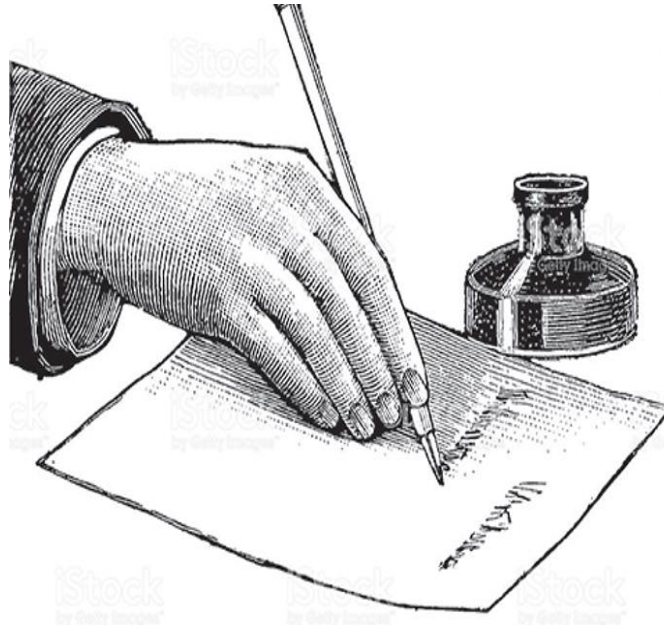


## US/EU: Weaponizing “Human Rights”



By: Abraham Tesfay

In the past few months, major western powers have invoked different facets of human rights and international laws of war in the conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia to cast the crisis in almost apocalyptic terms. And for maximum outreach and impact, the chorus continues to be amplified by pliant media outlets and affiliated international agencies.

The packaging remains subtle and well calibrated. At times, and especially these days, the specter of “Rwanda” is harped on to ominously insinuate “potential or imminent ethnic cleansing” in the making. The famine that stalked Ethiopia in the 1970s is rehashed for good measure now and then. And, at other times, the analogy shifts to Yugoslavia to convey impending “break-up and State failure in Ethiopia with dire consequences to peace and stability in the Horn of Africa region”.

Indeed, the constant refrain and chilling hyperbole in much sensationalized international media headlines and news reports run: “humanitarian conditions in Ethiopia are hellish as the nine-month Tigray conflict spreads in Africa’s second most populous country... People in Tigray are starving with up to 900,000 in

famine conditions and more than five million in desperate need of humanitarian assistance” (AP, AlJezeera, Reuters etc).

The frantic campaign is elastic with shifting focus and temporal frequency and intensity. As it happens, the tool kit in the first months of the conflict, mostly directed at Eritrea’s Defense Forces for reasons that will be elaborated later, consisted of churning out, almost on a daily basis, horrid stories on alleged “wanton massacre of civilians... vindictive looting and destruction of property... rampant sexual and gender-based violence, including gang rape, to instill fear on the civilian population in Tigray region.... etc.’”.

Some major newspapers – New York Times, Daily Telegraph etc. – run ludicrous stories alleging that perpetration of rape by Eritrean Armed Forces was part and parcel of a deliberate policy directive issued by higher echelons in the Army with the express aim of spreading HIV in Tigray. The peddlers of the false narrative were evidently ignorant of the fact that HIV prevalence in Eritrea – which stands at 0.2% is in fact 20 times less than the 4% rate in Tigray.

Then there is also the “Monaliza Saga”. Her fabricated story of rape by Ethiopian soldiers, later maliciously altered to “gang rape by Eritrean soldiers who also shot her in her left arm” went viral on all main stream media outlets. Her father belatedly admitted that the story was patently false; that she was a member of the TPLF Militia and her wounds/hospitalization stemmed from the injuries she suffered in the battles during the early days of the TPLF attacks on the Northern Command.

Furthermore, all the horrendous stories were, and remain, invariably based on “witness testimonies”, the majority of them through telephone interviews from abroad as well as in refugee camps in the Sudan where thousands of TPLF former Special Forces and Militias are sheltered.

The Amnesty International original report on the “Axum Massacre” was, for instance, culled out from interviews with 31 TPLF militias in the Hamdayet Refugee Camp. Its “final” report, issued six months later, did not feature any better in terms of pitiful methodology – largely based, by its own admission, on telephone interviews from afar with 61 alleged victims. AI’s long-standing and

malicious agenda against Eritrea is another factor that casts a long shadow on the motive and credibility of its reports.

Validation of outrageous allegations, even some modicum of background checks to ascertain credibility, affiliation and/or underlying motive of the “witnesses” have been sorely absent on all the stories churned out gratuitously without due regard to the damage inculcated on those presumed guilty on the basis of sheer, unverified, allegations.

More importantly, there is compelling evidence to corroborate that the driving force behind the concerted campaigns is indeed the singular pursuit of US-EU geopolitical agendas – albeit misguided – in the strategically pivotal Horn of Africa region; more than conscientious and humanitarian considerations and/or the interests of regional peace.

What is unfolding is in fact the weaponization and politicization of human rights and dire humanitarian realities to preserve and maintain narrow geopolitical agendas of the US and its European allies. The following facts illustrate that this is indeed the case.

1. The crisis in the Tigray region in Ethiopia was triggered by treasonous acts of insurrection that the TPLF stealthily launched on the night of November 3 last year. This premeditated act of unprecedented scale and gravity was endorsed by the TPLF Central Committee in its meeting in preceding days, although its contents were not divulged at the time. The objectives of TPLF’s massive and simultaneous military assault on all the positions of the Northern Command was to neutralize the whole contingent and requisition its heavy weaponry which consisted around 80% of the entire arsenal of the Ethiopian Defense Forces. The Northern Command was the largest among the ENDF’s four territorial contingents and 1/3 of its 40,000-strong personnel were ethnic Tigrayans with political affiliation and loyalty to the TPLF. The command and control echelons were disproportionately dominated by TPLF loyalist Tigrayans. With almost a quarter of a million Militias and Special Forces of its own, the TPLF was thus over-confident that its blitzkrieg operation will

succeed in a matter of days. TPLF's political agenda was then to "march to Addis Abeba to seize power in Ethiopia". Subsequent aggression against Eritrea to achieve its irredentist territorial ambitions and long-held policies of "regime change" was an integral part of the TPLF's reckless and perilous war plan,

2. The TPLF's war of insurrection was a rogue act that flouted, fully and flagrantly, Ethiopia's Constitution as well as its stability and safety. Indeed, the extreme danger and turmoil that would have ensued in Ethiopia, Eritrea and the Horn of Africa region as a whole had TPLF's original scheme succeeded is too evident to merit additional emphasis. But this rogue act of immense gravity continued to be glossed over especially by western governments and their legislative institutions as they began to express "heightened concern" on the humanitarian consequences of the war.
3. In the early months of the war, perhaps due to US Presidential elections and associated domestic dynamics of Transition, the EU was literally on the front wheel and much more vocal than Washington. EU policy thrust at the time revolved around demonizing and putting pressure on Eritrea to salvage the TPLF. The EU re-funneled 70 million Euros, under spurious pretexts, of development assistance that had been allocated to Eritrea as part and parcel of AU-ACP development cooperation framework. And in April this year, the Council of the European Union imposed "restrictive measures" on Eritrea's National Security Office. The resolution was couched in misleading and disingenuous terms. The EU invoked a controversial instrument – the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime – that it adopted in December 2020. The real reason and purpose of the resolution was to induce Eritrea's passive stance and to compromise its right of self-defense even as the TPLF continued to vociferously declare its intentions, and had actually launched, military assaults against Eritrea.
4. On Ethiopia, the EU initially treaded with more caution in its official press statements and diplomatic *de marches* although it suspended almost

90 million Euros from its budgetary aid to Ethiopia. Still, the EU's core policy objectives of resuscitating the TPLF remained clear and unequivocal as it insisted, tacitly putting the Federal Government and the rogue TPLF on the same moral bar and equivalence, on "unilateral declaration of cessation of hostilities by all parties and withdrawal of Eritrean and Amhara forces". The EU's Special Envoy, the Finnish Foreign Minister, went further to menacingly accuse Ethiopia of a "policy of ethnic cleansing". This was an overly outrageous effort to weaponize human rights issues to advance the EU's political agenda.

5. US position was relatively ambivalent in the early months of the conflict. Former US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, tweeted on 5 November 2020: "We are deeply concerned by reports that the Tigray People's Liberation Front carried out attacks on Ethiopia's Defense Forces bases in Ethiopia's Tigray region. We urge immediate action to restore peace and de-escalate tensions". Later on, however, the Biden Administration took frontal seat to openly and aggressively bail out the TPLF clique in close coordination with its EU and other allies in the G-7. In domestic terms, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee adopted successive resolutions to that effect.
6. Ratcheting up the pressure, the US State Department announced on May 23, on the eve of Eritrea's 30<sup>th</sup> Independence anniversary, "Visa restriction policy.. on issuance of visas for any Eritrean government officials... responsible and complicit in, undermining resolution of the crisis in Tigray region" although the actual list was not made public. The timing of the unwarranted Act speaks volumes on US adversarial stance against Eritrea. And, as a continuation of these measures, the US Treasury Department announced on Monday this week, the invocation of what it termed the "Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act" against Eritrea's Chief of Staff, General Philipos Woldeyohannes.
7. Throughout the past six months, TPLF's high criminality has remained off the radar-screen of the US, EU as well as certain UN agencies and media outlets at their beck and call. As indicated above, TPLF's cardinal

sin of launching a War of Insurrection was not roundly condemned. Revisionist narratives weaved thereafter generally speak of a “conflict that erupted in Tigray region”, deliberately circumventing TPLF’s core culpability. Some go further to insinuate that the war started when Ethiopia’s Prime Minister sent troops to disarm a rebellious TPLF. The Mai-Kadra massacre, TPLF’s revengeful atrocities on Tigrayans accused of “collaborating with the Federal Army” after its return to the region from its hideouts; the massacres it committed in Afar and Wollo regions remain unreported or downplayed. The BBC even produced a report last week questioning the credibility of statements made by TPLF POWs. TPLF’s massive and forced recruitment of Child soldiers to make them cannon fodder in its aggressive offensives have equally been ignored. US Ambassador to the UN, Linda Greenfield, has been vocal on her recent tweets about the Houthi’s use of child soldiers but keeps mum when it comes to the TPLF.

8. More tellingly, the US and its allies have kept silent when the TPLF rejected the Federal Government’s unilateral declaration of ceasefire and launched reckless offensives in the Amhara and Afar regions. TPLF’s hollow military bravado and threats to march to Addis Abeba and launch a war of aggression against Eritrea were not condemned. TPLF apologists rationalized its perilous war games as “military exigencies” driven by the blockade of the central government. Threats to invade Eritrea both during the early days of the conflict and in recent times have also been rationalized in the same terms by TPLF apologists and enablers.
9. The portrayal of the precarious food situation in Tigray region remains, likewise, selective and intriguing. In the first place, about 1.6 million poor farmers have remained, for 12 years since 2009, dependent on handouts under the Global Safety Net. The TPLF exacerbated the food situation by launching its War of Insurrection at a critical harvest time in November last year. Its continued war – and massive recruitment of children for its human wave military assaults outside its region – can only aggravate the situation during this crucial rainy season. Yet, USAID and others emphasize the prevailing dire food situation – their figures seem to vary to

suit the rhetoric of the day – with no reference whatsoever to TPLF’s culpability in this realm too. One wonders who is feeding the TPLF large army – USAID reinforced biscuits were found in the possession of TPLF POWs last week – if the food situation is so dire to affect 5.2 million people; literally the entire residents in Tigray region.

10. Another vital element that requires emphasis is the political stance of the US and EU in particular in the past 22 years of TPLF’s flagrant violation of international law to occupy sovereign Eritrean territories. These powers extended close to 40 billion US dollars to the TPLF regime. Yet they were “impotent” in curbing its excess and criminality. No serious statements were issued; no measures taken to nudge TPLF troops to withdraw from sovereign Eritrean territories. Emboldened by this complicity, the TPLF went further to wage provocative military assaults against Eritrea from time to time. In June 2016, for instance, the TPLF launched, again during a critical rainy season, a massive offensive along the Tsorona front. Its actual objective was to trigger a larger conflict for its broader aims of forcible “regime change”. Senior officials in Washington and Brussels were privy to the TPLF’s illicit acts of war and regional destabilization. But they took no deterrent action and their unified response was limited to the issuance of bland statements of “restraint by both sides”.
11. Finally, a passing remark on the contentious US Magnitsky Act and EU’s Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime. These unilateral measures are based on the controversial notion of universal jurisdiction. I will not attempt to go into exhaustive discourse on the legal validity and pitfalls of these dubious instruments. But they reek of Orwellian asymmetry; in which some members in the global community are more equal than others. Enforceability aside, imagine for the sake of abstract argument, that the AU in Africa, the Arab League in the Middle East etc. and individual powers elsewhere were to adopt similar Acts and indict others for grievances they hold – AU against US/EU for the war in Libya, for instance. This will surely sound a death knell to the UN and what is termed as a “rules-based international system”.

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