

THE MASSACRE IN AXUM

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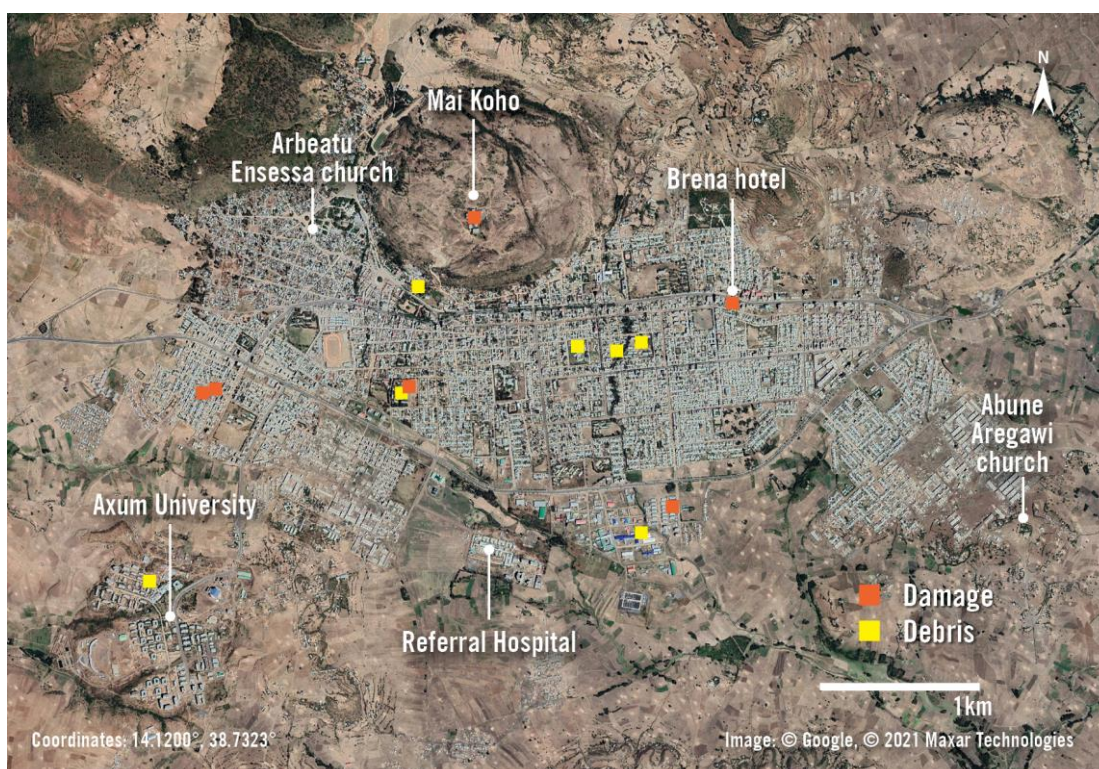
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



An overview of Axum shows key locations in the town. Structures damaged from shelling and airstrikes are shown with orange markers. Areas with significant debris – likely from looting – are shown with yellow markers.

Between 19 and 29 November 2020, Eritrean troops operating in the Ethiopian city of Axum, Tigray, committed a series of human rights and humanitarian law violations, including killing hundreds of civilians. Over an approximately 24-hour period on 28-29 November, Eritrean soldiers deliberately shot civilians on the street and carried out systematic house-to-house searches, extrajudicially executing men and boys. The massacre was carried out in retaliation for an earlier attack by a small number of local militiamen, joined by local residents armed with sticks and stones.

In the immediate aftermath of the massacre, Eritrean troops shot at those who sought to remove bodies from the streets, but later allowed residents to collect the bodies and bury them. Men from the community led the collective effort, pulling carts piled with the bodies of relatives, friends, neighbours and strangers, which they brought to churches across the city for burial, many in mass graves.

The massacre was the culmination of a wave of violations carried out since 19 November, when Eritrean and Ethiopian forces entered Axum together, after indiscriminately shelling the city and firing at those who tried to flee. Witnesses say that Eritrean forces, in taking over the town, carried out extrajudicial executions and engaged in widespread looting. Following the 28-29 November massacre, Eritrean forces detained hundreds

of residents and threatened renewed killing in the event of new resistance. Looting by Eritrean soldiers escalated, and insecurity and hunger led many residents to flee.

The events in Axum — a city located on the road linking Shire to Adwa, some 187 kms north of Mekelle, the capital of Tigray Regional State — occurred during the ongoing armed conflict between Ethiopia's federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Previously Ethiopia's ruling party, the TPLF lost its dominant political position in 2018, but continued to govern the Tigray region under Ethiopia's federal structure until the outbreak of war in November 2020.

On 4 November 2020, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed appeared on national TV and announced that he had ordered the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) — Ethiopia's military — to fight the Tigray regional paramilitary police and militia loyal to the TPLF. He said that the Tigray security forces had attacked the ENDF's Northern Command, based in Mekelle. In waging war against the TPLF, the ENDF has relied on the support of special forces and militias from the Amhara region, which borders on Tigray, and on the Eritrean Defence Force.

The Ethiopian authorities and Eritrean authorities have made contradictory statements regarding the involvement of Eritrean troops in the Tigray conflict, with some high-ranking officials denying their presence but others acknowledging it.¹ In this briefing, Amnesty International documents how the Eritrean military is responsible for serious violations against Tigrayan civilians in Axum. It concludes that the indiscriminate shelling of Axum by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops may amount to war crimes, and that the mass execution of Axum civilians by Eritrean troops may amount to crimes against humanity.

Amnesty International calls for an international investigation into the events in Axum, and for the Ethiopian government to grant full and unimpeded access to humanitarian, human rights, and media organizations.

This briefing is based on 11 days of research by Amnesty International at the refugee reception center in Hamdayet, eastern Sudan, in January 2021, as well as on numerous phone interviews with witnesses in Axum.² In all, Amnesty International interviewed 41 witnesses and survivors of the massacre, all ethnic Tigrayans, as well as 20 others with knowledge relevant to the situation.³ Given security concerns of interviewees, all of their names have been omitted.

On 18 February, Amnesty International shared the research findings presented in this briefing with Ambassador Redwan Hussein, Ethiopia's State Minister for Foreign Affairs and Spokesperson for the Emergency Taskforce in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but had not received a response at the time of writing.

¹ See, for example, "Ethiopian general says Eritrean troops entered Tigray - video clip," Reuters, 7 January 2021; "Complete lie': Ethiopia denies Eritrean army's involvement in Tigray," Afrinews, 12 November 2020.

² Amnesty International is still trying to secure access to Tigray Regional State to conduct fact-finding on the ground, following a formal request made on 3 December 2020. Other international human rights investigators do not have formal access to Tigray either. In December 2020, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michele Bachelet called on the Ethiopian government to grant access to independent human rights monitors so that they could investigate allegations of abuses. "Provide unhindered access to whole of Tigray to protect civilians, Bachelet urges Ethiopia," UN News, 22 December 2020.

³ Satellite imagery from 4 October, 16 October, 23 November and 13 December 2020 was also analysed to corroborate witness accounts of events. (The imagery from October was used for comparative purposes.)

INDISCRIMINATE SHELLING AND KILLING OF SUSPECTED TPLF MEMBERS

The armed conflict between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF began on 4 November 2020. At some point during the second week of fighting, there was aerial bombing in and around Axum, and on the afternoon of 19 November, forces loyal to the Federal government started to shell the city indiscriminately.⁴

In an apparent joint operation to capture Axum, Ethiopian and Eritrean military forces began firing artillery on the city from the west, the direction from which they advanced. A witness recalled that the shelling continued for quite some time: “There was not any army or forces inside the city at that time but they shelled the people. That was very scary ... shelling and gunfire.”⁵

Numerous residents described the terror that took hold of the city. A man recalled: “We were really scared because the sound was really huge. We never heard [anything] like that. And we saw the shells falling on buildings, houses.”⁶ A woman recalled: “I was shocked and saw everyone shocked and scared of what happened.”⁷

“Everybody ran away, leaving shops, markets and offices,” said one woman.⁸ One man recalled that some people tried to flee the city while “others were hiding around bridges, buildings, drainage pipes.”⁹ Another said: “I saw people scared, running away. They tried to escape but some of them ran into the zone of shelling.”¹⁰ The shells were falling “continuously” that evening, one woman said.¹¹

Shells landed on streets and on civilian buildings, killing and injuring residents. One man said a neighbour and three others were killed in a house in the Idaga Hamus neighbourhood. “My neighbour’s house was destroyed,” he said, “and the people inside died.”¹² The neighbour was a woman in her mid-60s named Telets Abraha, he recalled. Killed with her were two of her cousins — young men who had found refuge in Axum after fleeing the conflict in Humera — as well as her maid, a woman aged 18 or 19. “After our neighbour died under her home, we got scared and ran,” the man said.

⁴ Amnesty International phone interviews (names withheld), Axum, Ethiopia, 3-9 February 2021.

⁵ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 21 January 2021.

⁶ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

⁷ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 22 January 2021.

⁸ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 22 January 2021.

⁹ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 16 January 2021.

¹⁰ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.

¹¹ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 22 January 2021.

¹² Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.

In another incident that day, a man said he saw a woman and her infant child killed when artillery shells fell near the woman's house, which was located close to the Atse Menelik high school. "She was outside the compound and moving, trying to find a safe place," he recalled. "Then [the] shell fell on her. She had three kids. Two of them ran but the third was a little kid [she] carried on her back. He was killed with her."¹³

Azbia (name changed) said she saw a family being killed in the Hamed Gebez neighbourhood in O2 Kebele: "The heavy weapon fell on one house and ... killed five people — mother, father, brother, sister and maid. I saw this myself."¹⁴ Another witness said he saw five of his neighbours killed in the shelling in two separate incidents—a woman in her thirties, killed near the Damo hotel, and a woman in her fifties, killed alongside her two children and niece near the Remhai hotel.

Gebremeskel (name changed) described his experience that day:

I was with my friends chilling out on the street, when the bombing started. We were scared and tried to hide underground or in buildings. We found a market and hid there. I saw three people who were friends with each other try to run on the street. Two of them got injured. The third one was killed: half of his face was removed. We also saw a building hit. Then, later, we went to check it and I saw an old woman [had been] killed by the fallen building.¹⁵

This was near the stadium. The shelling, he said, "came from the direction of Shire."

Girmai (name changed) told Amnesty International that he watched the shelling from the top of a building, and that the bombardment started between 2 and 3 pm on 19 November. He said:

There was a lot of bombardment in the town. Damo hotel, near the Axum University — I saw it with my eyes — Enda-Gaber area. I was watching from the top of the building while the artillery bombs were hitting in different parts of the city. Near the Menelik school, around 11 people were killed including a woman who came from Humera ... The school is close to the Damo Hotel. I attended the funeral for some of the dead the next day.¹⁶

Luel (name changed) said he helped bring a 45- or 50-year-old woman to the hospital; she had been injured with shrapnel in her family compound. Some who were injured died because they did not receive treatment. A 15-year-old boy told Amnesty International that he fled to a neighbouring village, where he saw a man who had been injured in the shelling: "People told him that they will not give him any treatment because they don't know how. They told him to go to the Referral hospital in Axum but he was told that the soldiers already controlled the city, so he died in the village."¹⁷

Some local people, witnesses say, organized checkpoints, seeking to find artillery observers (i.e., spotters who help direct artillery and mortar fire onto targets). None of the witnesses to whom Amnesty International spoke, however, said that there was any armed resistance to the attack. "They [the incoming forces] didn't face any TPLF fighters; that's why they took control of the city within a day," one woman explained.¹⁸

When the shelling finished, Ethiopian and Eritrean forces entered Axum together. "They were shooting ... when they entered the city," Haftom (name changed) recalled. He said:

The place where we stayed was my friend's home and they shot into the home. The window broke ... We were upstairs and could see soldiers very clearly. It was dark — it was nighttime. We saw that tanks and trucks [had] lights [on]. That's how we recognized they were Ethiopians and Eritreans ... My friend was sick [from fear] from the morning because of the shelling. He became more sick after they shot the heavy weapons.¹⁹

Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers took control of the city that day. "The city became quiet and silent," one man recalled.²⁰

Once in control of the city, soldiers generally identified as Eritrean searched for TPLF soldiers and militias. The soldiers "were looking for militias or anyone with a gun," said one woman. "There were a lot of ... house to house killings." Mimicking the soldiers, she added: "Where is your young man, woman?" They killed a lot of young people that day."²¹

¹³ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.

¹⁴ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.

¹⁵ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 16 January 2021.

¹⁶ Amnesty International phone interview (name withheld), Axum, Ethiopia, 6 February 2021.

¹⁷ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 21 January 2021.

¹⁸ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.

¹⁹ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

²⁰ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 23 January 2021.

²¹ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.

Another man described the killing of a neighbour, a woman aged around 30: “We were running; it was at midnight; we ran through China Road ... in the direction of Shire ... We were running in front of her. She was carrying a torch. After she turned it on, they saw her and they shot her. We didn’t really see who or where they were.”²²

Witnesses told Amnesty International that killings of men suspected of being TPLF fighters and sympathizers were based on even the slightest possible clues. As one man explained:

They started looking for people to kill, especially those who are militias or farmer fighters or [who have] any relation with TPLF soldiers. They would ask for your cell phone and if they see any of your pictures or a family member who are farmers or fighters, they would kill you ... They started killing people, especially those who wore *shirit* [a sarong-like wrap commonly associated with TPLF fighters] and also those who wore camouflage shirts, even if just for style.²³

Weyni (name changed), age 18, described such an incident on 20 November, in which she saw Eritrean soldiers extrajudicially execute two men. Near Yemane Garage, a petrol station in the east of the city, she saw “two people riding a motorbike.” The driver, she said, was in his mid-twenties, while the passenger was in his fifties. “The driver wore a ranger’s jacket ... The passenger wore a *shirit* scarf ... They ordered them to stop and asked them to show their phones and laid them down on the asphalt face down and shot them in the back.”²⁴

With her friends, she faced harassment from Eritrean soldiers:

They would check your phone and if they see any Gebretzion picture or anything political, they can rob your mobile and beat you Eritrean soldiers started by robbing the mobiles of my friends. They asked to see the photo gallery on his phone and found pictures of TPLF leaders. It was a friend I was with. There was another [friend] with us. They robbed him of his money.²⁵

A 6 pm curfew, extending until morning, was imposed immediately.²⁶

On 20 November, residents ventured out of their homes or returned from the surrounding villages and found dead neighbours on the street. One woman said she saw two bodies — a man and a woman — near her home on China Road. One man said he found the body of a neighbour, a barber in his thirties, on the street near the Bazin school.²⁷ A woman who had fled to a village during the shelling said she returned to Axum that day: “During the journey we saw a lot of dead bodies on the street killed by heavy weapons or bullets,” she said.²⁸

Soldiers continued carrying out beatings and extrajudicial executions in the following days, although, it appears, on a smaller scale.

Returning to Axum on 22 November after fleeing the shelling, one man said he saw on the streets, especially on China Road, the bullet-riddled bodies of over 10 people. He recognized a neighbour who owned a butcher’s shop. Another man who had fled and who came back to the city around 25-26 November said:

After I came back to the city, I ... saw the Brana Hotel ... really damaged ... It was very shocking because we saw a lot of dead bodies [on the street], so we were scared and tried to hide because it's not safe ... I saw my neighbour dead. His body had been shot by five bullets. We found him, took his body to his house ... He's an old man. Approximately [age] 50.²⁹

A man said he saw two men being killed in the Edaga Hamus neighbourhood on approximately 25 November: “we saw them riding a motorbike and [they] were shot, so we ran away.” He said that the perpetrators could have been either Eritrean or Ethiopian soldiers. He explained: “They wore Ethiopian defense uniforms but could be Eritreans because many Eritrean soldiers wore that uniform.”³⁰

²² Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021. The so-called China Road is a major thoroughfare cutting across the city.

²³ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 21 January 2021. The farmers referred to are those given weapons and training by the TPLF.

²⁴ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.

²⁵ Debretzion Gebremichael, mentioned by this woman, is the head of the TPLF. He is currently in hiding.

²⁶ Local residents interviewed by Amnesty International said they were informed of the curfew by soldiers, but they did not know how it was declared or its legal basis.

²⁷ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 22 January 2021.

²⁸ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.

²⁹ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.

³⁰ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.



Debris from shelling is visible in front of the Brana Hotel, on Axum's old main road, in this satellite imagery from 13 December 2020. A man who had fled and who came back to the city around 25-26 November said: "After I came back to the city, I ... saw the Brana Hotel ... really damaged."

THE MASSACRE

FIGHTING

On the morning of 28 November, a band of pro-TPLF fighters mounted an assault on a position that Eritrean soldiers had set up on a mountain known as Mai Koho. This mountain, located just east of the Axum Tsion St Mary Church, sits a few hundred meters from many of the town's main hotels, banks, and churches, and overlooks the town.

The fighting started in the morning, several witnesses said, when TPLF fighters and/or pro-TPLF militiamen attacked the Eritrean position at Mai Koho. The group of assailants was reportedly small — witnesses said they saw perhaps 50-80 men armed with guns — but the offensive received local support. Some local youth rallied, joining the fight with improvised weapons, such as knives, sticks, and stones. Others brought food to the fighters, while an even larger number cheered in support.³¹

The Eritrean forces responded by firing automatic weapons and precision rifles. It is unclear how long the actual fighting lasted, though some said it went on into the afternoon. Some witnesses claimed that the militiamen succeeded in killing many Eritrean soldiers. Others described a dramatic imbalance between the two sides. A 26-year-old man who participated in the attack said:

We expected that TPLF soldiers might come fight the Eritreans but it wasn't them. We heard it was some militiamen. We wanted to protect our city so we attempted to defend it especially from Eritrean soldiers ... The Eritrean soldiers were organized. They knew how to shoot and they had radios, communications. Even before we started fighting with them, they killed with snipers and Bren [machine guns] ... I didn't have a gun, just a stick.³²

A 22-year-old man who sought to bring food to the fighters described a similar scene: “The Eritrean soldiers were trained but the young residents didn't even know how to shoot. After that a lot of the fighters started running away and dropped their weapons.”³³

DELIBERATE TARGETING OF CIVILIANS

From about 3 to 4 pm, lines of Eritrean trucks and tanks reportedly entered the city from the east. Their numbers bolstered by the new arrivals, Eritrean soldiers went on a rampage, shooting at civilian men and youths who were out on the streets attempting to flee in panic. The killing, which one witness said began around 4 pm, was carried out on a large scale and continued until the evening.

Kinfe (name changed), a university professor, described the beginning of the massacre. “Starting [at] 2 pm, the Eritrean soldiers started going home to home and killing men. When I heard that they [were] killing men, I ran out of the city.”³⁴

Kifle (name changed), age 26, told Amnesty International about killings he witnessed on the city's main street. “I saw the Eritrean soldiers killing the youth who were on the street,” he recalled. “I was on the second floor of a building and I watched, through the window, the Eritreans killing the youth on the street.”³⁵

³¹ Amnesty International phone interview (name withheld), 3 February 2021; Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 6 January 2021.

³² Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.

³³ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 22 January 2021.

³⁴ Amnesty International phone interview (name withheld), Axum, Ethiopia, 6 February 2021.

³⁵ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 6 January 2021.

The shooting, one witness said, “was huge.”³⁶ Another resident, a 21-year-old man, said: “I saw a lot of people dead on the street. Even my uncle’s family. Six of his family members were killed. So many people were killed ... This was in the middle of the city, not at the entrance or in surrounding villages.”³⁷ Some residents hid in buildings and witnessed killings through the windows. One man said:

I was at home. I saw around my home what is happening when some soldiers targeted people with sniper rifles, killing people. I ... saw the people being shot on the ground when they were running. Approximately 10 people or more. All of them young men ... Everyone was scared and ran away.³⁸

Other witnesses echo this account, describing Eritrean soldiers shooting at men who posed no threat to them. The victims, residents said, carried no weapons and in many cases were running away from the soldiers when they were shot. One man who had found refuge in an unfinished building said he saw a group of six Eritrean soldiers kill a neighbour with a vehicle-mounted heavy machine-gun on the street near the Mana Hotel: “He was standing. I think he was confused. They were probably around 10 metres from him. They shot him in the head.”³⁹

Another man described two killings in the Tsele neighbourhood. In the first case, Eritrean soldiers shot a homeless man known as Oud who had suffered from mental health problems: “He was walking. After he started running, they shot him: he started running and then stopped and was lying on the incline of the asphalt. I saw when they shot him — his body shook. They were about 70 metres from him.”⁴⁰ In the second incident, he saw a man being shot from behind while running.

One witness who was hiding in a forest just outside the city saw his neighbour, a farmer named Abreha, shot and killed by Eritrean soldiers: “He was in his field working. I saw Eritrean soldiers come up and get out of the car and they immediately shot at him.”⁴¹ When returning to see the body after the soldiers left, he saw that the bag of seeds that his neighbour had been preparing was gone: “[it] means probably that the Eritrean soldiers took them with them.”⁴² The victim, a father of three, was in his mid- to late-40s. That day, the man witnessed more men being killed: “I saw another two young men being shot in the head ... I saw them as they were shot from afar and falling on the street. It was around the preparatory school.”

The mass killing left the townspeople in confusion and disbelief. One resident said: “During this day, I never thought that Eritrean soldiers were killing civilians. People told me but I didn’t trust them. But after I saw that they had killed my neighbour. I understood that they were killing people and then I ran away from that.”⁴³ Residents had two options: running or hiding, in both cases with uncertain results. One witness said: “I think the reason they attacked the people easily is because some people ran, others hid in the city and were easily found in random places in the city.” Another man described the dilemma in similar terms: “When somebody is shot on the ground, you think you should run away because they will kill you, but when you run you are easily targeted.”⁴⁴

Those who hid at home were also vulnerable. A 23-year-old man said Eritrean soldiers noticed him after he opened the door of his home to observe what was happening:

Before they saw me, they were shooting at people. When they saw me, they started shooting at me and when I closed my door, they kept shooting at me. I heard them when they knocked on the door and said in Tigrinya, “open the door.” I kept quiet and silent, didn’t open the door, and hid under the bed. They started shooting at the walls. I could see small bullet holes in the wall. After that they left me alone ... Then I started observing through the holes. During that day, I saw people falling, soldiers passing that way.⁴⁵

Eritrean troops deployed tanks in the middle of the city.⁴⁶ One resident who lived near the Kideste Maryam hospital said he heard and saw tank shells falling in his neighbourhood, destroying a nearby building. “I heard [the tank] when it’s moving – you could hear the chains on the ground and the firing,” he added.⁴⁷

³⁶ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

³⁷ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

³⁸ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 21 January 2021.

³⁹ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.

⁴⁰ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

⁴¹ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 22 January 2021.

⁴² Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 22 January 2021.

⁴³ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 21 January 2021.

⁴⁴ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.

⁴⁵ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

⁴⁶ Amnesty International phone interviews (names withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 6 January 2021.

⁴⁷ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

Visibly traumatized, a young man who had joined the assault on May Koho, armed with a stick, told Amnesty International:

I saw a lot of my friends killed. One of them asked me to help but I didn't do anything. The Eritrean soldiers were lying on the ground and shooting from a distance. Five of my friends were already dead. The sixth was injured on his abdomen and the blood was percolating like a fountain so he asked me to help. So I brought him a blanket and tried to tie it. They kept shooting at us and the bullets hit around me. And he kept asking "Can you please take me to the hospital?" And I didn't take him because the hospital had already been looted and they were killing the patients at the hospital. And then I saw him when he's dead. His final sentences were "I'm tired, I want to sleep. Just save your life and run away."⁴⁸

The killings left the city strewn with bodies.⁴⁹ One man who had run out of the city returned at night after the shooting stopped. "All we could see on the streets were dead bodies and people crying," he said.⁵⁰

KILLINGS DURING HOUSE-TO-HOUSE SEARCHES

Residents say that, in addition to the shooting on the streets, Eritrean soldiers carried out house-to-house raids in the afternoon of 28 November and the morning of 29 November to find and kill teenage and adult men.

Several women Amnesty International spoke to were hiding at home when Eritrean soldiers came, asking if there were men in the house.⁵¹ A 28-year-old woman recalled: "They came up to my home and broke down the door and asked if we have young men — brothers or a father. We said 'no, we are just ladies,' and they kept going and checking our neighbours."⁵²

A 23-year-old man interviewed by Amnesty International named six of his relatives killed in the massacre. He found the body of one of the relatives — a 23-year-old cousin — on China Road. The man had been shot with three bullets, he recalled.⁵³

Habtom (name changed), a resident of Addis Ababa, said Eritrean soldiers killed four of his close relatives — Lisaneworq Laeke, Biniam Lisaneworq, Girmay Tekly and Birhane Weoday — near Axum's Abune Pentalwos Church.⁵⁴

A woman said that Eritrean soldiers killed one of her neighbours, a mother of five. "I saw her dead body. She had been shot in the chest," the woman said. The woman also said that Eritrean soldiers arrested two young men they found at another neighbour's house, while their mother and her third son, who was hiding, remained. "They took them, I don't know where," she said.⁵⁵

Bereket (name changed), a man who help bury the dead, including some of his friends, recalled:

My neighbourhood is around the Sabian Hotel near the hill (Tarik Sefer). They killed Habtom Araya, Buzu Gonu, Guesh Amdom, and Ephrem. There are also other people I know who are not from my area, Yohannes and Wedi Da'ero Hfash (nickname), [who were] killed near Menaharia. The first two were killed in one home, while the other were killed in two separate homes. They were just civilians. They were killed during the evening of 28 November.⁵⁶

Another man said he watched through his window and saw six men killed, execution-style, outside of his house near the Abnet Hotel on 29 November:

They lined them up and shot them in the back from behind. Two of them I knew. They're from my neighbourhood ... They asked "Where is your gun?" and they answered "We have no guns, we are civilians" ... One soldier went to his leader who was Beni-Amir [ethnicity] — he had three scars near each eye — and asked him, "shall we kill them or free them?" and he said, "just kill them," and they did.

They only shot twice for the six people ... They shot three people with one bullet. The first and second fell dead. The third one was injured, about to fall. They shot him a second time and killed the three others with the same bullet. They were lined up perfectly. They shot them with a Bren [light machine gun].

⁴⁸ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.

⁴⁹ Amnesty International phone interviews (names withheld), 10 January to 15 February 2021; Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 6 January 2021.

⁵⁰ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 16 January 2021.

⁵¹ Amnesty International interviews (names withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 and 19 January 2021.

⁵² Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.

⁵³ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.

⁵⁴ Amnesty International phone interview (name withheld), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 26 January 2021. This account is further corroborated by other witnesses in Axum who attended the burial of the deceased on 30 November.

⁵⁵ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.

⁵⁶ Amnesty International phone interview (name withheld), Axum, Ethiopia, 6 February 2021.

One of them didn't die immediately. He pleaded for help. And one hour later he died.⁵⁷

Another witness said that he saw five bodies of young men lined up on the ground near the Abnet Hotel.

IDENTIFYING THE PERPRETRATORS

Axum residents whom Amnesty International interviewed had no difficulty identifying the perpetrators as Eritrean soldiers. They described several tell-tale signs.

First, Eritrean soldiers often rode in trucks whose license plates read "Eritrea." Most wore a uniform that witnesses described as "beige" or a "mix of green and beige," easily distinguishable from that of Ethiopian soldiers. Some Eritrean soldiers, interviewees said, wore the uniform of the Ethiopian army, but could be easily identified because they wore plastic shoes known as *congo chama* or *shida*, which are popular in Eritrea. Ethiopian soldiers, on the other hand, wore standard-issue boots.

Cultural clues further helped people identify the perpetrators as Eritreans. Three scars on each temple, near the eye, marked some of the soldiers as Beni-Amir, an ethnic group that straddles Sudan and Eritrea but is absent from Ethiopia. While Ethiopian soldiers spoke Amharic, Eritrean soldiers spoke Arabic or Tigrinya, a language spoken by both Tigray people and Eritreans. Although the language is basically the same in both regions, the Tigrinya that Eritrean soldiers is a distinctive dialect, with its own words and accent. For example, as one woman explained, "They keep saying *ta'ale*, which in Tigrinya means 'move it.' But that's Eritrean Tigrinya. We use *laghak*."⁵⁸

Finally, Eritrean soldiers made no mystery of who they were. "Some of them told us they are Eritrean soldiers," the woman said.

ATTACKS ON PEOPLE COLLECTING BODIES

Those who left their houses on 29 November said they found bodies on the streets of their neighbourhood, "in every street and at every turn."⁵⁹ They learned of dead relatives, friends and neighbours. Survivors described moments of panic as they ran away at the sight of Eritrean soldiers.

For most of the day, Eritrean soldiers attacked the survivors who sought to bury the dead. A 21-year-old man said he was part of a group which sought that morning to bury friends: "We wanted to take their bodies, got the carts and then carried them on the cart — three dead bodies — and then immediately they started shelling us ... The shelling came from near the St Micheal church and fell about 10 metres from us. I think it was an RPG."⁶⁰

One woman, Tsigereda (name changed), told Amnesty International that Eritrean soldiers killed her nephews Teklay Fitsum (age 29) and Kibrom Fitsum (age 14) near their home in the area of St Micheal Church on 28 November.⁶¹ She recalled:

The next day, they did not allow us to pick the dead. The Eritrean soldiers said you cannot bury the dead before our dead soldiers are buried. The father found their dead bodies next day. They were killed by the Eritrean soldiers who have mark on their cheek like number eleven. They also speak a different version of Tigrinya, which is called Tigre, spoken in the western lowland areas of Eritrea. I was in Axum by then, I went out looking for them. The roads in the area were full of dead bodies. Almost all of the dead were male.⁶²

A 27-year-old man found the courtyard of his sister's house turned into an improvised morgue. He recalls countless bodies covered in blankets: "I didn't count [them] at that time because I was really shocked and my sister was really crying because her son had been killed. I took her outside of the compound so she wouldn't see the dead bodies and to calm her down."⁶³

That day, he and his sister sought to attend funeral rites but came under attack: "The people who had collected the bodies put them on carts and took them to the church. Me and my sister followed the cart. Immediately the soldiers started shooting on us from afar. We know that young men are targeted so I was scared and left my sister and started running away."

⁵⁷ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.

⁵⁸ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.

⁵⁹ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 22 January 2021.

⁶⁰ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

⁶¹ Amnesty International phone interview (name withheld), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2 February 2021.

⁶² Amnesty International phone interview (name withheld), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2 February 2021.

⁶³ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 21 January 2021.

MASS DETENTIONS AND THREATS

Eritrean soldiers also rounded up hundreds, if not thousands, of male residents in different parts of the city on 29 November. The men who were detained said the soldiers beat and abused them and robbed them of their belongings — jackets, belts, shoes and money. The soldiers also warned detainees that there would be renewed killings should they encounter any resistance.

A 26-year-old man described his detention: “Eritrean soldiers gathered us ... We were maybe 500 people, only men. They put us in a big hole in the ground” — the foundations of an unfinished building, located on the eastern entrance to the city.⁶⁴

Two other men Amnesty International spoke to said they were detained in the open air near the airport. One of them said: “They started gathering people, 300-400 in a group, taking them to different locations out of the city ... They took us out of the city.” He described the ill-treatment he faced: “They beat us and inflicted military punishment: forcing you to walk with your knees, or to crawl on the floor with your abdomen ... They didn’t beat me. They would make me sit and stand constantly, like a physical exercise, and rolling while lying down, but I hated this.”⁶⁵ The Eritrean soldiers’ threats made it clear that the killings on 28 and 29 November, and in particular the targeting of men of fighting age, represented a coordinated effort to terrorize the population into submission and deter further attacks. One of the men who was detained said: “The Eritrean soldiers surrounded us. One of their officers came up to us and made a speech “You people — if you try fighting us and hold any weapon against us — look at this red soil — we will destroy Axum like this. So don’t do anything against us.”⁶⁶

Another former detainee said: “They told us a lot of things: ‘Why are you trying to fight us? If you have a gun, give us, if not, we will continue this massacre.’ They also said, ‘We are destroying the TPLF ... If you keep following the TPLF and try to fight us again we will kill you and we will do the same as yesterday.’”⁶⁷

INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

International humanitarian law, which applies to all parties to an armed conflict, regulates the conduct of hostilities and sets out fundamental guarantees for the protection of those who do not or no longer directly participate in hostilities. The rules relevant to the violations documented in this briefing form part of customary international humanitarian law and are binding on all parties to the armed conflict, regardless of which treaties they have ratified.

One of the cardinal rules of international humanitarian law is that parties to the conflict must “distinguish between civilians and combatants” as well as “distinguish between civilian objects and military objectives.”⁶⁸ The corollary of the rule of distinction is that “indiscriminate attacks are prohibited.”⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.

⁶⁵ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

⁶⁶ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.

⁶⁷ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

⁶⁸ International Committee of the Red Cross, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Vol.1: Rules (ICRC Customary IHL Study) Rules 1 and 7.

⁶⁹ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 11.

Indiscriminate attacks are those that are of a nature to strike military objectives and civilians or civilian objects without distinction, either because the attack is not directed at a specific military objective, or because it employs a method or means of combat that cannot be directed at a specific military objective or has effects that cannot be limited as required by international humanitarian law.⁷⁰ Launching an indiscriminate attack resulting in death or injury to civilians is a war crime.⁷¹

Pillage (looting of personal property by soldiers) is prohibited and is a war crime.⁷²

International humanitarian law also provides fundamental guarantees for civilians as well as fighters who are captured, injured or otherwise rendered unable to fight (*hors de combat*). These rules include the requirement of humane treatment; and the prohibition of murder, of torture, cruel or inhuman treatment and outrages on personal dignity, collective punishment, and of rape and other forms of sexual violence.⁷³ Violations of these rules are war crimes.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 12.

⁷¹ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 156.

⁷² ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rules 52 and 156.

⁷³ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rules 87, 89, 90, and 93.

⁷⁴ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 156.

BURIALS

FINDING THE DEAD

As people came out of hiding and left their homes on 29 and 30 November, the scale of the killing became obvious to all. Those who ventured out saw dozens of dead and injured people scattered around their neighbourhoods, often recognizing familiar faces. The people Amnesty International interviewed provided the names of well over 200 people they knew who were killed on 28 and 29 November.⁷⁵ They said that all the victims were unarmed and that the overwhelming majority of them were men.

Amnesty International was unable to calculate the massacre's precise death toll, but estimates that hundreds of people were killed.

A 22-year-old man said he found the bodies of two of his friends side by side and that they had been made to kneel, indicating an execution-style killing. Speaking of one of the victims, he said: "They killed him with a bullet in the mouth. We saw the wound at the back of his neck."⁷⁶

In other instances, residents described injuries which suggested that some victims died because of a lack of medical care. A man said his friend had died from a bullet injury on the ankle. Another said he found the body of a friend about three metres outside of his friend's house. He said his friend had been shot in the abdomen with a single bullet, adding: "I believe that ... if he had gotten help, maybe he would be alive."⁷⁷

Some of those who had been shot were still alive by the time residents felt safe enough to leave their houses, but interviewees said there was nowhere in town they could be treated. One man said: "Some of them had bullets in their bodies but could have survived, I think. Some people were injured and said, 'I'm losing blood, please help me.'"⁷⁸ Another man recalled:

Around the Queen Sheba palace, I saw a lot of dead bodies and 10 farmers who had been injured by weapons. One of them, part of his bowel was coming out ... They were [men] aged 40 to 45-50 ... By that time there was no hospital. Kideste Maryam hospital had not been looted but there were no doctors or nurse. The Referral Hospital had been looted. We couldn't take these people to the hospital so we took them home.⁷⁹

One man similarly found a 24-year-old neighbour named Abdallah Hassan who had been shot with three bullets; he was near China Road. The man said: "He was alive but injured. They took him to the Referral Hospital, but he died there. There were no doctors or anything. It was empty."⁸⁰

COLLECTING THE DEAD

On the request of local elders, Ethiopian soldiers gave permission for people to bury the dead in the late afternoon on 29 November. Gathering the bodies and carrying out the funerals took days. Most of the dead appear to have been buried on 30 November, but witnesses said that people found many additional bodies in the days that followed.

The surviving men took up the task of carrying the dead to the town's churches. Amnesty International spoke to nine men who took part in the process, as well as to eight who witnessed it. The bodies were brought to the Arba'etu Ensessa church (next to the Axum Tsion St Mary Church), as well as St Micheal, Abune Aregawi, Enda-Gaber, Abba Pentalewon and Enda Eyesus (Jesus) churches. The men looked for bodies,

⁷⁵ Note that this figure does not include people whom interviewees said they saw killed or dead but whose names they did not know.

⁷⁶ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 22 January 2021.

⁷⁷ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 16 January 2021.

⁷⁸ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 16 January 2021.

⁷⁹ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 16 January 2021.

⁸⁰ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 22 January 2021.

piled them onto carts — up to 10 bodies at a time — and pulled these makeshift hearses to a church, before returning to the streets for another run. In some cases, however, the dead were buried in makeshift graves in the immediate vicinity of where they had been killed.

Bereket (name changed), a 21-year-old Axum resident, told Amnesty International:

I have seen many dead bodies since I was involved in collecting and burial of the dead on 30 November ... We collected the dead using horse/donkey carts. They didn't allow the priests to conduct funeral requiem for the dead or to clean and prepare the bodies as per the custom. We buried them at the Arba'etu Ensissa Church. While families of the deceased buried them in separate graves, unclaimed bodies were buried in mass graves.”⁸¹

Fanuel (name changed), a 23-year-old Axum resident, said:

I was involved in picking up the dead from the Abnet hotel area on China street. We were loading 8-9 dead bodies on a cart and took them to the church for burial. I made three trips to pick up the dead from the street. And there were many other people doing the same, using other carts. We buried the dead at Arba'etu Ensissa; there was no proper burial.⁸²

Another one of the volunteer pallbearers explained: “I helped [bury] my friends' dead bodies. A lot of people helped because there were a lot of dead. Everyone helped. We carried them on carts. Some of them may carry five, depending on what was on the street, some of them 10, others seven, all gathered at the church from different parts of the city.” A second man concurred: “We do three or four people in the same spot, cover them with a carpet, [or a] blanket, [then] take them to the church.”⁸³

Negasi (name changed), age 21, elaborated on his role in the transporting the bodies:

We started after getting the permission. Personally, during that day, with my friends and other people, we brought in a total of 18 dead bodies at different times. I brought five cartloads. First: four people. Then: three people. Then: two people. Then: eight people. Then, the last cart: only one person. That was all on the 20th [Hedar, i.e., 29 November]. The next day, I gathered 27 dead bodies ... In total I brought 45 bodies.⁸⁴

Other men Amnesty International interviewed say they carried comparable numbers of bodies. One, for instance, said he brought a total of 30 bodies to the Arba'etu Ensessa and St Micheal churches; another said he carried three or four cartloads, each bearing seven to 10 bodies, suggesting he moved between 21 and 40 bodies. Yet another said he may have carried over 50 bodies to the churches of St Micheal and Abune Aregawi; he estimated that he saw 400 bodies on 30 November alone. Finally, another told Amnesty International he saw about 200 bodies during various funerals.

The endeavor was grueling and traumatizing. One man recalled: “I had only seen foods or seeds or money being collected, not bodies. That was a huge deep sadness. It was difficult.”⁸⁵ In addition to the trauma of seeing and handling so many dead people, including loved ones, the men had to contend with the effects of decomposition and the fear of new killing. The bodies, which had remained in the open for a day or two before residents were allowed to take them away, had begun to decay. “It's smelly and very painful to see dead bodies,” recalled one man. And the pallbearers wondered whether killings might resume at any moment. “We got scared the soldiers might kill us. It was a tough moment,” he added.⁸⁶

The pallbearers nevertheless toiled out of a sense of duty. One man said: “It feels painful when your friends and cousins are dead and you are able to take the dead bodies. It can be painful if you stay at home, so I went and took dead bodies.”⁸⁷ Another man echoed this sentiment: “The feeling is complicated,” he said. “I felt several things: deeply sad because a lot of people died, and I never saw dead bodies and that was a shock. I was afraid people would kill me. At the same time, I felt a strong emotion and felt strong, to be better.”⁸⁸

Samson (name changed), a 23-year-old mechanic who assisted with burials at St Micheal Church on 30 November, recalled:

⁸¹ Amnesty International phone interview (name withheld), Axum, Ethiopia, 6 February 2021.

⁸² Amnesty International phone interview (name withheld), Axum, Ethiopia, 6 February 2021.

⁸³ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.

⁸⁴ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

⁸⁵ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.

⁸⁶ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

⁸⁷ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.

⁸⁸ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 16 January 2021.

It was a horrible experience to collect the dead from the streets as the bodies were already decomposing and smelling. There was no transport service, so we moved the dead bodies with carts. We were putting many bodies on one cart.⁸⁹

Uncertainty over the prospect of renewed killings by Eritrean soldiers weighed over the population. A woman recalled these days: “It was tough and scary. Everyone was afraid soldiers would kill people who helped bury the dead. It was very difficult. When soldiers came up to us, everyone ran, and when they passed, everyone returned to the proceedings.”⁹⁰ Afraid for their lives, some of the men Amnesty International spoke to stayed home on 30 November. Their fear was reasonable. One man said that on 1 December, he saw soldiers kill a man who was pulling a cart loaded with bodies near Axum’s main bus station: “It was Eritrean soldiers in Eritrean uniforms. Maybe seven of them. Most of them were women soldiers.”⁹¹

BURIALS

30 November marked the anniversary of St Mary, a major celebration in Axum, which on another year would have drawn the faithful from across Ethiopia and tourists from around the world. In light of the exceptional circumstances, the celebrations were canceled. “It was deeply sad,” said one woman. “There were funerals around the church — separate ceremonies. It wasn’t the usual celebration.”⁹²

Amnesty spoke to 11 people who attended funeral services in various churches of the city. They described an atmosphere of shock and collective trauma as hundreds of people were packed into mass graves. A man who was there said: “In every corner you can find a family that lost a family member. Everyone talks about what happened. The atmosphere is a sad one.”⁹³

The dead were so numerous and their bodies in such a state that they were buried immediately, many without receiving religious rites, such as funeral requiems and body washing. Many were buried in mass graves, which in itself is a not uncommon practice locally. In some churches, such as Arba’etu Ensessa, St Micheal and Abune Aregawi, the graves were dug in soil. In other churches, such as the Ende Eyasus (Jesus) church, the dead were placed in existing vaults.

“A lot of people were dead,” said a witness who went to the Axum Tsion St Mary church, adding: “They didn’t even have the time to recognize them. They just gathered and buried them.”⁹⁴ Another witness who was at the same church described the same conditions: “The problem was that there were so many dead bodies and they smelled because they stayed out for a while so they buried them straight away.”⁹⁵

A woman who attended services at Arba’etu Ensessa recalled: “There were several small mass graves. It depended on the carts. When they took five or six dead bodies, we would take them directly inside the grave. When there are seven to 10 bodies, they bury seven to 10 at once.”⁹⁶ In Arba’etu Ensessa, she added, “There were mass graves in many parts of the compound.” Another witness, a 23-year-old man, said that in addition to one mass grave that was used on a regular basis in Arba’etu Ensessa, “There were small graves on the left and right of the church in the compound, on both sides.”⁹⁷

Satellite imagery reviewed by Amnesty International shows disturbed soil in the compounds of Arba’etu Ensessa and Abune Aregawi in a time frame that is consistent with these witness testimonies. When asked to locate the graves on older satellite images of the Arba’etu Ensessa compound (which showed no disturbed soil), two witnesses independently pointed to the areas that Amnesty International had identified as showing disturbed soil on more recent imagery.

⁸⁹ Amnesty International phone interview (name withheld), Axum, Ethiopia, 6 February 2021.

⁹⁰ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.

⁹¹ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.

⁹² Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.

⁹³ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.

⁹⁴ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 21 January 2021.

⁹⁵ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.

⁹⁶ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.

⁹⁷ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 18 January 2021.



The Abune Aregawi church, located in the Semeret neighbourhood on the southeastern edge of Axum, shows new disturbed earth in satellite imagery from 13 December 2020. While in some churches the victims of the massacre were buried in vaults, witnesses say that in Abune Aregawi, the graves were dug in soil.



Satellite imagery taken on 13 December 2020 shows new disturbed earth at the Arba'etu Ensessa church in downtown Axum. It was here that, in the aftermath of the massacre, the largest funerals took place.

Two witnesses who spoke to the church authorities at Axum Tsion St Mary church (which encompasses Maryam Zion church proper as well as Arba'etu Ensessa) said 450 identified people were buried in that church alone. The figure excludes people who were buried there but not identified; the dead who were buried in other churches; and those who were buried on the roadside.

LOOTING, HUNGER AND THIRST

In addition to the killings and the detentions, Eritrean soldiers looted Axum systematically and on a massive scale, leaving residents without food or drink. All of the refugees we interviewed spoke of the looting and its terrible impact on daily life. They said that the looting began as soon as Eritrean forces entered the town on 19 November, but that it escalated in the wake of the 28-29 November massacre.

LARGE-SCALE LOOTING

“After they controlled the city on Hedar 11 [20 November],” one man said, “they started looting immediately ... Those were Eritrean soldiers. The Ethiopian soldiers did nothing – [they] just controlled the city, looking for hidden weapons and controlling government buildings.”⁹⁸ “The looting,” witnesses recalled, “was every day” and “huge.”⁹⁹ One man said: “Everywhere you go, it was looted.”¹⁰⁰

According to residents, Eritrean soldiers looted the university, private houses, hotels, hospitals, grain storage facilities, petrol stations, banks, electrical and maintenance stores, supermarkets, bakeries, jewelries, vendors’ shacks (known locally as “containers”) and other shops, breaking through entrance doors with automatic weapons.

⁹⁸ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 16 January 2021.

⁹⁹ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.



Debris consistent with looting around an unidentified building in central Axum, shown on satellite imagery from 13 December 2020. According to residents, Eritrean soldiers looted the university, private houses, hotels, hospitals, grain storage facilities, petrol stations, banks, electrical and maintenance stores, supermarkets, bakeries, jewelries, vendors' shacks (known locally as "containers"), and other shops, breaking through entrance doors with automatic weapons.



Debris consistent with looting around buildings that appear to be warehouses or industrial facilities, on the southern edges of Axum, shown on satellite imagery from 13 December 2020. Eritrean forces systematically looted the city. Residents said Eritrean soldiers stole sugar and flour from a store called Guna Trading; that they robbed May Akko, a large community store, of truckloads of sugar, cooking oil and lentils, and that they took flour and animal fodder from the Dejen Flour Factory.

The soldiers stole luxury goods, machinery (such as generators and water pumps), vehicles (including bicycles, trucks, three-wheel vehicles, and cars, sometimes taken from their garage), as well as medication, furniture, household items, food, and drink. "They looted whatever they could get. If they got mango juice, they would drink it and then carry things on the truck," a man said.¹⁰¹

A woman recalled: "Eritrean soldiers looted everything in the streets, including all the cars. There were many in the city, including four-wheel drives, but there are none left."¹⁰² A man remembered seeing four Eritrean soldiers stealing the vehicles of a local police station: "[They] dropped from one car and started to steal four cars ... They stole three white pickups and one camouflaged pickup. They broke the ignition box and short circuited them to start the engines."¹⁰³

Residents said Eritrean soldiers stole sugar and flour from a store called Guna Trading; that they robbed May Akko, a large community store, of truckloads of sugar, cooking oil and lentils; that they took flour and animal fodder from the Dejen Flour Factory, and that they looted the budget student grocery store of the university.

The massacre of 28-29 November appears to have precipitated an escalation in the looting. One man said: "They even looted private houses ... The people were really tired of that. A lot of the people of the city moved to the villages. It was a good opportunity for the Eritrean soldiers to steal all of the property."¹⁰⁴

One man said that on 29 November, Eritrean soldiers came to his brother's house and began to loot:

We told Ethiopian soldiers and they tried to help us and asked them to stop. The Eritrean soldier said "Hey you donkey, it's none of your business" ... They took the TV, a jeep, the fridge, six mattresses, all the groceries and cooking oil, butter, teff, flour, the [furniture of the] kitchen cabinet [itself], clothes, the beers in the fridge, the water pump, and the laptop. They damaged the door ... They took all of this in a Mercedes truck."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 21 January 2021.

¹⁰² Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.

¹⁰³ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 21 January 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

A baker who had fled Axum returned following the massacre, only to find that his bakery and residence had been emptied of its oven, kneading machine, televisions, bed mattresses, table, flour, and oil. “I found only my shoes and my pants,” he said.¹⁰⁶

HUNGER AND THIRST

The scale of the looting made life difficult for Axum residents, for whom electricity, phone networks and public services had already been cut since the beginning of the conflict in early November. Many of Axum’s residents eke out their living on a day-to-day basis, but now that their means of subsistence had been stolen there was little work that could be done. Food and water became scarce.

In the days after the massacre, a woman recalled, “we didn’t have anything to eat or to make money.”¹⁰⁷ On 1 December, another woman said: “The Ethiopian soldiers [using loudspeakers] kept telling us to open our stores but everything had been stolen.”¹⁰⁸ Only a few cafés reopened, she said. A man described the state of the city at that time:

The Eritreans had already looted everything, including teff and sorghum. We were very hungry. We couldn’t work. All the property, shops had been stolen. We didn’t do anything during that time. And also there was no bank or network. There was no internet access, and no one understood what’s happening in Axum. There was no electricity.¹⁰⁹

Several people told Amnesty International that, without electricity, residents were unable to mill sorghum into flour. One woman said: “For food, we boiled sorghum seeds in water and ate them. We call that *tutoro*.”¹¹⁰ A 17-year-old boy who was separated from his aunt — his caretaker — during the shelling of Axum described his difficulties: “I didn’t have any money and I didn’t know anything about my aunt. And my parents are dead. I didn’t have any money so I started stealing from the store of my aunt to get money. But still there is no food, no electricity. No one has a place to mill sorghum.”¹¹¹

Some people resorted to looting in order to eat. One man explained: “Eritreans, after looting the basic things — inside a store for example — ... they [would] leave the store open. So thieves came up and [would] also loot the open store.”¹¹² Another man acknowledged he tried to steal from the Degen Flour Factory with some friends, only to be forced by Eritrean soldiers at gunpoint to load bags of flour into trucks.

The electricity blackout and the theft of water pumps also affected the city’s water supply. Many residents were forced to drink from wells or rivers, which they said was unsafe. One man recalled: “About the water, we were drinking mineral water that we had bought before the war. After that we started drinking from the river and from a well which wasn’t safe. That’s how we survived. But there was no peace, it’s dangerous. You don’t feel comfortable even going to drink river water.”¹¹³ One woman told of the same problem: “It was kind of hard to survive because there was no water, so we drank water from the river or went around the villages far from the city so we could use river water.”¹¹⁴

The lack of food and water drove many to leave the town. One man who, after fleeing, returned to Axum on 23 December, subsequently left for his parents’ village to find something to eat. He explained that in Axum, “People can’t mill sorghum. There is no macaroni, pasta or packed food — nothing.”¹¹⁵

LOOTING OF MEDICINES

One man said his brother, who has heart disease, tried to obtain medicine at the pharmacies of the city’s two hospitals, but that they had been looted. “28 December was the last time I saw him. He said he was really in suffering and pain from the disease because he didn’t have his pill.”¹¹⁶ Another man from a village outside of Axum said that the small clinic in his village had been thoroughly looted, “especially the pharmacy.”¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁶ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

¹⁰⁷ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.

¹⁰⁸ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 21 January 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 21 January 2021.

¹¹⁰ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

¹¹¹ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 21 January 2021.

¹¹² Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

¹¹³ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 21 January 2021.

¹¹⁴ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 17 January 2021.

¹¹⁵ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 21 January 2021.

¹¹⁶ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 21 January 2021.

¹¹⁷ Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 23 January 2021.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The annual feast of St Mary of Zion, celebrated annually in the Axum Tsion St Mary church on Hidar 21 (30 November), is now laden with painful memories. Many hundreds of dead, the large majority of them men, were buried in a climate of fear and anguish that day.

By all accounts, the Eritrean military's killing of hundreds of civilians in Axum on 28-29 November was coordinated and systematic. Its aim was to terrorize the population into submission, as evidenced by the military's mass detention of residents on 29 November and soldiers' threats to resume wanton killing in the event of resistance. These killings — as well as other extrajudicial executions that preceded them — the deadly indiscriminate shelling of Axum, and the widespread looting of property, may amount to war crimes. The systematic killing of hundreds of civilians by Eritrean forces on 28-29 November may also constitute crimes against humanity.¹¹⁸

The survivors of the Axum massacre were robbed of their relatives, their friends, and their neighbours. Without some measure of accountability for the grievous violations that they have endured, such crimes are likely to continue.

Amnesty International calls for a UN-led investigation into these events, and for the Ethiopian government to cooperate fully with it, including by facilitating unfettered access for UN investigators. Besides examining events in Axum, the investigation should look into the totality of the war crimes and crimes against humanity allegedly committed in the context of the conflict in Tigray since 4 November 2020, with a view to ensuring accountability for suspected perpetrators and reparations for the victims and survivors.

In addition, we call upon the Ethiopian authorities to:

- stop the further commission of human rights and humanitarian law violations, including indiscriminate shelling and aerial bombardment, and deliberate attacks on civilians.
- ensure unfettered humanitarian access to Tigray.

Amnesty International also urges the African Union, the European Union, the United States, and the United Nations to encourage the Ethiopian authorities to implement the above recommendations.

¹¹⁸ According to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Article 7), murders committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population constitute crimes against humanity.

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THE MASSACRE IN AXUM

Over an approximately 24-hour period, on 28-29 November 2020, Eritrean troops operating in the Ethiopian city of Axum killed many hundreds of civilians. Soldiers deliberately shot civilians on the street and carried out systematic house-to-house searches, extrajudicially executing men and boys. The massacre was carried out in retaliation for an earlier attack by a small number of militiamen, joined by local residents armed with sticks and stones.

The events in Axum were the culmination of a wave of violations carried out since 19 November, when Eritrean and Ethiopian forces entered Axum together, after indiscriminately shelling the city and firing at those who tried to flee. Witnesses say that Eritrean forces, in taking over the town, carried out extrajudicial executions and engaged in widespread looting. Following the 28-29 November massacre, Eritrean forces detained hundreds of residents and threatened renewed killing in the event of new resistance.

In this briefing, Amnesty International documents how the Eritrean military is responsible for serious human rights and humanitarian law violations against Tigrayan civilians in Axum. It concludes that the indiscriminate shelling of Axum by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops may amount to war crimes, and that the mass execution of Axum civilians by Eritrean troops may amount to crimes against humanity.