLF’s use of child soldiers who are dying in tens of thousands can only be characterized as a “deafening criminal silence.”

TPLF’s crime is not limited to using child soldiers and raping women in Amhara and Afar regions. Destruction of properties and looting of any movable object from hospitals, schools, businesses and small shops is part of its war strategy.

According to *Euro Asia Review*, The USAID is on the record, acknowledging “[Tigrayan forces looted USAID warehouses in Ethiopia's Amhara region](#).” USAID mission Director Sean Jones stated: “We do have proof that several of our warehouses have been looted and completely emptied in the areas, particularly in Amhara, where TPLF soldiers have gone into.”

Furthermore, recently joint UN and Ethiopian Human Rights Commission report revealed [Tigray forces set up road blockades to delay the delivery of humanitarian relief](#) to their own people. According to the UN, TPLF [confiscated 428 UN aid trucks](#) to use them for transporting TPLF militia and weapons to the war fronts.

Sadly, CNN has done the international community a gross disservice by christening TPLF as a victim and demonizing the Prime Minister Abiy’s administration with fabricated genocidal crime, including using rape and starvation as weapons of war.

The misinformation has reached the highest level of the US government hierarchy, as evidenced in Senator Patrick Leahy’s recent claim of “[genocide occurring in Tigray](#).” The Senator’s claim stands in line with CNN’s reporting but contradicts UN’s report that stressed there is no evidence to support a genocidal crime.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate there is no evidence that CNN is corrupted by TPLF’s financial incentives. However, there is something systemic about it that screams aloud for an independent investigation.

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