

MEKELLE STORIES
LIFE IN TIME OF WAR

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Mekelle Stories: Life in Time of War

Anonymous

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ABSTRACT

On the night of 3 to 4 November 2020, war broke out in Tigray. Soon after Mekelle was bombed, people were stunned: should they leave the city? How to protect their loved ones? Where to get supplies? For two years, the war redefined the daily lives of Mekelle's residents; while the capital of Tigray was not the scene of violent armed fighting unlike the countryside and other towns in Tigray, every aspect of urban life, both public and private, was turned upside down by the blockade imposed on the entire region for over a year, by the influx of displaced people and by the echoes from the front.

We asked twenty women and men residing in Mekelle to tell us about their daily lives, day after day, event after event: how they coped with the shortages, the lack of health and communications services, the loss of income and the closure of schools. At the heart of these accounts of everyday life, they narrate how they resisted, despaired and struggled, and in which sources they did – or did not – find support, from their neighbours and family, to the Tigray Defence Forces.

With two researchers who themselves lived through these two years of war in Mekelle, the residents tell their stories. Some give numbers and dates, list the names of the places where they found refuge or fled to, and recall the most striking moments of their experiences of the war. Others describe the effects that fear, hunger, and their anger, hopes and despair had on them.

The book is divided into two parts: the first presents testimonies that have been transcribed verbatim, while the second brings together extracts based on interrelated themes and scales, and provide a glimpse of the collective experiences embedded in the individual stories.

Mekelle Stories opens a small window on the war in Tigray, seen from within a city, with its wellknown landmarks and its neighbourhoods. While the immensity of violence, suffering and trauma has yet to be documented, analysed and made known, this work reveals how the war affected and penetrated every part of the bodies and surroundings of the twenty people who tell their stories.

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Life in Time of War

Ad'É Books, Contemporary Horn of Africa
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Jean-Nicolas Bach

Preface

This book does not just tell the story of what war does to ordinary citizens; it also recounts how people who have suffered it talk about it. We know that war does not affect everyone everywhere to an identical degree, and civilian populations also suffer terrible direct and indirect manifestations of violence that may, to a greater or lesser degree, resemble the spectacular faces of war fronts that move away, only to return closer: the bombs, the raping, the hunger, the anxiety, the solitude, the fear for oneself and one's family, and the noises that haunt people for ever.

In this book, the sometimes invisible tragedies people suffer are first revealed by those who are suddenly plunged into darkness, and then tumble between life and the survival for which they fight with the feeble weapons civilians have at their disposal. It was important for our research centre to support this project from its very beginning because it documents, bears witness to, preserves and communicates words that are still marked by war, and that were collected in the months following the signature of the cessation of hostilities agreement in November 2022, almost two years to the day after the fighting began. Naturally, the intention was not that these words, which were captured in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, should reflect the entirety of the traumas and coping mechanisms that emerged across a far more extensive region. However, the testimonies are exceptional because they offer a microsocial, human, and practical entry point into the world of war and its complexities.

The testimonies compiled in this book have not been gathered and edited at random. They are the result of a specific methodology that was agreed on upstream of the collection process, as any research work in the human and social sciences requires. They have been powerfully illustrated by the artist Gabrielle Tesfaye, and they make it possible to document a social reality as it is perceived by the people who have experienced it, and who tell the story of it. They bring to light the multiple trajectories experienced by these victims, who have been plunged into war because of their social situation or simply because of where they happened to be at the moment of the descent into war.

When I read the book, I was particularly struck by the sheer suddenness of the war, which abruptly turned people's everyday lives, projects, and life trajectories upside down. In one of the many captivating testimonies, a woman tells of her experience of the hunger that took over her body from one day to

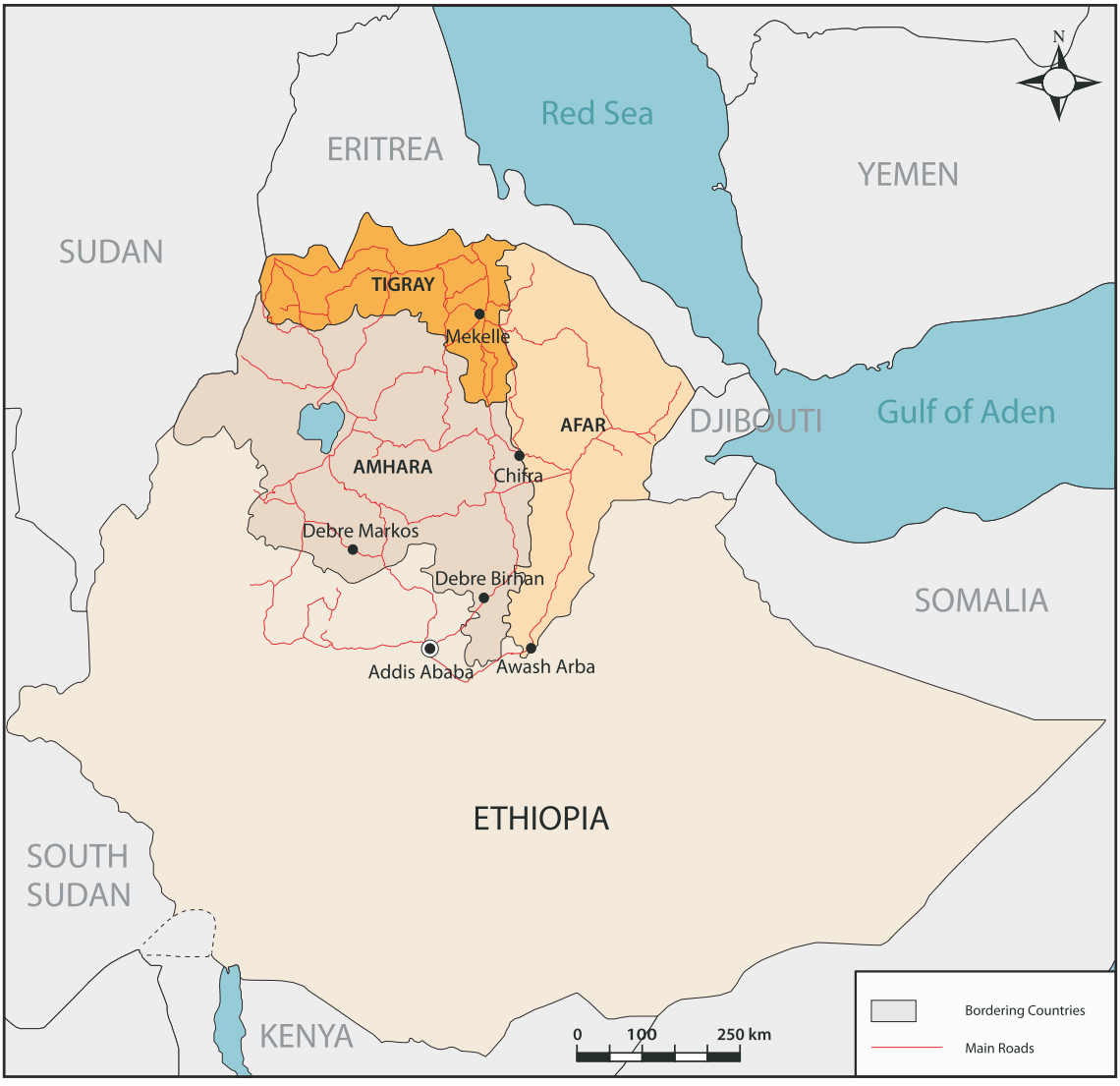
the next, and that will never leave her. This hunger runs through the pages of the book, together with fear, anxiety at the announcement of the arrival of the soldiers, and the noise of the drones and the fighter planes.

It was a sudden war, of course, but it was not unexpected. Its underlying causes were there to see in the months, or even years, before it broke out. Here, too, scientific research that has been carried out systematically and based on a precise methodology enables us to gain a better understanding of the mechanisms that led to a war as violent as this, and which in many respects is still continuing today. The warnings were not sufficient to prevent the human tragedy we have witnessed, even though we were not able to see it for ourselves (the region has long been inaccessible). I believe the testimonies in this collection can be interpreted as one of the initial forms of justice for people who have been marked for life, and they also unquestionably invite us to reflect more broadly (here and elsewhere in the world) on how to learn to live together again, on social justice, on the need to remake societies and nation(s), and on the methods that should be applied. This issue of reconstructing peace and the art of living together will be at Ethiopia's heart in the decades to come, and I believe that this collection has the potential to be one of the sources that will help us to understand, act, and remember.

Jean-Nicolas Bach
Director (2022-2024)
Centre Français des Études Éthiopiennes
Addis Ababa, 9 July 2024

Maps

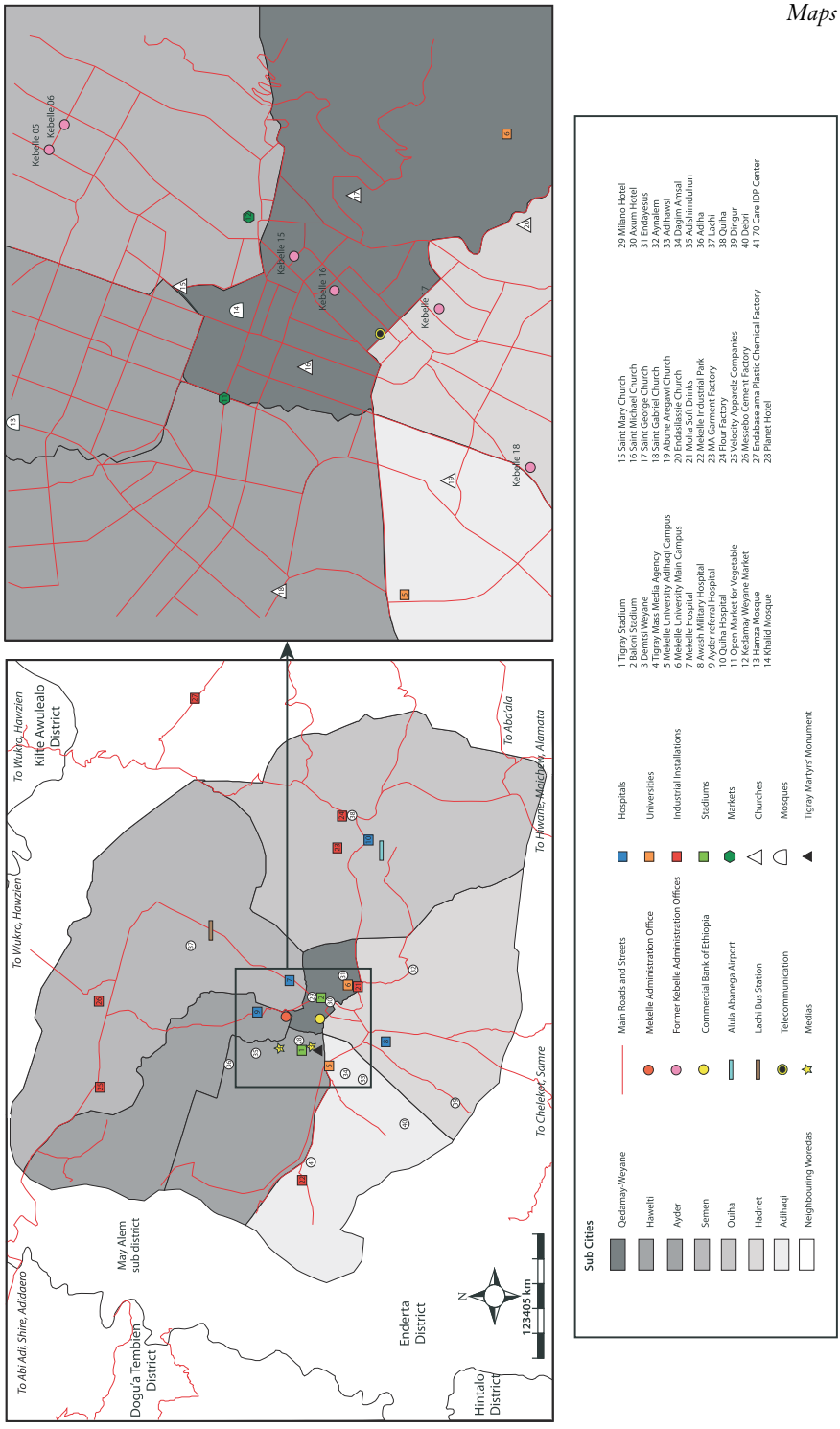
The locations shown on the maps correspond to the locations mentioned by the twenty storytellers in their narratives.



Map 1. Map of the northern regions of Ethiopia: Tigray, Amhara and Afar.



Map 2. Map of the Tigray region.



Map 3. Map of Mekelle, its surroundings and the city center.

Introduction—Mekelle Stories: Life in Time of War

Introduction to the project and this book

What the project is about

This book owes its existence to the fact that twenty people who experienced the war in the city of Mekelle, in Tigray (Maps 1 & 2), agreed to share their personal stories and narrate their daily lives from the first day of the war (4 November 2020) up to when we met them in 2023. Their stories, which were collected by two women researchers, have been told using the chronology of the war as the main guideline, plus a few additional topics when further probing proved useful. Our main objective was to allow the unheard voices of ordinary people who lived through the war in Mekelle to be heard.

The war in Tigray was horrific. The region's civilian population was targeted very extensively, and many people were massacred, raped, displaced, starved and deprived of care. Much has yet to be uncovered and much about this war remains to be told, written and analysed. Researchers bear some of the responsibility for unveiling the facts and events that were a part of it; however, this book is not about specific events, it does not analyse a collection of data and it does not seek to identify a "good"[1] or "moral"[2] witness of the war in Tigray and saddle them with educational or political responsibilities. Rather, it is about enabling, listening, transcribing, translating, editing and organising the voices of twenty individuals who recount their personal experiences of the war in one place, Mekelle, the capital of Tigray. It is a look at what war does to ordinary people based on what they told us of their own individual trajectories. It is about daily lives and agency in times of war.

Who we are

This book emerged from serendipitous exchanges of thoughts and ideas, influences from other books and projects,[3] research on the (impossible) construction

[1] Jean Norton Cru, *Du témoignage* (Gallimard, 1930). [2] Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Harvard University Press, 2002). [3] See, for example, Sara Cameron, *Out of War: True Stories from the Front Lines of the Children's Movement for Peace in Colombia* (Scholastic Press, 2001); Brandon Hamber, "Coming to Terms with the Conflict in and about Northern Ireland: Lessons from the Healing Through Remembering Project" *Temida,* 7, no. 4 (2004): 23–29; Theodore Trefon and Noël Kabubaya, *Goma: Stories of Strength and Sorrow from Eastern Congo*. (Zed Books, 2018).

of a normal everyday life during wartime[4] and the life experiences of a collective of four researchers. Above all, it draws on the personal accounts of two of them, who are from Mekelle, and on their encounters with the women and men whom they asked to tell the story of their lives in Mekelle throughout the war and in its aftermath.

Two of us, Nanou and Rima, are from Europe but related in several ways to Ethiopia, Tigray and Mekelle. The other two, Kebedech and Etsay, are from Mekelle.

It was Nanou who brought the four of us together. Our collective emerged from our first encounters, and together we carried out the project that led to this book. Nanou has been travelling to Ethiopia for over twenty years. During this period, through a combination of consultancy work and research (which has become increasingly important over time), she has formed strong bonds with several places in the country, including Tigray, Mekelle and other localities and landscapes in Tigray. As a critical friend of Ethiopia, she was deeply moved to see years of tension escalate into a full-blown war. She explains the process that led her to want to make it possible for some of those directly affected to tell their stories below.

Rima is the one who knew the least about Mekelle and Tigray, but she was convinced of the importance of listening to and sharing ordinary people's narratives. Her research in Ethiopia has always relied on qualitative methodology, including ethnography and the collection of biographies. Like many researchers who have long-time experience of fieldwork in Ethiopia, she was devastated by the war in Tigray. Through this project, she hopes that these stories will contribute to preventing the experiences of ordinary people from being buried in the memory and history of this war.

Kebedech, whose academic background is in language and literature, has worked as a researcher since 2013, when as an MA student at Addis Ababa University, she was given the opportunity to take part in her first research project. Since then, she has participated in numerous developmental and social research projects, mainly qualitative, and had worked with Nanou and Etsay before the war. Because she felt so oppressed during the blockade of Tigray—*"feeling as if someone had shut my mouth so I wouldn't speak out"*—writing her personal story was *"a way to speak out loud to the world"* about what she and

[4] See, for example, Tobias Kelly, "The Attractions of Accountancy: Living an Ordinary Life during the Second Palestinian Intifada," *Ethnography* 9, no. 3 (2008): 351–76; Lori Allen, "Getting by the Occupation: How Violence Became Normal during the Second Palestinian Intifada," *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 3 (2008): 453–87; Thierry Boissière and Laura Ruiz de Elvira, "Entre violence, incertitude et routinisation : réinventer les pratiques économiques quotidiennes en situations de guerre," *Critique internationale*, no. 3 (2018): 9–22; Laurent Gayer, "La 'normalité de l'anormal': recomposer le quotidien en situation de guerre civile," *Critique internationale*, no. 3 (2018), 181–90.

her people went through during the war. It was also an opportunity to become involved in research as a professional again after two years of not working and having no income.

Etsay is a researcher who has worked on numerous qualitative research projects in social sciences, and collaborated with Nanou before the war. She also worked in development and emergency projects before and during the war. She has always been interested in stories, and liked the idea of being able to read her own story again when her memories of the war might have faded away. She also believes that all the stories people were telling about how they had coped with what were probably the most difficult times in their lives should not be forgotten. Being part of this project meant *"working for my passion and also making some small contribution to studies written on the war."*

While this book is about the twenty people who tell their stories, our first priority was to protect their privacy and safety. This is why we have chosen not to use either the storytellers' real names or ours. The stories contain frank narratives on difficult topics in an uncertain context. We recognise that they are personal, and that there are many perspectives on this war. Different perspectives can often lead to contested narratives and a denial of a person's truth, but they can also lead to acceptance of the experience of another person who is "different" from us. This is what we hope this book can achieve.

Nanou's reflections on the genesis of the Mekelle Stories project

Nanou has long believed that life stories are particularly powerful because as a human being, the reader can relate to what another human being says about what she or he did, or thought and felt, and because by talking about their "normal lives," storytellers who are not "remarkable people" make the reader understand periods of history or particular places in ways that other types of literature do not. The start of the war in Tigray inspired her to try to write a first life story, that of a farmer friend whom she had had the occasion to meet in Mekelle in June 2021, when the city was under the control of the federal government. Her work was abruptly interrupted when Mekelle returned under the control of the Tigrayan authorities at the end of June 2021, ushering in a period when Tigray was virtually completely isolated from the rest of the world, until November 2022.

The idea that life stories would be a very powerful way of telling the story of the war reemerged shortly after November 2022, when Nanou was able to reconnect with her friends Kebedech and Etsay in Mekelle after almost eighteen months. Hearing them relate just a few moments from this period (over the telephone) convinced her that enabling "voices from below" to tell their stories of those times was important, not just to prevent the war from being narrated exclusively by political elites, military actors and activists on all sides, but also because it was one way to begin to "do justice" to what people like Kebdech and Etsay went through. This is also why our project started with Kebedech and Etsay writing their own personal stories.

Our approach

Enabling "voices from below" rather than analysing great events, as historians can do, means intentionally focusing on the effects of these great events on individuals.[5] We have relied on a scientific methodology, understanding that qualitative research can be "rigorous."[6] We used a structured qualitative research methodology to collect the narratives that form the substance of this book.

The whole process was iterative, as any qualitative research must be. It began—at a distance by e-mail and in WhatsApp messages and the occasional WhatsApp calls, although the connections were still rather poor—with Etsay and Kebedech writing their own stories. We agreed that the stories would start with the outbreak of the war and proceed along a timeline that we believed could be identified as the main phases of the war in Mekelle. We also talked about potentially important themes. However, we wanted to leave Kebedech and Etsay the space to write what they really wanted to say about that time, acknowledging self-narrative not only as a "methodological resource"[7] but also as "a researcher's commitment"[8] in sensitive, emotional contexts.

Kebedech and Etsay's stories helped the four of us to think more deeply about the topics and time periods, and how Kebedech and Etsay could structure their interactions with the people they would ask to tell their stories. By then we were able to meet in person in Mekelle, and held two meetings with all four of us, and a couple of other three-woman meetings when Nanou or Rima were in Tigray. It was not easy to agree on how to structure the interviews, but after trying things out with a few stories, it seemed more natural to let the respondents follow the course of time and to ask about events on that basis. Here again, the process was iterative, and we adapted our work to the various local social networks, their complexity, and the way they intertwined.[9]

We also discussed people's profiles. Within the constraints of our methodological framework, we wanted as much as possible to hear stories from different kinds of people in terms of gender, age, family status, stories of mobility during the war and occupations. At the same time, especially as the experience of the war was still so "raw," we were very conscious of the importance of empathy and trust between the storyteller and the person recording the

[5] Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Cornell University Press, 2006). [6] Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, *La rigueur du qualitatif : les contraintes empiriques de l'interprétation socio-anthropologique* (Academia-Bruylant, 2008). [7] Laurine Thizy, Mélodie Gauglin and Justine Vincent, "'Se raconter' sur le terrain : le récit de soi comme ressource méthodologique," *Genèses*, no. 123 (2021): 115–35. [8] Cefaï, Daniel, and Valérie Amiraux, "Les risques du métier. Engagements problématiques en sciences sociales," *Cultures & Conflits*, no. 47 (2002): 15–48. [9] Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, "La politique du terrain," *Enquête*, no. 1 (1995): 71–109.

story. We agreed that this should be the main guideline for Kebedech and Etsay as they thought about whom to approach. The storytellers were not chosen using a criteria-based sampling approach; they took their place as the result of a compromise between the researchers' plans, the availability of their interlocutors and previously established ties of kinship or friendship.[10]

Thanks to Etsay and Kebedech's careful thinking, the twenty stories reflect a range of different profiles and experiences of the war. Fifteen women and five men told their stories. The youngest was 19 years old, and some more elderly people were also interviewed. Fifteen of the storytellers, including Kebedech and Etsay, were of working age, between their late twenties and early forties. None of them were among the poorest before the war, and none were among the really wealthy. They were mostly employees, civil servants and small business owners. A few had owned some material possessions before the war, such as a house with rooms to rent or a small shop. They were all urban dwellers who lived in Mekelle before, during (at least for part of the time) and after the war. They had diverse relationships with the city's rural surroundings, the rest of Tigray and Ethiopia. They also had different experiences of mobilities before, during and after the war. One important dimension of the experiences of some of them was that they were responsible for dependents (children, the elderly or the sick) during the war, whereas in other cases it was more about individual survival. As a result, the stories tell of a range of different trajectories and up and downs the storytellers faced in order to make it through the war. We know that there are many more unheard and unrecorded accounts; however, we believe that this book presents a truthful—albeit incomplete—account of life in Mekelle during the war in Tigray, and to a lesser extent in the first few months after it ended. The twenty stories were narrated and written between January and August 2023.

The importance of trust and of establishing a "safe space" in which the storytellers would feel free to speak out and tell their stories as they felt best was the main reason why we agreed that they would not be recorded on an audio device. Kebedech and Etsay took notes during the interviews and wrote the stories afterwards, following the narration closely. Their transcriptions were only lightly edited for clarity, while keeping ways of saying things in English that are common in Ethiopia, and this light editing process was checked with them afterwards.

We had no prior experience of storytelling. However, in conversations about our early ideas we had a few encounters that comforted us in our belief about the power of storytelling and gave us useful advice. They also gave us a better understanding of how complex storytelling actually is in relation to the purposes and possible effects of the storytelling process, the different outcomes

[10] Ibid.

that participants might expect from it, how it might be perceived and how stories can be read by other people, especially in complex contexts like today's Ethiopia. This resonated with questions that are often raised by researchers who have done fieldwork in contexts of conflict and war.[11] It also helped us better define what our primary aim was in publishing this book now: it is above all a work of memory and documentation.

Kebedech and Etsay's reflections on their engagement in the Mekelle Stories project

While they were keen to do it, writing their own stories was not easy matter for Kebedech and Etsay. Organising their accounts from start to finish was a challenge; there were so many things to write about, things that sometimes came to mind at odd moments and were noted on whatever was at hand. Remembering what they had been through and how the war affected not only them but also their families, relatives, neighbours and the community as a whole triggered deep emotion, which also bubbled up as they listened to other people's stories, especially during the initial encounters or when the stories were particularly harrowing. However, their experience as researchers helped them, as did the semi-structured guidelines we had agreed on and the regular conversations with Nanou and Rima throughout the process, during which they could share their emotions. Starting from their own stories also reinforced their conviction about the value of our storytelling project, as they felt strongly that "*personal stories tell more about what happens really to individuals*."

It was important to take care when selecting the stories told by the remaining interviewees, as there were very few of them. Kebedech and Etsay thought the storytellers should be people who would trust them so they would tell their stories frankly and without fear. For this reason, they were relatives, neighbours and friends of friends. However, Kebedech and Etsay also bore in mind that they should be people who might have had diverse experiences of the war because of differences in their occupation, economic situation, age, gender, marital status, family size and history of mobility, as well as the kinds of problem they faced during the war and the siege (for instance ill-health, hunger, loss of a job and income, pregnancy and giving birth).

Obtaining consent was not an issue. In fact, Kebedech and Etsay found that when people were told about our objective and that their stories would be anonymous, they were happy to tell them, and saw it as an opportunity to share them with someone who would understand, and who could document what really happened

[11] See, for example, Carolyn Nordstrom and Jo Ann Martin. "The Culture of Conflict: Field Reality and Theory," In *Paths to Domination, Resistance, and Terror*, ed. Carolyn Nordstrom and Joann Martin (University of California Press, 1992). Cefaï and Amiraux, "Les risques du métier : engagements problématiques en sciences sociales"; Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro, and Arthur Quesnay, "The Epistemological Privilege of Fieldwork: A Collective Investigation in War-Torn Syria," *Bulletin of Sociological Methodology/Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique* 151, no. 1 (2021): 96–116.

in Mekelle and make their voices heard. The small financial compensation for their time came as a happy surprise. It was also important that the storytellers agreed to set aside enough time, as the storytelling process was long, and often required several meetings.

Some of the interviews were dominated by emotions, and it was painful for the storytellers to recall what they or the members of their families had gone through, and for Kebedech and Etsay to listen closely and empathise. But there was a sense that sharing was a way to obtain relief. Kebedech and Etsay used different approaches with people who were less expressive or less able to remember details, for instance encouraging them to talk freely and then elaborate a little when a particular point of interest came up. Sometimes, they commented on the storyteller's story, or recalled their own experience when it resonated, which also helped, and made the storytelling process more natural and less formal. Some of the storytellers who told their stories several months after November 2022 had difficulty with remembering details, so Kebedech and Etsay prepared a protocol with guiding questions, which helped prompt these people recall key points. Kebedech and Etsay also heard many stories during their chats with relatives, friends and other people, which in turn helped them better understand the storytellers, and made them better able to probe them.

The whole process was emotional and trying at times, but also deeply satisfying, as Kebedech and Etsay saw the importance of documenting people's feelings and the facts as they happened during the war and the siege, before the memories and emotions faded away. For Rima and Nanou, even though they had heard and read accounts from people who had experienced the war, receiving Kebedech and Etsay's stories was overwhelming, and made them realise for the first time so directly how much the war had disrupted all aspects of life in so many tiny details, and how it was all about fear, shock, survival and strength, but also about coping, doing and helping each other.

Throughout the process of listening, writing, reading and preparing this book, we would still have many doubts and questions about the methodological framework, how to put everything together, how to avoid adding our own analyses, etc. However, reading the stories one after another while they were being written and discussing this project among the four of us and with others always reassured us. We were not here to be the voice of the voiceless, but to give these voices an audience.

What this book is, and what it is not

This book, which is entirely based on these twenty personal accounts, is the result. In the first part, seven accounts are reproduced in full. The second part draws on the thirteen other stories to reflect on a number of themes we selected because they emerged as important aspects of individual and collective experiences (and perceptions of these experiences) of the war over the course of two years, at different levels: first the storyteller's personal state of mind,

then that of the storyteller and her or his people, the storyteller and Mekelle, and finally the storyteller and Tigray, Ethiopia and the world.

The book allows some of the voices from Mekelle to be heard, but it should only be a first step. We are deeply aware that the current situation in Ethiopia is still one of violence, and that during the war and since the uneasy cessation of hostilities in Tigray, other civilians have suffered and continue to suffer in Tigray and elsewhere in Ethiopia. In a context in which many people are directly affected by violence, individually or as a group, being able to hear the human stories of "others" is difficult, but indispensable. We hope, therefore, that our book will represent the first step in a wider storytelling process in Ethiopia that will enable many more voices from all over the country to be heard, and will tease their common humanity out of many more stories and form a foundation to help rebuild bridges between people from diverse backgrounds and aid collective healing.

The book illustrations

The illustrations in the book as well as the book cover are all from Gabrielle Frewayni Tesfaye.

Gabrielle Frewayni Tesfaye's testimony about her artistic approach

"*During the war, art was my refuge. As a diaspora witnessing everything happening in Tigray from abroad, I created a home for my pain and anger through painting, filmmaking and poetry. The motivation for this was not to alleviate the pain, as such was not possible during that time. Some days, it felt like there was absolutely nothing that could make myself feel better during such a time. However, creating art documented and expressed the raw experience in a way that nothing else could. The Tigrayan diaspora was stuck in an echo chamber, crying out into a world that didn't hear us, and completely helpless on how to save our families while feeling immense guilt of wanting to trade our lives with our loved ones. I used art not only for myself, but for my community that found a visual reflection of their experience they had no words for. I also used art in activism work by printing huge posters of the paintings that we held into the streets of cities all over the world in our protests.*

Art, a living expression of our unique, diverse and historical culture, tells our stories to the world and is marked in our collective global history. Reading the stories of this book was an emotionally intense experience, and I was taken back to the war time as I illustrated each story, however this time I was illustrating them in Tigray. It is an emotional balance of pain and gratitude, that I am able to paint for the people of Tigray, this time from my home in Mekelle. I hope the readers of this book will be able to land swiftly into each painting after reading the heavy stories, just as one does in an 'amen' after a prayer. I will always, and forever paint for the people and legacy of our beautiful Tigray."

Mekelle before the war (Map 3)

On the eve of the war, despite the general slowdown tied to the COVID-19 pandemic, Mekelle undoubtedly resembled a portrait a French historian might draw of it a few weeks later,[12] based on his memories of recent visits. In the centre, large avenues lined with modern glass-fronted buildings cut through the narrower cobbled streets shaded by jacarandas trees. Numerous commercial buildings destined to become hotels or malls were under construction. Shops offering electronics and all kinds of modern goods and supermarkets sat alongside traditional clothes and jewellery shops and the largest open-air market in Tigray. An ever-increasing number of trendy cafés competed with the small stools casually laid out on the pavements for customers to drink coffee or tea. In the burgeoning suburbs, industrial compounds alternated with condominium complexes and neighbourhoods with individual modern houses in small compounds.

Behind the jacarandas and cobbled streets, however, Mekelle was rife with strong tensions. The deterioration of the political sphere, especially between Tigray and the federal authorities, but also with the neighbouring regional governments, had a direct effect on the life of the city. The region did not produce enough to feed everyone, and Mekelle was highly dependent on other parts of Ethiopia for most of the manufactured goods it used and for many of the widely-consumed agricultural products such as coffee and red pepper. Disruptions in the supply of foodstuffs were feared and sometimes actually noticed.[13]

Locally, one of the hot issues was the fate of land on the fringes of Mekelle, and there were lively debates on land allocation to urban dwellers, expropriations from farmers and the loss of productive farmland.[14] Shortly before the war, some land on the outskirts of Mekelle had been allocated to enable urban dwellers to access home ownership. An emblematic public programme was the 70 Care land distribution project, through which every beneficiary household would be allocated a 70 m² plot to build their own home. As urban dwellers sought plots of land to settle on or invest in, some researchers expressed concern about the fate of farmers with land at the fringes of the city[15] and the low level

[12] Eloi Ficquet, "Atmosphères de Mekele, ville éthiopienne menacée," *Libération*, 26 November 2020, https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2020/11/26/atmospheres-de-mekele-ville-ethiopienne-menacee_1806843/. [13] Haile Tessema, "Mekelle City Unjust and Unsustainable Urban Expansion Has to Be Tackled before It Is Too Late," *Tigrai Online*, 24 February 2019, http://www.tigraionline.com/mekelle-urban-expansion.html [14] Ibid.; Tesfai Hailu, "The Adverse Impacts of Hyper Urbanization & Industrialization on Mekelle & Its Environs," *Horn Affairs*, 5 September 2017, https://hornaffairs.com/2017/09/05/the-adverse-impacts-of-hyper-urbanization-industrialization-on-mekelle-its-environs/. [15] Zemenfes Gebregziabher, Kwame Sebeh Yiadom, and Melesse Asfaw, "The Impact of Urban Sprawl on the Livelihood of Fringe Farmers in Mekelle, Ethiopia," *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 4, no. 16 (2014): 126–34.

of urban governance.[16] At the same time, the high demand for land and the drastic increase in land lease prices, which were closely related to the city's population growth, were making access to land for housing impossible for many people, which in turn prompted the development of informal settlements on the peripheries and in more central areas of the city. Many of the city's outskirts were dominated by grey concrete, bearing witness to the spreading urban sprawl towards the farmland.

Mekelle's population increased from about 65,500 in 1984 to an estimated 216,000 in 2007.[17] In 2014, it was the second fastest-growing city in Ethiopia, after Addis Ababa.[18] It has not been well studied, but this rapid population growth was the result of a combination of the expansion of the city's boundaries, a comparatively high fertility rate for an urban environment and rural-urban migration, which was already high in the 2000s and continued to rise in the 2010s. In 2007, more than half the population of Mekelle had come to the city in the last ten years. In 2017, a local observer wrote: "Mekelle has become a haven for skilled and unskilled job and fortune seekers from all corners of the region who flock to the city. [...]. There are tens of thousands of construction workers, daily labourers, housemaids, and service sector and sex workers, as well as the unemployed who carry IDs from other towns, cities, or even regions but are not registered in the city for various reasons, yet have made Mekelle their permanent home."[19] In 2021, the population was estimated to be about half a million.[20]

[16] Teklay Tesfay Gebregziabher et al., "Urban Leadership and Governance Practices and Challenges in the Regional State of Tigray," *Journal of Citizenship and Morality (JCM)* 2, no. 2 (2019): 54–77; Hafte Gebreselassie Gebrihet, "An Assessment of Urban Land Administration in Ethiopia: Evidence from Mekelle City" (Ph.D. Thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2022). [17] "Population and Housing Census 2007—Tigray Statistical" (Central Statistics Agency, 2007). Founded as a settlement in the 13th century, Mekelle was briefly the capital of Imperial Ethiopia under Yohannes IV, who in the early 1880s decided to establish his administrative centre there. In the 1890s, Yohannes's successor, Menelik, moved the seat of the court to Addis Ababa, which has been Ethiopia's capital since then. In the early 1990s, Mekelle was only a garrison town surrounded by rural villages when it became the capital of the Tigray National Regional State. [18] "MCSPP (the Mekelle City Structure Plan Preparation Project). Situation Analysis on Social Development and Demographic Characteristics" (Mekelle University, 2013–14). [19] Tesfai Hailu, "The Adverse Impacts of Hyper Urbanization & Industrialization on Mekelle & Its Environs," https://hornaffairs.com/2017/09/05/the-adverse-impacts-of-hyper-urbanization-industrialization-on-mekelle-its-environs/. [20] "Mekelle, Ethiopia, Population 2024," *World Population Review* (2024), https://worldpopulationreview.com/cities/ethiopia/mekele [archive]. This figure probably does not take account of the people who were displaced by the war and came to Mekelle, and had not returned.

Mekelle's pre-war economy depended mainly on commerce, services, manufacturing, tourism and urban agriculture, and most of its economic links were with the rest of Tigray and Ethiopia as a whole. The proximity of Djibouti played a relatively minor role in the city's development (over 90% of the import-export trade between Djibouti and Ethiopia is routed to Addis Ababa), while the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean war and the subsequent closure of the border for nearly twenty years had an adverse effect on Tigray's and Mekelle's economy. However, Mekelle's Alula Abanega International Airport provided cargo and passenger services linking Tigray and the rest of Ethiopia; Mekelle University (which was founded in 2000) and numerous higher education, and technical and vocational colleges made a significant contribution to the city's economy, attracting tens of thousands of students and university staff members from Tigray and other regions of Ethiopia;[21] and a number of government and private health facilities (including Ayder referral Public Hospital) provided services to people from all over Tigray and neighbouring regions.

With regard to the manufacturing sector, Mekelle had a federal government-built industrial park that was inaugurated in 2017, specialising in textiles, garments and leather products, as well as several other apparel factories, the Messebo Cement Factory (one of the largest cement factories in Ethiopia), Mesfin Industrial Engineering (a steel fabrication and manufacturing factory, including a car assembly line), and other facilities (e.g. steel and soft drink production). One recent development was the so-called "urban agriculture boom,"[22] especially as an alternative to food insecurity[23] (Belay Gebrekiros et al. 2020) and a livelihood for low and middle-income households. "Urban agriculture was on the agenda of the Tigray Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development, as well as city councils, in the Tigray region for some years before the conflict started. It has been practiced on a small scale, particularly to promote small businesses and to create jobs in the region."[24]

For the most part, however, Mekelle's residents depended on the small and micro-scale enterprise (SME) sector for their livelihoods. In 2014, nearly 12,000 formal and over 3,600 informal SMEs had been surveyed, more than

[21] "MCSPPR (the Mekelle City Structure Plan Preparation Project and Revision). History, Culture and Tourism" (Mekelle: Mekelle University, (2015–16). [22] Kifle Woldearegay, "How War and Crises in Tigray Triggered an Urban Agriculture Boom," *Medium* (blog), 1 August 2023, https://medium.com/@TowardsBrownGold/how-war-and-crises-in-tigray-triggered-an-urban-agriculture-boom-b5964df16a56. [23] Gebrekiros Hagos Belay et al., "Urban Agriculture Commercialization; An Alternative to Food Security (Case of Mekelle City)," *Agricultural Socio-Economics Journal* 20, no. 3 (2020): 213–24. [24] Kifle Woldearegay, "How War and Crises in Tigray Triggered an Urban Agriculture Boom," https://medium.com/@TowardsBrownGold/how-war-and-crises-in-tigray-triggered-an-urban-agriculture-boom-b5964df16a56.

half of which were operated by women. Most were in the commerce and services sectors. Manufacturing accounted for 10%, and urban agriculture and construction for nearly 8% and 4% respectively.[25] These SMEs were also a major source of employment, providing about 53,000 jobs in 2014, about two-thirds of which were daily or temporary. There were also several tens of thousands of jobs in the larger factories mentioned above. Employment in the public administration and the government-run service delivery facilities was important too, although in the early 2010s their share of the total decreased due to the rapid development of non-government economic sectors. The economic transformations and related social diversification that were under way before the war, including the consolidation of an urban middle-class, were particularly visible in education: although public schools were still prominent, the number of private schools, from kindergarten to college, multiplied. In fact, the school (public or private) where people sent their children was a very basic social status landmark.

As its main city, Mekelle was and still is the capital of the National Regional State of Tigray, and one of the region's seven administrative zones. The Mekelle City Administration is divided into seven sub-cities—Adihaqi, Ayder, Hadnet, Hawelti, Qedamay-Weyane, Quiha and Semen—which are themselves sub-divided into 33 *tabias**, and then further divided into *ketenas**.[26] This tight administrative system is not the only sign of the State's presence in the city: in Mekelle, the legacy of war, the memory of "the struggle" led by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) against the Derg* (1974-1991) and the commemoration of the "martyrs" of that war and the Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000) were never far away. TPLF fighters were officially celebrated as liberators and war heroes, and huge billboards, as well as memorial policies and place names, kept decades-old memories fresh.[27] Through these and the towering Tigray Martyrs' Monument in the compound of the museum of the same name, and through the annual celebrations and commemorations, the TPLF was present everywhere in the public space. It was also the ruling party in Tigray between 1991 and 2020, with a powerful involvement in all aspects of Mekelle's social life.

[25] "MCSPP (the Mekelle City Structure Plan Preparation Project)." [26] The "*kebelle*" as the smallest administrative level in Ethiopia is no longer used in Mekelle, and has been replaced by the term *tabia*. However, "*kebelle*" (together with its number, such as "*kebelle* 2" or "*kebelle* 6") is still used by the inhabitants to name places. [27] Alula Tesfay Asfha, "Integrated Approach for Heritage Conservation in Mekelle, Ethiopia: through the Historic Urban Landscape Approach" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Tsukuba, 2020).

Even though Mekelle is primarily perceived as a political place, religion also plays an important role in the daily lives of most of its inhabitants.[28] The city is dotted with numerous Christian Orthodox churches, several important mosques and a well-known Catholic church, which are also important landmarks when people need to identify a particular location in the city. Although the symbolic centres of these faiths are in other places in Tigray (in Axum, Al Nejashi and Adigrat respectively), Mekelle is where they have all established offices and an umbrella inter-faith structure is in place. Mekelle is also host to the renowned Saint Frumentius Theological College, where many of Ethiopia's Orthodox religious leaders trained, and the Catholic congregation in particular is very active in, and well-known for, its community-based development activities.

Like elsewhere in Ethiopia, local development and expanding public services brought a number of improvements over the fifteen years before the war. State and privately-owned banks with multiple branches proliferated, and mobile banking and ATM services enabled swift access to cash. Telecommunications services using landlines, mobile phones and the internet connected Mekelle to other parts of Ethiopia and abroad, and easy communications played a key role in business networks involving people in Ethiopia and beyond. However, local development policies also faced many challenges. One critical issue was access to water. With the combined effects of environmental change[29] and rapid urbanisation, "waiting for running water for days, if not a week, [had] become the new normal in Mekelle. Were it not for hand dug wells, whose health and safety [were] questionable, the city would [have been] unliveable."[30] Urban dwellers coped by diversifying their sources of water to include not only wells, but also streams, springs, runoff, etc. In 2020, the "Giba dam," which was intended to alleviate the shortage of drinking water in the city, was under construction with the involvement of Chinese

[28] According to the last census ("Population and Housing Census 2007—Tigray Statistical"), most of the residents of Mekelle were Christian (93%). [29] The city of Mekelle grew on a fertile, open, windy plain surrounded by gentle mountains on the eastern edge of the highlands, at the junction between the mountains and valleys of inner Tigray and the roads connecting other Ethiopian territories. With an average elevation of 2,254 metres above sea level, the city enjoys a temperate climate. Mekelle's annual average rainfall of about 615 millimetres (75% of which falls during the rainy season between June and September), makes it slightly dryer than average in Ethiopia (Awetahegn Niguse Beyene, "Precipitation and Temperature Trend Analysis in Mekelle City, Northern Ethiopia, the Case of Illala Meteorological Station," *Journal of Environment and Earth Science* 5, no. 19). [30] Tesfai Hailu. "The Adverse Impacts of Hyper Urbanization & Industrialization on Mekelle & Its Environs."

public companies.[31] Mekelle's peripheries and hinterland were seeing various infrastructure and recent industrial projects such as the Mekelle Industrial Park that we mentioned earlier. This raised issues of soil and water pollution and compounded the issue of the loss of productive farmland. On the eve of the war, the rural areas surrounding the city were increasingly perceived as key suppliers, whereas the neighbouring regions in Tigray were viewed more and more as unfriendly.

Chronology of the war in Tigray

Past decades

From the second half of the 19th century to 1974, an imperial regime gradually consolidates itself and gives the country its present-day territorial shape.

1974-1991: A military regime known as the Derg deposes the imperial regime and imposes a communist economic model.

1991: A coalition of armed opposition movements called the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which was formally established in 1988 and was led by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which was established in 1975, overthrows the Derg. An EPRDF led transitional government is established.

1993: Eritrea, which until then had been a part of Ethiopia and whose dominant opposition movement joined the TPLF/EPRDF in the fight against the Derg, becomes an independent country.

1994-1995: A new Constitution adopted by a Constitutional Assembly on 8 December 1994, comes into force on 21 August 1995. It gives sovereignty to Ethiopia's "nations, nationalities and peoples" and establishes Ethiopia as a Federation of National Regional States "delimited on the basis of the settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the peoples concerned." The Constitution recognises nine National Regional States and two chartered cities (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa), and gives every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia "an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession,"[32] under certain conditions.

1998-2001: A large-scale war breaks out between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Its conclusion leads to a "no war no peace" situation, with borders most often closed, incidents on the border leading at times to fears of a resumption of open conflict and both countries reportedly supporting and accusing one another of

[31] "Construction of the Much Awaited Gereb-Giba Dam Mekelle Officially Commenced Today," *Tigrai Online*, 24 September 2019, http://www.tigraionline.com/articles/giba-water-dam-mekelle.html.

[32] "Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia" (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1994), https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text/193667.

supporting dissident and rebel groups that had taken up arms against their respective government.

Before the Tigray war

2 April 2018: Following two decades of relative stability, social unrest and protests gradually surface after 2014 against the EPRDF regime, which is often labelled as being TPLF-led. In April 2018, Abiy Ahmed (from the Oromo Democratic Party, one of the members of the EPRDF coalition) is sworn in as Prime Minister.

9 July 2018: A Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia is reportedly signed between the two countries, although a signed version has never been published.

1 December 2019: The Prosperity Party (PP) is launched by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, succeeding the EPRDF. The TPLF is the only one of the four EPRDF founding parties that decides not to join the PP.

March 2020: The Ethiopian federal and regional elections, scheduled for August, are postponed indefinitely due to the coronavirus outbreak.

September 2020: Regional elections are held in Tigray despite the postponement decided at federal level in March. Over 2.7 million Tigrayans re-elect the TPLF to lead the regional government.

The war starts

On the night of the 3 and 4 November 2020: The Tigray war starts. An early flashpoint is the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) Northern Command headquarters on the outskirts of Mekelle. What exactly took place that night remains controversial. According to most accounts, Tigrayan forces moved in to take over the Northern Command bases in Mekelle and elsewhere in Tigray, there was fighting that led to casualties and some Tigrayan ENDF members joined the Tigrayan forces, which captured large quantities of arms, including heavy weapons. According to some accounts, this move was preceded by an attempted commando operation directed by the federal government aimed at removing the TPLF leadership. With a clear build-up of tensions over the course of several months, there is little doubt that preparations for war were being made on both sides. On 3 and 4 November 2020, Amhara and Eritrean forces took no time to enter the Tigray region at multiple locations.

4 November 2020: The ENDF, Amhara Special Forces and allied militias* and the Eritrean Defense Forces launch what Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed dubs a "law enforcement operation" against the Tigray regional government, "to restore the rule of law and constitutional order." Electricity, telecommunications and transport services to and from Tigray, including Mekelle, are immediately cut off.

7 November 2020: A Transitional Government of Tigray is declared as a caretaker administration by the House of Federation,[33] formally placing Tigray under direct federal authority. Members of the Transitional Government sit in Addis Ababa.

November 2020: The war intensifies. Reports of indiscriminate artillery shelling, rocket fire, mass killings and other atrocities against civilians emerge, despite the fact that no journalists are allowed to travel to Tigray. This includes shelling and air strikes on Mekelle.

23 November 2020: Mekelle is encircled by federal and allied forces.

Mekelle comes under federal control

28 November 2020: After heavy shelling, but with no urban warfare because the Tigray forces leave the city, Mekelle falls under the control of federal forces. Victory against the TPLF is declared.

December 2020-June 2021: Some food aid is gradually allowed in under strict controls. Air traffic and banking services reopen. Electricity returns. Regular road access is not allowed, which leads to a boom in smuggling networks, mostly for food, which supply Mekelle and other cities in Tigray at extortionate prices. Members of a federally-led Transitional Government establish themselves in Mekelle. Heavy fighting continues in the areas that are not under ENDF control. Reports of atrocities against Tigrayan civilians in Tigray, including mass killings and widespread sexual violence, continue to surface. The Tigrayan forces regroup under the banner of the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF). From April 2021, the fighting intensifies again in various areas of Tigray, and the TDF regain control of parts of Tigray.

The TPLF/TDF return to Mekelle

28 June 2021: The TDF regain control of Mekelle with no urban warfare because the ENDF and Transitional Government officials withdraw. This leads to electricity and telecommunications services being immediately cut off, with the ensuing disruption of banking services, the suspension of flights and a continued blockade of road transport to and from Tigray. A TPLF-led regional administration is re-established.

12 July 2021: A TDF offensive starts and recaptures Southern Tigray, including Alamata and Korem towns. The TDF continue their advance and enter the Amhara region. Shortly thereafter, the TDF also enter the Afar region.

[33] Ethiopia has a bicameral Federal Parliamentary Assembly consisting of the House of People's Representatives (HoPR) and the upper House of Federation (HoF). The HoPR Members of Parliament are directly elected. The members of the HoF are elected by the (regionally elected) National Regional State Councils.

10 August 2021: Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed issues a call for all eligible civilians to join the Ethiopian armed forces.

August-November 2021: Large-scale arbitrary detentions of Tigrayans living outside of Tigray are reported. The *de facto* blockade of Tigray continues. Humanitarian aid is mostly halted.

2 November 2021: The federal government declares a six-month country-wide state of emergency.

November 2021: A counter-offensive by the ENDF starts, aided by drones and air strikes against TDF and Tigrayan civilian settlements, including Mekelle.

December 2021: The TDF announce that they have withdrawn from neighbouring regions. Their final withdrawal from Afar only takes place in April 2022. The blockade, including of humanitarian aid, continues.

January 2022: A Tigray Emergency Food Security Assessment by the World Food Programme finds that 83% of people in Tigray are food insecure and 40% are suffering from an extreme lack of food after 15 months of conflict.

15 February 2022: The House of People's Representatives votes in favour of an early end to the state of emergency that had been declared in November 2021.

A humanitarian truce

24 March 2022: The government of Ethiopia declares an "indefinite humanitarian truce effective immediately." On 25 March, the Tigray authorities agree to a ceasefire. On 1 April, trucks carrying aid enter Tigray.

August 2022: The US and the European Union exert pressure on the federal government to resume essential services to Tigray. The federal government insists on a formal ceasefire agreement being reached as a prerequisite.

Fighting erupts again

24 August: Fighting erupts around the town of Kobo, some ten kilometres into the Amhara region, south of Southern Tigray. This follows a number of clashes between forces, for example in Western Tigray.

The following days: The parties trade accusations of restarting the war and carrying out further attacks. Air and drone strikes intensify again, including on Mekelle. After a few days of escalation, war rages in Tigray, once again involving the ENDF and Amhara and Eritrean forces against the TDF. A massive crackdown is launched against Tigrayans in Addis Ababa.

11 September: The Tigrayan authorities announce they are ready to take part in peace talks led by the African Union.

5 October: Both sides say they have accepted an invitation from the African Union to participate in peace talks in South Africa.

25 October: Delegates from the federal government and the TPLF start peace talks in Pretoria (South Africa), marking the first formal meeting between the two warring sides after nearly two years of conflict.

Peace agreement

2 November 2022: The parties (the federal government and the TPLF) agree on a "permanent cessation of hostilities" (known as the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, or the COHA) a little more than a week after formal peace talks began.

7 November: Top Ethiopian and Tigrayan military officials meet for a new set of talks in Nairobi (Kenya) to discuss restoring humanitarian access to Tigray and the process of Tigrayan disarmament.

15 November 2022: The first delivery of priority medical supplies and food aid since July 2022 arrives in Tigray.

Mid-November-December 2022: Banking services gradually resume, albeit with months of severe limitations on cash withdrawals. Connections to the national electricity grid and telecommunications are gradually reestablished. Flights to and from Mekelle resume at the end of December, although unofficial travel restrictions still affect certain groups of Tigrayans, mainly young people.

January-August 2023: Road transport slowly resumes. However, only one corridor through the Afar region is continuously open to "formal trade" and aid convoys until August 2023. Schools also reopen, although it is staggered throughout these months: private fee-paying schools reopen first, followed by government schools that are not occupied by Internally Displaced People. Over time, some IDPs are relocated elsewhere, although there were still schools serving as IDP sites in early 2024.

Establishment of the Tigray Interim Regional Administration (TIRA)

The Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (the COHA) includes a provision calling for the establishment of an inclusive Interim Regional Administration, following political dialogue between the parties and until the next Regional Council and HoPR elections.

Mid-March 2023: After informal consultations with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his rejection of an initial proposal that called for the TPLF Chairman Debretsion Gebremichael to assume the leadership of the TIRA, the TPLF Central Committee votes internally in favour of recommending Getachew Reda as the head of the TIRA (with 18 votes out of 41). Getachew Reda is appointed by the Prime Minister on 23 March 2023.

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The stories



"My son was staring at me without moving his eyes, in panic and fear"

Part I

"My story"

This first part comprises seven stories as they were told, in full. All the stories were striking, but these are those we found to be especially powerful for the purpose of narrating the war. Each vividly conveys how one specific aspect dominated a particular storyteller's experience of the war and its effects—from the desperate concern for a child, to the acute hunger faced throughout the months, to the lack of news of a spouse, and to the sense of dislocation of people and their lives. These facets of the storytellers' experiences are present in all their stories, but the relative acuteness with which they were perceived is unique to each story.

* * *

"MY SON WAS STARING AT ME WITHOUT MOVING HIS EYES, IN PANIC AND FEAR"[1]

My name is Kebedech. I live in Mekelle *ḳebelle** 18. I am married and have a son. I have worked as a researcher for many years and my husband was a trader, working as a wholesaler for a local electrical materials factory. My son is four and a half.

3–4 November, 2020: The war starts

I was in Shire for research work when the war began on 3 November 2020. It was 10 in the evening, and I was checking my Facebook account for updates before going to bed. Suddenly, I saw something that grasped my attention on someone's Facebook page. It said: "*The war has started as of today*." I was very frightened and I felt as if my body was frozen (couldn't move) for a while. Then I started to search quickly for additional information on the issue. I was panicking, and my hands were shaking. I found many posts on Facebook that confirmed the news. Then I saw posts that there was heavy gunfire in Mekelle city. At that moment everything inside me stopped moving and working right, and I started to worry about my family, and specifically my son. When I tried to call my family in Mekelle the network was not working,

[1] Written in January 2023, completed on 28 January 2023.

and the internet connection was cut off soon after, so I wasn't able to get any more information on social media. I wanted to call friends in Addis and get additional information, but it was too late to call, around midnight. So, what I did was try to get to sleep and wait until morning, even though it was very difficult even to think about falling asleep.

In the morning, I discovered that there was no network connection throughout Tigray, no internet connection, and no bank services at all. I understood that we could not continue working in the area, but we also could not leave for Mekelle immediately. We tried to check the situation in the city and if it was possible to do something until something happened in relation to our research, but everything was messed up and nobody could talk to us because they were in a hurry. Soon after that, in the afternoon, I began to see military movements using cars in the town. At that moment I understood that even my personal life was at risk, and that something worse was coming to the area. So, I started thinking about how to leave as soon as possible to escape from the war, as well as how to get basic things for living because I had no cash and no close relatives in the city, and there was no bank service.

I called friends outside Tigray just to talk and get additional information, and they were also aware of the war in Tigray. But there was no solution. Thus, with the research team I was working with at the time, I had to focus on how to leave the area because we didn't have enough cash to buy food and pay for a hotel if we stayed any longer. We started communicating with the organisation in Addis that had sent us to do fieldwork in Shire using the internet connection at the UNHCR office in Shire. They told us to stay there by any means until we got security clearance from them. The situation in the town was not stable, however, and people were leaving and moving to Central Tigray. In addition, we had no cash at all as a team, but we were able to cope because we began sharing it for food. In my case, the hotel manager told me not to worry at all about paying for the hotel, but what I wanted to do was to leave and go to Mekelle to share the bad situation with my parents. I was terrified because there was news on the radio and TV that there were air strikes on Mekelle a few days after the outbreak of the war.

Finally, we got clearance from the zone or city administration (I am not sure which it was) after six days, and we started moving towards Mekelle by car. We had our plane tickets with us. We were terrified on the way because our car was a V-8 and we thought it might be targeted. We had to go very carefully on our journey because there were battles in some areas along our way. For instance, we stopped after leaving the town of Axum—we were told to wait until the battle at the airport had finished. We did so, and we continued our journey and experienced more situations like that until we arrived in Mekelle. I finally got home at 10 p.m. On 8 November and was a little bit relieved to find that everyone in my family was fine.

November 2020: Fighting in Tigray, uncertainty in Mekelle

At that time, my husband, my son and I, as well as my housemaid and babysitter, were living together as a household, and I also have my family (my parents and two brothers) who live together in another household. Even though our homes are a little bit far apart, we are used to living close to one another and sharing what we have. My son stayed with them whenever I went for fieldwork and whenever I was busy with a write-up at home.

There were no basic services in Mekelle at that time, including no electricity. There also were no communications such as telephone and internet, so my job was *de facto* terminated because it depended on the possibility of communicating with Addis Ababa. It was my husband who had a job, and so he started to have to pay all our household expenses, even though all markets and businesses were not operating fully at the time because of the war and the transport restrictions that followed. I went back to spending my time at the market, which I had started doing during the COVID-19 pandemic. My late mother-in-law had a stall at the market before she passed away. When I couldn't move around and do my research job during the pandemic, I had started to sell vegetables at the stall just to get some income and pass the time. Sometimes I left it and someone from my parents' family worked there whenever I had research work to do. My parents were doing the market work when I went to Shire before the war to do research. When I returned from Shire, I started working there again, even though there was not enough profit to be made and little demand for the business because of the situation. After a week everything started to change dramatically: government work and businesses as well as other private businesses and services closed because of the heavy air strikes and gunfire, which sounded very close.

On 16 November 2020—it was a Monday, which is the main market day in Mekelle—my mother was at our workplace at the market. I was at home with my son and my housemaid. My husband was also in the city. I left my son with the housemaid and went to the market to help my mother. When I got there, she wasn't there. I was told she'd gone to buy tomatoes from farmers at the open-air market to resell them. I decided to wait for her there because the open-air market was very crowded. But we immediately heard a loud sound of jet planes and everybody started to shout and run in all directions, pushing one another and throwing whatever they were handling. I started to run in the direction of where my mother was because I thought the air strike had targeted the crowd. The military jets were right above our heads very close to us, and there was a kind of light on them that everyone there thought came from them dropping bombs on the crowd. Anyway, I started running away from the market, and my son was on my mind, but the jets dropped their bombs somewhere and left the city. The smoke could be seen not far from the market, but when I went back to the marketplace to find my mother, she

wasn't there. No one had any clear information, but everybody was running in the direction of the smoke.

I met my mother. We first went to my home, which is in the opposite direction from where the air strike had taken place, to check on my son and the housemaid. We then went back in the direction of the air strike because it is where my parents' house is. When we arrived there was a crowd, and we weren't allowed to pass after some distance. We were very worried about my father and brothers, who were at home. The air strike had been near Saint George Church, which had been damaged. My parents' home is immediately next to the church. We were finally reassured that my brothers and father were well and were outside the house, but the house was damaged: the walls had been a little damaged from shaking due to the strike.

Once everything was a little calmer, I noticed that I was smeared with blood because my period had started, outside its regular schedule, and it was also unusually strong. I will never forget that day because it still has consequences on my health today.

From that day on, my husband and I stayed at home. We always heard about battles in other places in Tigray on the radio, and we paid to charge our phones in shops that used generators to provide the service. My housemaid decided to go to her parents in Hawzien because she was very worried and was longing for her family. We owed her two months' salary (3,000 *birr**). We gave her half and promised to give the rest to her brother in Mekelle. After that, it was difficult to move here and there in the city because of the strikes, and I had to be at home for my son because my housemaid had left.

It was a very difficult time. People who arrived from any other part of Tigray were telling us that the situation was very bad: there was heavy fighting and it was getting close to the capital. It was also difficult to get access to food, and the grain mills weren't working because of the lack of electricity. As a household, we faced difficulties getting enough food because of the lack of flour and firewood to cook whatever was available, so we decided to send our son to my parents. We also started going there every afternoon, so that we would return having eaten some food and bring some food from them, which was enough until the next day. There was no transport at the time. There is no regular transport service to my parent's home, and in normal times we used to use contract *bajaj** to get there. However, we didn't have enough money to do that, so we were going there and coming back home on foot every day. Incidentally, we had no close connections with our neighbours at the time because we had only recently moved to this new rented house just after I returned from Shire, so we couldn't ask them for favours or support. However, we weren't paying rent because there was no money and no bank services, and our landlord told us we could pay when things improved or banking services returned.

Anyway, life continued to be terrifying and full of worry. However, personally I was hopeful that it would end soon and we would go back to our normal usual situation. The only good news I was hearing which made me happy was that the Tigrayan forces were defeating the opposing forces, and good news was breaking on the radio almost every day.

We sometimes rented movies to get some relief and relaxation, although everywhere was full of talk, news and rumours about the war, but it wasn't easy to get money for movies or to charge my PC and our phones every day. I think the telephone service was back, but only to communicate within Tigray or Mekelle.

28 November 2020: The ENDF enters Mekelle

It was 28 November 2020, a Saturday. After breakfast, my husband left for the city to meet up with friends and I left for my parents' home to visit them and my son. The streets were unusually quiet, and few people were out. I reached my parents' home, which is on a hill, and overlooks the whole city. I saw smoke somewhere in the suburbs, and could hear heavy shelling close by. I asked people about the situation and was told that the fighting was getting closer, and that the smoke was from a shell that had fallen on a house that morning, and all the family members there had died. I was terrified and panicked, and felt that something worse was going to hit us soon. I arrived at my parents' home and found my mom and son at home, but the others were out. I felt uncomfortable because my dad and my brothers were not at home, but soon my dad and one of my brothers got back. We started to chat about the situation. They were all a bit worried and fearful about the coming days. Another of my brothers called us from the city. He was terrified, and told us that many people were fleeing the city to escape from the war. He said, "*I'm coming and we can talk. Stay at home until then. They* (the Ethiopian soldiers*) are already close to Mekelle and they'll enter the city soon*." My mother and I froze in panic, but my dad and little brother were calmer and tried to convince us that everything would be OK and there was no need to worry too much.

My other brother arrived soon after and started to hurry us to pack some necessary things and leave the city. My mother and I were terrified and had no idea what to do, but my dad and little brother rejected the idea of leaving our home. Finally, after arguing for a few minutes, my father decided to stay at home whatever happened. My little brother agreed to accompany us to my aunt's home in Aynalem (a semi-urban area 8 kilometres from the city). He didn't want to stay there and decided to go back so as not to leave my dad alone. I decided to call my husband and tell him about all this. I called and told him that we were escaping and had to get some things we needed from home. We met him in the city and went home to pick up some clothes and food, especially for my son. However, my husband was not happy with the idea

either, so he decided to go with us until things calmed down. I started to collect things and pack our bags while my mother prepared food and coffee for us and our journey, because we would be travelling on foot for security reasons. But suddenly we heard a crowd shouting, cars honking and gunfire from outside. We all went out on to the street to see what was happening. There was a long queue of cars, including military vehicles and heavy weapons, moving out of the city on the main road. There was also a crowd of people expressing their joy in different ways. There were also Tigrayan soldiers in the middle of the crowd firing their guns into the sky as a sign of happiness. We were all very confused about what was happening, so we asked people about it. They told us that Bacha Debele (one of the chiefs of the ENDF) was under the control of the Tigrayan forces. We were all very happy and started to shout and share our joy with our neighbours. My brothers and my husband wanted to go into town to enjoy their happiness with friends. My mother wanted to go home because my father was there alone. I decided to go with her and return in the evening. We all left my home and went together to the centre of the city, where my brothers and my husband left us, advising us not to go into the areas that were targeted for shelling. That week, there had been news that the ENDF had announced some target areas inside the city for shelling. We went to my parents' home carefully, avoiding roads near the targets. We arrived home peacefully. My mother had carried my son on her back. There were no neighbours in the compound because they were at church for a group prayer, but my father was at home alone. Immediately after we entered the house, we heard heavy shelling and the house shook badly. We moved out the house quickly and sat in a corner of the compound which we irrationally thought was safe. It sounded as if the bomb had fallen on our heads. Unfortunately, my parents' home is on a hill and loose rocks were falling into our compound at every shelling passing over our heads and heading somewhere else. I had never experienced such loud sounds of gunfire from such a close distance before. I had never felt as terrified and panicked our thought about death as I did that day.

My father seemed calm. He was giving advice to people outside the compound on how to be careful and protect themselves from the shelling. Many people were coming to our area (around my parents' home) from the centre of the city to escape the shelling because it was in the centre and around the bus station, which is near my parents' area. I was subconsciously hearing my father's voice giving orders to the people arriving from the centre: "*Please lie down on the ground. Don't go in that direction, the shelling is coming from that way, so please go in that direction so you'll be protected! You, are you listening? Please save your lives and don't stand up*." This is what my father shouted to give orders to the crowd near his house who had come from the city centre to escape the shelling which they had seen killing and injuring people in previous airstrikes. When I started thinking straight again, I noticed that my mother

was kneeling with my son on her back near a container shop in the compound. She was looking at the ground and praying: *"Please God, save us from this punishment for our sins, at least for the sake of innocent children like this! Please send your mercy for the sake of the children and not for our sake, for adults who are full of sin!"* My son was on my mother's back and I was on top of them, thinking about protecting them from the shelling in case one fell on us. It was a foolish idea, but unconsciously that was my intention. My eyes were directly on my son who was staring at me without moving his eyes, in panic and fear. My mother told me later that he was shaking and his hands were holding her back tightly, as if he desperately wanted to not be taken away from her. Finally, the shelling stopped, but it seemed it went on for years, for thousands of years, and that it would never stop, ever.

When I looked up, we were in a very dangerous place and we would not have escaped death if something bad had happened. First of all, we were near a metal container. Also, when I looked up, there was an electrical device that looked like a transformer immediately above us. This always comes to my mind like a nightmare. One thing at least I will never forget is my son's feelings and panic. He was 2 years and 2 months old at the time.

Things finally calmed down, and we called my brothers and my husband to check whether they were safe because they had been in the centre during the shelling. My brothers arrived soon after and they started telling us about the death and damage in the city because of the shelling. That evening, my husband came and took us home. I couldn't leave my son with my parents after the terrifying shelling so we went home with our son.

December 2020–June 2021: Mekelle under ENDF/ Federal Government control

The next day, one of our landlord's daughters called someone in the morning and was told that ENDF soldiers were already in Mekelle. We heard that they were already inside the federal institutions, including the Ayder referral Hospital. Then we all understood the recent situation and what had really happened. I personally felt defeated and as if everything was hopeless. The day was black, and I thought better not to leave my home because I was afraid of what was happening outside. I think the phone service was cut off immediately, although I am not sure.

My home at the time was near a highway on one of the routes out of the city. It was busy with military movement every now and then and everyone in the compound tried to follow what was going on from our home. It was very scary and an unfamiliar situation to experience. It was unpleasant to see these soldiers in their military vehicles passing by our home.

I was not interested in going out, to visit my parents and friends, for instance, because I felt unsafe. I even intentionally used groceries and food

items economically because of this feeling of insecurity and uncertainty about what was going to happen next. There was no actual source of information about what was going on, but there were rumours from various people that made me very panicky. I think I had this feeling for around two weeks. There were no electric lights and no water supply. I remember how challenging and frightening it was during the night, even at home, because soldiers were passing by our homes in fast cars, which made us very afraid and depressed us.

The electricity was reconnected after a week or two, but the water problem continued. We even fetched water from a river near our home, which was very dirty. Most of the time we brought drinking water from the water trucks of the NGOs that were distributing water to the people. There were long queues to get it.

I remember that the two holidays at the time (Christmas and *Timket**)[2] were not celebrated happily. I didn't even go to my parents for the usual celebrations. The other problem was that it was difficult to access food and other goods because even the traders didn't feel safe about opening their businesses. Vegetables and other goods we normally found from the surrounding rural areas were totally unavailable because of the transport and security problems involved in bringing them to Mekelle. I remember that the price of tomatoes was 100 *birr* a kilo at the end of January 2021, so because of a lack of money I replaced them with carrots because they were cheaper at the time.

Step by step I became more used to the situation, and things seemed a little bit more normal. For instance, we got humanitarian aid for the first time (for my family it was the first time in our lives) for Ethiopian Christmas. There also began to be some movement at markets. My husband couldn't continue in his previous job because the factory had closed due to lack of materials from abroad. He started working with one of his friends in the big market in Tigray (*Kedamay Weyane**). He was getting materials from his friend and reselling them in the open air, and making a little profit. His business gradually got better during this period. I had no income, and so it was my husband who had full responsibility for our money situation. However, the banks started providing services soon after, although with limitations, and so I tried to use money from my savings. I paid our rent, which had accumulated for two or three months, from my savings. We were also able to buy enough of our main foodstuffs such as *taff**, macaroni, pasta and rice to cope for some time.

In my experience, this time was not bad for my household economically because my husband spent his time at the market and came home with some money. At least he had a daily income. I was not stable emotionally, however, especially in the evening and at night because there was gunfire and we heard

[2] Christmas or *Genna*, in the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahedo** Church calendar, is celebrated on 7 January. *Timket*, or Epiphany, is celebrated on 19 January.

about people being shot by soldiers. I was always thinking and worrying about my husband's and my brothers' safety in particular. People were also being arrested and kept in prison without being convicted. Young men especially (my relatives and neighbours) were at risk most of the time. This made me feel very panicked and hopeless.

In addition, there were no media except the Ethiopian media, which was a real torture for me. What they broadcast was lies and jokes about us. I remember that most of the people around me were very sad to see and listen to information on the Ethiopian media, especially about Tigray and the war in general.

We were eager to hear about the struggle and progress in the field, but we did it carefully and silently. I have friends in Addis, so I would call them just to get information. I was very disappointed because none of them distinguished between the TPLF and the Tigrayan people, or else they even lacked sympathy towards Tigrayan people. I was very angry and sad about this. Most of the time I avoided calling anyone in Addis. My main relief at that time was going to church every day and sending my prayers to God, because He was the only one who was unbiased and positive who I could communicate with at the time. My religious education there brought me a lot of relief and support to enable me to calm down and be positive about the future.

Meanwhile, I began to listen to and watch Tigrayan media broadcasts from abroad (like Tigray Media House), so it was very good that I could get information from the other side. I became hopeful that things would change soon because they were able to get information about what was actually going on the battlefield and how the Tigrayan forces were progressing. However, I was also made aware through these media of the massacres, killings and rapes in the other areas of Tigray. This hurt me very much emotionally and psychologically.

I also noticed that most of the people around me had the same feelings and were living with this psychological torture. When we chatted and talked about these things with our neighbours, relatives and family members, we got some relief and peace because most people were hopeful about the future. For instance, most people I knew at the time, like me, had no doubt that the Tigrayan government would return to the centre like before. The question in most people's minds was how soon this would happen. This was a result of the diaspora movement abroad, as well as hearing about the progress of the TDF on the ground from different informal sources and the Tigrayan media abroad. It was one of the few things that gave me strength and hope.

On the other hand, it was frightening to go out to the city centre as usual. For instance, when I went to my parents' home I used to take great care not to see soldiers in front of me. I went in another direction as soon as I saw soldiers to avoid even having eye contact with them. I could not avoid it fully, however,

and I had some experiences of interactions with them. One day, I think it was around February 2021, I was taking some vegetables (onions and tomatoes) to my parents. My son was with me. I took a taxi because I was carrying a heavy bag and it was hard to go on foot with my son. I stopped the taxi at my destination and I got out of the taxi handling the bag and my son. In front of me there was a soldier, who stood up as they do when they are keeping watch. I think it was not allowed to stop there because of security issues at that time. But that was not my problem. The soldier stared at me with anger and hatred in his eyes and said, *"You Junta*, son of a b**ch, get away from me before I shoot and kill you and your child!"* When I heard these words, I didn't look back at him. I put my son in front of me and put the bag on my back to protect him in case the soldier fired. I hurried to the next turn, my body shaking, so that I could get out of the soldier's sight. I was not confident and waiting for a shot until I had gone round the corner. This was one of the most frightening experiences of my life during this period. By the way, I recently heard that the soldiers were very emotional that day because they had been defeated on a battlefield somewhere.

On another day, I was going to my parents' home alone. I saw two soldiers beating a young man on the street. He seemed like a street boy. Both of them were attacking him. He wasn't moving and seemed to be dead, because they were beating him on his chest above and around his heart. Nobody dared to intervene or say anything. We all just passed by on the roadside as if nothing was happening. We couldn't even not bear to watching. This is also among the worst psychological tortures that I will never forget.

One day, soon after the ENDF had occupied Mekelle, maybe a week or two later, we suddenly heard intense gunfire throughout the city, as if something bad had happened. Cars were honking. I was very worried because my husband was outside. I was also worried about my brothers. I called my husband, but he didn't pick up. I also called my mother to ask about my brothers. She told me that they hadn't arrived back home yet. It was a very difficult feeling. My husband came and told us all (including our neighbours in our compound) about the situation. The ENDF had caught some TPLF men and killed some of the legendary leaders and were expressing their happiness. We switched on the TV to see how people were feeling. There was total happiness among the Ethiopians, even though it was such heartbreaking news for us Tigrayans. The next morning, we heard more sad news from our neighbour. When the ENDF soldiers were firing their guns here and there, a bullet had passed through someone's roof and a four-year-old child had died because of this gunfire from the ENDF soldiers showing their happiness. This is also a very painful and unforgettable memory from that time that weighs on my mind.

Even with these problems, our hopes increased as time passed. The news we heard informally was all about the TDF making progress and that they would soon occupy Mekelle again and the Tigray government would return to Mekelle.

We were not facing severe economic problems during this time, but we avoided buying clothes for the adults, household materials and some luxury food items, and especially games and toys for our son. We were not able to buy milk, eggs, or fruit because they were unavailable or extremely expensive. My son just started to live like an adult, eating what we ate.

At the end of this period, we moved to another house closer to the city centre. It was also a neat, good quality house on the 2nd floor. The rent was more expensive, so we had to add money for it, and we paid all the rent that had accumulated for our previous house.

The Tigray Orthodox *Tewahedo* Church had announced public prayers and fasting, and almost everyone took part wholeheartedly and believed that everything would change soon.

June 2021: The TPLF/TDF take back control of Mekelle and part of Tigray

It was late in the afternoon on 28 June 2021. I was at home with my son. Suddenly, I heard some sounds, a crowd shouting outside. There were also a lot of cars honking. I went outside on the veranda and started looking at what was going on. People were firing guns into the air, the crowd was expressing their happiness and *richittes*[3] could be seen in the sky. When I looked down the main street, I saw cars full of people moving quickly. There were Tigrayan flags on these cars. At that moment, I realized what exactly had happened. My heart filled with extreme happiness. I immediately went out on to the street with my son to witness the people's great joy. I don't know, but I have never experienced such happiness in a crowd, and it persisted for the next few weeks or months.

Lots of young people began to join the TDF. Everybody wanted to at the time, unless they had problems doing so. People were happy to face the challenges involved as they were so happy. For instance, even though telecommunications were disconnected and bank services were terminated soon after the TDF returned to Mekelle, people were so happy that they didn't mind initially. They quickly started to focus on the continuing war and getting back the resources that had been taken by the ENDF/*Shabia**/ Amhara forces, and punishing these forces for what they had done to the Tigrayan people.

[3] *Richittes* are firecrackers of the kind that makes a sound like gunfire and can be seen as a light flying in the sky.

The challenge I was facing at this time was that both my husband and my brothers had a strong interest in joining the TDF. I was very interested in joining too, but as I have a son, I had to be with him. I tried to convince my husband and brothers to stay, telling them that many young men and women from among our relatives were already fighting. I counted more than 50 young people who were with TDF at that time, who are our cousins, nephews or other close relatives. I was therefore able to convince them not to go somehow, although we had some disagreements and conflict about it.

I was a bit relieved, with the TDF marching out of Tigray and making progress on the front. I heard that registration for Kindergarten (KG) to primary grade 6 would be starting soon, which made me very happy. By then my son would soon be 3 years old, which is exactly the right age for KG, and so I was hopeful that he would soon be at school and I would be at work, free from being at home and handling all the household chores just like a housewife. I was hoping I would at least be a teacher so I could have an independent income and work. It was a very hopeful time, and we were all optimistic about the coming period.

However, as the TDF kept moving towards the centre of the country, the air strikes and drone attacks became heavier and more dangerous, and their main target seemed to be civilians. This made me and others lose hope and go back to living a fearful life. What I remember most is my son's fear and worry whenever military jets and drones passed over Mekelle. He suffered from nightmares. He always wanted to run away at night to escape the drone attacks and air strikes. My husband couldn't go out to the market as usual to earn money, just like everyone. We were also not able to use our savings, so we started to have financial problems. For instance, we were not able to pay the rent for more than five months. It became difficult to get food aid and other necessary items for living from the market. What was available was also very expensive, and unaffordable for us because we had no money.

It was also a difficult time for me to get a job, although I tried very hard to get any kind of work. Our landlord at the time was not helpful, and he didn't want to understand our financial problem. He was always asking us to pay the rent. We did give him two months' rent, but we had to give up buying other necessary food items to be able to do so.

The good thing at the time was that I had great neighbours, so we were able to lend and share everything whenever one of us had something available. We couldn't get support from my parents like before, however, because neither of them had an income because they didn't have a salary. My husband wasn't able to earn any money from his open-air business either, so he was even forced to do casual daily labour to at least earn a small amount of money every day.

During the harvest season, in January 2022, I think, we got food support from my aunt, a farmer who lives in a semi-rural area, so, at least we got food staples for two months.

During that period, I spent my time doing housework, giving my son a basic education and going to church every day to pray for peace and the security of my people in general. I was also involved in providing security services in the community. In our area, we used to ask passers-by for their ID cards and check that they were legal to ensure the security of our community.

At the end of November 2021, my younger brother joined the TDF, and my worry and distress increased, even though I was already worried about other close relatives and friends who were already with the TDF.

At the time, I had a good relationship with the TDF fighters, and I considered them to be people who were making a sacrifice for the sake of the majority. Everybody had good feelings about them and felt a strong bond with them. We weren't afraid of them, unlike with the earlier occupying forces like the ENDF. On the other hand, there was a feeling of disconnection from our relatives, even those who lived nearby, because of the insecurity (because of the drones and air strikes) and the disconnected telecommunications system. For instance, it was very hard for us to be on time for the funeral ceremonies of close relatives. However, we understood each other, and that we couldn't respect tradition, given the circumstances. I began to have a good relationship with the local government, especially with the development army women's group and the community security administrative groups.[4] I participated actively in collecting food and other material support for IDPs and the TDF. I also took part in the security activities in the community. In general, my connection with our community and community leaders increased, and was stronger than it had been in earlier times.

The other point is that I was very distressed and having mental health issues because of all the bad news I was hearing about air strikes, drone attacks, massacres, killings, abductions and arrests of Tigrayans in Tigray, especially Western Tigray, as well as outside Tigray, for instance in Addis Ababa, as well as in other parts of Ethiopia. It was very painful for me when I saw the IDPs in Mekelle and how they were suffering.

[4] Women development groups are government-promoted community structures that were established under the EPRDF regime, with the aim of organizing women to implement or support the implementation of key government policies, often requiring some form of behavioral change at individual or household level, such as improving the household's hygiene, adopting a balanced diet, inciting pregnant women to give birth at health facilities etc. They were also important in the implementation of social protection programs. During the war, the leaders of these groups played a key role in selecting beneficiaries for food aid, as well as organizing the collection of resources for the TDF.

On the contrary, I felt proud and relieved whenever I heard the news of the TDF's progress and the Tigrayan diaspora movement for justice for Tigray and to stop the war.

I didn't have any relations with Ethiopians outside Tigray, even outside Mekelle, at the time because I didn't have a close connection with people who were able to access the internet and satellite phones.

In February 2022, I registered for a voluntary research project announced by the Tigray Women's Association in collaboration with Mums for Mums, a local NGO. Later on, the Commission of Inquiry for Tigray Genocide took responsibility for managing the research. I trained for the Gender-Based Violence (GBV) study and we began the actual work after three months. This gave me a little mental satisfaction, as I was thinking that at least I was back working in my profession, even though with no salary.

I think it was in March 2022 that we heard that the TDF had returned from near Addis Ababa (Debre Birhan) because of the intense air strikes and drone attacks that had followed their advance. It was heart-breaking news for me, because I had hoped that everything would change soon and that we, the people of Tigray, would get justice and peace.

March 2022: An implicit truce

All the TDF soldiers returned to Mekelle, which created some security problems. Theft and insecurity increased, even during daytime, as no one was handling the situation, and so it was very challenging to move around or go anywhere, even to visit relatives and friends or to go out for any other business, including going to church to pray.

We hoped that humanitarian aid and the total blockade would improve soon because of the truce, but things didn't improve as much as necessary. However, we got some food aid again after many months, which gave us some relief as a household.

At this time, we and most people around us were very exhausted by the fighting, the blockade and the disconnection due to the economic and social consequences. Personally, I was very concerned about my son at that time. He was very traumatized by the war and its consequences. What he painted and talked about was only related to the war. He only knew about weapons and he was afraid of a future that might bring more drone attacks and airstrikes. I even took him to church to get holy water to heal the trauma. I was trying to teach him basic KG education—the Tigrinya and English alphabets, writing basic symbols and letters and some English words like parts of the body. I think I was successful in teaching my son and got him ready for KG even though it was challenging to get his full attention due to the trauma resulting from the war.

It was during this period that I experienced the most challenging situation because of my father's serious illness. He had a serious medical condition for

more than seven months, and it was a very difficult time due to our financial issues and problems with getting medicine when it was needed. He was in hospital for a week, but spent his most painful time seriously ill at home. Taking him to hospital and returning home almost every day was a challenge for us as a family because of the expensive cost of transport.

It was also at that time that I received some financial support from a friend abroad, which was very helpful for solving my economic problems—especially paying my father's medical expenses and our rent, and buying some essential food items for my household and my close relatives, in particular my parents. I was also receiving more food aid at the time, at least every two months, which was very helpful for our survival as well as supporting other relatives. I was also elected as a humanitarian aid committee member in our neighbourhood because I was neutral and not involved with political issues. My status in the community changed. I was the youngest of the committee members and the one who had an education, so the community was very welcoming to me, and I think I was also carrying out my responsibility for the fair distribution of food aid in the community properly.

However, I was very frustrated by the news from all over Tigray, especially the deaths and illnesses resulting from the lack of medicine and proper health services due to the blockade. The lies told by most Ethiopians and the weakness of the international community's attitude towards the Tigray war also made me very frustrated and pessimistic about the future.

August 2022: Fighting erupts again

It was terrible for me that fighting erupted again while we were waiting for peace and stability. I had so many brothers and sisters with the TDF, including my younger brother. Some of them had already died in the earlier fighting. It was very painful when the war broke out again, and I knew that it would take more young people away from us forever. We heard that everyone was exhausted from the fighting, unlike in earlier times, because they were suffering terribly from a lack of food, medicines and means of survival as time went on. I was heartbroken, even though economically speaking this period was good for my household thanks to the support from abroad, although the cost of goods increased a lot due to the renewed fighting.

The hope that my son would go to school so that I could focus on finding a job for myself remained unrealised because the fighting had erupted again.

It was also very sad to see IDPs here and there again due to the war. Since then, the city has become more crowded because of the IDPs. It became normal to see people asking for help everywhere in the streets. All of this became, and continues to be, a major concern and worry that weighs on my mind. It is especially painful to see children on the streets begging for their basic needs. This is what really happened in our city after the eruption of fighting again.

It was also at that time that my father recovered fully from his serious illness. It was one of the good things, and it gave me some relief, among the many bad things. During this period, I got pregnant, four years after my first pregnancy, but I had miscarriage after almost three months, which was very sad for me. According to the doctor, it happened because of the stress I had faced during the two years of conflict and because of the trauma. It was very painful for me and my husband. I am currently still having follow-up care and taking medication to improve my condition.

In September 2022, we moved to another house because the owner was nagging us to leave his house because we weren't able to pay him every month. We signed an agreement that we would pay the total rent due for seven months when peace came come and things got back to normal.

The house we moved to is an old compound with a small plot of land. It was a good opportunity for us to get involved in gardening. I personally spent my time growing vegetables, which at least gave me some respite from my mental traumas. I also saved money from not having to buy the vegetables that grew in my garden. Most importantly, my son was very happy when we were digging and watering the plants together.

I wasn't able to get food aid as before, however, because I was a newcomer in the area. My participation in community activities also ended. I left my work as a food aid committee member in the previous neighbourhood. I wasn't familiar with the people in this new one, so I wasn't able to participate in the community and local government bodies. However, I started to provide voluntary services in the sub-city again, specifically in genocide research, for an organizational damage study. I was a supervisor for the health sector study. I am still working on this as I write this story.

The cost of food, transport as well as other basic needs was very high, and many items were unavailable because of the blockade and the fighting in this period. The other problem was that prices were unstable. For instance, the price of *taff* might decrease by half between today and tomorrow and then again increase again the next day because of the hopes that a peace agreement would be reached, which was a rumour during the fighting. The other issue was security, which continued to worsen in our city. People could not move freely, even during daytime, because of the insecurity. The security issue continued to deteriorate.

The good thing was that I was able to support my parents and other close relatives. My previous neighbours also came over to my home for a chat, which was a good way of getting relief from our practical and mental problems caused by the war and related issues.

November 2022: The peace agreement

There was a rumour even before the actual peace agreement was signed. It was the happiest and best news I had heard for the past few years. It made me forget the bad things that had happened in the last two years. I was very happy when I heard about the peace agreement in Pretoria because I thought the blockade would be fully lifted and all of Tigray would be free from the foreign forces.

At a personal level, it was during this period that I got some hope for a job from my friends outside Tigray. It was also a very happy situation when the telephone and internet services were reconnected. It was especially helpful for me, because I was very distressed by the lack of communication, as well as by being at home the whole day. I was hoping that I would go back to my normal contacts and friends so that I would return to my profession.

I was also very hopeful that things would change and improve over time. Some of these hopes were realised. For instance, humanitarian aid is improving, even though my household hasn't taken any since the peace agreement. The price of goods also decreased a fair amount: for instance, the price of *taff* decreased by half.

As a household, we are financially better off than in earlier times of war because we've had support from abroad. We celebrated the most joyful and hopeful holidays at this time due to the peace agreement and a partial improvement of the blockade. I was personally happy to hear the voices of relatives and friends outside Tigray and to reconnect with them. This made me happy and gave me hope.

The other thing that is giving me relief and satisfaction is that I've started to be involved in professional work again, and I'm hopeful that my household will be better in the future. My husband has also begun to earn more money in the market, which is a result of the peace agreement and the partial reopening of the banks.

The frustrating thing, however, is that there are still people in the IDP camps with no salary or income. The banks are not fully open yet, and not operating fully, so people, including our close relatives, are suffering greatly, as they are unable to access their money.

In addition, the local government seems to be dysfunctional: there is no proper bureaucracy and there are no government services in place. Many people are worried about this and talk about the government's failure to maintain the rule of law and security and to prevent all aspects of illegal activity. This is one of the things that create frustration in my mind, and it is a black spot on the hope I got from the peace agreement. The security problem in particular is very crucial at this time.

The other worrying issue is education. My son is already over the right age to start attending KG, and I worry a lot about his future. I have tried to

compensate for this by teaching him at home on my own, and currently he has already the level of a child who has completed KG-1. This brings me a little relief. However, this is not just about my own child: it's about thousands of children in Tigray.

The most satisfying thing for us today is that we are hopeful of a better future and a real peace, with no sound of guns, shelling, drone attacks, air strikes, so that our children get some relief and a peaceful life. We hope for the full lifting of the blockade so that we can work, earn a salary, use our savings and grow economically. We hope for the withdrawal of all foreign forces, Eritrean as well as Amhara, so that we can live in freedom and self-determination. Despite this, I sometimes feel it will be no easy matter to get all this back. God willing, I hope everything will be fine and return to normal.

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"What I had to do was pray for mercy just like other mothers do"

"WHAT I HAD TO DO WAS PRAY FOR MERCY JUST LIKE OTHER MOTHERS DO"[1]

My name is Lemlem. I am 51 years old. I live in Mekelle with my husband and two sons. I was working as an employee in a textile factory before the war. My husband is a civil servant working as a clerk in a court. My older son is an accountant and logistics organiser in a large Ethiopian transport company. Another son graduated from Debre Markos University in August 2019. I also have my daughter with her husband and a son who are close to me, although they have their own household. We live in a rented house. Before the war, I had a salary of 2,600 *birr*, and my husband's salary was around 2,000 *birr*. My son's salary was around 5,000 *birr*.

3–4 November, 2020: The war starts

When the war started, my grandson and his babysitter were also living with us because his mother was in Shire for fieldwork.

On 3 November 2020, I was at my workplace and returned back home at 8 p.m. After a while, we heard heavy gunfire and were terrified. The gunfire went on continuously, so it created a deep panic in people. I was very worried about my sons and my husband because they were not at home. But they came back home soon after, and I tried to ask them what was happening in the city, but they had no information either. They guessed that it might be war between Tigray and the federal government, because we had been hearing on the news that the federal government's military force had been surrounding Tigray on all its borders. In the morning, we still couldn't get clear information about the situation. However, we realized that there was fighting between the Ethiopian military forces and the Tigray Special Forces at the Mekelle military base.

November 2020: Fighting in Tigray, uncertainty in Mekelle

From that day on, it was difficult to live a stable life. It was a very tough time in terms of our economic situation and security. We couldn't go to work and we couldn't earn money. There was even a problem accessing water and electricity. It was on and off. We were feeling confused by what was happening and whom the war was with, but we understood later on that it was against Abiy and that he was our enemy.

At the time, I personally had many worries. First of all, my daughter was in Shire and there was a total cut-off of communications. I worried about her a lot. I even sometimes thought something might happen to her because we'd heard that the war was very difficult in that area. I am also a mother of men and I was very worried that they might go to the battlefield of their own free

[1] Narrated over two weeks in March 2023, written in April 2023.

will or by force. In general, as a mother, it wasn't difficult to understand that something bad was befalling our community at the time, but what I had to do was pray for mercy just like other mothers do.

The next weeks and months were full of odd things such as electricity and water being cut off and banking services being unavailable, so most of us were facing big problems with trying to get our daily food and water for survival. There was also no milling service. Fortunately, I had got flour shortly before the war, which was good luck. However, I was almost as worried as other people who didn't have any flour. First of all, it is difficult to not worry when you see other people worrying and suffering greatly from the lack of flour. In addition, I had to share with other relatives and family members, so I worried about what would come next after the flour I had ran out, because I didn't know when it might be possible to get the milling service again.

We used to wait in a long queue to access drinking water from a water truck that came to our village[2] to distribute water to the community. We also used to fetch water for washing from a place about 2 kilometres from our home. The other thing which was odd and very disturbing at that time was the situation in the market. Everybody was there to buy food items, this and that, as if all the food would be finished by tomorrow. This made me wonder what kind of storm was coming to us. However, the good thing was that we got our salary for November, so I was able to buy very important things to survive, at least for a short period of time. For instance, I bought *taff*, pepper, wheat flour and grains to prepare *shiro**, even though there was no milling service for the time being.

We paid our rent for November up to July but couldn't continue paying after that. Actually, we haven't been able to pay rent up to now, so we have more than two years rent payments due, which will be paid in the future, maybe, if we are able to get our salary arrears.

The other thing which was very frightening at the time was the air strikes and bombardments on our city. Fortunately, the first air strike had fallen on farms, but we understood that there was a tendency to attack civilians, so many people started to think about moving out of the city for protection. Some of my neighbours left Mekelle and went to Hagere Selam, Debri and other areas around Mekelle. Some of my workmates, especially the younger ones, left to go to their parents and relatives outside Mekelle because there was no work and they feared they wouldn't be able to afford to live without a salary.

My worry about my daughter calmed down when she came back from Shire. It was a relief for me and especially for her little son, as well as for the whole family. It gave us strength, as all the family could be together and confront the bad situation.

[2] The term "village" is used here to refer to the neighbourhood of the city of Mekelle where Lemlem lives.

The economic situation was getting worse because the price of food had increased to almost or more than double. However, we ate economically, sharing things among neighbours and relatives and using cheaper food items, just to survive. I started helping my daughter, who used to sell vegetables at the market. I could at least earn enough to buy vegetables for my family to eat.

All the discussions, news and chats were only about the war. Young people were very motivated to join the fighting to defend their country (Tigray). What we were hearing and watching on TV was all about how the war was going and why people had to join the fighting. These made women like me worry a great deal and understand that the solution was to pray to God. There were group prayers at church every evening to beg God for mercy and to ease the effects of the war, and most importantly to protect our children from death and bad things. I think this had a great result. We could at least be resilient and calm down, even with such horrific air strikes as well as the shelling which was specifically targeting civilians. God did his work perfectly at that time, to protect us from bad things.

It was also very important to support each other because we did not have anyone else who could protect us and think better for us. What we did with our neighbours and relatives was to support one another economically, spiritually and socially, to keep us all strong and resilient to cope with the consequences of the war. We were sharing food and water, as well as ideas about how to help and support our poorer neighbours who had no support at all. We collected food items and gave them to those who had run out of food and were unable to feed their small children.

We had no choice except to support each other, because everyone outside Tigray seemed to be our enemy, who wanted bad things to happen to us. The Ethiopians were very harsh and inhumane when we heard their opinions and what they wanted for us. We were hearing and understanding all this when we watched their TV channels. However, we weren't aware of the contribution of our brave diaspora at that time because we didn't have access to other media like Tigray Media House (TMH)[3] because of the lack of electricity, and sometimes our own media were intentionally jammed by the Ethiopian government.

People, especially us women, were very committed and felt responsible for ensuring the security and safety of our surroundings. We used to keep things safe by organizing guard tours every day according to an agreed schedule. The government of Tigray was also very strong and very organised at that time, unlike these days, and they were organizing people and making them follow up and secure their surroundings. We were also proud of our young people of

[3] Tigray Media House is a supposedly independent legally registered non-profit organisation. It has played an important role as a provider of information throughout these past years, albeit (inevitably?) a rather one-sided one.

both genders for their commitment to join the fighting to prevent their people from surrendering.

I cannot forget two events from that time. The first is when Saint George Church and our home were hit by air strike, and the second is when the TPLF left Mekelle and the Ethiopian forces and their supporters came to our place to make us surrender. Many people from Mekelle will never forget these two events due to tragic experiences.

The first one, when the air strike hit the area around us, was not the first air strike on Mekelle, but it was very frightening because a church was hit. The church is also very close to our house so our house also cracked as it was shaken by the air strike. From that time, we started to be very frightened, as we understood that if they dared hit a religious centre, they would have no fear at all about hitting every human being and doing any other tragic thing.

28 November 2020: the ENDF enters Mekelle

The second and most tragic and frightening event was the shelling intentionally carried out on Mekelle's residents.

We were at my daughter's home because we had decided to leave the city and go to my sister's home in a semi-rural area near Mekelle. It was my older son who pushed us to move out of Mekelle, because the enemy forces were approaching. The heavy sound of shelling was already disturbing us close by, so we had agreed to leave Mekelle for our safety. However, my husband and younger son decided to stay at home whatever happened. After we reached my daughter's home, we heard a crowd expressing their joy by shouting, ululating and firing guns. When we asked for an explanation, we were told that Bacha Debele (one of the chief Ethiopian Army Generals) had been caught. We were happy, and forgot the idea of leaving Mekelle. The second tragic event I will never forget in my whole life happened on that same day, 28 November 2020.

We returned to my home. I was carrying my grandson on my back and my daughter was with me. Unfortunately, after we reached home, the shelling started heavily. I was very frightened and confused, considering the previous good news I had heard. Anyway, the shelling was very heavy, and it seemed as if it was falling on my home. My two sons were not at home, and as a mother, this made me worry a lot about them, and also about the other family members who were with me at the same time. Especially, I will never forget how frightened my grandson was, squeezing my back, his whole body shaking hard. Finally, the shelling stopped and I started to worry about my family members' whereabouts. I called my sons and other relatives to know what might have happened to them due to the shelling, but thank God nothing bad had happened to my close relatives. We heard that the hospitals had gone through very tragic events after the shelling, including deaths.

The next day, we heard that the Ethiopian National Defence Force was in control of Mekelle and that our forces had left the city.

December 2020–June 2021: Mekelle under ENDF/Federal Government control

At that time, the difficult thing was to cope and adjust my life to the new situation of being controlled, occupied by non-Tigrayan forces whom we had surrendered to. The good thing was that services such as banking and telecommunications had been restored. But we couldn't access money from the bank for a long time as we weren't getting our salary. All we had in the bank was our salary. We didn't have anyone supporting us financially from outside Tigray. Our sources of support were our close relatives, our neighbours and the government through food aid. The problem was that the food aid was not enough and not properly distributed due to the lack of proper government structures. To be honest, back then we ourselves got enough food aid as a household, because each and every member of our family got support independently, so that collectively it was a lot and this helped us to be able to afford food for some time. Food items such as *taff*, pepper, *shiro* and edible oil were very expensive and hard to find. The food aid was therefore very helpful, even with the restrictions in the amount and distribution problems.

Transportation from rural areas to the city was restricted, so the price of grains and vegetables was very high and it was difficult to access them. I remember that tomatoes were 100 *birr* a kilo, so we avoided using tomatoes. Sometimes, we used carrots instead because they were cheaper. At the time, there was no work at all at my previous workplace, so I was selling vegetables at the market. But I couldn't continue for two reasons. First of all, the soldiers were always on my route and the way they looked at people was not positive. It was difficult to face them. Second, the price of vegetables was very high and unaffordable, so that selling them meant losing money rather than making any profit.

The other problem was how to access water. There was no drinking water. We had to walk long distances to get it, and at the same time we feared having to confront the soldiers while we were doing it, so we sometimes preferred to use water economically instead of fetching it from far away.

What was very distressing was hearing every day about young people being killed here and there, and the arrests of neighbours and other people in the city. For instance, one of my son's friends was arrested because he had previously been a physician in the ENDF, but he had returned to his parents, leaving the ENDF after the outbreak of the war. He was caught by ENDF soldiers on his way from Quiha to Mekelle center and nobody heard anything about his whereabouts for a long time. Recently, we heard that he is alive and still in jail in Awash Arba, in the Afar region.

During this period when the ENDF was in Mekelle, two big holidays passed by, but we didn't celebrate them at all due to the worry and distress caused by the ENDF's presence. There is a military camp near our home. When our forces (TPLF) were here, we always felt secure and safer, but when it was occupied by these other forces (the ENDF) we felt unsafe because they moved and passed by our homes with their weapons, looking at people with bad eyes. At night we felt very insecure, because there was always gunfire.

One day an older woman who is our neighbour was passing through the neighbourhood and the soldiers were passing through as well. One of them asked her: "*Mother, why is everybody either looking at us with hatred, or avoiding looking at us out of fright?*" The old woman replied: "*Oh my son, it might be because you are newcomers to our area and it takes time to become familiar with you.*" But that was not the real answer. Most people felt insecure and that it was not safe to talk to or look at the ENDF soldiers, with the news of murders we heard from other areas of Tigray, including Mekelle.

After some time, I started working at the textile factory again for some few months. I saw so many tragic events, unfair treatment of people, arrests on my way to my workplace, because it is located some way out of the city near the airport, where the military camps and checkpoints are. The young people were moving around in panic in that area. I saw that they were very frightened and angry, as well as helpless and defenceless against the ENDF soldiers' actions. One day when I was going to work, we all stopped at the checkpoint and the soldiers started to check our ID cards as usual. There were three young men at the checkpoint. They were friends and all in the same car. The soldiers started to check their Ids cards, and one of the young men was Eritrean. One of the soldiers went to say something to his boss and he came to the checkpoint. He was told that the young man was an Eritrean. He checked the ID cards of the three men again, but he apologized to the Eritrean man because his ID had been checked. He was angry at the soldiers and asked them to apologize to the Eritrean guy for checking his ID card and keeping him there unnecessarily. This was one of the unforgettable events I experienced, when I realised for the first time that our land belonged to the Eritreans more than to us.

After that day, people in my surroundings, including myself, were very frightened and fearful of the presence of Eritrean soldiers nearby (in Mekelle), because what we had been hearing in the media about murders and rapes committed by Eritrean soldiers in other parts of Tigray was very inhuman and satanic, although the Ethiopian forces were also carrying out similar atrocities. I was very distressed and worried about my young sons as well as other neighbours and relative, whenever I thought of the killings and atrocities that were going on at the time.

Later on, my older son, my husband and I were all working again and getting our salary, even though not regularly, so it was not too bad economically, even with items and goods being expensive or unavailable.

One day when I returned back from work, I found my compound full of soldiers. There was a military car outside our home and soldiers with their weapons pointing at our house. It was terrible. I couldn't even walk properly. What I thought was about my sons. When I entered and asked them, they were searching our compound and looking up at our neighbour's house from our home because they were searching for someone's home located higher up. It was the house of a militiaman, and he was at the front at the time. They went to his home and searched it. Finally, they beat his wife and his three-year-old daughter and left the house. After that, his older daughter and one of his sons joined the fighting out of anger.

Another time, I think it was around February or March 2021, my older son was sick and had a simple intestine surgery. He came back home after recovery, but he was covered with bandages around his abdomen. He was sleeping at home and the door was closed. Two soldiers came to our home and all the doors were closed because no one was in the compound except my son. Our home was also closed. My younger son arrived immediately after the soldiers. They asked him why all the doors were closed, where the people were and a few questions about himself, blah blah. He told them everybody was either at work or at the market and there was no one there except him. They left after hesitating a little. Immediately after they left, my older son opened the door and came out. My younger son was very frightened and asked him to go back inside and hide somewhere in the house. The reason for this was that if they returned and saw him, they would be suspicious of his identity and would suspect him of being a TDF soldier with the wound in his abdomen. You can imagine the consequences after that. So, I was very frightened when I was told about this and I thanked God for making the situation better, even though it was a very big thing.

The other situation I will never forget is that we heard that Eritrean soldiers were in Mekelle and were searching for valuable things like gold, going to every house. Ethiopian soldiers were also with them to search for materials and documents, even photographs, related to the fighting, the TPLF and in general anything about our Tigrayan identity, such as a Tigrayan flag. All our neighbours discussed this and we decided to put these materials and valuables away in a secure place. We spent a whole day digging holes and putting our materials in a safe place that couldn't be searched. However, although they were searching in the neighbourhood, they never came to our house, and we heard they had finally left the area.

It was 1 May 2021. We always have an annual celebration at Saint George's on this day. We celebrate it with a lot of festivity. That year, however, we

didn't have enough money or courage to celebrate it as usual, but we couldn't ignore it because it's a religious holiday, so we celebrated it with neighbours and close relatives and beggars, as well as friends of my sons. Normally, we would put up a tent in the compound, but we didn't that year. Everybody was eating, drinking and chatting in the open air. Then two new guests came to our home. We served them respectfully as guests, which is our tradition. They ate and started drinking *siwa**. However, I noticed that the way they were looking around wasn't good. They were staring at the young men gathered there, including my sons, who were chatting and laughing loudly. I was very frightened. I then noticed that they seemed to be Eritrean soldiers, although they were not wearing military uniforms. I began to talk to them to try and distract them. They told me they were Eritrean soldiers. I must have shown some emotion, and they noticed, so I said that we were brothers and sisters, and blah blah. They told me they would come back and visit us. Finally, they left after staring intently at the young men. This was another of the very frightful situations I faced at that time.

We weren't able to go to church to pray at the time because of the curfew. We used to go to church after 6 a.m. and return home early because the soldiers were not happy to see us gathering. In the evening, we had to be back home before 6 p.m. immediately after praying in a group for a few minutes. We totally avoided going too far away areas, such as outside the city for religious holidays as we usually did. This weakened our social relationships with our relatives and the community. There were no weddings, christenings, funerals (*Tezkar**) or other ceremonies that could bond the community and bring it together. This led to worry, stress and depression as a community.

Our relationship with the authorities, especially the interim administrators, was not good either. We didn't trust them about anything because they were not working in our interest as a community. I don't even know why they were there.

We were happy with the Tigrayan Diaspora when we saw what they were doing on TV. It was a kind of relief while we were having to experience various bad situations in Tigray. We were also very sad with the Ethiopians because they neglected and ignored us as a people. They mentioned this on their TV stations at different times. They never considered us as Ethiopians.

The security situation in Mekelle was very bad at that time. People, especially young people, were being killed here and there by ENDF soldiers. There was always gunfire at night, which was a sign that this was going on. In addition, when the TPLF left, all the prisoners were released and disappeared into the city. This also contributed to the worsening security.

At the end of this period, we were somehow relieved to hear that the TDF soldiers were advancing and there would be good news soon. This was among the good things and many people were hopeful.

June 2021: The TPLF/TDF return in control of Mekelle and part of Tigray

It was in the evening that we started to hear this news, but we had noticed that in the few days before then the ENDF soldiers were not relaxed and seemed to be in a hurry. However, we could not easily believe it when people said they were about to leave as they had been defeated in the fighting**.** In any case, it was a blessed day and it was a surprise to see TDF soldiers in cars and hanging our flag, which previously been forbidden.

In the late evening of the same day, telecommunications were shut down and electricity and water were cut off too. However, we were happy, because we couldn't guess what was coming next and how much hardship would follow. The next day, the city was burning with joy. Everyone was out on the streets saluting the TDF soldiers who were moving around in cars with our flag. It made everyone happy, and is an unforgettable memory for most people, including kids. The people looked on the soldiers as saviours who had made great sacrifices to save their people's lives. Later, this led to many young men and women joining the fighting out of emotion. Many of our close relatives, including my sons, were very keen to join the fighting, and most of them joined up. Some returned alive or injured, but to this day, some have not returned, and we don't know where they are. I'm talking about close relatives who were very young and had great dreams. [*A little bit emotional*]. For instance, my nephew did not return from the fighting. He is 20, but we have not known where he is since the day he joined the fighting immediately after the TDF returned to Mekelle.

I was very happy at that time, with good reason, but when I think about it now, I feel confused and I have a reason for this, too. I always ask why, what is the reason we lost all these young people? We are being killed as a people. We're not getting enough money from the bank, we're not earning money, we have no salary, our land is still occupied by our enemies and our people are still living in camps, displaced from their homes. The only relief we've had is the opening up of communications and not having to fear shelling, drones and air strikes. That's it!

Back then we had to quit work, and we didn't have a salary since July 2021, so we were not able to buy food or pay our rent. During this period, we only received our salary twice, for holidays. The price of food increased even more than we expected due to the continuing war. I remember *taff* and pepper were very expensive, and most people, including us, started making *injera** from wheat and stopped using pepper on our food.

The other basic problem was the electricity shutdown, which led to economic hardship for many people. Firewood and charcoal were very expensive. In addition, we had to use candles for light. At the time, the price of a single candle reached 20-25 *birr* from 10 *birr* earlier on. So, it was a

challenging time for most people, including my household. We were able to cope by supporting one another, together with my relatives. For instance, my son-in-law was involved in small trading, so he was able to support us with some food items, and he bought rice, macaroni and cooking oil for us as well as for his household. My sister in the countryside also supported us with small amounts of grain from her farm. In addition, our development army group was very good at identifying households in dire need of food and mobilising members to contribute flour or money to help the neediest to be able to afford food for their family members for some time.

It was truly horrible to hear every so often about people who had died from drone and air strike attacks. As the TPLF advanced towards the centre of the country, the Tigray people's suffering increased. The deaths due to drone and air strikes were very disturbing and caused great psychological trauma, which continues to this day. Children in particular are still traumatized. For instance, my grandson still draws and makes aircraft and weapons with blocks instead of other pictures or things he could make.

March 2022: An implicit truce

At this time, we heard that the Ethiopian government had declared an implicit truce for humanitarian aid purposes, but we saw no improvement on the ground. It might be that some aid was allowed in, but it had no effect on us. Perhaps it was especially good for the IDPs, because they were given priority.

On the contrary, the blockade on the ground made things very difficult. The price of *taff*, grains for *shiro*, pepper, and cooking oil started to go up. It was also difficult to find these items on the market due to the blockade and all the obstacles preventing goods from entering Tigray. However, the sound of gunfire, air strikes and drone attacks stopped, so we started to feel somewhat relieved. We began to go to church, the market and other social events with a sense of calm.

I had left my job in July 2021, after the TPLF came to Mekelle. I used to spend my time at the market selling vegetables, but I stopped because it didn't make a profit. My younger son started to spend his time there. We decided as a family to keep him busy in the market just to prevent him from joining the fighting. His older brother tried to join the fighting many times with his friends. One day, he went to the training centre with his friends, but they came back as they had been told the centre was full of young people and they should go back after a month. He finally joined the fighting in November 2021, when the TPLF returned from Debre Birhan.

The worst experience happened to our household at this time, as my husband was terribly ill. On 12 April 2022, we took him to hospital urgently. It was difficult to identify what he had. He stayed there for eight days and then came back home after being told that he had tuberculosis. We were very

happy that he came home before Easter and that we would be able to spend a happy Easter as a family. However, he was not OK. His illness continued to get worse. Even though he took the medication he was prescribed for a month, there was no recovery at all. We took him to hospital again. We were told that he had hepatitis (which was affecting the liver) and not TB. He started taking another medicine, but this one weakened him physically and mentally. We were about to give up, but finally God helped us and his illness was identified: it was an intestinal infection related to a gastric problem and needed surgery, but he was too weak to undergo surgery and so the doctors decided to treat him with medication. He finally recovered after more than six months of emotional suffering and economic hardship for the whole family. It was a challenge to access medicine even if you had money. It was also very challenging to pay for transportation, as he was going to and from the hospital every day using *bajaj* on contract most of the time. With the lack of fuel due to the blockade, transportation was very expensive and unaffordable.

However, there were also good situations that made us resilient and able to cope with these hard times as a household. The first was our culture of helping each other as a family, with our relatives and the community as a whole. We got support from the church community because my husband was a very active participant in church services when he was healthy. We also got support from a diaspora neighbour. She sent money to the church to support needy people in the neighbourhood. The church selected our household for support because of my husband's illness. The other thing we got at this time that was helpful was the support my daughter got from a friend abroad. It was very helpful to cover medical fees and buy basic food items such as *taff* for both households. My husband's relatives in the countryside also sent us grain to support my sick husband. We also got food aid once or twice during this period. My husband's workmates and friends also helped us with some money whenever they came to visit him. In general, that was the toughest time, but we were also lucky, as many people were on our side and stretched out their hands in support so that we could be resilient. On the other hand, we were also supporting relatives and other neighbours who faced survival challenges in the past three years. Without supporting each other, you can imagine how difficult it might have been to endure the suffering and the economic problems.

One happy thing that happened at that time was that my older son came from the battlefield to visit us. It was after seeing him that my husband seemed to recover faster. He was very happy to see his son. On the other hand, my son was very sad and heartbroken to see his father, who had lost a lot of weight because of his illness. He also felt sorry that our household had faced so much suffering in his absence and that he had not been able to do something to take care of his father's well-being.

At the end of that period, we were hoping to experience full peace and that we would lead a normal life, without fear, worries or economic problems because it was being said the federal government and Tigray regional government would soon reach an agreement. At the beginning of August, we celebrated my grandson's fourth birthday in a good mood, wishing for peace and feeling hopeful.

August 2022: Fighting erupts again

Unfortunately, we heard that fighting had broken out again just when we were hoping for peace and stability as a community. It happened as soon as my son had returned to his army after his leave. This was the most distressing thing for our family and relatives. Many people were also very worried because they were very tired of the fighting and the blockade and its consequences.

As we heard it, this was the most difficult period of fighting, with many soldiers killed on both sides. But the sad thing was also that there were so many atrocities, murders and sexual violence committed against the Tigray people by the ENDF, the Amhara forces and Eritrean soldiers in the places they occupied. Everyone was heartbroken by this, and we all lost hope.

As the fighting continued, security in our city got worse, as the government structures were dysfunctional, especially the security structures. It was very difficult to move around in the city after 6 p.m., because people were being robbed and beaten. The hospitals were full of people who had been attacked by thieves armed with knives at night, in addition to all the young people who had been injured in the fighting. To see all this and think about the shortages of medicine made me feel crazy and hopeless.

People's attitude towards the regional government and the TPLF became negative. They were disillusioned with them for causing too much loss of life, disability, famine and displacement, and all this seemed to be for nothing. We started to lose hope that we would ever be stable again, and even that we would survive as a people.

During this period, group prayers to beg for peace continued to take place intensively at church. We used to pray and beg for peace every evening.

On the other hand, we reduced our participation in *ḳebelle* activities and keeping our neighbours' security due to the overall security situation. There were armed robbers and thieves around, so it was risky to check and ask for ID cards without having people with weapons with us. In addition, the government structures were dysfunctional: it was as if they had been dismantled. It became difficult to maintain government services as the regional government did not have a budget and could not pay its civil service. For instance, Mekelle became the dirtiest city in the world due to the failings of the city administration, and this has continued to be the case until now.

As a family, no one had work or a salary back then. My youngest son had some income from selling vegetables, but it was not that much. We weren't able to pay rent or buy clothes, shoes or other materials, except for basic food items we needed for survival.

The sense of mutual help decreased because resources were becoming very scarce, and people's ability to support others deteriorated, as they had no income and because of the blockade. For instance, the Mekelle community was very supportive of the IDPs, especially at the beginning of the war. We did our best to support the IDPs who were in need in food and other material support, but later on we finished everything and were in need of support for ourselves.

The other change at that time was a drop in young people's interest in joining the fighting. The government started to take them by force. Our city was very quiet—no young people were seen in the streets as they were trying to escape the fighting. Back then, many young people joined the fighting against their will, unlike in previous times. This continued until the fighting ended because of the peace agreement. It was very distressing and frightening for our people, especially for mothers.

November 2022: The peace agreement

It was a surprise and a source of great hope when we heard about the peace agreement. Relief from the fighting was one thing, and the other hope was that the blockade would be completely lifted so it would be possible to return to a normal life.

It was also a very tough time, as we were thinking about our children, relatives and neighbours who were involved in the fighting. Many people, especially mothers, were very worried about their children's whereabouts.

The government and its structures were about to collapse totally, and people, especially civil servants, were in a very critical situation, working without a salary. This is why almost everyone in Tigray was happy and eager to see the changes that would come following the peace agreement.

As hoped, the price of items, including food, decreased sharply. For instance, I had bought *taff* for 12,500 *birr* a quintal during the fighting. This went down to 5,000-6,000 *birr* soon after the signature of the peace agreement. The price of cooking oil, which was more than 2,000 *birr* for 5 litres, dropped to around 1,000 *birr*. Other items such as sanitary items also decreased accordingly. Later on, prices rose again because progress with the peace process was slow. Currently, the price of *taff* is around 9,000 to 10,000 *birr*. The price of wheat flour also rose again to 1,900 *birr* for a quarter of a quintal from 1,500 *birr* immediately after the peace agreement was concluded.

The other surprise during this period was that the telecommunications system was reconnected. We were very happy when it came back, as people

were able to talk to their relatives outside Tigray on phone. Our people also started to have access to medicine for some diseases, and most importantly, we were able to get basic vaccinations. What is odd is that we considered this to be a big thing even though it used to be considered as our right.

The other good thing was the resumption of air transport, which helped many family members to meet again and allowed them to express their longing physically. However, accessing air transport is a complicated process, the prices are unfair, and there are restrictions that prevent Tigray people from full access to it. Many young people were not allowed to fly outside Tigray for different reasons. This is a little worrying, and undermines the peace agreement.

We are also distressed about the disarmament of the TDF whom we see as our protectors and saviours, as we still have Eritrean and Amhara soldiers in our land. This has made us sceptical about the peace agreement. Our people are being killed, raped and detained in various occupied areas but the Ethiopian government and the international bodies say nothing, and are not taking any measures. In addition, we are still not able to access banking services long after the conclusion of the peace agreement. People are suffering from lack of money because banking services are restricted.

The very surprising thing is that humanitarian aid has been terminated since the peace agreement. We were able to get some aid previously even though it was not enough. However, currently it is totally terminated. It is being provided only for the IDPs.

People are also suffering because after the peace agreement, homeowners began to ask them to pay the whole amount they owed for rent. In addition, rents increased after the peace agreement because some people started to receive an income, remittances or a salary from being involved in different kinds of work. For instance, many people have been employed by NGOs since the peace agreement. But this makes it difficult, especially for civil servants, who haven't received their salaries so far. For instance, our landlord came and asked us to pay the whole amount we owed him for rent because of the peace agreement. We owe around 20,000 *birr* for rent altogether. We have been told to leave the house if we can't pay, but we're talking to the homeowner to reach a solution.

As a household we had two pieces of good news at this time. The first, and very important one is that my son has returned from the fighting and is completely healthy. The second is that my daughter got a job after the peace agreement, which is good for all of us.

Private schools have also reopened in Mekelle, which helps our children heal from the traumatic situation they experienced over the past three years. I think the education they are getting is a kind of tutorial, and it is only provided for lower grades. However, it gives us relief and hope to see small children carrying their schoolbags and going to school.

Now we're hoping for the establishment of a transitional government in Tigray and that the budget will be released so the government will be able to provide people with basic services. We also hope that the areas that are still occupied by other forces will be returned to Tigray so that our displaced people can go back to their home areas and find an end to their suffering.

The security situation in Mekelle is very bad right now. There is no rule of law and no accountability. We are living in deep fear of being robbed and killed by thieves and robbers. Many people are being killed by robbers everywhere, which makes us lose hope. This is because of the government's failings and dysfunctionality. We hope this might change once the transition government is in place.

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"I never thought the war would last so long and harm us so much"

"I NEVER THOUGHT THE WAR WOULD LAST SO LONG AND HARM US SO MUCH"[1]

My name is Bereket and I am 33 years old. I am married and have three children. There are six of us in our household, including a close relative of my wife who lives with us. I am working in the hospitality sector.

Before the war, I was employed as a chef in a hotel. I was also involved in TV programmes on food preparation. My wife had her own coffee house. Shortly before the war, I resigned from the hotel and my wife closed the coffee house. We were planning to start our own food preparation school and TV programmes.

3–4 November, 2020: The war starts

Before the war started, there were rumours on both sides about the possibility of a conflict breaking out. From the Ethiopian side, we heard on ETV that the war began because the TPLF attacked the military Northern Command base.[2] However, before that we also saw on Facebook that Abiy had sent a commando of Republican Guards to Mekelle to arrest the TPLF's leaders, but they failed and returned to the airport, and the TPLF attack on the Northern Command was launched and the war started in response to this commando attack.

I never thought the war would last so long and harm us so much. Shortly before the war, I was about to start my own business: I had already paid rent for premises for three months to open a food preparation training centre, and I was starting a TV cookery show.

On 3 November, I was at work preparing food for my friends in my new workplace as a launch event. I was on annual leave from the hotel, and my work there was due to end on November 9. I had taken my annual leave in order to complete preparations for my own business. Eventually, I wouldn't go back to my work at the hotel because I wanted to focus on my own business.

It was very frightening to hear about the war in this way. My family was also very frightened. Everyone was panicking. The next day, we began talking about the war with my friends, discussing the reasons for the war, whether it would continue and how long it might last, and so on.

November 2020: Fighting in Tigray, uncertainty in Mekelle

When the war started, communications and basic services such as water, electricity and banks were cut off.

[1] Narrated in early to mid-May and written between 10 and 20 May 2023.

[2] ETV has been renamed EBC (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation). It is fully owned by the Government of Ethiopia and is a key channel for the government to disseminate its narrative.

I returned to the hotel to resume work, but I was told that I had been fired because I was absent for several days and I had not got permission to go on leave. So, my earlier job was terminated in this way, and I lost my income too. The food preparation show I mentioned earlier was also terminated when the war started because the TV channel no longer had access to the satellite connection. I gave up the process of opening a food preparation training centre as no one was in the mood for that kind of thing. We all were thinking about survival, and not about getting training or education. Many things were spoiled and messed up after the war broke out, for both my own household and my community as a whole.

I remember that at that time I bought *shiro* flour for my household because there was no electricity so we couldn't go to the mill, but it wasn't proper flour—it was mixed with soil and we couldn't eat it. There was a general lack of supplies.

Security was better in those days, however. There were community activities to ensure security. People were assigned in turn to maintain peace and security in their surrounding areas, and the government security structure was also functioning.

My eldest son was a KG student. He had stopped going to school during the COVID-19 pandemic. We had hoped he would go back, but this didn't happen because of the war.

This was the time when the war and inflation began to create distress for me and the people of Tigray. I could see people's worries, hopelessness and anguish all around me.

I was out of a job at the time and had no income. It was a very stressful time for me as I had two small children. I had 5,000 *birr*, which I had meant to use to start my new business. My only solution was to use that money to buy basic foodstuffs and consume them economically. We also borrowed money from close relatives to buy food such as pasta and macaroni, especially for my children. Our parents also supported us in kind by providing us with *taff* and wheat flour, which was very helpful for my household to cope with this hard time.

However, the people were very strong spiritually and resilient so that they were able to get through this situation. No one had expected the war to reach the capital city of Tigray. It was very sudden and a totally new experience to be so quickly exposed directly to war. We were able to bear it by supporting, comforting, healing and communicating with each other. We all had the hope that everything would pass tomorrow, and we would return to our jobs and businesses, and that was a source of strength for us as a community.

Among the very sad events before PP entered Mekelle was the air strike conducted around Saint George Church. That was the day when children began to be psychologically harmed and traumatised and when their parents' fear and panic was passed on to them. Previously, children had been happy

when they heard the sound of an airplane, and shouted with pleasure. The strike took place on 14 November. I was in Adishimduhun, where I live with my parents, near Saint George Church. Jets came and hit the area around the church. From afar it looked as if it was around Axum Hotel, the FM radio station and Atse Yohannes school, but when I got nearer, I could see that the airstrike had been at Saint George's. I was very frightened, thinking that my parents and siblings might have been hit. When I arrived in the area, I saw that the church had been shaken by the impact of the strike, and doors and windows had been damaged. Fortunately, my parents were well, although the strike had hit very close by. One person died and another was injured. Some houses were also damaged because of shaking from the impact. One house was badly damaged, even the furniture.

On 28 November, one day before the PP entered Mekelle, a jet came and struck around Ayder referral Hospital. Many people were deeply distressed. The same day, there was also shelling around Adishimduhun. I thought the fighting was getting closer, and I was very frightened. People were very alarmed, and most started to flee from the city in all directions. Some moved to relatives in rural areas, some to monasteries, and others moved to churches with holy water services.

In the case of my household, we initially decided to stay at home, as we thought that anyway, the result would be the same. Later on, my wife asked me if we could move out with the kids. We talked about it, and finally decided to stay with some relatives, so we moved to my wife's parents in *kebelle* 17, which is in the city. We did this because we thought that if we were together, it would be easier to decide where to go finally. We started calling our relatives on both sides to ask them for advice. Everyone was at least prepared and ready to flee from the fighting, although most people were finding it difficult to decide where to flee to. The challenge we faced at the time was that we couldn't get any transportation. There was no taxi service, and private cars were busy fleeing with family members and relatives. Finally, after a lot of effort we got a *mahindra** and went to our relatives' place. The situation in the city was very frightening: everyone was speeding here and there, vehicles were full of people fleeing, most people were walking with family members and carrying bags. This was a very frightening situation for me and my household.

When we arrived at *kebelle* 17, we found them preparing, gathering mattresses and belongings to flee to a church with holy water service in the countryside. We began to discuss the situation. Most of the women were keen to flee from the city with their children. Most of the men thought it would be better to remain calm and stay where we were, and then to decide depending on the situation and how the fighting progressed. Finally, we decided to stay together and see, because we didn't know what might happen on our journey. All along, we were thinking that our forces were doing well, defending

themselves in the battle. We never thought the federal forces had seized places and were approaching Mekelle.

Later on that day, I returned home to see how things were and check that nothing had been stolen. I found everything was safe, so I started to go back. I was on foot, so I could see the situation in the city. However, heavy shelling began while I was on my way back. I was in the middle of town and could see the panic, especially in the children. It will remain stuck in my mind forever. I saw children shaking, crying loudly and panicking. Everybody was running away in all directions, but it wasn't possible to see where the shells were hitting.

Even young men were scared. Downtown there were some young men at a security checkpoint checking people's ID on the road. They suddenly started to run away in all directions as shelling had hit around *kebelle* 15, near where we were, causing terrible deaths and injuries. The psychological impact of these events on our people, community and children is yet to be fully understood.

The phone network wasn't good, so my family was very worried about me, and kept on calling. Finally, the shelling stopped in the early evening and I started to return to my family. I heard that there had been many terrible injuries and deaths and that the hospital was full of people injured by the shelling. I heard that more than 100 people had been killed by the shelling that day in less than an hour.

28 November 2020: The ENDF enters Mekelle

I couldn't believe that the PP forces had entered Mekelle even though I had been aware that they were approaching. I thought the fighting around Mekelle would be prolonged. However, it's good that it was over in a day, because the TPLF forces left Mekelle and the PP soldiers just entered the city. It was in the evening that I heard on Walta TV[3] that the federal forces were occupying Mekelle. I couldn't believe it. The next morning, my wife's relatives had a funeral ceremony to attend, and they called her to tell her that they had seen soldiers in Ethiopian uniforms. I never felt such a feeling of inferiority and failure as I did on that day. It was sudden bad news for me and for my household. I felt as if the decision whether we had the right to survive and live had been taken away from us. I felt as if I was owned and governed by foreign forces. This was because of the bad news about rapes and atrocities we were hearing the federal forces had carried out in other parts of Tigray before reaching Mekelle.

In the morning, I went out just to see what was happening. My wife begged me not to leave home but I decided that I had to see for myself what had really

[3] Walta TV is a TV channel owned by Walta Media and Communication Corporate, which has its headquarters in Addis Ababa. It is largely government-aligned.

happened. Anyway, I went out at 10 in the morning. I saw that many shops had been looted, as there was no police structure or anyone who could take responsibility. Some people reported the looting to the soldiers, but they replied that they had not come to protect people's property. They shouted at them and asked them why they had come there. I saw some people being ordered by soldiers to do exercises as a punishment. I had mixed, worried feelings at that moment. In my heart, I decided to join the TDF soldiers. Later on, I discussed it with my friends and most had similar feelings and had reached the same decision, but we didn't know where to go to join the Tigray forces. In the beginning, we had no information about where the TDF were. The news on the media about the atrocities and attacks on civilians meant that young people couldn't just stay in the towns and live in harmony with the perpetrators.

When I got back home, I saw a lot of PP soldiers downtown, passing by in military trucks. I was very frightened. I started walking back home, and saw looted and destroyed premises. When I reached the area around the Tigray region administration building, it was full of soldiers, and I felt very demoralized.

December 2020–June 2021: Mekelle under ENDF/ Federal Government control

During the PP period, there were checkpoints everywhere, and massive security checks in every house. Especially for young men, it was very demoralising to be checked without dignity and respect from the soldiers. In our area, people spent every day in fear that the soldiers might come to their home because they suspected something. My household members and my parents were very afraid that I might be caught and arrested by the soldiers at the checkpoints. Whenever anyone knocked at our gate, they were very frightened that it might be soldiers.

In addition, there was no justice in our city: there were robberies and thefts, even in daytime, and yet these people weren't being arrested and punished. People even considered it normal to see people being robbed in daytime, and they didn't react because they feared for their own lives. We were also hearing that people were being killed by the soldiers, especially when they were found outside during the curfew. My household and my parents were very worried about me whenever I went out, but I was very careful never to be out during curfew to avoid distressing my family too much. This was the main source of distress for many parents at that time. They were never sure that their children would return home safely.

I totally forgot about my business at that time. My wife and I had stopped working in our previous jobs as we were planning to be involved in our own business, but we couldn't do it due to the war. My new business place was located in the Tigray TV building, where a large number of soldiers were

living, so it was very risky and frightening to go and work there. In three months, I never went to check things, except perhaps twice. I had already paid the rent for three months, but this money was just burnt without me working or getting anything from it.

I remember that the price of food increased due to scarcity. Goods couldn't easily get into Tigray, and many merchants were involved in illegal trading, which led to these high prices. In addition, people didn't have enough money to buy things at these expensive prices.

As a household, for three months we did nothing that generated income. I managed my household by using the money I had at hand and in the bank. I also received some support from my parents and my wife's parents. However, I realised that I couldn't continue to feed my kids in this way and I decided to start my business as much as possible in the prevailing situation. The hotel where I used to work owed me some money. I got it, and used it as start-up capital to start my business at a small scale at my workplace.

Personally, I had bad feelings towards Ethiopians and no relationship with them because of their hatred for us. I was listening to and watching the media, and I could see how most Ethiopians were expressing deep hatred and a passion to eliminate us as a people. This was distressing, and made us feel alone and isolated from the rest of the country.

Of course, as a head of household I couldn't stay idle without doing anything if I wanted to afford my family's living costs. However, as a young man, I was less interested in working and earning an income considering the war and the prevailing situation. What we discussed whenever we met among friends was how to join the TDF. I was caught in a dilemma between ensuring my household's survival and fighting for my people's freedom, like most young people at that time. However, my wife convinced me not to join the TDF and leave her with the little kids without any income. She told me she would follow me if I joined the TDF, and so the family would be separated, and that I had to think about my kids. Everyone was facing critical economic problems, but it was especially difficult for heads of household, for whom the responsibility of ensuring their family members' living was very worrying.

We live in a rented house but it's like our home. Our landlord is like a relative to us. Not only did he not ask us to pay, but he used to support us financially. We also gave him money whenever we had some and could afford it. I can say that throughout the past three years he has been one of the people who helped us to cope with these bad times.

We sometimes only ate *qicha** without stew. I also remember times when we adults spent a whole day only drinking coffee.

After three months, I started my own business preparing and selling fast food in the place I had initially rented to run as a food preparation training centre and TV show. I worked with one of my friends, and we

started preparing and selling *dabo qolo**, which is a kind of local fast food. We continued working like this, which at least allowed us to buy food for our households. Then Easter came, and after the period of fasting demand increased and we were able to expand the business. Some people even came to ask me to give them training in food preparation. Security was a challenge, however. The place where we prepared and sold the food was unfortunately full of PP soldiers who were living there and moving here and there daily. I couldn't persuade myself to seriously engage in training. I only gave one short food preparation training session for 10 people and got some income from it.

Soldiers were passing by my place while I was preparing the fast food, so I couldn't feel safe, and it was very frightening to continue to work. It was difficult to carry on with the business, especially in the evenings. There used to be good demand at that time of the day, but I was frightened that I might be killed, because I was hearing that young people were being killed without any reason, just because they were found in the city in the evening. My wife was also very concerned about my safety and forced me to quit the job.

We were very afraid of the PP and Eritrean soldiers, and people were being very careful not to confront them. There were rumours about the presence of Eritrean soldiers even in Mekelle. I didn't believe it until I saw it for myself. One day, I was walking near my home in the Adishimduhun area. I reached a place called Dachina and saw PP and Eritrean soldiers together fetching water from the spring. I couldn't believe my eyes. They were just wearing their military uniforms. I was very surprised, but from then on, I believed that Eritrean soldiers were in Tigray, and even in Mekelle.

Around two weeks after the ENDF entered Mekelle, there was a movement by the young people to oppose the presence of Eritrean soldiers in Mekelle, as they were trying to take medical equipment from the Ayder referral Hospital. We heard that Eritrean soldiers in civilian clothes had entered the hospital to take all the equipment to Eritrea. People in Mekelle were very angry, and ready to strongly resist it. In almost all areas of the city the young people came out on to the streets and started to block the roads so that trucks couldn't move out of the city to take the equipment to Eritrea. Until midnight, the PP soldiers didn't shoot. But the young people didn't go back home as they were waiting for the Eritrean soldiers to come out of the hospital. I had joined them. At midnight, the PP soldiers started shooting, and one young man was killed. My family came and took me home, and the crowd began to disperse and return home. However, some young people stayed out in the streets the whole night. In the morning, we all went to the funeral of the young man who had been killed. He was a butcher, and he had a child. After the funeral, the soldiers rounded up all the young people, including women, and forced them to clear the stones and tyres that had been in the roads. Some refused, and a young Muslim, who said he wasn't involved in blocking the roads and didn't want

to clear them, was also shot and killed. At that point, community leaders and elders got involved and tried to mediate between the young people and the soldiers. They asked the soldiers about the Eritrean soldiers taking medical equipment. The soldiers replied that there was no such issue. The community leaders and elders advised the young people to clear the roads to solve the tension. In the end, we didn't see any Eritrean soldiers taking equipment from Ayder referral hospital, although people talked about it. Some also said that the Eritreans couldn't take it because of the opposition movement.

I had no direct connection with the TDF at that time, and didn't even know where they were. However, as an individual, I was contributing money and goods in support of the military forces through the city logistics department. I was proud of our forces because they were sacrificing for the sake of the people. In general, as a community, we were very attached and passionate towards the TDF while we were listening to the news on TVs and from people. Most people were very worried about the survival of the TDF because there was intense fighting in rural areas to eliminate them.

As a household, we didn't have any relationship with the local administration. We only met them for food aid. We didn't go to church as early as in earlier times, because we were concerned about security and the curfew. However, people were very much involved in prayers, as they believed that only God and prayers could solve our problems.

The community's social life also changed. It was difficult to be involved in *eqqub**, weddings, *mahiber** and other social events because of the economic hardship and lack of money. Banks were open, but there were limits on cash withdrawals. It was also difficult for people to get money because most people had no job and no income.

As a household with our relatives and as a community, we passed through these bad times by encouraging, calming and comforting each other, raising hope for a bright future, which contributed greatly to our resilience as a people.

As far as my personal life is concerned, earlier on I had applied for a food preparation position at an international standard hotel. I was called to start the job two or three weeks before the PP soldiers left Mekelle. This was a great relief for me and my household.

June 2021: The TPLF/TDF take back control of Mekelle and part of Tigray

One morning, I was at my workplace, and I heard that all prisoners had been released and the PP soldiers were commandeering people's cars and leaving the city in a rush. When I returned home at around 4 p.m., I could see the soldiers in a hurry, forcing drivers to leave their cars to escape in them. Then, at around 5 p.m., we heard that our TDF soldiers had already occupied all the suburbs of the city, and even the airport. We were very worried by this

news because we thought there could be fighting in the city, until we saw TDF soldiers in city centre. In the evening, we could see TDF soldiers on trucks flying the Tigrayan flag. We were very glad and delighted.

We immediately felt psychologically healed from the distress that had been bearing down on us because of security and safety concerns during the "PP time."[4] The next day, I saw many TDF soldiers on the way to my workplace. Our children were very happy too, because unlike when the PP soldiers were present, we were no longer preventing them from going outside the house.

In the hotel where I was working at the time there were wealthy people who had rooms. They contributed money and ordered the hotel to prepare food and to take it to the TDF soldiers. Our hotel was very busy preparing food for the TDF soldiers and taking it to their camps. The residents of Mekelle were busy in general, providing this kind of support for the TDF soldiers individually or in groups. It was a really good time, a time of joy and happiness in general.

However, the bad side was that basic services were cut off again. There were no bank, electricity or water supply services.

At that time everything, especially food, was very expensive or couldn't be found. However, I was working and I had some income, and so I was able to feed my family at least twice a day, and as I didn't pay rent, luckily, I was able to spend all my income buying basic food items for the family.

My wife was pregnant at the time. She was very worried about her health because the health facilities had no medicine. In addition, the drone attacks and airstrikes were very intense, and she was very distressed and frightened by them. As a family, we were all very afraid that she might have a miscarriage. Many pregnant women were suffering miscarriages at the time due to their psychological distress because of the airstrikes, the drone attacks and the prevailing general blockade. Children, old people, pregnant women and the entire community were affected mentally as they were afraid of dying from the airstrikes and drone attacks, or from hunger and lack of food and medicine.

Eventually, my wife delivered safely and gave birth to a daughter. On the third day, while I was at work, she had to run out of the house with the baby as there was a sudden drone attack and she had to hide in the basement of our neighbour's house. This was not normal as in our culture, a woman who has just delivered a baby does not go outside for 12 days. She also was spending her time hiding and worrying instead of being able to focus on rebuilding her physical and mental well-being. Actually, this was the story of most pregnant women at that time, and it was even worse for those living outside Mekelle.

[4] The "PP Time" is the name commonly given in Mekelle to the period of control of the city by the ENDF. It is named after the "Prosperity Party" created by the current Ethiopian leader Abiy Ahmed and ruling the current federal government.

The other challenge was to have my new-born vaccinated. There were no functioning hospitals or health facilities. I also didn't have enough money to buy medicines from private pharmacies. So, my daughter was only vaccinated after some time. Still, I consider myself lucky, because generally it became very difficult to get vaccines anywhere after my daughter got hers. Thousands of babies couldn't be vaccinated until the peace agreement was signed, which was very distressing and made parents mentally ill.

My eldest son was registered again for school at that time, but he couldn't attend because of the air strikes and drone attacks.

I didn't earn enough as an income, but we coped with the situation by supporting each other with parents, relatives and neighbours, as well as friends. I got some 50 kilos of *taff* from my parents again, and they bought clothes for my children. I gave money to my friends whenever I had some. We also borrowed food from our neighbours whenever we couldn't buy it, and we also gave them some items whenever we had them.

I was very distressed by the fact that my income wasn't sufficient for me to afford my household expenses. I was also very worried about those who had no income at all, and I could imagine how big their financial problem was. This is why I used to support friends with small amounts of money from my small income.

After some time, the hotel where I was working reduced our salary by half because the blockade was affecting their financial situation. This was very sad news for me because it affected my household's living standard. I was very worried, especially for my kids. They were very small and unable to understand the situation. I was finding it very difficult to see how they were being affected by a situation they didn't comprehend, and that they had done nothing to contribute to. I coped by borrowing from my workmates, and even from the hotel.

I had a good, strong relationship with the TDF. We were contributing money from our small salary to provide TDF soldiers with clothing as well as food. My wife also used to prepare dried *injera* and give it to the TDF, just as all the members of the community were. As a community, we were also voluntarily contributing small amounts of wheat and other food items from the food aid we were getting, and providing it to the TDF.

Being a young man, I was involved in the *ḳebelle* security activities: we used to go out at night with other community members to keep our surroundings safe and secure. The security situation was better at that time, although it can't be said that it was back to normal. We were free to stay out up to night time and to go to church and pray at any time of the day. The only problem was that we couldn't gather for group prayers because of the drone and air strikes, which especially happened when the TPLF took back control of Mekelle.

There were no social ceremonies such as weddings or christenings because of the blockade and lack of money. However, our friendship and family bonds were much strengthened as a community. We had the time and freedom to visit sick and needy people and to support each other depending on our ability to do so.

March 2022: An implicit truce

I don't think that this truce was very noticeable, except for the name, or that it had any visible result for most people. However, it was a positive thing for my household as we received food aid more often. But many people in Mekelle were still facing economic hardships and hunger because the food aid wasn't sufficient to survive. In addition, the distribution and registration were flawed due to unfairness and partiality. Sometimes, with the help of the development army groups, the poor weren't getting aid while better-off people were receiving it. For instance, I registered on many occasions to get nutritious food for my baby, but I never got any.[5]

However, as a community we were relieved that there were no drone attacks and air strikes and no physical fighting. The distress prompted by these situations had gone away.

There was also hope that peace and stability would come. Many people, including me, were expecting a peace agreement to be reached.

There was no improvement in relation to financial problems, cash and fuel availability. I used to walk a very long distance on foot from home to my workplace. I couldn't buy shoes or clothes for myself even though I needed them. Life was very difficult, not only for people with a low income like me, but even for those who had a better income. The price of clothes, shoes and food items wasn't affordable for many people because the truce didn't bring any change in relation to the blockade.

I was and still am proud of the Tigrayan diaspora. They were very committed to being our voice at a time when we were voiceless. They were very supportive of our people even when the banks weren't providing any services. They never lost hope, and always found ways to support their people. I believe that the current peace wouldn't have been reached without their contribution. However, I didn't have any support from abroad and I had no contact with anybody outside Tigray because communications had been cut off.

[5] When he talks about nutritious food for his baby, the storyteller refers to the fact that alongside, but distinct from, the food aid provided as support for the household as a whole (which he sometimes did get), there was also some distribution of nutritional supplements for infants and pregnant and lactating mothers (which he did not get). Both types of support were limited, and the processes to get each type of support were distinct.

At that time, security in Mekelle began to deteriorate. Thefts and robberies were a source of worry and distress for everyone. There were individuals dressed in military uniforms and using weapons who were robbing others. It was a very distressing and worrying time, especially for wealthy merchants, who had to keep large amounts of money at their homes because the banks were closed.

August 2022: Fighting erupts again

I saw the news on the social media. We were all expecting discussions and negotiations between the two parties. Instead, fighting erupted again. This was more than ever very worrying and frightening.

The government declared that every person in full health had to join the military. This also was very worrying for young people and parents. Most young people weren't willing to join the fighting and they weren't even attending the meetings aimed at encouraging them to join, which was undermining the government's capacity to continue fighting. So, it was a logical next step to force young people to attend and give them a political education so that they would decide to join the military.

In addition, some fighters were in cities after escaping from the military camps. They were being gathered up and forced to return to their camp. So, the city was quiet, as if there was no one there. People didn't move much at all.

Unlike earlier in the war, I was very afraid of being forced to join the fighting, so I was very careful whenever I moved around, but one day I was taken while I was going to work. I was put with 1,000 young people and we were given a political education and left to decide. Only 50 people decided to join the military. The rest of us were sent home. At that time, it was said that many young people were being taken forcibly against their will.

As the fighting worsened, forced recruitment was conducted by house-to-house visits. It was a very difficult time for young people and a source of distress for parents and relatives. Generally, the community was in big trouble and very worried. I sometimes stayed at work overnight to escape the house-to-house checks.

There were no bank or electricity services during this period. The blockade lasted for a very long time, and generally people were facing huge hardship and challenges to their survival, in addition to the fighting. Our survival as a people was threatened. For two years, civil servants and retired people didn't get their salaries or pensions. In addition, the price of things tripled after the fighting erupted again and some goods weren't available. This was all very distressing and affected us mentally as a community.

Personally, I still had my income, although it was reduced, but inflation was very high. As a household we had to minimise our consumption by reducing the quantity and quality of our meals. Sometimes we didn't give food such as

fruit and animal products to our children. The lack of food had a major effect on my children's physique. It was very stressful for us as a household.

We gave up participating in maintaining security in our surrounding area. Trying to stop robberies and thefts was too dangerous for us, because the police structure was dysfunctional and all the police officers had joined the fighting again. The rule of law in Mekelle was at its worst. There were more and more incidents of robberies with people being killed in the evenings or during the night. People were scared and distressed by the city's poor security.

During that period, we went to church to pray less often out of fear of being forced by the government to join the fighting. I even avoided visiting my parents. It was them who were visiting us.

There continued to be a strong sense of supporting one another among community members. I had good relationships with my neighbours and relatives. We comforted each other and encouraged one another to be resilient and cope with our economic hardships and hunger. We encouraged each other to get through these bad times by sharing hope. We also supported each other financially and with food. Economic hardship was at its peak. Some households in our area completely ran out of food. Community members contributed some flour to help these households have some food.

Overall, we overcame the hardship smartly by being together as a community: those who had some money shared it, and those who didn't comforted others with words of hope.

We had less of a relationship with the *kebelle* administration, who came to our house and told us to encourage our family members to join the military. They also begged members of the community for food, clothes and shoes for the TDF fighters.

I was hearing lots of rumours about young people being forced to join the fighting. People were told that they weren't Tigrayans if they didn't join the fighting, or they were forced to step on the flag if they refused. One of my friends told me that he was shot at while he was running to escape, but they missed. People were arrested for days for not joining the military. In general, many young people were taken by force to join the military. They came to my home many times to take me, but I was at work and they couldn't find me. This was very worrying for my family, especially for my wife, as she didn't know what might happen to me while I was at work. All these things led to people developing a hatred for the regime.

November 2022: The peace agreement

I heard on social media that the two parties went to South Africa for negotiation and in the days before the agreement was signed, there were rumours and speculation about what they agreed and didn't agree about. When I heard about the peace agreement, I was a little less mentally distressed

and psychologically worried. We all knew that for whatever reason, the ENDF and other forces had gained an advantage over the TDF and were occupying Tigray again, and so most people, including me, were worried about being killed by our enemies or forced to join the fighting. It was a big relief for young people to hear about the peace agreement.

Personally, there are some points in the agreement I can never agree with. But I was pleased with it anyway. I was just happy that this bloody war had stopped. Many people objected to the disarmament of the TD. We felt unsafe and unprotected, so this was worrying and a source of distress for most people. There was a sense of why all this fighting and loss of life of young people if it was just to finally disarm.

On the other hand, the peace agreement led to a sense of relief and reduced people's distress. Civil servants went back to work and the community started thinking about work. Overall, it was the starting point to create a new future for Tigray.

I resumed working for my own business after the peace agreement. My parents supported me financially to start it up. However, there is still inflation, and I can't earn enough to afford my household's living costs. I also have unpaid rent for my home and my workplace, which stresses us as a household. However, the peace is lasting, and I feel free to move and work. In addition, my eldest son got a scholarship to learn at the Nicolas school, which is a big chance. I asked the school for support and they gave me this opportunity. My second daughter is also registered for KG school and I have paid for her. Both are attending school. This is a fruit of the peace agreement, and I am happy about it.

At a community level, the Amhara and Eritrean forces are not yet out of Tigray, which makes us worry, as the peace agreement has not yet been fully implemented. These forces haven't left Tigray as the agreement requires, IDPs are not yet able to go back to their place of origin, and education cannot start everywhere as some schools are still full of IDPs.

The lack of or limitations on transportation, inflation and the lack of medicine and goods are still unresolved issues. There are still restrictions on electricity, water and communication services. Banks are not providing all the necessary services due to lack of cash. For all these reasons, people cannot be fully relieved and cannot enjoy the peace agreement as much as expected.

I still have a good relationship with the TDF. I collected clothing and shoes from my family and relatives and provided them to the TDF as support. I have friends in the TDF. We got time to chat and talk about the bad situations they went through and it was amazing. I am still proud of the TDF and the Tigray diaspora for the contributions they made for our people.

I still have bad feelings towards Ethiopians and I don't want that to change, because they hate us.

As we no longer fear drone attacks or airstrikes, church prayers and preaching have intensified. In this calmer context, people can once again learn about their religion and celebrate religious and social holidays.

The community has resumed celebrating social events such as marriages, christenings, death memorials, *mahiber*, *iddir** and *eqqub* normally thanks to the peace agreement.

The rule of law in the city has been better since the peace agreement. People can move around without restrictions. There is a police structure in place so that security activities are being carried out effectively. Even if I cannot say that the security issues have been fully solved, things seem to be back to normal at present. Crimes such as thefts and robberies seem to have decreased compared to earlier times.

Still, even with the peace agreement there are some issues that distress me and affect me mentally. Generally, it's because the peace agreement has not been fully implemented. However, I hope that things will improve, the peace agreement will be fully implemented and all the problems of the Tigray people will soon be solved.

The establishment of the Tigray interim regional administration

I am happy that the interim government of Tigray has been established because government structures and organisations are back at work. The community is happy too, and is hoping there will be good governance. People are able to start moving about and working as they want. I have been able to get a licence for my business. These are all the result of the establishment of the interim government.

However, there are still unresolved problems. IDPs cannot return home. Civil servants do not get their salaries regularly and have not received what has been owed to them for two years. Some parts of Tigray are still occupied by our enemies. Bank services are not operating fully: there is still a lack of cash and restrictions on the amount of money customers can withdraw.

I expect that the interim government will be responsible for solving all these problems. Overall, it needs to play an essential role in ensuring the rebuilding and rehabilitation of Tigray, and in healing people from their post-war trauma.

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“The most distressing thing is not knowing my husband’s whereabouts”

"THE MOST DISTRESSING THING IS NOT KNOWING MY HUSBAND'S WHEREABOUTS"[1]

3–4 November, 2020: The war starts

I am Le'elti. I was in Mekelle when the war broke out. There was heavy firing and shots were falling near our neighbourhood. We went out of our compound with my neighbours and we saw the shots in the air. Then, we heard screaming, and people gathered where it came from. Two people had been killed. The shooting just went on. The mobile phone network was working, so I called my brother, who was living in Quiha. He told me that the firing was from the Northern Command military base and that they were fighting among themselves. I went to sleep after it stopped. I was pregnant at the time. I was with my two children and my husband.

November 2020: Fighting in Tigray, uncertainty in Mekelle

The next day, the community security authority called a meeting and they told us about the outbreak of the war and that we should maintain security in our area. I was terrified by the situation. The next day men were told to maintain security in the area, and my husband started going out in the evenings to do this. The men were doing this based on an agreed schedule. The water supply stopped for almost a month and the electricity was cut off some of the time in that same period.

The price of *taff* went very high, and it was sometimes not even available. I went to a nearby market to buy some, but I couldn't find it in the stores there. I went to another market, where I found some *taff*, but a women snatched it from my hands and we had an argument. I returned from the market empty-handed. I bought wheat instead because it was cheaper and easily available. I had prepared a lot of food for when I gave birth, so I didn't need to buy many things during this period, and I was able to pay house rent.

Before the war, I used to go to the nearest health centre for follow-ups. After the war broke out, the health workers came to my house for check-ups, to ask if I was missing anything. They told me I had to go to a health facility immediately when I felt I was going into labour because there were no phone communications at the time. They brought me the medicine that had been prescribed for me, and I was also going to the health centre, but only once a month. I was ill frequently after the war began, out of fear, and I had pains in various parts of my body. I was going to the health centre to ask if I was getting close to my delivery, but the health workers told me I had more time.

[1] Narrated in the first half of May 2023.

Once a jet came while I was at church. Everybody started to run in all directions, but I couldn't run like them. I fell and people ran over me. I was shocked and stressed. I couldn't control my body, also because I had left my children at home. Another incident that I remember also happened during my pregnancy was when a jet came and I went to a neighbouring house with my children to take shelter because it had an underground space. But after letting some people in, the women refused to allow me to enter. At that point I felt so hopeless with my children! A militiaman saw this and he took me to a place with trees.

During that period, my income varied depending on the situation. I was getting about 2500 *birr* a month from collecting cash for the militia and I also had an income of about 5,000 *birr* from braiding hair. This went down because there was less demand for braiding, but the collection of cash for the militia continued. My husband used to work on a construction site, but this income stopped right after the onset of the war. However, during that period we had enough of everything we needed because we were using cash we had saved.

I had good relations with my husband and children. I also had good relations with relatives who were living here in Mekelle. We used to visit one another. I had an easy relationship with my neighbours too. I discussed what we should do with the people who lived in the same compound. We were giving flour to those who didn't have any, because the mills had stopped working as there was no electricity. Charcoal was expensive and wasn't easily available, so we were giving some to the people who had none. In my case, I didn't have any firewood and it wasn't easy to buy. We registered to get some, and I got it when my turn arrived, but before that I was taking some from my neighbours.

I was going to church with my neighbours to pray. People at the church were telling us that "*Mercy will come if you confess and pray*." I felt relieved when I went to church and prayed. I felt nothing bad could happen to me. But I felt stressed and forgot my sense of relief as soon as I got back home. I sometimes took my children to church.

The local administration used to tell us to contribute dried *injera* for the army. They asked about three times, and people contributed flour and participated in baking bread. I contributed, and kept the women company while they were baking, but I didn't really help them because I was pregnant.

There also used to be meetings to tell parents to send their children to the battlefield as the enemy had come.

Theft and robbery were a concern, so the local administration told us to watch out to prevent robberies in our area. We used to check people's IDs to identify if there were any newcomers in the community. We did this for about a month, based on an agreed schedule. I joined my neighbours, and we watched our neighbourhood together in the evenings from 10 p.m. to 11 p.m., sitting outside our compound. My neighbours and I once found a man dressed

in women's clothes and a wig. We asked him to show us his ID card, but he refused, so we reported him to the police. The police station was close to our neighbourhood and the police arrested him. Later I heard that the man was a spy. I was hearing about incidents of burglaries and people being robbed while moving around in the evenings. I was afraid of being burgled, so I didn't leave my house alone even after I locked it. Other people in the compound had similar fears and did the same, so we used to make sure that someone was left to look after the compound.

It was a disturbing time in many ways. I was worried about whether the war would continue. The increase in food prices was also distressing. I wasn't able to buy charcoal because the small sacks that used to be sold for 150 *birr* now cost 500 *birr*, and the smaller ones in plastic bags weren't easy to find. My husband looked downtown and bought some. Before the war, a bag was sold 20 *birr*, but my husband bought one for 70 *birr*. It was the same for firewood, and this was stressful, too. I was preparing porridge for the mornings and afternoons because I didn't have any firewood to bake *injera*. We were using flaxseed as a sauce with the porridge as we didn't have anything else. We didn't have an option because we didn't have enough money and things weren't easily available. We bought things through acquaintances and connections.

When I felt distressed, I went to church, which refreshed my mind. I also used to borrow things from my neighbours. If someone was baking, we shared it. I was sleeping a lot out of distress and because I was pregnant. I was also getting sick more frequently than I had with my previous pregnancies, so I was so concerned about the health of my baby and thought I wouldn't have a healthy baby. I was also worried about my children, and wondered who would raise them if I died in the war.

The air strikes were worrying and frequent. Saint George Church, Dagim Amsal and Adihawsi were all bombed. I always kept my children close to me. When the jets came, I held them tightly and screamed. My children cried a lot, especially the younger one.

I was scared because there were heavy artillery strikes when the ENDF was about to enter Mekelle, and especially on the day they arrived. There were frequent strikes. I saw the victims of the artillery attacks on TV. I remember that a pregnant woman and a child were killed by artillery strikes in Messebo Cement Factory. They said she was fleeing from Mekelle.

28 November 2020: The ENDF enters Mekelle

My husband and I decided to move out of Mekelle to save our lives. We took this decision jointly. There were seven other families in our compound and we decided together to leave Mekelle. "*They will kill us if we stay here*," we told each other. The main reason was the artillery strikes, which had killed many people. An air strike around a market place had also killed a lot of people.

I had heard that the ENDF were getting closer to Mekelle, and the city was a frequent target of heavy artillery strikes. The strikes were the reason we finally decided to leave, because I thought the ENDF would carry on with them. So, we decided to go because we thought this situation would continue.

We left Mekelle on the morning of 28 November 2020. We moved with my children, husband and brothers to a rural area I didn't know. We took flour, some charcoal for cooking and clothes with us. A lot of people from Mekelle were going there, and we simply followed them. We stopped at a place with walls but no roof, something people had built to let others know the area had an owner. There was just one room. We cleaned it up and stayed there for four days. We returned to Mekelle because there was heavy artillery nearby. It was quite tough to live there. We were borrowing materials from the residents. There was tap water but no electricity. Many other people from Mekelle were facing these same very difficult circumstances.

When we moved to that village the TPLF were still there. Then, on 30 November, they dispersed and retreated in different directions. I remember that on that day my neighbours who had fled Mekelle and were staying in the village with me told me to take a walk. We went up, and when we looked down, we saw there was fighting nearby in a large open field. My neighbours left me alone and ran away. I couldn't run because I was pregnant, but I managed to slowly return to the settlement.

The ENDF didn't come to the village, but there was a battle nearby. Artillery shells were falling in the village, so on 2 December we decided to return to Mekelle. We made this decision together, with my husband, neighbours and brothers, mainly because of the heavy artillery strikes nearby. Also, the house had no door or roof, so it wasn't somewhere one could stay for long. My two brothers and some neighbours from my compound also returned to Mekelle.

I suffered a lot during this return I was weakened by fear and my pregnancy. I was in my 9th month, and I gave birth only two weeks after we'd returned. We'd gone to the village by car, but when we returned there were only a few cars and lots of people wanting transport. Only the strongest got a seat. I wasn't strong enough to fight and get a space. This also affected my brothers because they couldn't go without me. I walked for about five hours to reach our home in Mekelle. We left the countryside at noon and reached Mekelle at 5 p.m. My children and I faced starvation while we were in the village and when we were returning to Mekelle.

December 2020–June 2021: Mekelle under ENDF/Federal Government control

I was scared to hear that the ENDF were in control of Mekelle because I was hearing that they were raping women and killing people. This is also what other people believed.

When I delivered, it was on 21 December, I went into labour at 2 a.m. but I couldn't go to a health facility immediately because of the curfew. My brother, who had a *bajaj* and lived nearby, was with me, and we waited until 5 a.m., when I took the *bajaj* to go to Mekelle Hospital, but the ENDF stopped us mid-way, saying there was a curfew. They forced us to park. At 6.30 a.m. my labour became very intense and I delivered a baby girl. My brother bowed down to the soldiers' shoes and he cried and begged the soldiers to let us go because the baby had been born. Fortunately, they allowed us to go.

We reached the hospital, and there was only one male health worker there. The soldiers used to hit and rape women, so they weren't working the evening shifts. I asked him to help me but he said, "*I'm already helping others.*" He added "*Push down, tell her to push down*," but we told him "*The baby is already out, I am holding it in my pyjamas*." Finally, he came to me after he had finished helping other women deliver. I stayed at the hospital from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m., and the service was OK. There was no electricity. My sister brought me some food during the day. I had a healthy baby, and I was healthy as well. I was so happy to have a healthy baby. I had worried so much with all the ups and downs I had faced throughout my pregnancy because of the war. I was able to get vaccinations for my baby and follow-up services at the nearest health centre.

My husband went to the battlefield on 9 January 2021. This was a joint decision, too. He said, "*They're killing young people so I'd better go to the battlefield and die there.*" I agreed, because they were killing innocent young people and taking them from their homes. "*Going to the battlefield is better for you*," I told him, because it was better than seeing atrocities being committed right in front of me.

Many things improved following the capture of Mekelle by the ENDF. The price of food went down, and aid arrived soon after they came. For the first time, they handed out two months of aid. Water and electricity and phone communications were also restored soon after they captured Mekelle.

The price of rice and macaroni, which had risen to 200 *birr*, fell to 120 *birr*. I ate rice and macaroni because I used to bake *injera* in an electric oven and there was no electricity. The price of firewood had also decreased, but electricity would still have been better.

I had already bought oil and red pepper and I had enough for a long time, so I didn't need to buy any during the ENDF time. Traditionally, in our neighbourhood, about 30 women come to your home on the third day after delivery and porridge is prepared for them, and *injera* and stew is served to them on the seventh day. None of this was happening because people were afraid and so the oil and red pepper, I had bought lasted longer than I'd planned.

When the banks opened, it helped me because I was able to withdraw some cash, and I bought some*taff*. At that time, a lot of trucks were coming into

Tigray from other parts of Ethiopia and *taff* became very cheap—3,000 *birr* a quintal for *sergenya* taff* (the quality between red and white *taff*). I bought 50 kilos for 1,500 *birr*. I was also able to feed my children properly as much as I could. I withdrew cash from the bank whenever I needed it, but in the end the cash I had at the bank ran out. I was also paying rent. I wasn't using public transport; I went around on foot.

I started working as a maid in two houses on a daily basis. The income helped cover the rent and our monthly food and other consumption. Before the war, I had about 20,000 *birr* in the bank and I used that too. I worked as a maid for three months before the TPLF returned to Mekelle. I didn't get food aid from government, but I received 25 kilos of flour twice from a local organisation, which was very helpful. I used it in various forms, in *qicha*, bread and porridge. I also got 25 kilos of wheat flour from another organisation, and that helped too.

I was a development team leader I was taking assignments from the local administration. It was about screening the poorest of the poor and people who deserved food aid. I didn't have any relationship with the ENDF. There was a curfew when we weren't allowed to leave our home. People were being killed if they were out late in the evening. There were a lot of thefts both outside and inside houses. Sometimes people threw stones at the gates of our compound, but I didn't out as I didn't know who they were and what they wanted. Thieves burgled houses while people were asleep.

We supported one another with our relatives who lived here. My brother also supported me out of what he earned with his *bajaj*, and I also gave him cash once—5,000 *birr*, when he needed it. We also supported one another by exchanging ideas. Like me, my brother wasn't rich, but we helped one another as much as we were able to. My husband gave me cash when he was around. We had a good relationship. I didn't go to my parents' house in the countryside because of financial constraints and also because I was afraid to leave my children behind, as things weren't safe here.

I helped with baptisms and mourning, but I didn't prepare food or drink for my child's baptism because I didn't have enough income, unlike in previous times. Only three women came to church with me. I also didn't have the money to buy clothes for the baby. Normally the godmother, is supposed to buy clothes but she couldn't afford them. Fortunately, one of my neighbours and a relative bought new clothes for her.

I paid 700 *birr* for the church, which I had to pay for the baptism. There was also a 400 *birr* payment for a birth certificate but I couldn't afford that, so my child still doesn't have one.

My neighbours and I supported one another, and they kept my baby when I went to work as a maid. We exchanged ideas. Neighbours shared meals and brought wheat flour to one another, but I couldn't, so two women gave

me 25 kilos of flour each (50 kilos in total). Once, some better-off women contributed about 30 kilos of flour and gave it to me. There was no collective community activity during the ENDF occupation.

There were also times when I limited my participation in social events. One woman brought me *areqe** for the baptism and sugar when I moved to a different house,[2] but when her sister died and I went to the mourning and had tea with her and other women, I couldn't comfort her as we're expected to. I couldn't take her anything because I couldn't afford it.

Before the war, I used to participate in a monthly *mahiber* to commemorate Saint Mary. There are 12 members, and each of us in turn prepares food and drink, and we gather at the house of our host once a month. This takes place throughout the whole year and each member hosts once. In the first month of the ENDF occupation, the *mahiber* was on the third day, and the host for that month lived in a place called Aynalem. The other members didn't go, because it was said that the ENDF were raping women. This was when I was not in Mekelle. The *mahiber* was interrupted for three months as we were afraid of the ENDF soldiers. One of the group members was raped by ENDF soldiers while she was sitting, waiting for her turn to get holy water at the church. The soldiers took two women who were waiting at the church and gang-raped them. Our *mahiber* member is still paralysed, and she hasn't rejoined the *mahiber*.

However, we started again in February 2021, after we got used to the situation, partly because one of the members told the group she had had a dream that we should resume. I didn't host the *mahiber* during the "PP time," but I did attend *mahiber* meetings at the homes of other hosts. The difficult thing about these monthly meetings was that the women members who lived in distant areas like Lachi and Debri didn't join us because they were afraid, they could be raped. There was also another difference in the *mahiber* ceremony. Normally, the person who takes the responsibility for the next month takes the picture of Saint Mary, bread and *siwa*, and we escort her to her home ululating joyfully, but during the "PP times" we were afraid to do this and so we didn't, because the PP soldiers used to ask groups of people why they had gathered.

I was going to church to pray, but I was afraid. There was also a curfew. I went to church in the morning at sunrise, usually with women from my compound.

The owner of our house lived in the countryside, but his son-in-law lived in the same compound as me. Lots of people were coming in *bajaj* and cars to meet him. He handed items in sacks to them and received cash in exchange,

[2] *Areqe* is considered to be a substantial gift.

which he counted, but we didn't know what was going on. On 25 January 2021, seven PP soldiers arrived and told us all to assemble in one room. I wanted to pick up my child, but they told me to leave her, and when I said "*She is so young. I want to take her,*" one of them pointed his gun at me and said "*Leave her. I told you to leave her, otherwise I will kill you with this.*" They also took the mobile phones from all of us who rented in the compound. They asked us where the owner's son-in-law's room was. By coincidence, they had told us to assemble in his room, so we said, "*This is his room.*" Then they asked, "*Which one is his wife?*" and we told them. They asked her what her husband did for work, and she told them he was a driver. The PP soldier replied "*He's not a driver. He sells guns.*" They asked us to tell them where the guns were, but we said we didn't know. They threatened us, and told us "*We will search every house, and we'll kill you if we find guns.*"

They locked us in and started searching every room in the compound. They found gold and jewellery from one of the women, but didn't find anything else. However, when they came back to the room where we were and searched there, they found military boots and uniform, and more than 200,000 *birr* in cash. They took the shoes, the uniforms and the cash. They also took the gold they had found. They returned our mobiles to us except for the wife of the man under investigation, and they beat her badly. This was a most shocking experience for me. After that, we first tried to see what clothes and shoes people who knocked at the gate were wearing by looking under the gate before opening it. We didn't open it if we thought they were soldiers.

My husband came back in June 2021 because he had malaria. However, people told us that my husband had been reported and that the ENDF were searching for people who had returned from TPLF, so I sent him to his parents' house. Seven days later, the ENDF came and asked me to bring my husband. I told them I didn't know about him and that I didn't live with him. They took me to a camp and detained me for a night. They questioned me rigorously, saying that they knew my husband had returned from the battlefield. Eventually they released me. My husband took anti-malaria medicine and recovered, and went back to the army just a few days before the TPLF captured Mekelle.

During my detention and questioning, the ENDF soldiers insulted me a lot. I was very angry and felt very bad to be humiliated by them. Once, my older daughter was playing outside of the compound with some other children after 6 p.m. which was curfew time. Some ENDF soldiers arrived and peed on the children's leg while they were sitting down. My daughter was shocked to see them, thinking that they might beat them or take them away. They were terrified. The soldiers yelled at them, "*Go away! Get inside your house*." I really panicked. I thought my child would not come home safely. After that, children avoiding going out when it was late.

Before I gave birth, my pregnancy was a source of stress for me, and I was also worried about my parents, who live in a rural area. I wasn't stressed in terms of our economic situation, because I had money. The most distressing thing for me was my husband's situation. He was a member of the Special Forces, so I worried that the ENDF might arrest him. I got tense each time someone knocked on our gate. He went to join the Tigrayan army 8 on January 2021, but I continued to be stressed after he had left because they might come and accuse me of having sent him to the battlefield. I was relieved of that source of stress when the TPLF returned to Mekelle. When I became too worried, I went to church to pray, and that is how I used to get relief from my stress.

June 2021: The TPLF/TDF take back control of Mekelle and part of Tigray

When the TPLF came back, I was in a neighbourhood called Lachi attending my monthly *mahiber*. My friends and I went to get a taxi at the end of the ceremony, but there were no taxis to the centre of town. I walked to the centre with the *mahiber* members and we looked for a taxi again. I couldn't get one, but my friends did and went home. The road was deserted: there were no cars and no people. I asked people what was going on and they told me "*They're leaving. The TPLF are coming back.*" A man told me to avoid the main road and take the inner pathways because the ENDF were killing people. I followed his advice. I was carrying my child on my back, and it was a very long way, but I was so scared I didn't notice.

When I arrived home, I gathered my neighbours together and asked them what was going on. They told me the TPLF had returned. Right then I didn't believe it, because the enemy was capable of spreading rumours like this, but later on, the TPLF were firing their guns and their return was announced on FM radio at 7 p.m., so I was reassured that they had really returned. I was so happy! My neighbours and I gathered and spent almost the whole night on the road watching people rejoicing. They were using car horns to express their happiness. In our neighbourhood some people brought out stereo speakers and started playing loud music and dancing.

I spent the whole of the next day at the Military Hospital visiting the TDF. I and some other people got together and took food for them. I was so happy when the TPLF returned. I thought it was the end of the war. Everyone I knew was very happy too, and so were my children.

When the ENDF left, phone communications and electricity were cut off. In the space of two months the price of food and goods increased a lot. The price of *taff,* which had been 6,000 *birr* at the beginning, reached 9,000 *birr* after two months, and just before the peace agreement it had reached 14,000 *birr*. Matches increased to 10 *birr* from 2 *birr*. There was no electricity, so I was

buying candles, which went up from 10 *birr* to 40 *birr*. The price of 50 kilos of wheat, which had been 1,300 *birr* during the ENDF period, rose to 4,500 *birr* and then to 12,000 *birr* when there was complete siege around Tigray. This was brown wheat. *Shiro* increased from 40 to 150 *birr* a kilo. Oil was being sold at 300 *birr* a litre, so I stopped buying it. I had continued using oil when it was 200 *birr* a litre.

The price of sorghum rose from 2,500 *birr* a quintal to 9,000 *birr*. It became so expensive because it's mainly used to prepare *siwa*, and there was no beer at that time so even bars were selling *siwa*. Conditioner, which cost 50 *birr* in peacetime, rose to 300 *birr*, and I bought it at that price. I used to wash my children's hair with shampoo, and this too became very expensive! It went up from 70 *birr* to 480 *birr*. I still bought shampoo, but I reduced the frequency with which I washed my children's hair from once a week to once a month, and I also used very little shampoo. When my children finished their shoes, they were about to go barefoot, so I was forced to buy shoes called *shebett** for 350 *birr*. In normal times, these shoes cost 20-30 *birr*.

I was working as a maid at the time, and the income was very important. I also received aid four times, which was also very important to ensure we had enough food as a family. However, I was concerned about things becoming so expensive because I didn't have enough income to fulfil our basic needs. I was worried, and wondered how I was supposed to live like this, and for how long.

In the summer of last year, I had nothing, and there were times when my children weren't eating, and were going to sleep without food. I heard that at one market place there was fresh maize to take on credit, resell, and make profit. So, I went there and asked the man, and he said a quintal of fresh maize was 1,500 *birr*. I didn't have money, so I asked the man if I could pay him after I'd sold the maize, and he agreed. However, after a few hours I had sold the maize for less than I'd bought it for, and made a loss of 100 *birr*. The man was sitting with me, so he was getting the cash for what I was selling directly, and this came to 100 *birr* less than what he had given me as a price. If I had sold the maize to retailers, they could have taken the whole day and sold it at a profit, but I couldn't, because I had to repay the seller immediately. The only profit I got from this business was that I took the corn that wasn't properly ripe and I feed my children after boiling it. We ate it for dinner and for breakfast for the next morning. My children and I frequently faced nights without food.

To solve these problems, I sent my daughter to sell *qolo** twice a week on market day. She could make a profit of 120 *birr* a week, and we used this to buy bread and rice. I couldn't afford to buy flour and bake *injera*. My daughter worked until September, and then stopped. One reason was that she was supposed to start school, but also the grain became expensive and there was less profit from the business.

I used to pay 2,000 *birr* a month for house rent. I couldn't pay it, and after a while the owners reduced it to 1,000 *birr*. I still couldn't afford this rate, and I still have unpaid rent. After that I got a government house made entirely of corrugated iron, because my husband was in the army. The house, electricity and water were all free. This was very important. It was a big relief, as I had been very worried about whether I would be able to pay our rent.

During this TPLF period, I suffered a lot economically, and the only relief was that I no longer had to worry about being killed by the ENDF.

I had a health issue with my breast. I went to an NGO that gives free health treatment, but it was beyond their capacity and they referred me to Ayder hospital. I didn't go to the hospital, however, because I couldn't afford the payments. I went back to the NGO and told them. They gave me tablets and I was cured. I also got back pains, and was bedridden for two weeks. I used traditional remedies and was healed. My youngest daughter, who was born during the war, was ill a lot of the time, mostly due to malnutrition. She was sick for more or less two weeks out of four, two weeks healthy then two weeks sick. Her weight was also below the normal weight for her age.

My children went to school for two months. This was a good thing, but I was worried about airstrikes and them being hit, and my mind was always with my children. I was happy because they had been at home all the time, and going to school would help them refresh their minds. Buying school materials was a challenge for me, but my elder daughter was given exercise books by a local NGO. I arranged it so that my elder daughter would use one exercise book for two subjects and I gave the remaining exercise books to my other daughter.

I was getting support from my relatives here. It wasn't much, but it was a temporary solution when I was in trouble. I was participating in social life but in some cases I had nothing to contribute. At the beginning my neighbours and I continued to support one another, but this changed a bit when I moved to another neighbourhood where I didn't get much support. In my previous neighbourhood, my neighbours used to give my children lunch whenever I didn't have food at home. In my new house, we were going together to clean the hospital where injured TDF soldiers were being treated. I shared ideas with my neighbours and we comforted one another. I continued participating in my *mahiber* every month and to go to church to pray without any safety issues, but I rushed back home from church out of fear of air strikes.

Thefts worsened during the TPLF period and became very common. It was normal to hear news of thefts in the city, and the government didn't offer any solutions. In some cases, the thieves were armed. I was contributing to the army as we had been instructed to do by the development team.

I had good relations with the TDF. I greeted them well and asked them about my husband's whereabouts. The most distressing thing for me during this period was that I had no information about him. I searched for him a lot

but I didn't get any clues. I was very worried about him. I was also stressed because of the family's economic situation and not having enough money to feed my children and buy the necessary things for my children and me. This is why I sent my daughter to sell *qolo*.

March 2022: An implicit truce

Before the truce people suffered a lot from starvation. Then aid started coming, but it wasn't distributed promptly. Most people only received food aid in June, as I did. I got food aid on 26 June. It was very important, and saved my family's life. I remember that at that time, it was announced that the water from the Tekeze dam would be released and electricity would be interrupted for three weeks, so many people were in a rush to receive aid and make sure the wheat would be ground. I managed to get the wheat early enough to have it ground, but people who received food aid after the electricity was cut off suffered, as they weren't able to grind the wheat to eat it. I received 75 kilos of wheat, 2.5 litres of oil and 9 kilos of peas, which represented my family's consumption for three weeks. Because food aid was available, it led to price reductions for many items. It saved many people's lives, especially those who had really been starving. Before, even people who had been able to support others earlier on had lost their capacity to do so.

I gave a small amount of flour to one of my relatives. A woman who had received aid after the needy people had been prioritised gave what she received to me and another poor woman. I was so happy when people supported me, first because it solved my problems, but it also made me happy to feel the love people had for me.

August 2022: Fighting erupts again

I heard on the news that the war had broken out again. I remember that both sides were blaming one another for starting it.

When the news broke, the prices of good started to increase. Merchants were communicating with one another to raise their prices. Wheat, which had been 2,500-3,000 *birr* a quintal rose to 6,000 *birr* a quintal. The price of oil also increased so I stopped consuming it. On New Year's Day, 11 September 2022, I didn't have any money to buy meat. Some women neighbours gave me meat, which meant that my house was full of the food I needed for the holiday. I was extremely happy, and so were my children, who could eat like other people.

Before the war started again, the police were deployed. This didn't bring about any changes, however, and the robberies just continued. There was an order to feed the police through the development teams, which was a burden for everyone without improving anything. When they caught someone, they kept him for a few days then released him, so it was pointless. Thefts just continued during the war. The administration also asked us to check ID cards,

but I didn't take part in this. It wasn't applied uniformly in all areas, and some neighbourhoods weren't checking ID cards.

I used to contribute to the TDF. I went twice a week to clean the hospital where injured TDF soldiers were. Other women and I took food for the TDF soldiers who came to the neighbourhood. Injured TDF soldiers often passed through our neighbourhood. I was having sleepless nights after seeing badly injured soldiers. When things got worse, I was afraid that the ENDF might come in the evening. Other people in the neighbourhood were also very worried. I was also scared when there were drones in the air. I continued to attend my *mahiber* and go to church.

There were meetings on how to stay in safe places when drones and jets came. The information was to stay away from corrugated iron houses, which is why I was always scared when drones came. Also, the area where I was living was said to be a special target. In June, I faced one terrible incident with an air strike. A drone came in the evening, and as my house is all made of corrugated iron, I went out with my children and my neighbour. We came across a hyena on our way. We screamed, and a women opened her door and let us go in. The drone hovered in circles in the air for a long time. Then it dropped a bomb around Dagim Amsal at around 3 a.m. We left the woman's house at 6 a.m. and went back home.

When the conflict worsened, I became scared, as there was news that the ENDF were advancing towards Mekelle. I left the area because it was quite close to a camp and started to live with my parents-in-law. I stayed there for a month and a week. Everyone in the government residence compound left the area. Living with others was very uncomfortable for me and my children. They were used to live freely, and at my in-laws' house they couldn't use as much water as they liked. Water and electricity were a challenge. My in-laws complained a lot when my children turned on the tap. They also didn't let me use electricity for cooking, although they did allow people who paid them to.

November 2022: The peace agreement

I heard about the peace agreement on the news. It made me extremely happy, above all because it meant that I could go back to the government house. On the fifth day after the peace agreement, they posted a notice that we could go back to our house. My other neighbours were also very happy to go back to their homes.

As there is peace now, I can leave my children and go anywhere to work. Some days ago, I left my children for my brother's mourning celebration. Before that I couldn't even think of being away from them.

After the peace agreement, one notable change which made everyone happy was that some goods, such as beer, shoes and clothes, became available. Shoes and clothes were important for me. As second-hand clothes became available,

for instance, I was able to buy clothes for 100 *birr* and 50 *birr* for my children. Their clothes were worn out, and I can't buy them new clothes. Shoes were also very expensive, as much as 300 *birr*, but the price decreased to 150 *birr*, so I was able to buy them. At these prices, what I used to need for only one child could serve for two children. I had stopped buying oil because of the high price, but now it has decreased to 120 *birr* a litre, so I am buying and using oil again. The price of powdered detergent has also gone down from 60 *birr* for 100 grammes to 25 *birr*. Earlier, I hadn't been washing clothes until they were completely clean, and so sometimes some stains remained. Now I wash my clothes until they are very clean. Transport to where my parents live had been 800 *birr* for a round trip, and this fell to 300 *birr*. This was a very important change, and I have been able to visit my family twice. Now there are feasts and I can participate in social events like weddings and mourning, and I can buy the items that are expected of me.

The price of some items has gone up, however. There has been a huge increase in the price of cement and rents, which have almost tripled, and houses are not easy to find. Landlords make their existing tenants move out and they let the houses to other people at a high price. Meat has also gone up to 750 *birr* a kilo from 250 *birr*. Chicken has also gone up to 1,000-1,500 *birr*, which has never been seen before. The price of *taff* has also increased again, after there had been some reductions immediately after the peace agreement was signed.

Now there is peace, and I can go anywhere without a time limit. I can also go to my parents or relatives to take them food without leaving my children hungry. But theft is still an issue in Mekelle, and there are even more incidents, and the thieves are using different techniques to steal.

Now when people are sick, they can seek treatment and get treated.

Private schools have reopened, but the children of poor people like me are sitting idle at home, because the IDPs have refused to leave the government school. They called the parents and told us that the IDPs were refusing to vacate the school, and no specific date was given for when my children might start school again. You have no idea how sad I feel when other children return from school and my children have to stay at home. Children in other government schools have started going too, but ours is a special case. I have received 10 exercise books from the government and I have prepared materials for my children. My second child cries when she sees rich children going to school. She says, "*If my father had been here, he would have paid and sent me to a private school*," and this makes me feel so bad as well. I and some others who do not know their husband's whereabouts went to the officials to appeal. "*We are not able to send our children to school. Others whose fathers are alive are sending their children to private schools by paying,*" we told them. The officials said they would look for a solution.

I have a closer relationship with my relatives, and I can meet more of them in person and talk to them on the phone. I met my brothers, whom I had never seen throughout the war, at my parents' house. The main reason for this is that transport is cheap, and it's also possible to speak on the phone. Our relationships have also improved because it's easier to take items to support them when we visit, as things are cheaper. A taxi to visit relatives used to be 20-30 *birr*, and now it's 10 *birr*. A kilo of sugar, which is often taken on visits, has gone down to 100 *birr*, when it used to cost up to 300 *birr*.

I have good relations with my neighbours, and my social life has improved, as it has with my relatives. I went to the countryside for the Easter holiday, leaving my children behind. I left them with no meat, but my neighbours gave them food, bread and meat. They even got too much food, which they had to store in our neighbour's fridge. When I returned home, they told me they were very happy.

I still go to church, but now I can stay as long as I have time to. Now going to church is enjoyable. Earlier, the authorities used to tell us "*Don't gather, don't wear white clothes*," out of fear of air bombardments. Now I can go in a group and I can wear anything I want.

I got some cash support from an NGO, 4,500 *birr*, for my youngest daughter. I had registered for it when I was pregnant. Another NGO also gave us 1,000 *birr* for the Easter holiday. I haven't had any contact with people outside Tigray. I call my parents using other people's mobile phones.

The most distressing thing is that I still do not know my husband's whereabouts. My last hope was to call him when phone communication resumed. I called his mobile, but he doesn't have it with him, and other people answered. I asked them where they got the phone and they told me they'd found it in a place called Chifra, in Afar region. I also asked Tigrayans returning from captivity and civilians who had been in prison for various reasons. My brothers comfort me about my husband's situation, but my parents-in-law don't help me with anything. I also got news that my brother had died, and this was a sorrowful time. I went to my parents' house to mourn. He died on the battlefield. He has two children and his wife died when they were young. Now they have no parents at all. He was my older brother. My relatives comforted us, but the neighbours couldn't do so as is customary because in one single day the village received news that seven men had died, so the neighbours weren't able to give comfort or make frequent visits to all the bereaved families. Only our close relatives remained with us.

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"I would personally have preferred a bullet rather than hunger"

"I WOULD PERSONALLY HAVE PREFERRED A BULLET RATHER THAN HUNGER"[1]

My name is Girmanesh and I am 31. I am the mother of a teenage daughter and live with my mother, an older sister, a younger brother and my daughter. Before the war, we all had work and an income. My mother was selling vegetables at the market, my older sister was a translator and Tigrinya language teacher for foreigners and my younger brother was working in construction and had a good income. I was working for different private organizations and individuals, paid by the hour. As a household we had a good income and a well-off life: we ate good food and wore good clothes, and my daughter was learning at a good school. However, we lived in a rented house. We never knew the words "hunger" or "lack of food."

3–4 November, 2020: The war starts

Unfortunately, when the war started, we didn't have any flour or money at hand as a household. We were all left with no work and no income, as we all had jobs in the private sector. The banks were closed. For all these reasons, we lacked food immediately after the war broke out.

When the fighting started, we spent the night hearing gunfire, but we didn't expect it would grow into a full-fledged war.

My sister used to work with *ferenji**. They all moved out of Tigray at the time of the regional elections as they were told that a war would break out soon. So, we had some hints, but we were still taken by surprise when the fighting started all of a sudden.

The day after the gunfire at night we heard on the radio that the war had begun. I remember that on that day, I bought a new uniform for my daughter because schools were scheduled to reopen soon, after the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the war broke out, my brother was in Maychew working on a construction project for Raya University, so he remained there. Communications, transport and electricity were all shut down. The situation was very frightening, and the next day no one could be seen moving in the streets.

November 2020: Fighting in Tigray, uncertainty in Mekelle

The next day, none of the individuals and private organizations I was doing laundry for were able to carry on continue, so I lost my income as soon as the war began.

We immediately moved from our expensive house to one with a cheaper rent.

[1] Final narration in mid-June 2023. Written before the end of June 2023.

We usually had stocks of food such as *taff*, macaroni, oil and so on which could be consumed over at least five months, but unfortunately, the war started at a time when we had run out of everything, and we had been planning to replenish our supplies. So, for our households the main change was a lack of food. We couldn't even get food just to deal with our hunger. Some relatives who lived nearby shared some wheat. My best friend also gave us pasta and other food items "for now." Some people also sometimes gave us 100 or 200 *birr* to buy bread just so we could survive, but this wasn't enough for our family, as we had no food at all. The price of pasta and macaroni increased and we had no money, so sometimes we spent the day without eating at all. It was difficult to buy items such as pasta on the market, and I remember I bought pasta for 70 *birr* a kilo, which was very expensive for families like us who had no income at all. Whenever we were able to buy flour, we couldn't buy firewood, so we went to the hills around Saint Gabriel Church to collect firewood and bake *injera* to eat immediately just so as not to go hungry. We also ran out of charcoal so we couldn't cook food as we needed.

In addition, because we had just moved into a new house, we were newcomers to the area, so we had little connection with neighbours and our surroundings. This made us suffer a great deal; we had no support from neighbours, community leaders or even the *kebelle* as we weren't well known.

One day, someone gave us 200 *birr*. We had no food at all. We wanted to buy grain but there was no mill service because the electricity was cut off. Our only option was to buy flour. We bought 3 kilos of corn flour with that money and tried to bake *injera* with it, but corn flour cannot be baked properly as *injera* and we couldn't get it out of the stove. After that we bought maize and decided to boil it in the form of grains instead of buying flour. I had gastric problems because we were always eating boiled maize. At that time, we were having at most one meal per day, with little food of low quality.

Security wasn't a major issue in our city, but there was a lot of fear in the community about lacking food and being exposed to hunger, because everything was lacking and getting expensive. Our household was experiencing hunger, and we feared we might be exposed to worse.

We were also worrying about my brother and if he was alive because there were no communications. However, he came back from Maychew after a while as his job had been terminated.

There was no food aid at the time. As a household, we had never thought of getting food aid; we believed in hard work and having our own income. So, I had no relation with the *kebelle* administration. I only went to the *kebelle* for our ID cards. As a family, we used to pay attention to our physical appearance. We dressed well, and never looked like if we might be lacking food. No one in the community thought we might be exposed to hunger.

We were very scared by the air strikes. Also, hearing about atrocities and sexual violence in other areas of Tigray made us fear the worst, and we prayed it wouldn't happen in our area.

As a household, we were very worried about the closure of banking services and our lack of income, and that our hunger might cause health complications in the future.

Most people were fleeing the city in fear, as the federal military could be heard approaching Mekelle. We also fled to Aynalem (a place near Mekelle where my aunt lives) as the sound of heavy weapons was getting closer, but we returned after three days when things seemed to have calmed down.

28 November 2020: The ENDF enters Mekelle

28 November 2020 was a very frightening day. People were fleeing out of Mekelle in fear of the shelling. It was very painful to see parents running away, holding small children and mattresses. The problem was that nobody knew where to go to escape—people were just running out of the city in any direction. On the second day, we didn't see any soldiers in the city; only commandos arrived. There had been shelling on the previous day, and I thought it was our forces shelling the enemy. I didn't know that the shells were being fired at us. We had no experience of war; we knew nothing about guessing the direction guns are being fired in based on the sound. That day, my mother hid under the bed and told us to do the same. She said she knew how we could protect ourselves from shelling from her earlier experience of the war against the Derg regime. The next day, someone called my brother from the city and told him the PP soldiers had reached Mekelle.

December 2020–June 2021: Mekelle under ENDF/ Federal Government control

Since then, the story of our household has been just horrible.

Our household experienced hunger. Earlier on we could at least eat whatever food we had once a day, but from that day on, we started to no longer be able to eat even once a day. My mother began to be sick because of the lack of food. As the months passed, the price of food increased. Pepper, oil and salt became very expensive, and our household couldn't afford to buy them at all. Salt reached as high as 100 *birr* a kilo.

During this period, we got food aid for the first time, as it was given out to everyone. The banks also reopened, though with limited capacity. We withdrew some cash and paid two months of rent. We had to pay, because we were newcomers to the house so we couldn't go that long without paying. The electricity wasn't stable—it was on-and-off. Firewood and charcoal became very expensive. We used to collect firewood from the hills to cook, because we didn't have any money.

I don't remember the price of some foodstuff such as *taff*, oil and pepper, because I never bought them at that time. We just ate wheat *injera* with salt. Most people were selling the wheat they received as food aid and buying *taff* in exchange, but we couldn't do this because we wouldn't get enough *taff* for our household. We preferred to have more food even if it was lower quality. We also prepared *shiro* with the beans we got as aid. It didn't taste good, but it was helpful for at least a few days.

Later on, my gastric problems got worse and my mother's health worsened too because of the lack of food and medical treatment. There were no medical services at that time. We couldn't take her to private health facilities because we didn't have much money in the bank. My mother was about to die in front of us because we had no money. Earlier on she had been very active at the market, and it was very painful to see her just lying on her bed and not being able to help her.

It was an unexpected situation for us. We had never dreamed that we would live through such horrible and trying times in our lifetime. It was better for people who had at least some small amount of money or good connections and communication with other people, but back then we had no one who could support us and advise us what to do. We had been used to living well and having enough income, but suddenly, we lost everything. It was a very painful time in our lives.

In normal times my daughter went to a private school and I also sent her to take taekwondo karate lessons. Nobody expected us to be hungry because we had clean, good quality clothes. But we weren't able to feed my mother, let alone take her to a health facility. This made me feel bad, and made me cry.

Later on, my younger brother wasn't able to cope with all this suffering, so he decided to return to Maychew. He told us he was going to go back to his job, but that wasn't really the reason. What he wanted was to escape from seeing his mother sick and helpless and his sisters suffering from hunger. He left to go back to work there, but the university where he had been working was occupied by PP soldiers. This was very distressing and worrying for us as a household. Our mother in particular was very sad and worried about her son's well-being, in addition to her illness. She worried about him a lot.

He didn't go back to his job. Instead, he was arrested and beaten by the PP soldiers in Maychew. He was suspected of being a member of the TDF just because of the way he looked. He didn't tell us at the time to avoid worrying us, but we heard about it later, when he returned to Mekelle. He came back because he thought it was unfair to spend money to rent an additional house there in Maychew without having a job and an income. But when he came back his mother was very ill. This was very worrying for him, and also, he couldn't get a job here in his profession as it was difficult to get a job in construction at that time.

So, we continued living without a job, depending on the small amounts of money, like 100 or 200 *birr*, our relatives and friends gave us, but it wasn't enough to feed us. We were also getting some small amounts of flour and baking *qicha* to eat every day. If we didn't get any, support we spent the day without eating.

The hunger continued and our mother became very seriously ill over time. I remember that our hunger got worse, and that we never went to the communal kitchen to bake *injera* for about two months because we had nothing to bake. Even so, none of our neighbours asked us why. I'm not judging them; it was because they didn't expect that we might face hunger. No one could think that we might be hungry, considering our previous life and looking at our clothes. Finally, the effects of hunger started to be visible on all of us. We began to lose resistance and to lose our balance when we walked because of the hunger.

I have an older sister who lives in her own home. At one stage, I sent my daughter to her because I couldn't afford to feed her, so my sister supported me by feeding my daughter. My daughter is a very wise girl. If she was given two pieces of bread for breakfast, she would bring one for us so that we could share it among all of us. This behaviour was very painful for me; I was thinking that as her mother, it was me who should be thinking about her, and yet I wasn't able to treat my daughter the right way.

There was gunfire at night and people were very distressed about it, but for us, we only worried and suffered because of our hunger, and didn't have time to worry about anything else. I would personally have preferred a bullet rather than hunger. There was nothing that worried me more than my household's hunger at the time.

We hated Ethiopians because we thought they were the ones who were waging war on us and causing us to go hungry. We were watching what they thought about us on TV, and it made us very sad.

It was also deeply distressing to be at home hungry all the time, and yet many people came and knocked at our gate for help because they were hungry too. There were IDPs, old people and children begging us for a little bit of food just to stop feeling hungry, but we couldn't support them as we were hungry too. I always cried whenever people came to our home to beg for food. If we had something, we shared small amounts with them. It was inhuman to ignore the children who begged like this, so we tried to share, even though we were suffering from lack of food too.

Our mother was critically ill at this time. She could no longer speak, and she couldn't move, even to urinate. Her problem was just lack of food, and we knew she would be cured if she could get enough.

We started selling household materials like jerry cans and other plastic or glass containers of liquid (like oil, hair oil and alcohol) just to buy food for the

day, or even just a meal. We sold our belongings and expensive clothes cheaply; for instance, I sold all my brother's trousers to buy food for my family. When I say food, it was just for a day or a meal, and no more. We couldn't sell our more valuable property because we couldn't find any buyers, and also because they were collateral for our rent. However, the landlord didn't ask us to pay rent because our mother was critically ill. Most people were unable to pay rent at the time. The first challenge was to afford food in order to survive.

Most people were getting food aid regularly at that time, but we didn't receive any, except for once at the beginning. One day, I went to a woman who was registering households for food aid. I told her all our problems, that my mother was sick and we were beginning to show symptoms of hunger as a family. She said she would come to our home for a visit, but she never did.

Even when we got the first food aid, I fell over in the crowd because of hunger, as my body was shattered due to lack of food. Someone took me to the house in a *bajaj* and sent food aid to my home. But no one, including from among the development army group leaders, came to check on our family again.

I think the reason is that in peaceful times we knew nothing about people, our neighbourhood or the *ḳebelle* system, including the development army groups. The only thing we knew back then was hard work and our jobs. Our weak connections with community organisations like these hurt us during these bad times. No one considered us for support, even though we were the household that was suffering the most from lack of food. The community thought we were rich. People said one of my mother's sons (my younger brother) was working with a construction contractor and one of her daughters (my older sister) was working with *ferenji,* so it was believed that we were better-off. This and other reasons made us suffer from lack of food as a family during the bad times.

I never went out during the "PP time," so I had no direct relationship with the soldiers. I heard about them being downtown, but I never went there. I saw them sometimes in the market, but I never had to have any relations with them.

In the first two months of the PP period, people didn't feel free to move around the city. Most people were going to church and places of religion during daytime, and were afraid of moving about after curfew. It was a big source of distress for parents, and young people in particular didn't feel safe. Later on, the transitional government announced that people should start working again and resume normal social activities, so some people started working and moving in town.

However, one day I saw soldiers shooting people. Our home is near a market. People were running away from the market. When I asked what was happening, I was told soldiers were shooting at people. I didn't have time to ask for more information, as everyone was in hurry to escape the gunfire.

I went out to the street and I saw soldiers shooting two young people. One was an underage boy. One of them died, and the other was injured and taken to hospital.

People weren't happy about seeing federal military forces when they were going to church or downtown. We were as frightened as if we had seen Satan. I also remember another young man, his mother's only child, who was killed by the soldiers. That's why we feared them and were frightened; for us they were just like wild animals, killing people.

Towards the end of the "PP time", I became aware that my older sister had lost a lot of weight because of hunger. We had all lost weight but in her case, it was significant, and it was visible because she had been rather overweight earlier on.

Most people were able to cope thanks to support from the diaspora. Those who received remittances from abroad weren't affected by hunger as such. It was people like us who had no diaspora support who were the most affected, and were exposed to weight loss as well as illness.

My mother couldn't sleep at night. She was extremely worried about the situation, and most importantly about us, her children. We were also very worried about her illness and hunger.

I also worried a great deal about my daughter. She had grown a lot physically, even though she was young. She had been a well brought-up child, but in those days, she couldn't even get enough food. But the good thing is that she is very wise and smart. She didn't show us that she was hungry. She spent the bad times reading books. Early in the "PP time," we heard that two or three girls who worked at the mills had been raped by soldiers, so I was very worried about my daughter and never let her go outside, even during daytime.

The other distressing thing for me and my family was my brother's situation. He had been a young man with a job and an independent income, and now he found himself having to spend his time stuck at home fighting a shortage of food. My mother was also very worried about him if he went out in the evening, and about what might happen if he came across soldiers after the curfew. We were all very concerned about him.

Before the war I used to go to church, but not frequently, only on Sundays, because I was busy with work. But in those days, I started to go more often to pray to God to give my family a little food so that we could resist our hunger. I think most people began going to church more often during that time even though it was challenging in terms of security, in particular before 6 a.m. and after 6 p.m. Most people were doing nothing, and there were no drone attacks or air strikes. They were very much involved in praying and public fasting during the PP period.

Many young women were running small businesses such as coffee places, especially in *kebelle* 16, downtown. The PP soldiers were their main customers.

But this wasn't possible for young women like me. First of all I had no money to start a business, and also I didn't want to have to interact with soldiers.

Things became very difficult for my household. First, we had nothing at all when the war started. Second, we were getting very little support from others, only a little money for our daily food or small quantities of food. We only got food aid once. We didn't have money to buy even low-quality food. Goods were very expensive because the road from Addis wasn't fully open. One day, someone gave us 600 *birr*. We had no food at that time. I went to the market to buy some food, but I couldn't decide what to buy with the money. I was confused, because we needed everything and everything was so expensive. In the end, what I was able to buy with that money was just 4 kilos of food aid wheat. Imagine how long that would feed us. We could only bake *qicha* and eat it without stew.

My mother was still ill, but we couldn't take her to a health centre. My sister and I also had health problems because of the lack of food. We couldn't go out or walk for long distances—our bodies couldn't resist because of the lack of food.

June 2021: The TPLF/TDF return in control of Mekelle and part of Tigray

When the TDF returned to Mekelle there was heavy gunfire, also from the PP soldiers. This sounded just like when the PP took over at the time the older TPLF leaders, Seyoum Mesfin[2] and others were killed and others such as Sebhat Nega[3] were arrested.

[2] Seyoum Mesfin was a founding member of the TPLF. He later occupied senior government positions in EPRDF-led governments, including as Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1991 to 2010, and Ambassador to China from 2011 to 2017. Although he had retired from politics, he fled Mekelle together with the TPLF leadership when the ENDF were closing in on the town a few weeks into the war. He was killed on 13 January 2021, in a clash between the ENDF and Tigrayan forces trying to protect their leadership.

[3] Sebhat Nega, who was also a founding member of the TPLF, is known as one of TPLF's ideologues. Although he formally retired from senior party positions in 2010, he was said to continue to be highly influential in political, intelligence, business and strategic circles. He stepped down from his last known official position as Director General of the Ethiopian Foreign Relations Strategic Studies Institute in May 2018 shortly after Abiy Ahmed was made Prime Minister. He too fled Mekelle with the TPLF leadership a few weeks into the war. He was taken prisoner during the incident when Seyoum Mesfin was killed. He was released on 7 January 2022, the Ethiopian Christmas Eve, together with some other Tigrayan and Oromo political prisoners. Several other Tigrayan leaders who had been arrested at the same time remained in jail for more than another year.

We were very surprised by the return of the TDF, it seemed like a fable, not something real. We were happy, thinking that there would be peace and that we would start working and earn an income so that we could stop suffering from hunger. But we had no energy and couldn't celebrate the event as most people were doing. Neither I nor my older sister or my mother, who was critically ill from hunger, had enough energy to even go out, and stand or walk. My daughter was with her aunt, but she was also not OK, even though she was less affected than us. I didn't really know about my brother, because he didn't show anything. He acted as if he was OK, and spent his days out so we wouldn't worry about him.

In our household, we were just hoping for better times, and that everyone would get food aid so we would be relieved of all the problems related to hunger and lack of money. Alas, things didn't turn out as we hoped. We had no idea at the time that worse was still to come.

Electricity, telecommunications and bank services were immediately cut off.

My father lived with my sister. He had divorced my mother long ago. He used to work as a guard in a private business. During that time, he had a problem with his eyes and had surgery. His boss came to my sister's home to visit him while I was there. She asked me what I was doing and I told her I had no job or income. She asked me to work for her, and that is how I started working two weeks after the TPLF returned to Mekelle. She employed me because she thought everything would soon get back to normal, and she had sent some of her workers away when the war started as she could no longer pay all of them. Whatever it was, I was happy to work with her. She owned a big business, including a hair salon and training centre, a décor and traditional clothing shop and a home equipment and furniture shop. I was employed as a salesperson in the traditional clothes and home equipment and furniture shops. The salary was very low, but she promised to improve it in September. We agreed that I would work with her on many things, because I can also do handicraft work. However, things didn't turn out that way, and I only worked with her for four months.

I learned a great deal about the current situation while I was working there, but it didn't bring any positive changes to my household's economic or food situation because my salary was low and I wasn't paid on time. The owner had told me she would increase my salary in September, but she didn't. I was very worried about our survival, and also about being able to pay for my daughters' education, because I thought schools would reopen in September.

My daily routine was as follows. In the morning, I went to work after just having liquid wheat porridge for breakfast. I dressed well and I was clean, as if I had had a good breakfast. I returned home at lunch time as if I had lunch at home, but I was just drinking water then returning to work. My boss couldn't fathom this out, and considered me to be well off. This was very painful for me.

She didn't know how much I was suffering at home because of the lack of food for myself and my family members, or how my mother was critically ill from hunger. I had been hoping she would support me a little because she had told me she supported people in need. I don't know why she couldn't understand that I was having severe problems. At one stage, when she was late paying my salary, I told her frankly that I was living a poor life, my parents were divorced, and my mum was critically ill, and at least after that she paid me on time. But the salary was very low. I was only able to pay for the food I had bought on credit with half of it, and buy between three and five days of life-saving food with the other half. Sometimes I bought pasta or macaroni and we ate it boiled with salt, without any sauce.

I should thank a shopkeeper called Woreke, who supported me a lot at that time. She gave me pasta and macaroni on credit, and refused to take money from me when I wanted to pay her back, saying things like "*it's OK, you can give me it another time when you get enough money.*" However, I didn't want to do this because I had no idea when I might get enough money, so I paid her as soon as I was getting my salary.

The bad thing was that no one except me in the family had started working. It was difficult to cope with the situation.

During this period, there were a lot of TDF soldiers in the city. I was at work one day, and a soldier came and told me he was very hungry, and asked me to give him some money for food. He really seemed weak and hungry. It was very painful. I told my boss about it and she gave him 200 *birr*.

Another day, a woman came to me with her two children and told me that she and her children were very hungry. She looked very well off. From her and her children's appearance and the way they were dressed they didn't seem like that; they looked like very rich people. I also asked my boss to help them, and she gave her something, but less.

On another day a woman came and asked me to call the boss for her. She cried, and told her she had been her customer during the good times, and that she had children living abroad but couldn't get in touch with them due to the blockade, so she was facing a critical shortage of food. She said she was very hungry. Imagine, this was a shop for well-off people, and this hungry woman standing in front of us had previously been a customer. It was very moving. She told us that because she had no food at all she always went to the church to get a small piece of *injera*, but she had a young brother who was always hungry at home. My boss told her that everyone was facing similar problems. She gave her 200 *birr*, and the woman hugged her very happily.

I found two things about that situation very upsetting. First, it was very painful to see how this woman, who had had a good life earlier, was now so happy with as little as 200 *birr*. It seemed very unfair. Second, it reminded me about my brother, and how he sometimes spent the day out, but sometimes just

lying on his bed because of hunger. Knowing my brother's situation, it almost made me cry as I told the story the woman had told us about her brother.

I observed so many of these kinds of story while I was working at the shop. I could see that everyone, including better-off people, was exposed to economic hardships and lacked food.

I talked to my older sister, and we decided to go and beg for food and support for our household's survival, but in other areas of the city. We agreed to go to a neighbourhood called Dagim Amsal, where rich people lived. However, when we got there, I found a woman I knew from work, as she was a customer. Anyway, we started begging by knocking at every gate and we managed to get some flour and money that might be enough for our household for a week or so, and we returned home. Then another day, the women I had met in Dagim Amsal came to the shop, and she asked me why I had been there last time. I told her frankly that I went there to beg for food. She was shocked, and asked me why I was begging. I told her everything, and that all my family were going hungry, but I couldn't beg in my own neighbourhood because I didn't want people to know. She was very sad for me, and told me it didn't seem like that because I was well dressed. She had come to the shop to collect the remittances she had received from her children living abroad, which were being sent to my boss. She had received 120,000 *birr*, and she gave me 1,000 *birr* in front of my boss. She also had a notebook with a list of people she would be giving money to. I was really amazed that there were people like her who shared their money to support others. She also suggested I meet a shopkeeper in Dagim Amsal called Gere, who was helping a lot of people in need. My boss saw all this, but she said nothing at all. I bought 50 kilos of wheat with the money.

During the four months I worked there I wasn't getting enough food. Most of the time I only drank watery porridge in the morning for a full day at work. My older sister was selling plastic and glass containers from her home to buy coffee for 10 *birr* and preparing coffee at home, which we were drinking as if we had enough food. Sometimes, when we were given a bit more, we baked *qicha* with wheat and shared it. For long periods of time, we couldn't bake *injera* because we didn't have enough flour. Most often, what little we were eating was only made from wheat, which gave me haemorrhoids (warts). I had suffered from them before, but they got worse during this period. My sister, my mother and my daughter suffered from them too, because we were only eating wheat, and this exposes you to haemorrhoids. Eating *costa** helps, but we couldn't afford it at the time, so we decided to grow *costa* on a small piece of land at our home, and started eating small amounts sometimes.

At work, I could see that many people were facing hunger, and there were also many people who supported others who weren't getting enough food. I could see that times were hard for most people. Everyone was very worried

about their children who had joined the fighting. This was when the TDF were leaving Tigray. I remember that at the time of the *Wofri Adedat* (Mothers' Operation) the fighting got worse on both sides. People were afraid of the drone attacks and air strikes. Lots of children were coming to the shop and begging because they were hungry. The blockade was at its worst, and most people were facing severe economic hardships.

However, there were also a few people for whom it seemed that nothing bad was happening. There were a lot of weddings in Mekelle at the time. Most people weren't aware of this because they didn't have the time or opportunity to see it, but because of my job I could see it, as many people were coming to the shop to rent traditional clothes and hiring make-up services. There were killings at the time, and many IDPs and other people were in a critical condition, but there were also people who were buying a single item of traditional clothing for a wedding for 35,000 *birr* and paying 20,000 *birr* for one facial make-up and 60,000 *birr* for wedding décor. I remember one rich man who bought half a million *birr* of equipment for his house and paid in cash. I was very shocked. All this was hidden from the public, but I could see it because of my job.

My boss was earning a lot of money from her business. The government was calling for wealthy people to deposit money in the bank so that poor people could get their money out, even in small amounts. But no one was willing to do this. Even my boss didn't put her money in the bank. I was confused, but at the same time l learned so much, especially how much difference there was between "ordinary people" and those involved in business. The blockade never hurt the rich; it was the economically poor members of the community who paid the price of the war and the blockade.

I personally wasn't afraid of air strikes and drone attacks. I never ran and hid to protect myself because I was so weak with hunger that I never feared death. My suffering from hunger was worse than death, and my body, especially my hands and legs, was all swollen because of hunger. For instance, one day there was a drone attack in *kebelle* 6 and many people from a compound died. My boss asked me to run to an underground place with her, but I refused. I wasn't able to run and keep my balance because of hunger, so I stayed where I was.

During that period, all food items were very expensive due to the blockade. Wheat reached 150 *birr* for one kilo.

I quit my job after four months because my boss didn't want to pay me. She told me to leave and return when things were OK and back to normal. Things were already more than normal for her, however. She was making a lot of money, as I had seen during my time with her. Anyway, I thanked her and left the job. My salary had been 2,000 *birr*, which wasn't enough for my household because food was so expensive, and also I wasn't paid on time.

However, people viewed me as if I had a job and an income, so I was excluded from getting support from other people or the government. For instance, I couldn't refuse to pay my landlord because I had work. I sometimes gave him 200 or 500 *birr* to share what I was getting with him, but I wasn't able to pay our rent in full.

After the return of the TPLF, schools reopened in September, and my daughter went back to school, but it couldn't carry on because of the fighting and the fear of drone attacks. She also went back to her karate classes. At first I didn't want her to go because it would be difficult for her to perform with too little food, but she insisted, and convinced me that she would attend but be careful not to overdo it. So I allowed her to go. She didn't have to pay for it because she was already a "black belt" at the time. But she had to give up. She was falling over with headaches due to the hunger, as she was having to walk to Adishimduhun to attend the classes, which was a long way from our home. I couldn't afford to pay for her to get taxis.

At the time, the *kebelle* kept coming to register us for food aid, but I don't understand the criteria they used to select people for food aid as we never got any. I was very depressed about this because I had stopped working. Most of the time the *kebelle* leaders came at night or in the evening, because they were coming not just to register people for food aid but also to check on the young people to get them to join the fighting.

One day, a woman development army leader came to our home and ordered us to prepare 2 kilos of flour for the next day. I told her we didn't have that even for ourselves, but she didn't believe me. I argued with her and told her to check my house if she didn't believe me. I was very angry. Our neighbours were well aware of our problems, and my landlord in particular was well aware of our hunger. He used to bring us left-over food from *mahiber* or funeral ceremony in the neighbourhood because my mother was bedridden. I was very angry at the *kebelle* women because she couldn't understand how bad our situation was.

I became more and more worried about my household. We weren't able to get our daily food. Then I remembered the shopkeeper called Gere in Dagim Amsal, whom the woman at my workplace had told me about. I decided to go and ask him for support. I went with my sister, but we couldn't find Gere's place, so we started to knock at any gate and ask for support. We knocked at the first gate. There was a woman, and we told her we were begging because we were hungry. She was very sad for us and took pity on us and gave us flour. We spent the whole day begging and collected some flour and money. That really made me understand the good hearts of the people of Mekelle. We did it because we were running out of food and it was a matter of survival. People were very kind and gave us what they had.

We begged like that for more than two months, going from house to house in Mekelle, but many people also came to our home to beg for food: older

people, children and pregnant women were all begging because they were hungry. We shared some of what we had received from begging door to door with them. I couldn't turn my back on people who were hungry like me. Most people from Mekelle and Tigray in general were like that, and that's why we survived.

We begged for two months because we were acutely aware that our mother was bedridden because she didn't have a balanced diet or proper treatment. She got a bit better, because her problem was hunger and we were able to provide her with some balanced food from what we got. But we didn't notice that my older sister had also lost a lot of weight in a short period of time.

Later on, the people of Mekelle were all severely impacted by the blockade, and it became difficult for everyone to support others. We were no longer able to get food by begging. Because the blockade was so long and getting worse, everyone became a beggar, so our household was once again exposed to the worst of hunger. We found Gere, the shopkeeper, but he only gave us 30 *birr*. He told us that he had been supporting a lot of people since the start of the war and wasn't able to give away any more money at the time because the blockade was at its worst. We understood and returned home.

Our bodies changed because of hunger. We all lost a lot of weight. We couldn't sleep. We were getting headaches all the time and had skin problems and scratched our skin badly. I knew these were all symptoms of a shortage of food and hunger.

At some stage, my best friend, who had given us some food at the beginning, asked me what was happening to me and to my family. I told her nothing. But she said she could see that our skin had changed, and we had all lost a lot of weight. So, I told her. She collected some flour and money from her neighbourhood and sent it to me. I was grateful, because this was a critical time, and we were able to survive for some time by eating small amounts of food.

Back then, there were all kinds of theft, which had been unheard of earlier. The mills were working at night to save energy, so robbers were stealing flour from them at night. People were stressed and were afraid of going to get their grain ground. In streets where there were few people, there were even robbers who just took clothes and shoes from people while they were wearing them, which had never been seen before. This were the result of this terrible blockade and showed how people were pushed into doing such immoral things because it was a question of survival. For me, it was a consequence of hunger and lack of food.

March 2022: An implicit truce

Around Easter, I remember we went from home to home in our neighbourhood to beg for help. It wasn't easy for us to overcome our shame and expose ourselves to people who had known us as better off, but our hunger was so bad

that we got over our shame. We got a little bit of help in kind and cash, and were able to spend the holiday with some food.

I got food aid once at that time, although only for three family members instead of the six of us (a cousin who had come from the countryside was living with us at the time). They told me I would get the other half of the food due to us next time, but after a month, I couldn't get any aid at all, even though our situation satisfied all the criteria. My mother was sick and bedridden, and we had nothing to eat at home. I even showed them the container for dough in my house and they saw it had been empty for a long time. I cried a lot when I explained the hunger our household was experiencing. In the end, I got food aid for a second time, for five members. Most of our neighbours could see our situation and how hungry we were. My landlord in particular, was very sad about our situation and he started to share his dinner with us. He also collected 50 kilos of flour from the neighbourhood for us and brought it to our home. I was surprised and very grateful. He also continued to bring us left-over food from religious and traditional feasts that were held in the neighbourhood.

I don't want to go on without saying something about the people of Mekelle. They contributed greatly in many ways, feeding the IDPs, the TDF fighters and community members who were facing food gaps. Many people survived thanks to their support. Ultimately, however, everyone was exposed to economic hardship, and it became impossible to support others. Still, the reason we were able to overcome the bad times is the culture of supporting one another, which prevailed up to the end of the war.

One of my friends told me that a wealthy man in her neighbourhood gave a quarter of a quintal of white flour each to the poor people in his area, so there were also a lot of wealthy people who helped people survive through the bad times.

August 2022: The fighting erupts again

What I remember most during that time is young people being forced to join the fighting.

We had expected that a peace agreement would follow the truce and that we would go back to our normal lives. I personally had hoped to be able to work again and earn an income, like in normal times. But what happened was unexpected and made everyone feel very hopeless.

The fighting was very frightening. We heard that Alamata, Shire and Korem had been occupied by the enemy again. This was the worst news, and it demoralised our people greatly.

The government started to force everyone to join the fighting, but people were exhausted by the fighting, and everyone was well aware of the consequences of war, having experienced them in the previous rounds. This meant that most people no longer supported the fighting, and everyone was doing

whatever they could to avoid joining. It was impossible to move freely in the city. It was a tough time, especially for young people, and mothers were very worried about their children.

My younger brother was one of those who were taken to the training centre by force. He has an eye problem and a supporting document to provide evidence of it, but there was no chance to explain this while he was being taken away. It was only after he had been taken to them that they checked his eligibility to join the fighting, so it took two months for him to be sent back home. My mother was about to die when my brother was taken to join the fighting. She was very sad, and worried about him very much, which had a devastating effect on her health.

In terms of food aid, we again satisfied the criterion of not being able to use the stove for a more than a month, but still we weren't selected. We were told that this was "because of a computer fault," but we know that computers are just operated by people.

Security in Mekelle was at its worst during that period. Robberies and thefts increased, and were even committed in broad daylight. In the evenings, people were killed by robbers.

November 2022: The peace agreement

I was very happy when I heard about the peace agreement. Again, I hoped to start working and get an income so I could prevent my household from having to continue to face hunger. I thought the blockade would be fully lifted so that people would stop suffering from the war and lack of food. We were full of hope that everyone would get emergency food aid.

What we hoped for from the peace agreement has not happened so far, however. We haven't been able to get work and earn an income. We haven't been able to access the health services we need. My mother hasn't had any treatment, because we haven't been able to afford it so far. We thought her main problem was a lack of a balanced diet. This is the reason why she's still ill and in bed today, because she hasn't received any treatment, and we can't afford to provide her with a balanced diet even now.

After the peace agreement there was only one round of food aid, and we weren't included. I went to the *kebelle* administration and spent a whole day going to different offices to complain, but I couldn't find anybody who was involved. Luckily, and there's nowhere else like Mekelle for this, people here would never eat alone if their neighbour has nothing to eat. It's thanks to these people that we survived the bad times. If everything had been like with the administration, we would all have died of hunger. It's thanks to people's support that we were able to get some food, at least to survive.

However, we are still facing great challenges to our survival as a household. I haven't been able to earn enough income to ensure my family's basic needs.

I went to the private organisations where I had been working but they couldn't take me back. I'm still living by begging for 200, 500 or 1,000 *birr* from different people to at least buy food for my family. I haven't been able to get enough money to take my mother to a health facility.

One day, I took my mother to a government health centre. The nurse was very shocked when she saw her body. She has lost so much weight and is only left with skin on her bones. The nurse told me to feed her a balanced diet with what was available at home. How could I dare to tell her that there wasn't any no food at home? I kept quiet and cried in front of her. [*she cries*]

One time, I went to my uncle, whom I had never visited during the bad times. He is quite well-off economically, but I had never gone to this home, and he had never checked on our situation throughout the two years of crisis. I told him my mother was critically ill, and had been for a long time, and that we couldn't get enough food as a family. He gave me 2,000 *birr* and also came to visit her. After that he also sent us 50 kilos of wheat. We were very happy. This was around the Christmas holiday, so thanks to that we were able to celebrate the holiday with some food.

Two months ago, a friend of my brother came home to visit us. He had become paralysed, so he had to sell his house to be able to afford medical care. Even despite his own case, he was saddened by my mother's illness and our household's situation. He saw that there was little food at home even though Easter was coming, so he bought us 50 kilos of wheat, 50 kilos of *taff*, pepper, oil and other necessary groceries. This was the first time after a very long period that we ate *injera* made from *taff*, and with a proper stew, with pepper.

One day, we went to the World Vision organisation and asked for food aid. We were given a quarter of a quintal of white flour, and we were at least able to eat enough food, but we couldn't get enough money to take our mother to a private health facility.

I took her to a government health centre after the peace agreement but there were no medicines. The doctor told me to give her at least porridge and a lot of water, so that's what I'm doing.

I was very happy when I heard my daughter would start going to school again. I had already paid three months of school fees earlier on, just before the war, but she was worried because she thought I couldn't afford to buy her school materials, a uniform and food for school. She's a very wise child, and she wants to learn, even on an empty stomach. I am so worried about her education. The school fees increased by 200 *birr*, and I also couldn't give her good quality food, so I worry that she might not want to eat in front of the other pupils. However, my best friend is also giving me rice, pasta and macaroni for my daughter. She has also lost a lot of weight in the past two or three years.

My daughter tells me many painful stories from school. For instance, there's a new student in her class who comes to school with no food and spends his

lunchtimes sitting under a tree. When the students asked him why he doesn't have any lunch, he told them he doesn't like having food at school, but this is not true. The truth is that he has no food at home, or nothing like what other students have. Although we're all happy that schools have reopened, there are still so many things to be resolved moving ahead.

The past time was very difficult for everyone, but it was worse in particular for pregnant women, old people and children under two years old. Children suffered from hunger and their psychological well-being was affected, so many children were coming to our home and begging for a piece of *qicha* to survive. This was very painful.

The establishment of the Tigray interim regional administration

The establishment of the interim government brought nothing special apart from the fact that some people have been able to support us, at least.

I'm still looking for work, and so far, I haven't been able to get a job that might provide us with a sufficient income. So far, things are not back to normal. I spend my time looking at vacancies, but I haven't found a job so far. I recently started working as maid for someone. This is for half a day, and my monthly salary is only 800 *birr*. People are not able to pay much because they're not getting their salaries. Civil servants are still facing huge problems because they do not receive their salaries regularly. My brother and sister haven't got a job so far either, so there hasn't been any change in our household's problems. I'm praying for things to return to normal soon, for civil servants to get their salaries, and for trade and construction to resume as before so that we can be employed and get an income.

I would even do daily labour if I got any, so I could take my mother to a better private clinic and pay my rent. To this day we are still unable to pay our rent. The landlord understands our problem, and so he has never asked us to pay so far.

In general, I'm not completely happy about the peace agreement or the interim government because many critical problems have not been solved to date.

* * *



"I have deteriorated, physically, economically and mentally"

"I HAVE DETERIORATED, PHYSICALLY, ECONOMICALLY AND MENTALLY"[1]

My name is Senait and I am 34 years old. I had a small hotel business before the war, and I was living quite well. I was able to support my mother and sisters financially, whereas I am currently living thanks to the support of relatives and friends. I live in a rented house.

3–4 November, 2020: The war starts

When the war started, I was at my hotel in Mekelle. I heard there was fighting between the Tigray and the federal forces. The next day, I was able to get detailed news from various media. From Abiy's media, I heard it was a law enforcement operation launched because the Northern Command base had been attacked, while the Tigray media presented it as an attack by federal forces to kidnap the Tigray leaders.

Back then I was terrorised by this news, but I had no idea it would last this long and destroy so much.

November 2020: Fighting in Tigray, uncertainty in Mekelle

Communications, banking, water and electricity services were cut off immediately. We found it very hard to cope with this, because it was a completely new experience for us. At my hotel, I used to serve alcohol, food and accommodation services, and employed two women. At the time, I had already paid three months of rent for the hotel, but I was only able to work for three weeks after the start of the war.

Fortunately, I had a little bit of *taff* flour and other basic food items that I could use economically to cope with the situation. It was a difficult time, however, because there was no electricity, and charcoal and firewood were very expensive. The main problem was access to mills. Many people, even though they had grains and cereals at home, had problems with food because there was no milling service.

I remember we were walking a long distance to get water from a river, and we were using it to prepare food even though it was not clean. It was difficult to buy *injera* anywhere because of the lack of electricity, which was a big problem for bachelors. However, the community was helpful and sometimes provided them with *injera*.

My mother and two of my sisters came to stay with me to seek protection from the war and share food.

[1] Narrated in the second half of July 2023 and written up between then and early August 2023.

The air strikes were terribly distressing for us because we had never experienced them before. People couldn't go about their business out of fear of air strikes. As time went by, the effects of the war also intensified and became more visible. People were coming to Mekelle to flee the fighting in other parts of Tigray. We started hearing stories from IDPs of horrible atrocities, rapes and mass killings by Ethiopian, Eritrean and Amhara forces. This was very upsetting for us.

People also began to share what they had and to try to calm each another down by going to church and having group prayers to cope with the new situation.

I had no income at all anymore, and I couldn't access my bank account, so I had to use all the money I normally used to run my hotel to buy food. My mother and sisters had no money either, so it was my responsibility to be able to afford food by any means.

The most distressing thing during this time was thinking about the future and what would come next. I was very scared whenever I thought about the fighting, the air strikes and the shortage of food and medicine, and about what would happen if things continued the same way.

28 November 2020: The ENDF enters Mekelle

There was some very frightening shelling just before the federal military forces entered Mekelle, and many people were killed. We spent our time in a nearby church with my mother and sisters. People were terrorised and began fleeing to rural areas and monasteries to escape the shelling and fighting. That was when one of my sisters came to my house—my mother and another sister were already living with me—and we all went to the church to seek protection from the shelling. I was very scared by the shelling.

December 2020–June 2021: Mekelle under ENDF/Federal Government control

I was terrified to see armed soldiers in the city. There was also a curfew, and we were very scared of being killed by soldiers if we were outside during the curfew, so we used to rush home before 6 p.m. and we couldn't go out before 6 a.m., even to go to church.

I remember one day there were clashes between the federal forces and young people from the city in the downtown area. I saw a car with Eritrean plates in front of the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia. These young people wanted to prevent the Eritrean forces from taking money from the bank, and that's why the clashes happened. The young people confronted the Ethiopian soldiers, who started firing in the air to disperse the people who had gathered, and while they were doing this, they shot a young man. I saw it. He was taken to hospital, and I don't know what happened to him after that.

I also saw two neighbours being shot and killed by PP soldiers. They were 21 and 17 years old. One of them was shot by a sniper. He was hit in the back of the head while he was entering his house, just because young people were demonstrating downtown.

With the soldiers behaving this way, we weren't free to go to church or to the market, or to visit relatives. We had a big feeling of fear, and were afraid our freedom had been stolen from us as a people.

When the banks reopened, I tried to resume my hotel business, as the rent was already paid for three months, but it was difficult to work. Soldiers were coming to my hotel, which upset me. They came to drink beer, and they always insulted us. For instance, they said things like "*how can they know if I hadn't added poison to the beer*," or they told me that we Tigrayans were untrustworthy, bad people, and they wanted to eliminate us. Overall, it was really uncomfortable to continue working at the hotel, as I was always afraid I might be mistreated by the Ethiopian soldiers. Also, we had to close our hotel at 6 p.m. because of the curfew, which reduced my income compared to before the war.

I used to spend the night at the hotel with my workers, but we were very scared in case the soldiers came and attacked us sexually. Still, we had no choice but to stay at the hotel because security was poor and there were thefts and robberies at night.

One day, unusually, I went home to spend the night there. Our neighbours at the hotel called me at 3 a.m. to tell me my hotel was being robbed. I reported it to the soldiers, but they did nothing. The good thing was that my neighbours woke up and shouted, so the robbers couldn't take much. They only took tables and chairs, nothing valuable.

Prices were very high, and at the same time there were limits on taking money out of the banks. The price of food items such as *taff*, pepper and oil increased, and life became a struggle.

I got food aid once during this period. The development army group members from my area were not good people; they repeatedly provided food aid to themselves and people they liked rather than to people in need.

Because of the war, our family dispersed to different places. My mother went to live with her siblings in the countryside in search of food and to survive, although she came back during the "PP time" with a little bit of food from her rural relatives. My sister went back to her place in Mekelle. My little sister, who used to live with me, couldn't continue to, so she went to live with another sister. I was suffering from stress and had mental problems because of the lack of peace, but I got some relief from going to church and trying to refresh my mind.

I hadn't had any relationship with the *kebelle* administration, and I had never participated in religious and social activities such as *mahiber* or *tsebel** [2] because I was busy at work, and had no spare time. That didn't change, but I began to go to church regularly to seek relief from the mental distress caused by the war and the economic hardship that I was facing.

Most people were very distressed by the atrocities they were hearing about and because of the way they were mistreated by the federal soldiers here in Mekelle. I was very concerned, especially when I heard about gang rapes by the soldiers. Some friends who worked at a hotel like me told me they had been raped by soldiers. The soldiers would come to hotels and ask for a woman who would spend the night with them. If they were refused, they used their power and took the woman of their choice and kept her with them for as long as they wanted. When these women returned, they were mentally and physically harmed. I know some women who caught an infection of the uterus in this way.

Sometimes this happened to me too. Soldiers came to my hotel and asked me for a woman to spend the night with them. I used to tell them we didn't provide such kind of service. They insisted a lot, but I convinced them by talking to them politely and telling them that I was married, and showing them the fake wedding ring I had at the time. It was God who protected me. One day, the soldiers came to a nearby hotel and wanted to take a young woman who was working there. She refused, so they started beating her heavily. She didn't give up even so; she kept trying to escape from them and finally managed to do so through another hotel door.

I never moved out of Mekelle, but my mother told me that transport was very expensive and the way soldiers at the checkpoints were treating people was horrible and frightening. Nobody could stop them when they forced people out of a vehicle and took them away. She told me she saw the soldiers taking a young girl out of a vehicle by force on the pretext that she didn't have an ID card., blah blah… In general, it was very unsafe and dangerous to use transport and move from place to place in Tigray.

I had no links with Ethiopians at that time. I never called anyone, even people I knew. They had bad feelings about us, and I was also angry because of what they were doing to us.

It was a difficult time economically, but I was able to cope by using my savings and the little income I was getting from my hotel. Poor security and the high prices of goods and food limited the services I could provide, and I was only getting a small income from renting rooms. Later on, I left the hotel I was renting for 10,000 *birr* a month and moved to a smaller and less expensive place, where I started to sell only beer in the bar.

[2] A religious gathering and feast prepared monthly or annually.

My sister was sick with diabetes. I suffered a lot, and took her to hospital, but there were no medicines, so we had to buy everything she needed from a private pharmacy. This was very expensive, and sometimes medicines weren't available even there, but we managed with the support of relatives and friends.

June 2021: The TPLF/TDF return in control of Mekelle and part of Tigray

We were very happy to see our sisters and brothers who had gone off to fight again. It was very emotional, and a big surprise for us how they came back unexpectedly. People celebrated in the streets for weeks, singing, ululating and expressing their feelings. I could see the respect we had as a people for our heroes and heroines, and I believe they really deserved it.

However, all the suffering and hellish life began after this for most people in Tigray. Back then, we had no idea we would suffer so much. The huge economic and social crisis that unfolded from then on was the result of the TDF regaining the upper hand.

The next day, I saw TDF soldiers, who were very young boys and girls, walking down the street in a line. I was surprised, as they were so young. Most people were very surprised too, and many young people who saw it went to join the military.

Communications, banking and other basic services immediately stopped again, and we began to feel the consequences of the war.

It was the worst time in my life. I stopped working, and was left with no income. I also suffered from mental and psychological problems because of the economic hardship. It hurts when you lose everything you had in that way.

I couldn't pay my rent, and I even had to stop baking *injera* regularly. I didn't have enough money to buy *taff*, oil and pepper because they were very expensive and unaffordable.

It's easy to speak about it now, but it's very difficult when you experience it. Sometimes I would spend a day without eating, until someone (usually friends) would give me money to buy *injera* for survival.

Later, the situation became even worse because of the blockade and lack of food, so I started to sell my belongings so I would be able to buy food to survive. I felt very sorry about selling some very expensive things I had bought very cheaply.

I remember a time when I ate dried *injera,* just pouring water on it, because I couldn't get any money to buy anything to go with it. All the food items that I used to afford easily, like onions and tomatoes, were difficult to buy because of their price.

Back then, I lost all the money I had and sold most of the things I needed to run my business (such as beds and music players). As time went on, I realised

that my life was messed up and I would never recover my business. I gave up completely. I was very badly hurt psychologically.

I also have a chronic illness that needs serious treatment, but I wasn't able to seek treatment as I had no money. I have a uterus infection that has never been treated. The only treatment I am getting is spiritual, when I wash myself with holy water in various churches and monasteries. [She is not willing to tell us the reason for the infection].

People supported each other to cope with the hardship. My neighbours supported me a lot by providing me with food during the bad times, especially my landlady, who even provided me with dried *injera* for survival. As time went by, however, most people found it hard to ensure they would get their own food. For instance, we used to regularly support IDPs and injured TDF soldiers with food and other services, but later on, most people were no longer able to do this. They were hurt psychologically and economically, and they lost the courage and capacity to do it as the war and the blockade went on.

When the TDF came back to Mekelle, I was appointed as a member of the women's development army group. I was mainly involved in nursing and feeding injured TDF soldiers and providing support for IDPs. However, even though I was a member, I couldn't do anything about the provision of food aid, as this was done by another committee called the humanitarian aid committee, who decided everything, so the provision of food aid continued to be unfair as usual. I only got food aid once during that period of time.

My economic situation got even worse, and I couldn't even feed myself. I began to sell alcoholic drinks like wine (which I had kept at home when I stopped the bar business) very cheaply just to buy *injera* and bread.

Security in Mekelle worsened, and thefts and robberies increased a lot, so people didn't feel safe in their own land. I think this was because the focus was on winning the war rather than maintaining security.

The other distressing thing at that time was the drone attacks and air strikes. It was very frightening and many people suffered from psychological problems and trauma, especially children. For myself, my head is still full of the terrible sounds of jets and the shouting after the drone attacks. I forget things easily, and cannot remember things as clearly as I used to before the war. I sometimes feel as if my head has been re-formatted and my memory was deleted. In addition to my mental issues, I didn't have enough food, so I had problems with keeping my balance and walking properly.

March 2022: An implicit truce

I don't think the so-called implicit truce had any impact on my life. I never got any food aid during that time. The only good thing was that we got relief from the sound of gunfire and the fear of drone attacks and air strikes. People were able to move around freely and go about their business.

August 2022: The fighting erupts again

When the fighting erupted again, we were terrified. Everybody was very frightened when we heard that the federal forces had reached Shire and were advancing very fast. Most people began to flee again. Injured TDF solders gathered in Mekelle from all parts of Tigray. Even some leaders seemed to be ready to flee. We were very distressed by all this. I was very busy supporting injured soldiers in many ways.

People were very frightened because with the humanitarian truce they had not been expecting the fighting to resume; rather, we were expecting that a peace agreement would follow. Instead, many young people lost their lives during this second round of fighting. People felt terrorised and gave up. It was a time when we lost hope and realised, we would be eliminated as a people.

My health situation deteriorated because of my fear of being mistreated by enemy soldiers again. I was not in a normal psychological state.

On top of this, prices rose more than ever, and most people were facing hunger. There was some food aid, but I didn't get any. I couldn't get any food at all from anywhere, because everybody was short of money, so I only had small amounts of dried *injera*, which I had to make last as long as possible.

The government was completely dysfunctional, and there were no municipal, justice or police services. Sanitation in the city became terrible. Some people were paying to have their garbage removed, but most couldn't because they had no money, so they were throwing their rubbish here and there. Security became still worse, robberies and thefts became commonplace, and people were being murdered at night during robberies and thefts.

My mother and sisters were dependent on me. I couldn't afford to pay rent for them to live in two different places, so they started living together. We all suffered from our economic crisis, from hunger and from health problems. We couldn't get any support from relatives in rural areas because we grew up in Eritrea and don't have close ties with them. I have a sister who grew up with me, whom I supported for her education. She's a nurse, but she had no salary at the time. She had supported me financially earlier on, but now she herself was in trouble financially, and she's also married.

I also have relatives in Saudi Arabia, but they are not very supportive. I remember that my mother once received 5,000 *birr* and she gave me some of it. I do have friends, and clients who know me from the good times and felt pity when they saw me, as they knew how I had been earlier on and could see how bad it was for me, so they were giving me 200, 300, 500 *birr*… I'm still living that way today.

When the TDF came back from Debre Birhan, I started to participate actively in church activities. I joined an "*arsema mahiber**" and we carried out group prayers and fasting. This was a big help to calm me down and give me some relief from stress and my mental issues.

November 2022: The peace agreement

In October 2022, all the churches organised prayers and fasting because the war was horrible and people were very frightened because the enemy was returning. I remember that we spent three days, the 14th, 15th and 16th of T'ik'imiti (24, 25 and 26 October), continuously in deep prayer. We prayed to God with all our heart, asking Him to protect us from all our suffering and from the war. And then, we heard about the peace agreement. It was the day I realised that God is alive for sure, and that He always stands with those who are oppressed and need His help.

We all were very happy about the peace agreement, whatever was in it, because we no longer had to fear being eliminated and killed, and we would no longer lose our young people in a horrible war. In addition, we were relieved of the drone attacks. We were also happy when we saw the communications, electricity and transport services resume. Many people met their loved ones when air transport started up again. In general, we were very happy with the peace agreement at the beginning. We had very high expectations, and believed that it would be implemented speedily and fairly.

Later, however, we began to be disappointed by the way it was being implemented. I expected the IDPs to return home, that we would all start our previous businesses again and be able to properly work, that civil servants would be paid their salary arrears, and most importantly that Tigray would be fully recovered, according to the Constitution. However, none of these things have been fully implemented so far.

The situation with regard to inflation and prices improved after the peace agreement, but then prices increased again after some time. I think the peace agreement has improved some people's lives, but not mine. I couldn't begin my work as I don't have the capital. I have deteriorated, physically, economically and mentally.

I haven't been able to get medical treatment for my disease so far. I went to a government health facility, but they couldn't treat me properly because of a lack of medical supplies and medicines, and I can't go to a private facility because I can't afford it.

I sometimes pay my rent when I get support from friends. My landlady had reduced my rent to 1,000 *birr* a month during the blockade, but now she has increased it to 1,500 *birr*. I am accumulating debts, and I don't know when I might be able to pay it all back.

I didn't see any change, even after the establishment of the transitional government. Government services went from bad to worse. There is no justice system, and it's not safe to move around freely. I sometimes feel we're living without a government. People are being arrested for robbery and theft, but they're released immediately because the justice system is not good.

I saw a man being robbed of his gold and money here in the neighbourhood. It was 11 in the morning. Other people saw it too, but no one dared to do anything because robbers are armed with knives or sharp objects. People who steal and are caught on the spot are released after a week, which is not fair. Thieves have become their own government in this city.

I am still a development army group member, and I participate in the *kebelle*'s activities, but I'm not happy with the lack of good governance here. Digital ID cards are being prepared for residents and we're being told to work hard to identify Eritreans and Amhara living here, but most of the time it's people in high positions who are selling ID cards to Eritrean spies.

I sometimes think about the people of Tigray and feel very sad. These people sent their young children to fight with no hesitation, thinking that better things would come and to safeguard our interests as a people. However, we haven't got what we deserve in terms of good governance, peace and security. We are still living in fear because of the lack of peace, security and instability, and in fear of hunger and war. Our people are still dying of hunger and lack of medicine. The rest of the world is kidding us, using the peace agreement as an excuse. All this makes me and other people like me distressed, and causes mental problems.

My mental makeup has changed completely. For instance, previously I was very patient and liked spending time with children but now what I hate the most is children shouting and causing a disturbance. There is a little girl in my neighbourhood with whom I was very close. She used to spend time in my home before the war. Now, she hates me and never comes over anymore because I mistreat her and shout on her when she comes. I do this because I'm easily disturbed by children shouting and talking, and there's nothing I can do about it.

My hope for the future is that I will recover from my mental distress and get back to my work, like before the war. I need security to improve, and some financial support to start my business up again and change my life.

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"But then the war started, and everything got messed up"

"BUT THEN THE WAR STARTED, AND EVERYTHING GOT MESSED UP"[1]

My name is Elsa and I am 19 years old. I used to live in Hawzien *woreda**, in a rural *kebelle* called Debrebirhan, with my parents and siblings. When schools closed due to COVID-19, I came to Mekelle to live with my aunt and my brother. After a few weeks, I decided to earn some money by working as a housemaid in Mekelle. I didn't have any serious financial problem, but as a young girl, I want to be economically independent. I found work as a housemaid for a not very large family, because I had no experience of that kind of work before. I stayed in this job until the war broke out.

3–4 November, 2020: The war starts

I was in Mekelle working as housemaid when the war started. I didn't have any plans to quit my job or leave Mekelle; my plan was to live in Mekelle and continue my education alongside my work. But then the war started, and everything got messed up.

November 2020: Fighting in Tigray

After the war broke out, I stayed in Mekelle for three weeks. I was very frightened when air strikes hit the city. I really panicked, especially when an air strike hit around Saint George Church. There were no communications, so I couldn't call my family in Hawzien, but I saw the war was getting worse in Mekelle, so I decided to go to Hawzien to join my parents and siblings. The rumour at the time was that Mekelle would be destroyed by bombs and air strikes, so I decided to flee the coming destruction. I preferred to be with my parents through whatever good and bad things might happen if the war got worse.

I travelled to Hawzien on 22 or 23 November 2020. Transport was very expensive because lots of people were leaving to go to their home areas and families. People were leaving because there was no work in Mekelle and they were very scared by the war, so they wanted to be with their parents and families.

Before the war, it cost 80 *birr* to go to Hawzien, but that time we paid 500 *birr* for a one-way trip. We were very frightened on the way to Hawzien because we'd heard that the PP soldiers were already in Adigrat. Still, I arrived safely and met my parents. But the next day, the situation got worse. We could see smoke and gunfire from the direction of Adigrat. Many people were completely terrified and started to flee to other areas, mostly from urban areas to rural parts of Hawzien *woreda*. I remember phone communications were

[1] Narrated and written in the first half of August 2023.

shut down when the war broke out, then on the day I arrived in Hawzien the phone signal came back so I could call relatives and friends in Mekelle and other areas in Tigray and get information that the situation was getting worse everywhere.

On 24 November, PP and Eritrean soldiers occupied Hawzien town after heavy and frightening fighting. I was at home in my village (outside the town) with my parents. Almost everyone was fleeing from the town to our area and beyond to escape the fighting and killing. There was shelling on the town before the soldiers entered, and some people died, so people felt they couldn't stay in the town. They preferred to flee anywhere, whatever might happen to them.

The PP and Eritrean soldiers killed many young people in Hawzien town under the pretext that they were spies. I heard that they killed 30 people immediately after they occupied the town.

After people had fled the town, they started shelling rural *tabia* too, including ours. I thought I was going to die. My prayer to God was to take my soul to heaven, and at least protect the rest of my family, especially my younger siblings. People who had fled from the town started to flee further away to forests and caves in the countryside. We followed them far from our area to try to escape the shelling and the soldiers.

Our father stayed at home while all the other family members left. But later on, he followed us when the situation worsened. Shells landed near our neighbours, and many people weren't able to control their fear and blindly fled anywhere out of the village. Many left with nothing to eat or drink. We had no food or drink, even for my little brothers and sisters who fled with us.

We stayed in this remote place for two days but couldn't get enough food or water. People who lived in the surrounding areas brought us a little food and we gave it all to the children. But after two days the situation was worse. The sound of gunfire was very disturbing and frightening. In the area where we were, there were many people who had fled from Hawzien town, Megab and our *tabia*. But even our remote area was shelled, although nobody was injured. We heard that our village had been occupied by soldiers, and four men from our neighbourhood were killed because they had stayed in the village while everyone had fled. Three of them were young, and the fourth was married with children. His wife and children had fled with us. They were buried by elderly people from the area who hid from the soldiers at night. We heard that they were killed by *Shabia* (Eritrean soldiers) while they were hiding in cactuses trying to protect themselves.

While we were staying out there, I went back home once to check on my grandparents, who had stayed in the village. When I went to their home, I found that my cousins had gone there, and we met in our field. But a shell hit right where we were standing. It went deep into the ground and didn't

hurt any of us, but we fell to the ground and were covered by soil and couldn't immediately stand up. We thought it had hit us and we were dead.

We returned to our village one day before the PP soldiers occupied Mekelle. In our area, the gunfire had decreased and things seemed quieter. But there was huge shelling in Mekelle. My relatives in Mekelle called and told us about it. I was very worried about them. They told us the shelling was indiscriminate and many civilians had been killed. I heard that more than 100 civilians were killed that day.

My brother had been in Mekelle, and he fled to join us on foot. He couldn't use transport because he couldn't get any, and anyway it wasn't safe, because the soldiers were deployed all the way to Hawzien and they were killing people, especially young men. He arrived in our village by hiding from the soldiers and using little-known and difficult routes from Mekelle to Hawzien and then to Debrebirhan. He told us the PP was approaching Mekelle and the town wasn't safe.

We heard that Mekelle had been occupied by PP soldiers. People were very sad to hear this. It was very worrying because we thought our leaders would immediately be caught by the soldiers and killed or arrested, just like what they had done to Seyoum Mesfin and others. I was also worried about my relatives in Mekelle.

After we returned from where we had fled, the gunfire started again and we fled again to my grandparents' village. This time my father came with us. There were eight of us altogether with my siblings.

December 2020–June 2021: Under ENDF/Federal Government control, and Eritreans in Hawzien

After that, there never was peace or stability in Hawzien. There were always gunfire and murders, especially in Hawzien town. Sometimes, the PP and *Shabia* soldiers came to our village, firing their guns and taking goats and sheep from the farmers by force. Nobody could oppose them because they killed anyone who tried to.

We couldn't go to the town freely. No young people dared to go to Hawzien town for the market or anything else because the soldiers were killing them, accusing them of being spies. Two young men from our village were killed in town. They went to Hawzien for the market, but the PP soldiers killed them because they suspected them of being spies for *Weyane**. Even mentally ill people who were living on the street were killed by the soldiers on suspicion of spying.

There were both *Shabia* and PP soldiers In Hawzien town. The *Shabia* camp was on the way out of Hawzien to Freweyni, while the PP soldiers were camped in schools in the centre of town. At times, the TDF would come to town at night to attack the enemy camps and then returned to their place,

but we didn't know precisely where they were. This made the PP and *Shabia* soldiers very angry, and they killed a lot of young people after that.

One day, I was at home and my parents and siblings were out. A large group of *Shabia* and PP soldiers came to our village to steal sheep and goats, passing by our home. It was the first time I'd seen them. I was terrified, because I'd heard they raped girls and women. I tried to hide inside the house. Fortunately, they didn't come into our home, and they left after taking sheep and goats from our neighbours.

My parents and our neighbours were very worried about the risk of being exposed to hunger because it was impossible to go to Hawzien freely. Our market is in Hawzien but we couldn't go there, so people were worrying because they couldn't buy or sell goods. Also, there was no electricity, so it was difficult to get our grain milled. At one point, my parents and I were just eating roasted grain because we couldn't grind it. It was also difficult to cook any food that needed oil because we couldn't go to the market for a long time. Sometimes, elderly people and women went into town to the market or for other reasons because they were less at risk.

My father was a merchant before the war. We had a good income. My parents were even able to support me financially when I was living in Mekelle. He used to sell cattle, bringing it from Axum and Shire. But during that period, it was difficult to do business, and this had a powerful impact on our economic status and living standards.

After a few months, I went back to Mekelle because I thought security was better and it was safer for me. On the journey it was terrifying to encounter soldiers at the checkpoints. They were very angry with us and slammed the back door of the car on us to scar us with the loud noise. The people in the taxi, especially the children, were panicking, and their bodies were shaking. I thought that as at least Mekelle is a big city, I could live with my aunt, or get a job and live independently. But my expectations were misplaced. There was a curfew, so security was worse, and young people were being killed when they were found outside their home during the curfew. It was also worse in Mekelle economically, because everything had to be bought from the market and was very expensive. Goods and food items were also scarce because of the war. In the village, people at least had some cereals and grains from the previous harvest so they couldn't get really hungry. In Mekelle, the situation was different, and many people had no food at all.

My aunt had money in the bank, and the banks were opened at the time, so she could at least meet her family's basic needs. Also, her husband had his own business trading utensils, so he had some income, although less than before. My aunt wanted me to work with her husband at the market, but I didn't want to because I was afraid of the soldiers. I was very scared of being raped by them,

as I had heard they were doing in other areas of Tigray, including Hawzien, so I used to avoid having to meet them as much as possible.

My aunt has two children, so it was difficult to afford food for all of us. We sometimes couldn't afford groceries such as onions, tomatoes or cooking oil, which was very expensive at the time. We were cutting down what we ate at meals to save food for the future in case the situation got even worse. I wanted to start working as a housemaid as I had before. I asked the household I had been working for before the war if they would employ me again, but they told me they couldn't afford to pay for a housemaid because they weren't working and had no income. I tried to get a job as a housemaid in other households, but most people were not interested because they were unable to pay and couldn't afford to have to feed one more person.

So, as a young woman I felt unstable. I wanted to be independent, as I had been in pre-war times, but there was no way to, so after two and a half months I went back to Debrebirhan near Hawzien. I had decided to join the TDF, so, I went back, planning to get information in Hawzien about where the TDF were. When I reached my village, I saw that things had got worse because of the war. The health facility wasn't operating because most of the workers weren't there: they had either joined the fighting or moved back to their home areas. People in my village were suffering from different diseases, but they couldn't get access to any health services. Also, they couldn't go into town because the soldiers were there and it was risky to encounter them. The Hawzien health facility was also dysfunctional because it had been destroyed and looted by the soldiers. Many people from our village turned to holy water whenever they were sick. I saw lots of children who were sick from a lack of food and had no access to health services or medicines. People with chronic diseases were also suffering in both Mekelle and Hawzien as there were no medicines and they had no money for health services.

When I went back to Hawzien, the price of transport had gone down a little—to 300 *birr*—but there was no change in terms of security: the soldiers were still threatening, mistreating and insulting people at checkpoints.

As soon as I arrived, I started gathering information to join the fighting like my peers. Many of my friends, neighbours and relatives had already joined rather than be killed or raped by the Eritrean and PP soldiers. But my parents heard about my plan and wanted to prevent me from joining. They tried to convince me, telling me that my uncles had already joined. Even my younger brother had also gone to join although he was under age, so he was sent back home after three weeks of military training, and he told us that he was sent back because of his age.

My parents sent me back to Mekelle to prevent me from joining the fighting. I have a cousin who lives in Addis. She called me and told me to visit her and so I went to Addis at the end of April 2021. I was not sure if it was a good idea

and I had many fears. I had been told of Tigrayans being jailed and mistreated in Addis. I couldn't speak Amharic, so I feared I would face communication difficulties and that I might be mistreated because of this. On the other hand, I was eager to see Addis and travel by plane for the first time.

At Mekelle airport, there were many soldiers in PP military uniform. I was terrified to see them, but they didn't say anything. When I arrived in Addis, I was amazed by the beauty of the city, but I couldn't move around and visit places as much as I wanted because my cousin and all the other family members were out all day. We were only able to visit the city in the evening, and even then, there were many restrictions, including avoiding speaking Tigrinya outside the house. We also couldn't watch Tigray TV, Demtsi Weyane[2] or TMH TV because someone in the neighbourhood might report us to the police and we could be arrested. So even though I was quite happy to be in a new place, I was also very bored. My parents in Hawzien didn't know about my trip to Addis. They thought I was in Mekelle with my aunt. So, I decided to go back to Mekelle. I went back 10 days before the PP soldiers moved out of Mekelle.

The next day, I went to Hawzien because I was missing my parents and siblings. When I was in Addis, I was worried about the people in Tigray, especially my parents. I was afraid someone from my family or a relative might be killed by the PP or Eritrean solders. I worried about what they had to eat if they had no money to buy food. When I was in Mekelle, there was regular food aid for most people. My aunt also got food aid twice and I was included in what she got. However, there was no food aid in Hawzien. I think priority was given to urban dwellers and not rural dwellers.

After I had been in Hawzien for a few days to visit my parents, I decided to go back and live in Mekelle with my aunt and my older brother, who was already there. While I was travelling back to Mekelle, I saw *Shabia* prisoners of war on big trucks around Agula, near Wukro. I was very happy to see this because I'd been told how they mistreated people and raped girls like me everywhere in Tigray. They raped many women, especially in Hawzien. I heard about a woman from near our village who was raped, beaten and left in her home by Eritrean soldiers. There were four of them. This is why almost all the young people in Hawzien joined the fighting. Two or three people from every household in Hawzien joined the fighting because of the atrocities and rapes perpetrated by Eritrean and PP soldiers.

[2] Demtsi Weyane is an Ethiopian news-based television and radio network headquartered in Mekelle. It was founded as a radio station by the TPLF in 1980, and launched a satellite television channel in 2018, broadcasting mainly in Tigrinya with some programming in Amharic, Oromo and English.

Everywhere in Tigray there were group prayers and fasting. Most people got a little relief from their suffering when they went to church. I remember that there was a three-day fast and group prayers in Mekelle before the TPLF came back, and it was because of the prayers that they came back. However, it was difficult to go to church at night and in the early morning and late evening.

June 2021: The TPLF/TDF return in control of Mekelle and part of Tigray

I was in Mekelle when TPLF came back. We were all very excited and happy about it. It was in the evening. I saw them on the streets with the Tigrayan flag. Everybody was crazy with happiness. There were songs and group dancing everywhere in Mekelle.

However, the electricity and communications were shut off immediately, so once again we couldn't communicate by phone or get banking and other basic services. People began to suffer a lot because of a lack of money and not being able to get food. Most of the time, the provision of food aid was delayed and unfair. There were no health services because there were no medicines.

I decided to start working as a housemaid again so I would be economically independent. My parents and relatives were unhappy because they wanted me to continue my education. However, there were no schools at the time. I worked for around two months as a housemaid in Mekelle. My parents asked me to go to Hawzien because school was going to start in September. I left Mekelle in August and went to Hawzien. We registered, but school didn't start because there were no school materials. Fortunately, our village school wasn't destroyed and looted, but all the other schools in the surrounding villages had been destroyed and looted by Eritrean soldiers. It was difficult to resume school without materials, and also many students were missing. Most of them, especially those in grade six and above, were fighting, and the majority of those who had stayed behind weren't interested in continuing with school. Most of us were disturbed and worried about our peers who were on the front.

I remember that in Mekelle, school started in September and children up to grade six attended for two or three months. But after that, the drone attacks and air strikes made it difficult to carry on, and the schools closed again. As the fighting progressed toward the centre of the country, things became more difficult for us in all sorts of ways. Prices rose even more, and many people faced hunger and death. We couldn't communicate with our relatives and friends, which was very distressing. I personally was very worried about my parents and siblings in Hawzien when I was in Mekelle, and *vice versa* when I went to Hawzien, as we couldn't communicate.

When I was in Mekelle, I had access to the media, and I became very distressed to hear about the atrocities and sexual harassment on TV. I had no access to the media whenever I went to my village, but we used to hear

from people about the atrocities and rapes happening in nearby villages and Hawzien town.

I was also very distressed by the air strikes and drone attacks in Mekelle. People were dying. I especially remember an air strike or drone attack hitting a residential area in *ḳebelle* 5 in Mekelle in which more than 10 people, including children, died. It's still on my mind today.

In Hawzien too, there were prayers and group fasting. One market day, a drone flew over the market. People were panicking, and everybody was running in all directions to escape the attack. Some people lost their goods and money while they were running. However, the drone didn't attack, and just left after flying over the people in the market. There were group prayers in churches after that.

I was very happy whenever I saw TDF soldiers, both in Mekelle and Hawzien, because I felt safe. I could see how they were feeling bad about the destruction of the Tigray people, their hunger and suffering. I had many relatives and neighbours, including my uncles, in the TDF, so I was very happy when I saw them in Mekelle after the TPLF's return. Everybody was very happy about the return of the TPLF and TDF. We prepared dried *injera* for them and served the injured in hospitals in Mekelle. My mother told me it was similar in Hawzien too: they were giving eggs and dried *injera* to the injured soldiers. People were very happy to support the TDF in all possible ways.

People then began to go to church as early and late as they wanted. The celebration of the *Abreha wa Atsbeha* religious festival not far from Hawzien after the TPLF returned was very colourful. Celebrations and gatherings for christenings, weddings and *mahiber*, which had been discontinued during the "PP time" because people feared for their safety and for economic reasons, resumed after the TPLF came back.

On the other hand, farming in Hawzien areas wasn't good, as farmers were lacking improved seeds and fertilizer, a situation that has continued to this day. I remember that during the "PP time," improved wheat seeds were provided for farmers in our village, but it was a very small amount, only 15 kilos.

When I was in Mekelle during that time, I tried to get a job as a housemaid, but demand was low because most people didn't have any money. The pay was also very low. Earlier, the average monthly pay had been 1,200–1,500 *birr*, but it went down as low as 500 *birr* at this time. Some of my friends worked for free because food and other accommodation expenses were too costly.

I couldn't get any income, and my aunt, brothers and parents couldn't give me pocket money for shampoo and soap. I couldn't buy clothes or shoes. This lack of money was a big worry, so I talked to my aunt about what to do to get an income. She tried her best to find a job for me, but she failed. Then one day, a relative and friend of mine came to my aunt's home in Mekelle. She

told me she was trading grain in Hawzien, buying from a market and selling in another nearby market at a small profit. She convinced me to work with her.

I went back to Hawzien and asked my father to find some money for me to start the business, which I did in December 2021 with a small amount of capital. I was buying cereals such as *taff* and wheat from rural markets and selling them at the Hawzien market. The profit wasn't very good, but I was able to get a small income for my hair oil, shampoo and soap, and I could even buy coffee and sugar for my parents. My challenge was the fluctuations in prices. Sometimes the price of cereals would decrease after I had bought them and so I was facing losses. In addition, transport was expensive as fuel was scarce, so sometimes profit was very small.

Most people didn't have money at this time, even in Mekelle, so, many people, including my relatives, began this small-scale trade just to get a small amount of money for their daily needs.

I continued trading up to July 2022 when I stopped, because the harvest was very poor that year, grains became exaggeratedly expensive, and market prices were even less stable.

Earlier on, my parents in Hawzien and my aunt and other relatives in Mekelle gave each other a lot of support. For instance, my aunt sent food items such as oil, macaroni and rice from Mekelle to my parents and grandparents, and my parents sent grain to our relatives in Mekelle. My grandparents in particular had quite a lot of wheat and *taff*, and they also have irrigation, so they grew vegetables such as onions and potatoes. They supported my parents and relatives in Mekelle by sharing grains and vegetables with them. As time passed, they became unable to support each other in the same way; for instance, my grandparents weren't able to get fuel to irrigate, so they couldn't be productive.

After I stopped trading, my parents wanted me to get married. A guy asked them if he could marry me, and they were almost convinced because he was a rich merchant. My father had previously strong views about me, and wanted me to be properly educated before I got married, but he wasn't the same at that time, and he tried to convince me to accept the proposal. I firmly refused, and my siblings also took my side.

In the rural areas around our village, many girls married because their parents couldn't feed them or afford to keep them. It was also very difficult to refuse because there was no schooling. Some parents also married their girls off to protect them from joining the fighting.

March 2022: An implicit truce

I didn't know anything about the implicit truce. I remember nothing special about the situation during that period.

August 2022: The fighting erupts again

I remember that it was around the *Ashenda* holiday, Girls' Day, that the fighting erupted again. Instead of buying new clothes and doing our hair to prepare for the celebration, we spent the time worried and distressed, and afraid of the war and its effects. Everyone was full of sadness and worry. I personally had never thought the war would start again. I was expecting peace, because the gunfire and talk of war had subsided for a little while. Many students were also very hopeful that schools would reopen for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The other worry was that young people were being taken to the fighting by force. Many young people in Mekelle and Hawzien were taken by force while they were just carrying out their daily activities or at night. I was among those identified by the *kebelle* people to be taken to join the fighting. However, unlike earlier on, I wasn't interested in going. I was very frightened of dying and my parents were very worried too. My older brother was caught, but he escaped from the training camp after a few days, but I don't know the details of how he did it. We knew the fighting was worsening because the pressure on young people intensified.

Mothers held big group prayers to try to stop the fighting, but this failed, and many young people died in this second round of fighting. I heard from some friends who were members of TDF that the fighting at that time was the worst of all throughout the two years of war, and unlike in the earlier round, the fighters were no longer motivated by the belief that they were fighting for freedom.

Many people from our village, including priests, joined the fighting during that period, some of whom are my relatives. The good thing is that the peace agreement was concluded while they were still at the training camp. I escaped being taken because many of my relatives, including my uncle, had joined the TDF, so my father confronted the *kebelle* people, telling them that I was underage and that many of my relatives had already joined.

The enemy soldiers were closing in on us, and we heard they had reached Shire. We could hear gunfire from nearby areas. We were very frightened and panicked about what might happen next. It was very frightening, and many people began fleeing from Hawzien to the rural *kebelle*s again, carrying only their basic belongings. However, fortunately the war stopped, though I didn't understand why at that time.

November 2022: The peace agreement

It was the happiest day for me. I heard the news on TV, and watched the signature of the peace agreement. I called my relatives in Addis. I couldn't believe it because it had been such a long time. It was like a dream, seeing people communicating on the phone. Meanwhile, the banks also reopened.

They were not fully functional for a long time, but it still helped people, as they could use their savings to buy food and for other expenses. The price of *taff* and other groceries such as oil, rice and pepper decreased to some extent. People were able to go back to work and earn money. My father restarted his cattle trading business. These are all good results of the peace agreement, but I hear some people are not happy with it because it hasn't solved some of the issues and problems so far. For instance, IDPs haven't been able to return to their homes yet, and people are still dying of hunger and lack of medicine.

The health facility in our village has started working, but it offers limited services because of a lack of medicines and a shortage of health professionals. After the peace agreement was signed, I happened to fall ill while I was in the village. I went for treatment, but I couldn't get any medication except for some paracetamol tablets to relieve the pain.

Transport has improved; it is available and prices have gone down to some extent. My cousin in Addis also came to visit us as flights to and from Mekelle started up again.

Schools reopened both in Hawzien and Mekelle. We went to register, but most students, especially those above grade six, were not interested in attending without their friends who had joined the TDF. Later on, after I came back to Mekelle, they started, but there are not enough books, chairs or blackboards, and I don't really know how well they're being taught. I came to Mekelle three months ago because I wanted to work and earn an income just to afford my own expenses, including for education. I am working as a housemaid and I'm paid 1,500 *birr* a month. This is thanks to the peace agreement—my boss is able to pay me because of the agreement, which has enabled him to start working and get an income. I believe I'm grown up enough now, so I don't want to bother my parents. My plan is to save some money and to start my education. I'll go to Hawzien or register here in Mekelle for the next academic year.

The establishment of the Tigray interim regional administration

For me, the establishment of the interim administration is just a change of government leader from Dr Debretsion[3] to Getachew Reda.[4] I don't have any idea of the changes that happened after it was established, but there are problems that haven't been addressed so far. For instance, the IDPs haven't returned home yet, and Western Tigray, Southern Tigray and Erob are still in the hands of Amhara and *Shabia* forces. Robberies and theft are still common in Mekelle, and people can't move around freely as they can be killed by robbers. Food has become expensive again, as it was before.

* * *

[3] Debretsion Gebremichael, who was elected as chairman of the TPLF in 2017, also occupied senior positions at a federal level until 2018. He was Vice-Prime Minister from 2012 to early 2018, when he became Deputy President and then President of Tigray National Regional State. Whilst to this day (early 2024) he has remained TPLF chairman, he was reportedly not accepted by the Prime Minister as leader of the Tigray Interim Regional Administration that was to be established under the COHA. [4] Getachew Reda, who also occupied senior positions at a federal level, served as the TPLF spokesperson and an advisor to Debretsion during the war. He was one of the two TPLF chief negotiators who signed the COHA in November 2022. Upon the unsuccess of Debretsion's nomination, Getachew was elected by the TPLF Central Committee (in a close contest) to lead the Tigray Interim Regional Administration (TIRA), and accepted as such by the Prime Minister. To-date, he has led the TIRA since March 2023.

Part II

"The war for me, me and my people, me in my city, and elsewhere"

Following the seven storytellers' accounts in Part I, this second part draws on and weaves extracts from the other stories, along a thematic narration of the war. It still has the storytellers at its centre, but it uses another lens to uncover experiences of the same war period by people of Mekelle. In the first part, each personal account follows the sequence of events in a time-linear manner. In this second part, extracts of narrations from different storytellers are grouped by themes that emerged from reading and re-reading all the stories and relating them to one another.

Alongside the full stories of the first part, the themes are also a narration of the war, as they highlight aspects of the storytellers' experiences that arose as particularly salient in all or most stories. The pattern is concentric, with themes that relate to four increasingly wide "circles" around the storytellers.

The first is the storytellers themselves. The first section therefore looks at the storytellers' perspectives of themselves, how they lived the moments that defined the trajectory of the war, what they endured and how they coped with the war and its effects.

This is followed by the storytellers' narration of how they related to others in their community during the war—their families—especially their children—relatives, neighbours and friends, and how worrying about and caring for one another was so important.

Next comes the storytellers' experiences of living in their city of Mekelle, but in a time of war, with deteriorating urban services, a fraying social fabric, and diverse relationships with those who successively controlled Mekelle; and also, for some, their experiences outside Mekelle in places to which they moved for periods of a few days, a few weeks or even a few months.

Finally, there is the widest circle. This section speaks to how the storytellers found out about and perceived the war outside Mekelle and their relationship with people outside Tigray during the fighting.

The extracts in this Part II are taken from the thirteen stories that are not presented in full in Part I, although the themes that structure this Part crosscut the seven stories of Part I too. Whilst these themes pattern all stories, individual experiences relating to a theme were not identical: some experiences were quite similar from one storyteller to another, but others had quite different

experiences of the same event or condition. Grouping extracts from stories by different people under a common theme brings out these similarities, nuances and differences to form a tapestry of experiences that enrich those presented in the first Part. The storytellers whose experiences form this Part II are briefly presented first.

The storytellers

Etsay is a woman, around 40-year-old, recently married when the war started and with no child during the war, whose husband is a civil servant. She was in the field for research when the war broke out. When she wrote her story in February 2023, she was working at a Tigrayan NGO.

Akberet is a 35-year-old woman, divorced and with twin 8-year-old sons when the war started. In addition to her own children, one niece and one nephew were living with her. She was working as an employee in a local factory and could resume her work after the signature of the Pretoria agreement. During the war, she volunteered in various government-organised activities. She narrated her story in April 2023.

Kibreab is a 28-year-old man living with his parents and five younger siblings (two brothers and three sisters). His father is a civil servant and a church servant. Before the war, Kibreab was studying for an MSc after having obtained an engineering degree, and at the same time working on a construction worksite on the periphery of Mekelle. During the war, he engaged at some point in contraband trade to be able to afford food for the household. He narrated his story in April 2023.

Sindayo is an elderly woman living alone, although her children and grandchildren were often visiting and helping her both before and during the war. She had some income from renting rooms although this became more variable during the war, but she could also rely on support from her children. She narrated her story in April 2023.

Hiwot is a woman in her late 30s or early 40s, married and with three children. She lives as a housewife whereas before the war her husband was doing daily labour. She also narrated her story in April 2023.

Almaz is a woman in her late 30s or early 40s, married and with three children and who had no job before the war. During the war, she started producing handicraft during the "PP time," but she stopped after TPLF returned to Mekelle because of the blockade and subsequent lack of inputs. Her husband, a driver for a private company before the war, started farming for his parents

and in-laws to get food for his household during the PP period. He was still doing that when Almaz told her story in April 2023.

Hana is a 35-year-old woman, married and with one son when the war started, and who had a baby daughter in May 2021 during the war. She was a teacher in a private school and resumed her work in March 2023 after the signature of the COHA. Her husband is working in construction and could also resume his work after the COHA. Hana narrated her story in May 2023.

Menbere is a young man in his early 20s, living with his mother and a brother. He holds a university 1st degree and before the war, he had a job that required access to internet. His mother is a civil servant and the household also had some income from rent, and some support from family outside of Tigray during the war. He narrated his story in May 2023.

Teklay is a young man in his 30s, married, with one small child when the war started. His wife was pregnant and delivered during the "PP time." He used to be a trader in electronics, and shifted to selling solar lamps at some point during the war as there was no electricity. He narrated his story in May 2023.

Samuel is a 42-year-old man, teacher and single. During the war, he had no income at all as schools were closed, but had some support from his better-off sister and from abroad. He narrated his story in July 2023.

Nigisti is a 25-year-old woman, married and with a three-month-old baby son when the war started. She had a small shop but closed it during the "PP time." She reopened it after the signature of the COHA, but with more competition in the neighbourhood and people buying in bulk, she makes little profit. Her husband had a job in a metal workshop. He did daily labour at times during the war, but could resume his job at the workshop after the COHA. He narrated his story in August 2023.

Mulu is a 42-year-old woman. She is a widow with 5 children from 9- to 25-year-old all at home. She is the sole bread-winner. She used to sell *injera* before the war. During the "PP time" she got some income from doing public works under the "safety net," a government social protection program. Then this stopped when TPLF returned to Mekelle and had not resumed when she told her story in August 2023.

Mebrihit is a 39-year-old woman with an estranged husband, and three children who at the start of the war were 17, 11 and 2-year-old. Before the war she was selling food to daily labourers. She worked under the government "safety net" during the "PP time." During the TPLF time, she spent some time

at her mother's farm in the countryside, then selling *injera* back in Mekelle. Before the war her last child's father supported her financially (1,500 *birr* per month), but he stopped when he went to his parents' place when the war broke out, and he never returned. Her son helped with some income from car-washing. When she narrated her story in August 2023, she was doing daily labour.

* * *



"The war for me"

"THE WAR FOR ME": GOING THROUGH, ENDURING AND COPING

Trajectories

The various trajectories are narrated here through the most important events of the war in Mekelle. The storytellers recall what they did, where they were and how they felt and reacted on these highly memorable days:

1) *Day 1, the Northern Command's night: Shock*
2) *The following days: The war becomes reality in Mekelle*
3) *The ENDF enters Mekelle: Confusion and helplessness*
4) *The TPLF/TDF re-enters Mekelle: Confusion, joy, hope and mixed feelings*
5) *The "truce" of March 2022: A sort of respite?*
6) *War again: Anguish and despair*
7) *The Pretoria Agreement and its aftermath: Relief, but not quite normalcy*

Day 1, the Northern Command's night: Shock

> "I was in Shire when the war broke out. I had gone there for a few days of fieldwork. I realized that a conflict had begun after I saw on TV that there wouldn't be any flights to Tigray. At that moment I was having breakfast at the hotel I was staying in. I was disappointed to hear this because I didn't want to travel back to Mekelle by car; I thought it was just fighting. I never imagined the conflict would reach this level and become such a bloody war. I didn't understand the situation right away because I didn't follow the media and I didn't discuss the political situation in the region or the country with friends. I understood later, when many people said the war was expected, although it wasn't known when it might start. I wanted to send some documents to Addis but the Wi-Fi wasn't working. At the time, I wasn't aware what was really going on, except I guessed that there was a serious problem. I realised later that the phone wasn't working when I tried to call my team to go to work, assuming that working was still possible. They came to the place I was staying because we had an appointment, and I got more detailed information about the situation from them. I learnt that there had been active communications about the conflict on social media that involved a prominent political figure. I missed the social media communications in the evening because I had to do some writing, and I usually switch my phone off after 9 p.m. After getting information about how serious the situation was, I went to the bank with my colleague to get cash from the ATM, but it wasn't working. This was a shock because I didn't have enough cash. I had become used to withdrawing cash from the ATM and I was somehow dependent on it." (Etsay)

"I understood the war had started from FM radio in the morning. It became clear to everyone at that moment, because everybody heard it at the same time. I couldn't believe it at first. When other people and I asked about the war we were told it was between Tigray and the federal government. It was difficult for me to accept that the federal government was attacking us." (Hiwot)

> "I heard gunfire, and so I opened Facebook and Telegram and saw a message that read *'Calm down, it's nothing serious.'* This was being reported on social media based on what Getachew Reda had said. I went outside alone in the evening and there were people and policemen passing by. They said, '*It's the militias practicing*.' I went back home and went to sleep, but I didn't trust what they'd said completely. I was sceptical because the gunfire intensified and became continuous. The next day, electricity and the mobile network were cut off, which shocked me and my family. I met my friends for tea and we talked about these events. That was when I understood that this was war. We discussed issues like '*When's it going to end? What's our fate going to be?*'" (Menbere)

"At the onset of the war, my son was 3 months old. I was at home, in the same house as now. I heard gunfire in the evening. My home was near a military camp and because it's made of corrugated iron sheets the gunfire was audible. I was in a big panic, unable to stand, and my stomach contracted. There was a long exchange of fire. The phones weren't working. My husband and I went to my parents-in-law's house when there was a pause in the firing. Their home is very close to ours. We went there because our house, which is made of metal and can easily be pierced, wasn't as safe as theirs, which is a 'normal' house. Other people who lived in normal houses were also staying at their home. We didn't know the cause of the gunfire. We asked one another "*What's happening to us?*" We spent the night at my in-laws' and went back to our own house after 8 a.m. That day, we understood that the fighting was due to Abiy, and was between Abiy's and Tigrayan forces. I heard it on Tigray TV. I felt sad about the war." (Nigisti)

> "On 3 November 2020, I was at home with all my children. We were asleep until we were woken up by the sound of gunfire. We were shocked, and had no idea what was going on. We had never thought of such thing before, so we were very scared. There was heavy firing and the sparks were visible as the electricity was off. It was coming from the Northern Command and passing over our home. There was also some smaller gunfire in a place called Awash. We went out to see what was

> happening. One of our neighbours asked me what was going on and I told her I had no idea. She called her husband, who was out, and he told her it was safe and that it could be training, and there was nothing to worry about. I told her that wasn't quite the case. It started at about 11 p.m., and lasted for about an hour, then it stopped. I thought we were all dead. It was terrible. I went home with my children and we sat down. We just sat on the sofa until the morning and didn't go back to bed. We were all in a panic. We didn't know what was going on. We tried to get some information, but the phone wasn't working. The next morning, I understood from my neighbours and people in the neighbourhood that it was an operation by the TPLF to take over a camp. […] We heard a lot of things from many people. That day, 4 November 2020, was a dark day. The previous evening, I had no idea of the reason behind what had happened—we just knew about the gunfire—but the next day we understood that there was a conflict. I worried about what was going to happen next, what our fate was going to be, and how we were going to get over that time. I used to think my children would go to school and get a better status in life, but now I was feeling sad as a human being. […] When I think of that day, it feels as though it's not part of my own story; it seems like it's someone else's experience in another country." (Mulu)

The following days: The war becomes reality in Mekelle

"The next day, 4 November 2020, I was at my workplace, a plastics factory 25 kilometres from Mekelle. We heard there were air strikes near our workplace. We all left the workplace in the afternoon. Two days later our project was shut down. The foreign workers stayed in a guest house while we, the local workers, decided to stay at home because of the security situation. We never thought the war would last for long. […] However, one of the foreigners who was a manager of the organisation told us that all foreign workers were leaving Tigray, and that we could talk to him about our work whenever necessary. Meanwhile, we were told that our contracts had been terminated because we couldn't continue working this way. We got some money as compensation, and it was deposited in our bank accounts. After a week, a place around 300 metres from our home was hit by an air strike. I was at home. I went out to see what had happened. The strike was really close to us, and our home was shaken by the strike. A stone fell on to our roof and almost hit me. I can't remember what happened after that because I was very frightened. My younger siblings were especially panicked, and the strike traumatised them for a long time. That day, I understood that the war would compromise the safety and security of

civilians, who would never be safe and protected from any kind of risks related to the war. […] Things went on like this until 29 November."[1] (Kibreab)

> "The next day, some people came over at 6 a.m. and told me my brother had been injured in a fight with someone on 3 November. He had been taken to hospital and admitted. […] I spent the next few days, from 4 to 7 November 2020, at the hospital. […] I understood from what I observed at the hospital that there was a war going on. I saw many injured soldiers, and because there wasn't enough room to accommodate all of them, they were scattered everywhere around the hospital compound. My brother had been injured in the head, and I was very shocked, but I was more shocked when I saw soldiers with serious injuries like losing hands or legs or with severe injuries to other parts of the body. […] There was no electricity at the hospital. They were using generators to perform operations, which were supposed to be turned off for some time to cool them down. My brother was lucky enough to be operated on by a specialist doctor, but others didn't get the chance to have the operation they needed because the generators were not working all the time, as they had to be turned off regularly. We were using our mobile torch and candles for light. While I was at the hospital, I really felt bad seeing injured soldiers lying on cardboard sheets because they couldn't get a bed. The soldiers who were being treated at the hospital were from both the Tigrayan forces and the ENDF. They were treated in separate spaces, which I think was for the safety of both sides." (Almaz)

"Basic services such as telephones, electricity, markets and banks stopped immediately after the war started. People were in a big panic, and were afraid they would lose everything. We all started to buy as much food as we could. During the first few days all the shops were closed. I also closed my own shop and stayed at home for some days […] The price of food rose unexpectedly. Like other people, I bought as much food as I could, using the money I had at hand, but I couldn't buy enough as I didn't have much money and the banks were closed." (Teklay)

> "In the week after the outbreak of the war, I started to store whatever I had, and I also bought more items, as the price of goods wasn't exaggeratedly high. Many people were storing food and other consumer items. I bought 50 kilos of *taff* for 3,500 *birr*, one kilo of *berbere** for 250 *birr*, 5 cans of *shiro* for 60 *birr* a can, 3 litres of oil for 70 *birr* a litre

[1] 29 November 2020, the day after the ENDF's takeover of the city.

> and 50 kilos of charcoal for 350 *birr*. Many of these items lasted until 9 December, when the PP forces took control. I also bought firewood in the expectation that the electricity might be cut off. I bought 50 kilos of wood for 150 *birr*. I bought sugar and coffee. I wanted to buy more items like soap and hair oil, but I couldn't because I didn't have enough money. I bought what I could with the savings I had from before the war." (Mebrihit)

The ENDF enters Mekelle: Confusion and helplessness

"Mekelle was occupied by the ENDF at the end of November. It was one of the days when Mekelle was being frequently attacked by heavy artillery. In the afternoon, I heard that the ENDF chief, Lieutenant-General Bacha Debele, had been captured, and people were rejoicing. Many people, including myself, didn't know what had happened, and it was only in the evening that I understood that Mekelle had been taken by the ENDF. I heard the news on the BBC. Later, everybody discovered that the TPLF had left the city earlier [...]. Psychologically, it was confusing and a bit hard to accept that the TPLF had left, because the news was about resistance and a TPLF victory." (Etsay)

> "I was at home when one of my friends came over and told me that Bacha Debele had been arrested during the fighting. We started going downtown to celebrate the event, but suddenly my friend told me we should return home. If we had gone downtown, we would have been under the shelling [...]. Just after that, the hill our home is located on was hit by a second round of shelling [...]. The next day, we heard that PP soldiers were in Mekelle. At first, we didn't believe it, but we saw it for ourselves the next day. We started walking towards the police station just to observe the situation. That area and the Milano Hotel nearby were full of PP soldiers. We were very frightened, and began to return home. Suddenly, one of the soldiers called us from behind. We replied '*yes, sir!*' in a frightened manner. We were just waiting for a shot to be fired, but he ordered us to buy him cigarettes from a shop. We bought them and returned home. After that day, I didn't dare to go out because our area was full of PP soldiers. Their camp was located near to our home. The police station and the Milano Hotel, which is also near our home, were also occupied by soldiers." (Kibreab)

"On the morning of the day the PP forces occupied Mekelle, there were heavy artillery strikes in Mekelle. I was watching them with my friends from a hill in an area called Endayesus. Lots of people were fleeing Mekelle, many of them carrying luggage and travelling alone. We were watching where the artillery shots were falling and the dust

blowing up in these places. I thought the targeted areas were *kebelle* 5 and Adiha. I watched until 12 p.m. or 1 p.m. and then went back home. The artillery stopped for some time and it rained in the afternoon, but there were artillery attacks in the afternoon as well. Military vehicles carrying heavy weapons were passing by. Then I heard from some people that Bacha Debele, the senior ENDF general, had been arrested. I was happy about this because I thought that first, it meant that the TPLF had won, and second, that it could be the end of the war. The people around me were also very happy. However, at about 7 in the evening I heard that in fact Mekelle had been captured by the ENDF. Until then I hadn't been aware of this. I called friends, but they didn't know anything about the capture of Mekelle either. I was confused until I saw the ENDF soldiers. The next day, I went out with my friends and the TPLF forces were still there. I saw a few of them passing through our neighbourhood on their way out of Mekelle. In the afternoon, I saw the ENDF commandos passing by in trucks. Their caps different from those of the other soldiers [...]. They were entering the city and going in the direction of the airport." (Menbere)

> "I was at home when the PP forces entered Mekelle. It was 28 November 2020. There was a heavy bombardment in the morning. It was a terrible day, I was very scared, but there was nowhere to go. I heard a lot of noise and cars passing through my neighbourhood. Many cars passed by in the afternoon. It was being said that Bacha Debele had been caught, and I was happy. The militias in our neighbourhood were firing their gun to express their joy, so I assumed our forces were still in Mekelle and that's what everyone else assumed, too. I got news that the PP forces had entered only the next day, the 29th, from people at church. I heard that the news about the capture of Bacha had been circulated so that people wouldn't be shocked, knowing that our forces were leaving the city. I felt very sad when our forces left, and the PP entered Mekelle because I knew we would be in trouble and wouldn't agree with them. I thought that challenges would arise. Everyone, including my children, felt bad about the situation. I was worried about myself and about people as a whole, because the war was going to continue. I didn't go outside my home that day—I only saw them on the 30th." (Mulu)

"It was a friend who told me the federal military had entered Mekelle. I thought the shelling just before they entered was our forces firing on the enemy. I never thought they would be defeated by the federal forces. I felt a deep sense of inferiority, and defeated and abandoned. I felt hopeless when I realised that federal, Eritrean, Amhara and all the other military forces of the country were collaborating to defeat the Tigrayan

people. My hatred towards Ethiopians and Eritreans increased. I never imagined they could unleash so much murder and destruction on our people and infrastructure." (Samuel)

After several months of intense fighting all over Tigray, the Tigrayan forces retook control of large areas of the region, including Mekelle.

The TPLF/TDF re-enters Mekelle: Confusion, joy, hope and mixed feelings

> "The days when Mekelle came under the occupation of the ENDF and the Tigray forces were similar for me, in the sense that both took place with many residents, like me, not knowing what was going on. I didn't know what was taking place in both cases. The day the ENDF left I had been in the office, and had left a bit earlier in the afternoon. I heard repeated gunshots from one side and many people were coming from downtown. Taxis and *bajajs* were also rushing towards the residential areas. I asked people what was going on but I couldn't get any information, because many people didn't know what was happening either. They were just rushing to get home. I was in a dilemma about which direction to take to go home. I took a taxi that was going in the direction of downtown, but people told the driver to turn back and he turned round and dropped us off. The passengers in the taxi entered a compound to stay there until things settled down. However, the situation stayed the same, so I went out and took another direction to get home. I started walking, and fortunately I met my neighbour and her son, who were walking home, so I joined them and we travelled home together. When I reached my neighbourhood, I understood that the ENDF had left the camp. The next day, the news was about people expressing their joy on the streets. I was very curious to see this and so I went into the street with my neighbour. The streets were full of people expressing their joy by singing, screaming and using car and motorbike horns. Many of the people in the crowd were holding a Tigrayan flag. The joy was astonishing, I have never seen such joy being expressed by a crowd. I wanted to watch the news about this, but the power was cut off for many days after the ENDF left Mekelle." (Etsay)

"One day before the TPLF reached Mekelle my mother called and told me that TPLF troops were in her village. She said they had spent the night in her house, and that they were on their way to Mekelle and would reach Mekelle at about 11.30 a.m. I was expecting the TPLF's return, therefore, and so I wasn't surprised when they entered Mekelle the next day. [...] People went out into the streets, and I went out with my children, too, because they wanted to see what was going on. People were dancing and cheering to express their happiness. There were also

a few TDF fighters with them. I had mixed feelings about the arrival of the TPLF because I wasn't sure what might happen next." (Almaz)

> "On 28 June 2020, I went to Aynalem to seek some traditional health services for my child. While I was on my way, somebody called the *bajaj* driver and told him to stay where he was because the ENDF were leaving. That afternoon, we were told, '*The TPLF are returning, so close your businesses and stay at home*.' I went out to call my brother, who was at work, and brought him home […]. It was just before my daughter's baptism. I was at home when the TPLF entered Mekelle on the Monday. Because of my recent delivery, I couldn't go out but I could hear people rejoicing outside. For almost a week, people celebrated to welcome the TDF soldiers. The community welcomed them very well, and people prepared bread, *siwa*, popcorn and water for them, using their car horns to express their happiness at their return." (Hana).

"The return of the TPLF was a time full of joy. Before they came back, leaflets were distributed in churches like Saint Michael and Saint George telling people the TPLF were coming back, so, I was expecting their return. At the same time, of course, I and other people were also sceptical about the messages. […] In the weeks before the return of *Weyane*, the PP forces had been collecting their mattresses and other stuff and leaving on buses. They were also burning garbage in their camp. This made me and other people sure that the TPLF were coming. One evening they were packing and rushing to leave, and I was really expecting the return of *Weyane*. On the morning of the next day, I heard from someone that the *Weyane* were walking towards Mekelle, and they entered the next day. Many people watched them, including myself. I felt so happy. People were giving them *injera*, water and bread. I watched what was going on, but I didn't get close to where they were staying." (Nigisti)

> "There was huge joy and happiness when our patriots (the TDF) came back. Everybody was very happy, and surprised that the Tigray government was restored so rapidly, even though most people had been expecting it. It was the same for our household. We were all relieved and happy, because we thought everything would quickly return to normal. Personally, I was neither a supporter of nor opposed to the TPLF, so I wasn't that emotional. But I was happy the ENDF had left our area." (Kibreab)

"I was at work that morning. Some PP soldiers came to our company and asked us to give them all trucks with drivers. We told them no drivers were available. They were in a hurry and angry. They tried to

take the trucks on their own, but most of them weren't working and were out of fuel. One soldier beat our mechanic in anger. We were all very frightened. Then we heard that the PP soldiers were leaving Mekelle because they had been defeated in the Alula operation in a battle at Qola Tembien. The city was very unstable, and people were frustrated by the situation that day. We were told to leave work. We went home on foot because there was no transport. Only the guards stayed on at the factory. Everything was odd, but we didn't realise the TPLF had come to Mekelle [...]. When we reached downtown, it was full of TPLF soldiers. We were very emotional and happy about this. We were also very hopeful that this would be the end of the war, and that we would never be frightened for our safety again. We started to live peacefully, without worrying that our children might be slaughtered or that PP soldiers might rape us. We started to sleep peacefully at night." (Akberet)

> "I was very happy when the TPLF returned to Mekelle. I have no words to express how happy I was. My neighbours and relatives were also very happy. We were so happy initially, hoping that things would return to normal." (Hiwot)

The return of the TPLF and Tigrayan forces to Mekelle (June 2021) marked the start of a period of blockade during which banking and communications services, as well as flights and regular transport routes, were cut off. No food or other goods entered Tigray other than on humanitarian convoys and through smuggling networks. In March 2022, a humanitarian truce was unilaterally announced by the federal government.

The "truce" of March 2022: A sort of respite?

"The truce brought no changes to my life or my household's, but I was happy that some food aid was allowed in, and some members of the community got aid, just enough to save their lives. Some medicines also got in, so a few sick people were saved. During that time, most people who were in need got food aid at least once, so in return, people were once again highly motivated to help maintain peace and security in their neighbourhoods. Women were actively involved, checking for newcomers by asking for ID cards. Men took turns during the night. Security improved in the city and there were fewer incidents of robbery and theft. On the other hand, the prices of goods didn't change, and continued to increase over time. We felt calmer, however, because the air strikes and drone attacks also decreased at that time. People were able to socialise and go to religious celebrations without fearing air strikes and drone attacks. Because things seemed to be improving and

getting back to normal, and as most people had been greatly affected by the war, we all expected that a peace agreement would be reached and that there would be complete peace." (Teklay)

> "It was good news to hear about the truce, as we were stressed as a people by the war and the economic situation caused by the blockade and siege. I remember that everyone around me was hoping for peace soon. However, the truce wasn't for real. It didn't solve people's economic problems, and it didn't stop the blockade as had been hoped. It only allowed a small amount of humanitarian aid to enter Tigray, which wasn't in any way commensurate with the problems on the ground. However, it was good to be relieved of the gunfire and air and drone strikes […]. It was a time of hope for total peace, and most people were positive about the truce, even though it couldn't solve their economic problem as such. We also got some food aid during that time as a household. However, we can't say it was very helpful, because the blockade continued to affect the economic situation, market prices and the availability of goods. There were also problems, and food aid and retail goods were blocked in Amhara and Afar regions even though the Ethiopian government had declared the truce. There was no improvement in terms of getting supplies of medicine and other medical items in Tigray, so the health situation went from bad to worse. Many people started dying of famine, malnutrition and lack of medicines in different parts of Tigray. This was very distressing for us as Tigrayans." (Kibreab)

War again: Anguish and despair

"My expectation was that both parties would negotiate and make peace. However, unfortunately the war broke out again. It was very painful, and people were very frightened of it because they already understood what it could take from them. Many young people were unwilling to join the fighting, unlike previously, so the government started to take young people by force. The city was empty, and no one was in the streets. It became like a desert because the young people were hiding to escape from being taken to fight. The economic situation was very bad. People's lives deteriorated. The price of everything increased dramatically. For instance, the price of edible oil increased to more than 2,000 *birr* for 5 litres, which was unaffordable for most members of the community. The worst thing was that it was very difficult to get even 50 *birr*. Humanitarian aid stopped totally due to the fighting. […] I was very frightened and distressed because I had two brothers in the TDF, one who has diabetes, and the other whose wife gave

birth while we were escaping the shelling […]. I worried about them constantly, especially that he one with diabetes wouldn't be treated if he was injured because of his chronic disease. However, thank God both are alive, because they were lucky." (Akberet)

> "We were […] very much hoping that a peace agreement would be reached. Nobody was ready to fight again because we had seen and experienced the consequences of war as a people. However, the unexpected happened—the war broke out again. This was the most hopeless time for us, especially as young people. It's very painful to experience fighting again when you were expecting a peace agreement. At that time, most young people like me didn't support the war. We had all had enough of the suffering, the trauma and all the bad experiences war brings. So, we were not at all in favour of this renewed fighting. People who had already experienced so much atrocity and hunger and the bad consequences of the blockade were no longer strong enough to cope with more war. What the people wanted was for the blockade to be stopped peacefully and an end to their suffering as a people. […] I personally was afraid of being separated from my family and that they would go hungry if the war continued for a long time because I could see people, including children, falling down from hunger in the streets, and children being separated from their parents and families due to the war." (Kibreab)

"I heard about the fighting erupting again on FM radio. […]. This was very distressing news that made me, and most people feel utterly hopeless. It wasn't what we had expected. As soon as the fighting started, electricity, transport and trade stopped and the blockade was back in full operation, which led to an increase in the price of most goods, and food in particular. […]. In the earlier period, some goods had been entering Tigray illegally, but when the fighting started again, transport and even contraband trade were totally blocked, leading to a sharp rise in the price of goods. […] Most people were confused by the fighting and couldn't support it, unlike earlier on. They were critically in need of food and peace, instead of supporting the war." (Teklay)

> "The outbreak of this new round of war was very sudden. Like others, I was thinking that peace would come, so it was shocking to hear that there was war again. After that, all the news and exchanges of information were about the war, and people began to be very worried when the TPLF was pushed back from the territories they occupied. They were also saying that they had left certain places. On the one hand, people were worried about what the federal and Eritrean forces would

> do if they captured Mekelle, and on the other, I was saying let these forces enter if that's the option, because we were also worried when the TPLF was in control with the forced recruitment." (Menbere)

"By the end of the conflict, people in Mekelle were worried, afraid the federal forces and their allies would take over Mekelle. The occupation of new areas was shocking because there had been news of victories by TDF before that, although many people who had been to the battlefield told about how the other forces were using human waves, and that the TDF was facing a shortage of many types of arms. People who lived in the areas occupied by the ENDF and in areas nearby were displaced to Mekelle, which was clearly visible in the city. When I found out about the advance of the forces, I was very worried. I tried to look for a temporary house so I could stay away from my current home, as it's located near a military camp. I also talked to my family about the possibility of moving to my mother's house. Even though I had been in the house near the camp while the ENDF was there during their earlier occupation in December 2020, I was now terrified to imagine the presence of the other allies because of the terrible stories I was hearing from people and the media. The media were reporting that the forces were planning to brutally harm people because treating them well, as they had done in the past, had not been helpful. One option was to move to my mother's house, which is relatively safer than mine. Finding another house within a short period of time wasn't feasible. Finally, the peace agreement was signed in the meantime, and I was relieved of my worries. This was one of the most terrible times during the conflict." (Etsay)

> "When the fighting erupted again, we feared the PP would capture Mekelle again. The news at that time was all about the areas captured by the PP forces that were marching towards Mekelle. […] Those who were living in camps were selling their property such as beds and wardrobes. Some moved into rented homes. The PP forces were very determined to capture Mekelle. What was terrifying was their plan; they were saying things like '*If we return, we won't leave anyone alive. We were cheated before*.' In one of the videos released on Tigrayan media, they said '*We will not leave anyone, even trees*.' Many people saw this, and everyone was shocked, and because of it some people planned to flee to other places. One of my neighbours said she would go to the outskirts of Mekelle, to an area called *Seba Kare*, but I didn't plan to go anywhere because I had been in a worse situation when I fled the first time. I had fled because the information about the PP forces was so terrible. We were told '*They will kill you, they will leave no one*.' So, I was expecting

that no one would be spared. But this was an exaggeration. I didn't face anything terrible when the PP forces were here. Many people were terrified, including me, but it proved to be just worries. It didn't happen that way. So, this time, I waited at home for whatever would happen." (Nigisti)

The Pretoria Agreement and its aftermath: Relief, but not quite normalcy

"Now I have peace in my mind. I have also gained weight and people have noticed. I had lost weight during the *Etswan Kiban** (blockade) and had become thin. People are telling me I have gained weight, and some have even asked me if I'm pregnant." (Nigisti)

"I first heard the news about the peace agreement from other people and I couldn't believe it, but then I was able watch the peace agreement process on TMH media. I was very happy, because it meant the gunfire would stop and there would be less death. I also thought it was a positive thing that basic services would resume and humanitarian aid would be allowed in. If it is implemented as agreed, I believe the peace agreement can benefit the people of Tigray and ensure that they get what they fought for. Most people saw the peace agreement positively, and expected that food aid would flow unhindered and basic services such as communications and banking services would resume completely. Most were facing hunger and could no longer meet their basic needs, and they expected things to improve rapidly thanks to the peace agreement. I personally benefited from the peace agreement. I was able to get food aid and cash from the bank, which was very helpful for solving my household's financial issues. We got food aid at the beginning, although it stopped completely after that. The peace agreement also allowed me to restart my business fully. The blockade was lifted and there was transport, so I was able to buy goods for my shop. This also led to the prices of most goods decreasing. Some people were also able to get financial support from relatives and friends living abroad or outside Tigray, because communications had returned and the banks were open. My daughter is also back at school.

However, there are still unresolved basic issues for Tigray. The IDPs are still living in tents and lack food and medicines. Children can't go back to school because most of the government schools are occupied by IDPs, especially from Western Tigray. Many schools are totally damaged and can't open. The rehabilitation and reconstruction of schools and other facilities is very much needed, and must be facilitated. Civil servants and pensioners still haven't received their salaries or pensions so far, and this has caused a crisis. Farmers can't access fertilisers, pesticides or improved seeds.

> The situation for merchants has improved. We have started to bring goods and materials directly from Addis Ababa, and we can sell them at a relatively fair price for the community. Step by step, our children seem to be healing from their trauma, and we expect this will improve further as they are going to school. I am also relieved that my daughter is going to school. I was able to improve my life and that of my household somewhat, as I am trading again and getting a stable income. However, I'm still distressed when I think about the lives of civil servants, who still can't feed their households. For them, it's still like blockade times. They are very distressed psychologically. […] There are so many issues that are still unresolved, but as a people we're thankful for the peace, and hope we can compensate for what we've lost by working hard and collaborating with one another, if peace is maintained and expands to all parts of Tigray." (Teklay)

"I heard about the peace agreement on the TV news. I was quite happy. But I wondered, '*Is there really going to be peace?*' I wasn't 100% sure; I was very sceptical. People I knew were feeling the same. On my way to the market, I once saw a woman who was cheering loudly and giving thanks for the peace agreement and waving her hands, and I wondered '*Is she mad?*' But then a woman who was nearby told me '*No, she's not mad. She's just expressing her happiness*.' Then I realised how extremely happy people were with the peace agreement. My understanding of the peace agreement was that people would go back to a normal life, livelihood activities would resume normally, civil servants would receive their salaries, and construction work would resume. However, while certain things improved after the peace agreement, it's not like I had expected. The most important result of the peace agreement for me is that peace came, and the war and air strikes stopped. This gave me relief. Over time, many things like banks, electricity and phone communications were restored. The road to transport goods also opened. This was very important, because lots of goods are reaching Mekelle, so immediately after the peace agreement many items became much cheaper, and although prices increased again somewhat later on, they are still much lower than used to be the case during the blockade. The prices of some goods even went back to their pre-war level. For instance, matches now cost 2 *birr*, which is the same as before the war. This is also the case with needles and dish-washing soap bars. Generally, prices have evolved in two ways. For some items, there was a decrease after the peace agreement and then some increase over time. This is the case with *taff*: it was 6,000-7,000 *birr* a quintal right after the peace agreement, but now it has increased to 7,000-9,000 *birr* a quintal

depending on the type of *taff*. In the case of other things, the prices went up. This includes an increase in rents. I've moved twice since the peace agreement, and prices are very high. I was paying 2,000 *birr* for the previous house but I wasn't comfortable in it, so I left to go to another house, which I found after searching for a very long time. I entered the new house two days ago. I've heard that the reason for the increase in rents is because there are many IDPs in the city." (Hiwot)

> "It was among the happiest moments of the past three years of my life. I thought every problem would be resolved and fade away following the peace agreement. However, it was good on paper, but it wasn't implemented as needed and promised. For instance, banks opened after a delay [...]. Currently, I've convinced myself that banking services are still not available because I can't access my money anyway. We've heard that the budget has been released, but civil servants haven't been paid back yet. Even the telephone services haven't started fully. It has only been recently that I've been able to talk to my mother on the phone. [...] The other good thing following the peace agreement is that goods started to reach Tigray, and the prices have fallen considerably. The price of *taff* has gone down from 17,000 *birr* to 6,000 *birr* since the peace agreement [...]. We've started eating *injera* made from *taff* again, as usual. [...] The most important thing is that after the peace agreement, we stopped hearing the sound of gunfire, air strikes and drone attacks. We want this to continue for the sake of our children. [...] I've already started working in the soft drinks factory again, and we've started production and distribution. However, production is very limited, and we can't distribute our products everywhere in Tigray due to security issues. [...] The other distressing thing is that after the peace agreement our landlord began asking us to pay the accumulated rent, but we only earn a small amount of money, and we give priority to buying food instead of paying the rent. I have around two years of accumulated rent." (Akberet)

"Mentally, I feel as if I'm getting back to normal and have some hope for the future, although there still remains a lot of uncertainty [...]. I realised that getting to a normal situation also takes time. For instance, I used to call friends and relatives to wish them a happy holiday, but I didn't feel like it at Christmas even though there was the mobile network. I don't call many people as I did in previous times, and I can't deny that the absence of the mobile network gave me some privacy and relief from wasting time and distractions. As many items have become available, it has made me feel that things are getting back to normal, but I am also asking myself how I can bring my income back to normal.

I've decided to quit my current job and look for a better one that would enable me to realise my dreams.

[…] It's been just a year since the peace agreement was signed between the Tigray Regional Government and the Ethiopian federal government. To be honest, it has brought about remarkable changes in some aspects of the lives of people in Mekelle city. However, this is only compared to the situation during the blockade. Otherwise, a lot of issues are not being addressed according to what is in the peace agreement. The psychological, social and economic problems caused by the war continue and are still causing suffering. This is also a time when the city is grieving and mourning the loss of mostly young people who died fighting to protect their people. There are also many young people who have been left with various kinds of disability, which hinders them from being productive citizens unless they are helped in many ways. The hopes I had soon after the peace agreement have not been fulfilled. This is because the underlying causes of the war are still there, and the attention given by national and international entities to rehabilitate Tigray has been unexpectedly low. The fact that there are emerging global crises competing for attention and resources also gives me little hope for the immediate restoration of Tigray." (Etsay)

> "I don't want even one person to be lost because of war, I don't like war, but I wasn't happy with the peace agreement because I thought it wasn't fair. The reason for my disappointment wasn't about disarmament or disengagement, which made most people angry. My disagreement came from the bit about the establishment of a transitional government in Tigray. This meant disrespecting people's voices and their votes for the TPLF in what was the fairest and mostlegal election ever. I was happy that the fighting stopped because it meant an end to deaths and people being injured directly because of the war. Electricity, communication and banking services resumed. However, I don't believe the Pretoria Agreement stopped the war completely. The silent killing of Tigray people has continued thus far, caused by hunger, a lack of medical services and a lack of shelter, […]. Many IDPs are dying of hunger and lack of medicines […]. After the peace agreement, I travelled to Wukro to visit my parents and brothers, although the price I was charged for transport wasn't fair. Generally, with the peace agreement, people recovered somewhat mentally and psychologically, including myself, and we started to think again about living, doing business and earning a living." (Samuel)

"The price of *taff*, oil and every other food item dropped significantly. Soft drinks, beer and juice became available and cheaper. People who

used to sell *siwa* started selling beer, and many people started drinking it again. Many people are consuming juice. I started to have soft drinks. The price of tea and coffee also decreased, and I am able to go out and have fun with my friends in cafes. I can also get cash from relatives so I can spend money on coffee, tea and soft drinks. I also bought clothes at a fairer price than before the peace agreement.

[…] After the peace agreement was signed, young people also started migrating abroad. It takes a long time and is also very costly to go to Europe and the USA, but many young people are without hope and don't want to live in Mekelle because the war can break out again at any time. Also, no job opportunities are being created for young people, and priority is being given to the TDF." (Menbere)

> "Another change after the peace agreement that helps us indirectly is that my husband is working and earning an income, because many people are withdrawing cash from the bank and building houses, and they need iron gates and other metal things. My husband works at a metal workshop, and they have more work on gates and fences. The goods I can sell at the shop are cheaper, and my husband also has more income, so I can buy many more items for my shop. It's not that I want to grow and improve; it's merely for survival. What I get from selling goods at the shop I'm using for my daily consumption. The income from the shop is less than it was before the war, because a lot of shops opened during the war and there is competition, whereas before the war I was the only one in the neighbourhood and I had lots of customers. People's behaviour has also changed. Now many people prefer to buy goods in bulk because it's cheaper. They have also learnt to buy from the main market in the city centre. The *Etswan Kiban* (blockade) pushed people to do this, to buy things in bulk and from the main market at lower prices to save, even when the difference is small. The customers I have now are people who buy items in small quantities because they don't have money or people who need something urgently and buy a small quantity until they go to the main market." (Nigisti)

"I've recently started selling cactus fruit, and it's profitable. […] I also sell roasted and fresh maize on the street, which makes me about 300-400 *birr* from a quintal of fresh maize. […] Both cactus fruit and maize come from rural areas outside Mekelle. I was also selling cactus fruit last year and getting an income, but this year is better than last year. People are no longer scared, and the cactus fruit has grown well, and is bigger than last year. Also, there weren't many people buying last year and it was also more difficult on the supply side. It was wartime and people didn't feel safe to go and pick the cactus fruit from the fields,

and the militia were threatening them. This year, people are earning an income and they can afford to buy the fruit." (Mebrihit)

> "I was so happy about the peace agreement; peace was what we were asking for in our prayers and *mihilela**. I was so happy, my family were happy, and I think everyone was happy too. A lot of things have changed since the peace agreement. There is peace, and nothing is more important than peace. Peace is the priority. That said, although there are a lot of improvements, there's nothing that's improved poor people's lives. Like me for instance, nothing's improved in my life." (Mulu)

"I want the 'Genocide of Tigray' to be recognised, and those responsible to be punished according to international criminal law. Finally, justice should be assured for all, and that will compensate our people for what we lost in the past three years." (Teklay)

Enduring and surviving

In this section, we read narratives of pain and hardship at an individual level, and how the storytellers tried to manage it.

The storytellers are urban dwellers who spent most of the war in the city. They all experienced the unpredictability of the war in their daily lives. Here, they tell us how their bodies and their minds became distressed, anxious and hopeless.

Shelling is one of the most traumatic experiences they narrate. Most people were not able to rely on any previous experience of it. It affected neighbourhoods and their inhabitants directly and was so completely arbitrary—today there, tomorrow here? From a more constant and silent perspective, the loss of income and any kind of resources and services put people's lives at risk, especially employees and vulnerable people. All this led to the mental distress many of the storytellers reflect on.

Findings ways of surviving and coping is a direct answer to the experience of hardship, so what mattered the most was finding a shelter during the bombings, thinking about solutions outside Mekelle, taking advice so as to make decisions about fleeing or staying; finding food and alternative sources of income; and facing the multiple scarcities (electricity, water, goods, etc.). For some, the church offered a source of relief from mental distress (alongside other things like talking among neighbours, gardening, support from outside of Tigray—themes that are addressed later in Part II).

Experiencing an air strike, finding a shelter, taking advice on where to go

> "The airstrikes were quite disturbing and terrifying. I was even disturbed by noises that sounded like jets. In one instance, I had a terrible experience in relation to an air strike. I was at my grandmother's house, and after a while I heard the horrific noise of a jet, so I went inside. This was just because I was thinking that being in the house

> might be better, even though it has no protection, as the roof is only corrugated iron. After a while, I went outside to look at the sky and saw a lot of flying objects, which I thought were bombs from the jet, so I went inside again, feeling hopeless. I started screaming. My grandmother was praying. I thought the flying objects in the sky would fall straight on the house I was in, and I was waiting to die. After a while, I heard a huge sound of bombing on a nearby area, a few metres from my grandmother's house. After that there was no more noise. I went out to see what had happened, I met some people who were standing outside pointing towards a huge column of dust blowing in to the sky. It seemed to be quite close to the neighbourhood. I walked some more to try to see, but it wasn't in the area where the dust seemed to be rising from. I went back to my grandmother's house and carried on talking to the neighbours, some of whom said that they had seen the jet closely as it was flying at a low altitude. I understood later that the flying objects I had seen were unsuccessful shots to bring down the jet. The bombed area was televised; the bomb had been dropped between the stadium and Saint George Church. After any air strike the usual questions were where it was, did it harm people or anything and was it shot down. Air strikes were frequent but in some cases, they missed their targets, which was said when the bombs were found to have been dropped on empty areas." (Etsay)

"When the TPLF was in charge, thefts were not a threat. What concerned me and everyone else was the air strikes. My children panicked and cried when jets came. One incident I can't forget about the jets was when I was going back home after fetching water. I was carrying a 20 litre jerrycan on my back when I heard the noise of a jet. Many people ran to hide, but I carried on walking. However, the jet dropped a bomb and I was shocked, thinking it had been dropped on my house. I dropped the jerrycan instantly and ran to the closest house. I saw many children coming out from under the bed, and a woman told me they'd been hiding there to escape from the air strike. After that, I went home to check on my children, and then went back again to pick up the jerrycan where I'd left it. It was broken, but I took it home." (Hiwot)

> "That day I had gone to Trinity Church early, but when I arrived a lot of people, including those at the *mihilela,* were leaving to go home, so I went to the market to buy a coffee pot. It was Monday, a market day. A jet with dark paint on its nose flew by, followed by a terrifying noise, and it almost touched the ground somewhere in the market. I screamed '*My children!*,' and tried to hide. I thought I was dead. People

were saying it was a *Shabia* plane. A militiaman went upstairs in an unfinished multi-story house to shoot at the jet, which was easy to target, but lots of people shouted '*Don't shoot!*,' as it would have been a disaster if the jet had been shot down and exploded there. There were lots of people because it was market day. Many traders dropped their cash while they were fleeing. Even the thieves were afraid, so the traders would have been able to find their money again when they returned, but then the jet came back before they had time. People were thinking it had gone, but then it dropped a bomb on an area called Enda Giorgis, making a huge noise. It dropped the bomb just as I was about to buy my coffee pot, so I left everything and just ran back home. When I got home the 100 *birr* I was holding in my hand to pay for the pot was still there, but I didn't even remember I was holding it. My children were very worried about me because it was being said that the place that had been bombed was where I had gone. Many people were going in the direction of the bombed area to look at it. It was an unforgettable day, and I still remember that moment whenever I go to the market." (Mulu)

"There was information that they were going to attack us with heavy artillery. There were also loud noises, and houses were shaking. I thought we were going to die. People in the neighbourhood were saying that it would be better to go to church because it had an underground space. I went to the church with my children. I was the only one of the residents in the compound who did. My husband and the other men didn't follow because they had to protect the houses from thieves. The men also prepared a safe area for themselves in the sewage tunnel in front of the compound. They opened the tunnel and cleaned, washed and smoked it and kept it open so that they could go there when heavy weapons were fired. There were a lot of people at the church. Almost everyone from the neighbourhood was there, with packed food. I had taken *injera* and water, and gave them to my children. I only stayed there for two hours, from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. I returned home at 3 p.m. because my children were disturbing me, and my oldest child was crying '*Take me to my father*' […]. I only went to the church for protection on that day." (Sindayo)

"I saw a lot of cars carrying mattresses and other stuff travelling out of Mekelle. This made me seriously contemplate this option too, and I thought about going out of Mekelle to rural areas. I discussed the issue with my relatives. Many of them said there was no guarantee of safety even if I left Mekelle. My uncle told me that there was no need to go to rural areas because Tigray forces had been seen in one of the areas where I might possibly go with my family. One of my relatives

> also invited me and my family to go to their place, and told me there were a lot of people from Mekelle with their cars who were staying in the rural areas […]. My husband also said that it was better to stay at home, or that at least I could go to my relative's house in Mekelle. My house was near a military camp, which was another source of concern for me. I prepared various types of roasted grains in case there was a need to leave home urgently if things got worse. Finally, I decided to stay at home. The reason I wanted to discuss this with other people was mainly to know what was going on and how necessary it was to go to rural areas. Otherwise, I didn't have a strong desire to migrate to the rural areas, which entails travelling long distances on foot. I'm not good at this, particularly climbing mountains." (Etsay)

"I decided by myself to flee because of the air strikes, and I was afraid of accidentally harming my baby's bones when I lifted him up to run. I discussed it with my husband, and we decided together that it would be better if I left. My husband stayed in Mekelle because his parents were here." (Nigisti)

> "My younger siblings asked us to leave Mekelle because many of our neighbours had fled to rural areas before the occupation by the ENDF forces. We discussed it with our parents, but we didn't think it would be helpful or safe to flee from Mekelle because the PP soldiers were moving towards Mekelle from all directions. Basically, our father refused, and we said that he trusted God and that we would be protected. I preferred not to go out to escape from the soldiers. I remember that I never left the house for two weeks or more." (Kibreab)

"Our household was divided. I wanted to stay at home, but my wife disagreed and wanted to move out because there were rumours that the city would be attacked by air strikes and shelling. This is why many people were spending the day outside Mekelle and returning in the evening. My wife did this too. She took the kids with her to a place called May Alem, near Mekelle, in my brother in-law's Sino truck. She stayed there for some three days, but the kids couldn't calm down. They were disturbed and very frustrated, and couldn't get enough sleep at night. So, she started going there for the day and returning to the city in the evenings. But I decided to stay and never left Mekelle." (Teklay)

Losing income, diversifying income sources

> "My job was also terminated again and I had no income at all, so I couldn't afford to live as I had before. For instance, I completely

> stopped eating outside, and I sometimes skipped meals.[2] I remember that most of the time, I only ate once or twice a day thanks to the support I was getting from friends and relatives. Previously, I used to eat whenever I felt hungry. I also changed what I was eating. I was drinking a lot of *tahini*[3] instead of eating *injera*, which was too costly. Inflation was very high at the time because goods couldn't get in from Addis Ababa because of the war and the blockade. […]. It was a very challenging time for civil servants, including teachers like me. There was no way to access money. I stopped paying my rent on time. Luckily, this didn't cause me too much stress because my landlady is a very good person; she even gave me food sometimes.
>
> I personally faced economic hardship. I am just a teacher, and it was difficult not getting a salary for two years. I had to completely change the way I lived to cope with the situation. I completely stopped eating outside. Sometimes I just drank *tahini* with a small piece of bread as a meal. I never went out after 8 p.m., unlike the way I used to live before the war. Throughout the war I never bought any new clothes or shoes, and just lived with those I got from friends. My daily life and status deteriorated badly, and I even visibly lost weight." (Samuel)

"The shop wasn't working because we didn't have cash to buy goods. The goods I had in store were taken by the PP soldiers, who didn't even pay me for what they took. I needed all the money I was getting from my shop for my daily life, and couldn't manage to save anything. The soldiers used to ask for something and not pay. For instance, if they asked for *areqe* or cigarettes, the only thing they knew was to give an order: '*bring!*' When I asked them to give me money they didn't. They even took photos of me on their mobile phones to scare me. Many of the ones who took *areqe* and cigarettes didn't pay. There were also some soldiers who did pay. The ones who took eggs usually did. My husband wasn't working at the time because there was no metal to work with. Our income was much lower than what we used to earn before the war.

[…] In peacetime, our household's income came from my shop and the earnings of my husband, who had a job working for private employers. We used to cover all our daily expenses from these two sources of income. But now, there was no income from the shop, and my husband wasn't getting any income either. We were using what we had saved before the war and what our relatives gave us. Unfortunately,

[2] The storyteller is a man who lives alone. Like most Tigrayan men, he probably rarely cooks for himself. In normal times, he would regularly eat out, in the many small eateries preparing a couple of dishes every day for this kind of customers. [3] A local flour made from roasted barely used as a drink mixed with water and sugar.

we had to use all our savings we had made for housing work in an area called *Seba Kare*.

[…] I stopped working at the shop when the PP were in control and didn't start again during the Weyane time. My husband wasn't working either. The total lack of income made our hardship worse. Sometimes I only gave two pieces of bread to my husband for dinner. I was also going to my aunt's house and helping her with domestic work, and I ate there. I started to do this during the 'PP time' when I was facing a shortage of lack to the point where I couldn't walk steadily. I was cleaning taff as a source of income. I hadn't known how to do this before, but I had no choice. It was tough, because I had my son with me, and my aunt used to get angry when he spilt taff, and told me to hold him. Then I became angry too, and hit him." (Nigisti)

> "Before the war I sold food, and I carried on like that for some time. My customers were daily labourers who were paid on a weekly basis. However, when the news spread that the PP forces were advancing toward Mekelle they left for their rural homelands when the PP were about 2 hours away from Mekelle by car. They went on foot because they were afraid of being caught by the PP forces, and anyway there was no transport. But they left without paying for the last days of food they had taken. Before the war, the father of my youngest daughter used to help me with the income he made from working as a carpenter. At that time, he was living with his brothers, whom he was helping. But after the war broke out his job ended. Before the war he was giving me 1,500 *birr* a month, but he didn't give me anything after he left for the countryside. He also never came back here." (Mebrihit)

"During this period *[when Mekelle was under federal control]* my husband didn't have a job. I started to make *dantel** and do basketry to make an income, as we were facing a gap to satisfy our family's basic needs. I was making a good profit, which helped me cover my consumption needs. The profit was better back then, because enough inputs were coming from other parts of Ethiopia at inexpensive prices, the banks were open, and people were also able to buy handicrafts.

[…] but I was forced to stop as I was making less and less profit over time and in the end it was pointless. I was making more profit during the ENDF occupation because conditions were better at that time. This changed when the TPLF controlled Mekelle, because there wasn't enough supply of inputs. Also, the number of people who could buy handicrafts also fell because the banks closed, and people didn't have access to cash. This made me finally stop my handcraft work." (Almaz)

"Most people's income fell due to the war. For instance, my income went down because I worked with electrical goods and there was no power, so I couldn't sell most electronic items. I shifted to selling solar lights, moving here and there, to cope with this, but I still wasn't able to get the same income as before. There was a range of reasons for this. First, I had to take my products from home to the shop and back at night every day because of the lack of security. In addition, whereas previously my household and I were living with our parents and didn't have to pay rent, when the war started, we rented a separate house, which cost us 5,000 *birr* a month.

[…] As a household we sold our property and goods at a very low price to be able to afford our food and basic needs. For instance, my wife had a haircutting machine that we sold at half its initial price. We bought it for 150,000 *birr* but sold it for 72,000 *birr* just to buy food. This economic crisis is still affecting us as a household now, as we are facing challenges to recover economically. My wife sold a lot of other haircutting equipment, thinking she would just buy it again when things got better. But she still hasn't been able to, so she's still unemployed. I also sold some of the electronic goods I had in my shop at a reduced price in the open-air market to cope with our economic crisis and shortage of food. Generally, my income as a trader decreased and I wasn't able to continue trading as I needed to due to the lack of money." (Teklay)

"Life was expensive, so I sold all the silver jewellery I had, with earrings and necklaces, to buy food. I had bought it for 10,000 *birr* and sold it for only 3,500 *birr*. People always exploit you when you're having problems—they know that people with problems will sell their jewellery cheaply. Some of my neighbours also sold their silver jewellery like me. I know women who sold their beds and kitchen cabinets to pay their rent. Selling property became a common thing, especially to be able to buy food and pay the rent. One neighbour sold her TV for this reason." (Mebrihit)

Lacking everything, managing food scarcity, multiple coping strategies

"I was in trouble because of the water and electricity being cut off. We had to get water from water-sellers who brought it on trucks or in cars. I also had to use a traditional oven to bake *injera* and the smoke caused me problems. Firewood was expensive and scarce. I had to go and search for it in the surrounding hills and other areas. I had to wait a long time for the traditional oven because a lot of people were using it, as it was communal. I was also forced to live in the dark: there was no electricity,

and it was expensive to use candles. It was 23-27 *birr* for one candle, so we had to use them economically. I ate dinner early when there still was daylight and then went to bed. I stayed outside to use the natural light until it got dark, and only used candles for a short time, mostly to go to bed. My family had stomach problems caused by the water we bought from the water-sellers. It was expensive and maybe not clean. I didn't know where the sellers were getting it from: it could have been from a river or another unsafe source, but I just needed to get some. I wasn't able to wash my clothes at the right times because of the water shortage.

Phone, electricity, internet and bank services all stopped. Phone communications were very important for asking about other people's well-being, as well as for my husband's work, as he was being called to do income-generating things. Having no phone service affected his income. The electricity cut-off also affected me, because there was no milling service. At home no light I used candles, which was expensive—one candle cost 35 *birr*, up from 10 *birr* in the past. I didn't have enough light in the evening. My husband was charging his phone from generators, and we were getting light from a mobile torch, which used to last for about two days. It was also taking a long time to bake *injera* because lots of people were using the traditional oven, whereas before I used it any time I wanted. There was also no water, which affected me. It used to come once a week or once a month. There was a car with a water tank, and we bought 80 litres for 4-6 *birr*. Sometimes we bought spring water. There was also water from a well, which we had to pay for. I went there when there was a long queue at the spring. I was using the water from the spring to drink, after boiling it, and water from the well to wash goods and clothes. There were long queues at the spring and the well, and people who went there earlier were exhausting the supply. The well needed time to refill. I used these sources for a long time. At times, tap water was nowhere to be found for more than a month, and at times there were shifts for getting water. There was a time when I had to dress my child in dirty clothes because we had no water. During the rainy season I also collected rainwater and used it to wash clothes and dishes and to prepare food. It was very helpful, although I didn't use it to prepare the dough for *injera* because rainwater spoils *injera*. There was also water leaking from a tunnel in my neighbourhood, which many people used to water plants in the garden, whereas I used to use it to wash some of my things. I used to go early before people muddied it, so I got clean water by letting the dirt settle. (Nigisti)

"During the war there were no medicines for chronic illnesses or HIV. My brother was HIV positive, but the tablets he was taking weren't available, so he took something else, but his illness got worse and he died. What he was using came after the peace agreement was signed. A neighbour who was also HIV positive and couldn't find her usual medicine changed to another type and became paralyzed. She's better now, but she's not able to walk properly. Now she gets the medicine she was using earlier on, before the war. Both types of medicine were provided by government health facilities." (Mebrihit)

> "My son became underweight, and he was given *Plumpy'Nut* by an NGO.[4] I got it from the Kasech Health Centre. He was registered to get it for six months, but in the end, I only got it once. I asked why it had been stopped and they told me new supplies hadn't arrived." (Nigisti)

"I was also affected by the huge price increases, especially for food. Oil was one of the most expensive foods items, and was really not affordable. I only use liquid oil, and not fat, for health reasons, and it was even more expensive. When the oil prices went up, I avoided using it for some time, or only used a little to make what I had last longer. There were also times when I used ground sesame instead of oil. I consumed the sesame in two ways, either putting it in stews instead of oil or mixing it directly with water and having it with *injera*. […] *Berbere* was another food item I wasn't able to afford. I was using a little bit for each serving, and for some time I didn't use it at all. When I bought green pepper, I dried and ground it, and used it as a chili pepper to prepare stew. When I got bored with it, I just sprinkled it on *injera* and ate it like that. […] Shiro was also one of the most expensive items, so I wasn't able to buy it for some time. I only bought some when my daughter gave me money to. […] The price of firewood also increased over time, as electricity was frequently cut off for longer periods of time. I bought firewood even though it was very expensive, because I had no choice. Some people were using cow dung instead of wood, but I didn't because it causes a kind of smoke that's not good for my eyes." (Sindayo)

> "Over time our economic situation became a challenge. […] Economically speaking, life was full of hardship. No goods were reaching Tigray because the roads were closed. The price of *taff* went up. I asked a man I used to by *taff* from, and he told me it was 16,000 to 17,000 *birr* a

[4] Plumpy'Nut is a brand of ready-to-use therapeutic food specially formulated for the nutritional rehabilitation of children from six months of age and adults suffering from severe acute malnutrition. It is the most commonly found nutritional supplement in Ethiopia.

> quintal, but I had to borrow money to buy it, so I told him I couldn't afford it and asked him to look for a cheaper option. He got me *taff* for 10,000 *birr* a quintal and I bought that. Powdered detergent, macaroni, pasta, *berbere* and coffee were also quite expensive [...]. I was under financial stress because I had no income. I couldn't buy salt, *berbere* or soap. Before the war I used to drink coffee three times a day, but I had to stop when it reached 500 *birr* a kilo. I didn't drink coffee for two years. Still today I only drink coffee occasionally—I can't afford it three times a day, or even daily. I wasn't buying clothes for me or my children, and we had to mend our clothes and shoes. We minimised our consumption of everything because of the financial constraints we were facing. I was eating *injera* without stew. There were times when I couldn't buy salt, powdered detergent or soap to bathe or wash clothes [...]. I don't know how I coped with these hard times." (Mulu)

"I was buying oil in small amounts and there were also many times when we didn't use it. For instance, in 2022, I didn't use it from July to October. I only used the oil that was provided as part of the food aid. There were also times when we didn't bake *injera* because I didn't have any *taff*. In 2022, my family was going to be without food. A friend told me you could get paid to carry harvested crops, but when I went there, I couldn't do it. One man I knew from before told me to pick up what was left on the ground in the field, and I got 9 kilos of wheat that way. That day we ate it roasted for dinner, but the next day I told my daughter to have it ground, and she baked *qicha* and we ate it. I carried on like this, and between October and December 2022 I got another 30 kilos of wheat." (Mebrihit)

> "*Berbere* became expensive, so I wasn't buying it. I used turmeric instead on a daily basis. I was also using half the salt I used to before the war, as the price reached 200 *birr* a kilo which I couldn't afford. I was buying salt without iodine for 20 *birr*. People say it causes goitre, but I had no choice and so I used it." (Nigisti)

"Coffee was also expensive. Once I went to the market to buy half a kilo of coffee for 300 *birr*, but I could only buy half that, a quarter of a kilo, for that money. The price of coffee continued to rise steadily to its highest level. In earlier times I used to buy a kilo of coffee at a time, but at that time I was forced to buy it in smaller amounts, and to use what I bought efficiently. When the PP were here and in previous times, I drank coffee twice a day but when the price rose so much, I started only drinking it once a day." (Hana)

> "Coffee was expensive, and I couldn't afford to buy it. I used what I had, mixing it with roasted barley and *moqmoqo** (root herb) to thicken it, with only one spoon of coffee for two spoons of the barley and *moqmoqo* mix. I did this for about five months, but then coffee reached 800 *birr* a kilo so I stopped drinking it, but I became ill, so I started using only a small amount. Before the war I used to drink coffee three times a day, in the morning, at midday and in the evening, but at that time I was only drinking it once a day, and mixing it with barley and *moqmoqo*. Since the peace agreement I've started to drink pure coffee again." (Mebrihit)

"Exchanging information about plants in our garden was also a form of collaboration, particularly during the rainy season. The condominium residents had been planting vegetables since April 2022, but they added more land and sowed grains and oil seeds. In my case, my husband took a piece of land in front of a condominium and sowed flaxseed with his neighbours. We also had a vegetable garden during the rainy seasons. There was cabbage, Swiss chard, green pepper, lettuce, haricot beans, kale*, potatoes and other thinks. We had vegetables, which we ate ourselves, and I also used to give chard to our relatives and neighbours. The varieties of vegetables decreased during the dry season because watering them from the condominium was a bit difficult. Having a garden was good not only for food but also in terms of the psychological satisfaction I used to get when the plants were growing." (Etsay)

> "I started growing vegetables so I could at least afford food for me and my sons. It wasn't only me: all my neighbours who had a piece of land started to grow vegetables as a trend. The *kebelle* leaders also started to encourage us by visiting us and providing professional advice from agricultural experts. Mekelle University was also able to sell seeds at a cheaper price for people to grow vegetables such as lettuce and kale (*costa*). We also grew green peppers, tomatoes and pumpkins by buying seeds from the market. This had several advantages. First of all, vegetables were very expensive so it was good that I could use them from my garden. For instance, I totally avoided buying edible oil and onions for some time. I only used the vegetables that were available in my garden. I was just buying salt and frying the vegetables, and adding salt to serve to my children. The second advantage was that it made me escape from thinking and worrying about the situation too much because I was busy in the garden. The final benefit is that most people are still growing vegetables even now. We have adopted it as a habit. Most of the time, our challenge was the lack of water." (Akberet)

"In those days, our people's economic situation began to worsen because of a fully-fledged blockade that became even more strict after the TPLF's reoccupied Mekelle […]. This also had a negative impact on our household. Our income, which had previously fallen by 50%, fell to zero at that time. It was very distressing and painful, especially for me as the first-born of the family not to be able to do anything to solve my family's economic problems. To address this, I was forced to make very difficult decisions. We never had accepted food aid before because my father refused it on principle, and we thought our economic situation wasn't bad enough to force us to take it. However, after the TPLF returned to Mekelle, we had to accept food aid, and we used it to solve our food problem. My mother started to prepare *injera* by mixing *taff* with the wheat we got as food aid. In normal times, we never ate *injera* made from any other crop than *taff*. We adults adapted to this rapidly, but it was difficult for the younger siblings to get used to eating odd *injera*. I was also forced to sell things I had bought after saving money for a long time. I also had to take some money from my savings. […] However, even all of this wasn't enough to solve our economic problems, so I borrowed some money from friends who were in a better economic situation at the time, and I got involved in contraband, which is illegal in normal circumstances. In this way, we were able to buy food sometimes. My friends' support was also essential for getting me access to this trading opportunity. I worked in the business for five months, and we were able to afford to survive as a family by supporting each other. Some close relatives also lent me additional money so that I and my household could at least survive, although with a lower quality of life. We used to minimise our consumption of some food items, such as edible oil and red pepper, and only use common food items like *injera* and *shiro* instead of having a variety of different food. Even though we were able to afford to live in survival mode, we couldn't pay our rent for two years." (Kibreab)

> "The food items I remember were very expensive were *taff* and oil, although all food became expensive. In the cases of *taff*, there were time when I replaced it with wheat and used that for *injera*. I felt very sad to have to prepare *injera* with wheat instead of *taff*, because it was tough to make good *injera* out of wheat. On one occasion, I cried when I was trying to bake *injera* with wheat and I wasn't able to bake good *injera*. I also reduced the amount of food the family was eating so what was available would last longer. Oil was one of the food items that became very expensive, even though it's needed for all food preparation. For some months we were forced to eat *injera* without stew or oil, and ate

it with just some green pepper and salt. There were also times when I used sesame and flaxseed to replace the oil, but these seeds also became very expensive after a while. Clothes and shoes for adults and children became very expensive and I couldn't afford to buy them. The children were using old clothes and shoes. Hygiene and sanitation materials like soap and shampoo were also very expensive, and I had to face a shortage of them. Before the war I also used to give my children food like macaroni, pasta, wheat flour, juice, eggs, milk and *taff*, but I couldn't after the war started. I also stopped buying toys like balls and other things for them [...]. My children also said, *'It doesn't taste good,'* when I gave them *injera* made from wheat. They also didn't like to eat the bread prepared from the brown wheat provided by the aid.

To cope with these expensive prices, I limited myself to what I could afford. Coffee was one of the items that became very expensive, going up to 1,000 *birr* a kilo. I was buying small amounts of coffee in a group with two or three women, as I couldn't afford to buy even the smallest amount of coffee offered by retailers. Sugar was also a very expensive item, and for a very short period of time I replaced it with candy. I was using one piece of candy for two cups of coffee, most often crushing it a little bit and adding it to the coffee and stirring it. Sometimes I put the candy into the coffee directly and waited for it to melt, but that took time, and I preferred the first method.

Dish washing soap was too expensive, so I replaced it with ashes. I used them to wash everything, including dishes, pots and other utensils. It was effective, but not as good as soap. I used ashes throughout the period of TPLF's control of Mekelle, for more than a year. I started to use soap again after the peace agreement was signed as the price went down. The price of soap also made me change how often I washed clothes from every two weeks to once every two months. This meant we were wearing our clothes without washing them for a much longer time.

Wood and charcoal are indispensable, but they were also too expensive, and I was forced to replace firewood with cow dung. It was relatively cheaper (2 *birr* per piece of dung), but you need a lot of cow dung to bake *injera* and bread, whereas firewood was 900 *birr* a quintal but lasted for a long time, depending on how it was used. I used dung for more than a year, throughout the period when the TPLF controlled Mekelle. It produces a lot of smoke and it irritated my eyes, and it was suffocating, but it was the cheapest option. I also went up into the hills to collect firewood, but I was only able to get small sticks. I collected firewood like this for about two months with my neighbours. I didn't have anything to replace charcoal, so I reduced my use significantly

from 50 to 25 kilos a month. Matches to light the charcoal were also expensive, so I used fewer of them, burying the fire under ashes and keeping it going the whole day and even into the next one." (Hiwot)

"I received food aid once. It was 45 kilos of wheat, 1.5 litres of oil and 4.5 kilos of peas. It was supposed to be for three family members. I sold it and bought other food items. In those days I wasn't sure about eating wheat that came as government aid, so I sold it and bought wheat flour to replace it." (Hana)

"Shoes also became very expensive. Even the previously cheap plastic shoes became expensive, up to 600 *birr*. Back then I had some car tyres, so I went to a shoemaker and asked him to make 3 pairs of shoes for three people. I paid 300 *birr* for the three pairs. The material was mine, so I only paid for his skilled work. I'm still using these shoes, and haven't been able to buy any others yet.

I was getting money from what my son was earning. It wasn't enough, but it was better than nothing. On my side, I didn't have any meaningful work at the time, so I started selling maize on the streets and using what was left over for our food. I was making a good profit from this. I dried the maize I hadn't sold and added wheat, and using it to make *qicha* for my children. I did this for seven months, until the price went up. Also, young people stopped going out because they were being arrested to be taken to the front, so at some stage they stayed at home, closed their doors and didn't go out anymore. Another reason why I stopped the business was that I was short of cash. Then I baked *injera* for people for about five months. I was baking 400 *injera* a day and making 2,200 *birr* a month. It was a small amount of money, and I couldn't even buy 25 kilos of *taff* with it, but it was better than staying idle. But after some time, I felt a pain in my breast, and I stopped. I was given priority when aid came because I was poor and a female head of household. I received aid three times in that period for four family members. One round included 60 kilos of wheat, 4 litres of oil and 6 kilos of peas. The development team leaders were taking 4 kilos of wheat as a contribution. I also planted vegetables during that period—Swiss chard, green peppers and tomatoes. Having a garden was useful for me and the family. We could have Swiss chards the whole year, and I prepared it twice a week. I also gave some to my siblings. Having vegetables from my garden helped me save the money I would have used to buy them. I took care of the garden with my children, and I'm still using it. This year I planted maize. Many people in my neighbourhood planted vegetables even though the piece of land they had was very small.

I was doing 'safety net' work,[5] cleaning roads and sometimes planting seedlings, and getting a monthly salary for it, which I withdrew from the bank. I was getting 1,500 *birr* for five family members. This stopped when the TPLF returned, and even now with the peace agreement I'm not getting it. Comparatively, things were better then *[when Mekelle was under federal control]*: I had the 'safety net' income, and prices were relatively cheaper. Also, my son was washing cars and giving me money from his income, and this too was significant for the family. He was already doing this before the 'PP time,' but his income even increased during that time." (Mebrihit)

"Also, at some point my husband bought plastic shoes and planned to join the fighting, which made my stress worse. He said '*What will I do here? It's just making the shortage worse.*' He thought that being away would help us. But I rejected his decision, and he accepted it." (Nigisti)

Mental distress, going to church

"On Hidar 18, 2013 EC (27 November 2020), some people called and told me that the federal military forces had been seen in Quiha, which is very near Mekelle. At that moment, I totally lost hope. The next day I saw them in *ḳebelle* 18 with my own eyes. Many people's morale plummeted when the PP occupied Mekelle. We were scared of atrocities and mistreatment, so I was very emotional when we saw them for the first time, I wanted to kill them all. However, I had nothing, and I couldn't do anything at the time." (Teklay)

"During the war, with all the stressful moments I was experiencing, I often forgot things like where I had put stuff. Once, I had something in my hand and I was nagging my children to find it. Then my oldest daughter noticed and asked '*Are you OK? You already have it in your hand.*' I also used to spend sleepless nights thinking about the war and its consequences, dreaming of being in the battlefield with weapons firing at me." (Hiwot)

"I used to feel so distressed to see the injured TDF fighters! I didn't express it outwardly, however, as it would have made them feel bad

[5] Before the war a federal social protection program called "productive safety net" was implemented in selected rural and urban locations, including Mekelle. Under this program able-bodied people work for a number of days every month on various kinds of public works and receive a small remuneration for their work (in cash or in kind/food). This was stopped when the war broke out. It resumed for a few weeks in the "PP time," then it was stopped again when TPLF regained control of Mekelle and most of Tigray. It had not yet resumed when the storyteller narrated her account.

> about their situation […]. I was worrying about the survival of me and my family members because of our financial constraints coupled with the ever-increasing living costs, and also the airstrikes and shelling, which were claiming many lives. There were many occasions when I just sat and thought about all these worries. I was getting bad headaches when I worried a lot, and I used to go to holy water and church when I was feeling stressed." (Almaz)

"I wasn't exposed to hunger because as a merchant, I coped with the situation by using the money I had to run my business and selling other assets so I could afford to buy food to keep me and my household alive. But I suffered from mental distress when I saw teachers and civil servants, who used to help others, reduced to a state of dependency and having to beg from others for their own survival. It was also mentally painful to see pregnant mothers and women with newborn babies exposed to hunger and begging for food on the streets of Mekelle. I supported them by sharing what I had, but it hurt a lot psychologically, and the pain is still there today." (Teklay)

> "My worry at that time was about the shortage of food. I was worried about the scarcity, and I worried a lot about my child. At first, I was also worried about the PP soldiers because I was influenced by what I was hearing on media, that they were slaughtering and killing people. Later on, as nothing happened to me or other people in my neighbourhood, I no longer worried about this." (Nigisti)

"I was afraid when the jets came to bomb us and when there was heavy artillery fire. It wasn't only for me but also for other people, because everyone was ours. I was worried, and wondered '*Will a jet come today, or tomorrow? Who will die?*' In those days it wasn't the economic problems I was worried about, but survival.

There were lot of worries to have. In addition to not living in peace, many things were lacking. The main thing was the lack of peace, because it led to the shortages and lots of other bad things. I had so many worries in my mind that I used to get headaches. Even though I didn't get any closer to a solution by thinking about my problems, I couldn't stop thinking—it was my inner self just urged to. When I got worried, I tried to sleep at home so I would stop. Two members of my family, my son and my nephew, joined the army when our forces took control in June 2021 […]. I was worried about their survival. I was worrying not only for them but also for everyone at the front." (Mulu)

> "I still feel distressed because of our financial constraints, even after the peace agreement. I recently looked for a house to rent at a reasonable

> price, but it was hard to find, and it was stressful until I got the house I have now moved into. I'm also worried about whether the relatives who support us will continue to or not. Schools will be opening soon, and my children will be going, which has become a source of worry for me because they need school materials and food for their packed lunch. Packing a lunch box is going to be a must if they're going to be at school for a full day. They'll also need a better breakfast if they're going to school." (Hiwot)

"I used to go to church and pray for mercy. I was also an active participant in the mass prayers organised by the church in my neighbourhood. The priests told us there's nothing that can't be averted with prayer and fasting [...]. Praying at church and chatting with people was helpful for getting rid of my stress and the stories that were causing me distress […]. I used to go to church almost daily at that time and, come back home after the service […]. I felt some relief from my depression when I went to church. The church priests and deacons were telling people to cooperate with one another, and encouraging us to overcome the tough times." (Sindayo)

> "I carried on going to church but there were some changes. Churches cancelled the usual evening church education programmes because no one could stay after 6 p.m. In the mornings, people could stay as long as they wanted. I used to go to church at 8 a.m. There were collective prayers from 4 p.m. to 5.30 p.m., which I went to." (Hana)

"The religious fathers were trying to appease the community members and providing spiritual advice, telling us that the bad times would pass and be replaced by peace. They contributed greatly to making us strong and resilient. We were all attending common and public prayers and fasting." (Teklay)

> "*[Before the war]* I mostly went to church on holidays like Sundays and the Holy Saviour and Michaelmas days. I usually stayed until the ceremony ended. During that period, I started going to church more frequently, and I also attended the group prayers known as *mihilela*. I frequently took part in in the group prayers, which took place in the mornings and afternoons. I went to church when there was enough light because there were lots of risks." (Mebrihit)

"I was depressed about not having a job and spending my time with no work. I went out for walks and to have tea with my friends. In the beginning I was afraid of the ENDF soldiers, but later on this fear

disappeared because luckily, I seldom met them. When I felt distressed, I went to church to pray, and at least this calmed me down." (Menbere)

> "I used to go to church to pray. I went less frequently during the war because it made me lose hope and my courage was affected. The religious *Nefse Abat* of the family encouraged me, talking about the challenges we were having and saying that they would all go away at some point." (Hiwot)

"I was going to church frequently. I wanted to spent time at church. Sometimes my head was about to explode, and so I went to church. It was a terrible time. There were air strikes and we were told not to gather' Infants were no longer being baptised because people were afraid of the air strikes. They were unable to meet their basic needs. There were *mihilela* in the mornings and afternoons, and most of the participants were women. People were afraid of the air strikes, but they still attended prayers. "*Things are a matter of chance,*" they said. I was going to church to pray on my own and for the group prayers. The priests taught us about helping the poor and needy people in our neighbourhoods, and told us to fast and receive Holy Communion. Going to church was much better than sitting at home—it refreshed my mind. Whether I was starving or not I felt refreshed and I forgot about my problems.

Now I have hope that I will improve my life as long as I am healthy. I can go anywhere I want and I can do anything I want. We went from starvation to having enough food, and we've even been able to start saving because we have more than enough to just survive for a day. But there's a lot of news about the deaths of young people who were in the army." (Mebrihit)

> "I am less stressed than when there was war and forced recruitment to join the TDF. However, there is still an atmosphere of war, even after the establishment of the interim government. We are relieved from getting constant news about war, but there is no hope of being able to work and change our lives. I can't carry on with my earlier work because generally things are not completely back to normal. It's distressing. In the past, when I was working, my mind was at peace, but not now. I get bored. I try to manage my stress by having coffee and tea and sometimes going out for a walk with my friends. When I'm at home, I watch TV and movies, and use social media like Facebook and Telegram to entertain myself, to get information on various issues and to communicate with my friends." (Hana)

"I'm still going to church, but less frequently since the peace agreement. I no longer run to church like before, because there's peace now. It's human nature—we run to church when we're facing problems and less often when our problems are solved." (Hiwot)

* * *



"The war for my community"

"THE WAR FOR MY COMMUNITY": WORRYING ABOUT AND CARING FOR EACH OTHER

Taking care of my people

The great majority of the storytellers are parents, mostly mothers. Aside from themselves, everything is about their children: their daily lives, their education, their trauma and their future. Most of these parents' pain, strategies, worries and decisions are rooted in their children's lives, whether the child was yet to be born or old enough to join the fighting. Most of the storytellers were responsible for others during the war—children or a mother and sometimes children of other people. This has defined their lives for these two years of war, and is still was the case when they told their story. Even storytellers who were not parents themselves were saddened that children had to experiences the war, and were concerned by the effects it had on them. Some of the storytellers who told their stories sometime after the peace agreement expressed how happy they are to see their children resume a more normal life, such as going to school.

The story of a family's journey to the nearby countryside is also included here, so that we can capture the extent of the hardship people were facing, and their strength when it came to saving their own people.

My children

"At the end of 2021 my wife was pregnant. She was having check-ups at a government health facility. The lack of medicines was a big challenge, however, so I let her go to a private clinic three times for check-up services that were unavailable at the government facility. But this cost me a lot because the private clinic asked an excessive price for medicines and examinations such as ultrasounds. When she gave birth, there was no ambulance service and no transport because of the lack of fuel. Unfortunately, she went into labour during the night, and we couldn't take her to a government health facility because there was no stable supply of electricity (the power was on and off and they didn't have fuel for the generator). We took her on foot to a private clinic called Temesegen. We couldn't call anyone to ask for a car because the telephone network was cut off. At the hospital we paid an exaggerated price for every single item, starting with bandages and gloves. We even had to pay for medicines that had been provided free before the war. The physicians in the clinic lacked experience, so my wife had excessive bleeding for three weeks after the birth. She was referred to Ayder referral Hospital and was treated there. My baby couldn't be vaccinated immediately after she was born, and we waited a month for her first vaccination. We tried very hard to access vaccines, going

> to different government and private health facilities, but we couldn't get all her vaccinations on time, and she had breathing problems when she was three months old. We were paying 50 *birr* an hour to give her oxygen when there was electricity and 80 *birr* when there wasn't any. All this was due to the shortage of medicines as a result of the blockade. I was able to make sure my baby got treatment because I had money." (Teklay)

"School for my kids had stopped during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they couldn't go back to school after that because of the war. They've been away from school for more than three years, which is heartbreaking when you think about it as a parent. They learnt a lot about military things, and their minds are full of fighting and conflict, which causes trauma. I see many examples of how traumatised my sons have been by the war. The pattern and quality of their sleep has changed since the war. They don't want to be without me, even for a few minutes. Also, all their games and playing are related to fighting, military equipment, stories such as being a soldier and using tanks, as well as how to escape from drones, air strikes and shelling." (Akberet)

> "There were a lot of children in my neighbourhood. Their perspectives and activities are among the things that make me feel so sad inside. It shows how much they were influenced by their environment, which was about conflict. There was one incident that really shocked me. When I went to visit my grandmother one day, I saw a child of eight or nine years old playing with wires. He had made something with the wires that I could see, something on three legs. I asked him what it was. He replied that it was a *Dishqa**, a common weapon that was often mentioned by the media and people in the community. Children reflected the conflict in their games, the things they played with and their songs, and in the way they perceived their environment in general." (Etsay)

"My sons and other children couldn't be healed from the trauma they developed because of the drones and air strikes. It seems to be sealed in their heads and hearts forever" (Akberet)

> "One of the items which increased in price was macaroni, which affected me directly because my son had begun to eat solid food. But I couldn't afford to buy macaroni, so I was feeding him *tahini** and *mittin** (a flour prepared from mixed grains). The price of *taff* also went up. So, what I did was reduce what I was buying; for instance, I planned to buy just 25 kilos of *taff* instead of 50, and I used it economically. I wasn't able to buy a good variety of food so my child wasn't eating a

> balanced diet, which affected his health. He was underweight and late to start walking." (Nigisti)

"[…] During the blockade there were times when we ate in the morning but didn't eat in the afternoon. '*That's enough, this is for dinner*,' I told them, but I didn't feel good inside. My son understood but my two daughters didn't understand about the shortages and kept asking me. One them said '*Please give me food now. Forget dinner*.' I was sad, but it was the only way I could manage what I had. I spent almost a year like that. Now I am giving them enough food, and I'm happy and my children are happy too." (Mebrihit)

> "I also was very worried that my children might face violence. People were saying that girls shouldn't go outside. I made my children stay at home, both the boys and the girls. I also told them not to discuss things with our neighbours. I was always worried when I left my daughters behind, always afraid that something could happen to them. Whenever I went outside, I thought about my daughters. I didn't have a phone at the time, so I had no way to communicate with them when I was away. My worry was all about my children, not for myself.
>
> […] I don't know how I coped with these hard times. I was both a father and a mother to my children. I felt so bad when my children, who used to live a better life, had to mend their clothes and shoes." (Mulu)

"In September 2021, our children were able to be registered register and go back to school, which had closed during COVID-19. My sons were in second grade and they learned for a month, doing a kind of revision, and then moved on to third grade, where they learned for a month and then went into fourth grade. We were all happy about this because it was a good opportunity for our children to move on from all the feelings and perceptions of conflict and war. However, the schools then closed again because of the drone attacks and air strikes." (Akberet)

> "In September 2021, schools opened for the first time since the outbreak of the war, and I was able to send one of my children to school. My daughter, my husband and I were all very happy about the school opening. However, buying school materials was a bit of a challenge because the prices had gone up and our family had no source of income. We bought half the required notebooks and for the rest, our child used paper left over from her previous academic years. Another challenge regarding school was that I wasn't able to pack a lunch box for my daughter. She was going to school after breakfast and eating lunch when she came home. Before the war, I used to pack two types of food for her school lunch. The school was only open for a few months. It

> closed after our daughter attended the first semester and took the exam. The children were told that they would go back for the second semester, but eventually they weren't able to continue due to the air strikes." (Hiwot)

"I couldn't afford to send him to a private school, mostly because I couldn't afford to pack varieties of food for his school lunch, and as a family we also couldn't afford the school fees. So I sent my son to a government school, because there was no need to pack a lunch box for government schools because pupils attend private schools for the whole day, whereas it's only half a day in government schools. Buying notebooks and pens was expensive, but one of my relatives covered the cost. Under normal circumstances, government schools also require pupils to have a school uniform and my son would have needed to buy a new one, but the school understood the economic crisis and didn't ask the pupils to wear one. Only the students who had been going to school before the war were wearing uniforms, because they already had them. My son went to school without buying one. I was relieved that he was going to school because I had been worried about the interruption. My son was also very happy about going to school. However, I had some concerns about the way students were handled at the government school. The teachers didn't pay the proper attention to the children's discipline, and the children didn't behave well. Teachers in private school's handle children better. This also made my son hate school. He went to school for about five months, but stopped when the armed conflict got worse." (Almaz)

> "My son was going to school. he was in second grade. School was only for half a day. I don't remember exactly how long he went there; I just remember it was for a short time. I was happy when school resumed. It lifted my child's spirits. He was enjoying it because he was learning instead of just playing in the mud, and it made me happy too. Exercise books were expensive and I couldn't afford them. We made them out of old ones that had been used by his sisters, cutting out the pages with notes and using the ones that were still empty. He should have had a bag, but I couldn't buy one, so he was going to school without one. However later on, the jets and drones became frequent, which made the children stop going to school. I felt bad about it." (Mulu)

"Our children were traumatised by the sounds of the drones and air strikes. When they were asleep, we had to avoid shouting or speaking loudly because they were terrified by loud sounds as a consequence of the war. Parents worried a lot whenever their children of fighting

age went out, fearing that they might be taken to join the fighting by force and would not return. Mothers were terrified for their children whenever there was a knock at the door. My children were very afraid of drone attacks and air strikes, so I used to let them watch cartoons just to forget about the war.

[…] The situation for merchants has improved. We've started bringing goods and materials directly from Addis Ababa that we can sell at a relatively fair price for the community. Step by step, our children seem to be healing from their trauma, and we expect this will improve further because they're going to school. I'm also relieved that my daughter is going to school." (Teklay)

> "My youngest son has started school again. He's in second grade. He goes to a government school. I am so happy about it. He has been going for about 3 to 4 months and has completed second grade. I got educational materials from the school and so I didn't need to worry about them." (Mulu)

"What I can't forget from the 'PP time' is what happened to my son. One day, he was washing cars with his friends when some PP soldiers arrived and took two young men from nearby. My son and his friends were very scared. They wondered whether they would ask them to wash cars or kill them, so they ran and hid in a water drain tunnel. My son called and told me the PP soldiers were arresting young people. I saw them too, with seven young people in their car. Then I wasn't able to reach my son by phone anymore, so I was very worried. I wanted to see if he was in the car with the young people, but my neighbours locked the gate. '*You're not going anywhere*,' they told me. '*At least you should stay, the two of you shouldn't go*.' I was panicking! After that I forbade my son from going out. I made him stop washing cars.

[…] The thing I also can't forget from the 'PP time' that I had sent my two children away to the countryside, my oldest son, and my two-year-old daughter. They walked for three days to get there. I thought they were dead, because there was no communication. They called when the phone network was restored. I worried a lot, thinking that they might not be alive, I can't forget this stress and my worries. I was also feeling sad in general. I was worried about my son. I wasn't letting him go out, even in the daytime because I was afraid, they might harm him. There were many cases of young people being beaten under the pretext that they were *Junta*. My son was an obedient boy, and spent most of his time at home. He only went out to wash cars, and always came home on time.

[…] One source of worry at this time was my son. He had been trained as a soldier. There was a time when people who had had training were arrested, but my son didn't tell anyone he was trained. However, he didn't have an ID, so I was afraid he could be imprisoned. In fact, once he was put in jail for not having an ID. He was there for a day, from morning to evening, even though he told them he was only 17. But they didn't believe him, so I took his school certificate and vaccination card, and in the end, they released him." (Mebrihit)

Taking my people away, seeking protection

"I went to Hagere Selam to leave my kids with my parents there because I feared for their safety and that their basic needs would not be met in Mekelle. I thought I would return to Mekelle after waiting for a week or more there. I went there with my two kids and another four kids of relatives with me. In all, I had six kids with me. I paid 200 *birr* for each of us for transport up to half way, then we went half way on foot. Previously the price had only been fifty *birr* each way. We went there to stay with my mother. I wasn't the only one who went there to escape from the war. Another brother and sister also went there with their children. We faced a lack of food in the area when we went there, and we were very frustrated to be dependent on our mother's food with all these children. However, when I tried to return to Mekelle after a week I couldn't, because the federal forces had already occupied Mekelle. So, I stayed there at my mother's. There was heavy fighting in Al-assa, which is near Hagere Selam […]. It was very frightening to hear heavy shelling near us. We heard that Mekelle had been occupied and that the federal forces were closing in on Tembien. The fighting there took three days, day and night. Finally, Hagere Selam was occupied by the PP a week after they'd taken control of Mekelle. That night, we fled to a rural area outside Hagere Selam before the soldiers arrived. Only my mother remained in the house. The house was hit by shelling and my mother was buried under debris and was unconscious for a while. She returned to consciousness and was able to get out of the debris […].

My children and I, my sister and her children and seven children of my older brother had all fled to the countryside. In total, more than 50 people were hiding in a single cave in the area. There were teachers and engineers with us in the cave. Another brother of mine also fled with his wife and mother in-law to another cave. Everybody was running mindlessly in all directions. Shells were falling near us as we ran. It was very dark, but we used the light from the shelling for direction. We had many small children with us. It was the saddest time I have ever experienced. It's still very painful when I remember it now.

My brother, who was fleeing with his wife, his children and his mother in-law, had to face another hardship on his way. His wife was pregnant, and she started to go into labour. There was intense shelling all around. She couldn't be carried because she was pregnant. Her mother is blind so she couldn't run. My brother was carrying her, and they kept escaping, running, and he was encouraging his wife, who was having labour pains, to keep going and walk fast. There were also two small children with them, which made the journey very difficult. Later, at around 1 a.m., her labour became too strong. They had to find a place for her to give birth. They found a house, but it was closed because most people had fled. My brother prepared grass as a mattress for his wife to lie down on and went in the surrounding area to find women who could help them. It was very difficult to find someone in that situation, but he found a traditional midwife with the collaboration of the women neighbours in the area. His wife gave birth 'peacefully,' with the shelling falling near her. Her labour was in fact very short because of the panic. They didn't have a piece of clothing for the baby or for her to change into. She just gave birth in the animals' stable, lying on the grass. It was very painful, but we thanked God that mother and baby were both alive.

We stayed in the cave for the next few days with no food or water. Just imagine—there were kids with us. We felt helpless not to be able to provide them with food when they shouted for it. It was when we moved to find food and water in places a long way off that we heard the news of my brother's wife's delivery from some people. We went to the place where they were, asking people the way, and visited them. Until then, neither we nor they had known where the others were. We stayed in the cave for eight days. My older brother used to go to my mother's house and come back with some food for us, such as *qolo* and *injera*. He used to go there at nightfall and return during the night.

We heard that the soldiers were killing men but weren't doing anything to women. I went to Hagere Selam to visit my mother and to observe the general situation. I found that her house had been hit by shells. My mother was there, alive but alone, so we decided to take her to relatives in another rural area nearby. After nine or ten days, all of us (my family and I, my brother and his family and some other relatives) went to where my mother was. We couldn't return to Hagere Selam because we heard that the PP (ENDF) was committing atrocities there, including raping women. However, my brother, whose wife had just given birth, couldn't come with us because culturally you aren't allowed to move a woman until 12 days after delivery. We stayed in that place for a week and then returned to Hagere Selam with my mother. Our

life was very hard. It wasn't easy to find food. We used to walk long distances to get water from a river. Our kids weren't able to eat the food we provided them because they weren't familiar with it.

The day after we went back to Hagere Selam, we all moved to my older brother's home because my mother's home had been hit by the shelling. We didn't want to be reminded of it constantly. We suffered a lot there with our kids. Fortunately, I had some money, 15,000 *birr*, that I had collected from my *eqqub*. It was with me, but not mine. I should have handed it over to someone, but I couldn't because of the war. I used this money to buy food during the bad time. We were buying macaroni at a very high price and serving it to our children just boiled, with no sauce. I also had 5,000 *birr* of my own money. In total, I spent 20,000 *birr* on food and transport during our stay away from Mekelle. The price of macaroni had risen from 30 *birr* to 60 or 70 *birr*. When I returned to Mekelle in January (2021), the person asked me to give his money back, so I repaid him by borrowing from my brother and selling the food aid I got at the time. But then I faced a food shortage again because I had sold the food aid. I only brought the edible oil home, and I had some white flour at home that I had kept, so we used it economically for some time. I also received 5,000 *birr* from abroad at that time, which was very helpful for surviving with my kids." (Akberet)

Helping each other: neighbours, relatives and friends

The storytellers all underline the value of pulling together throughout their experience of the war. They highlight its importance for their survival and for finding comfort and relief from their mental distress. A few also note that over time, as everyone's resources were depleted, there were limits to how much people could help one another. However, as will be seen later, some also explain how they were sharing with or helped others—even with what they were receiving from outside Tigray.

Help among neighbours

"The other good thing during that time was the sense of relatives, family members and neighbours supporting each other. I remember the time I ran out of food for my sons. My neighbours went from house to house to collect food support for me [...]. This meant I was able to use the flour that had been contributed by my neighbours to feed myself and my children for some time [...]. What was very distressing at that time was the siege and blockade imposed on us as a people, but we overcame it by collaborating with and supporting each other as relatives, family and a community. It makes me proud, and I thank God personally for it." (Akberet)

> "We were also supporting one another with my neighbours. We used to borrow food such as flour, oil and *asbeza*[1] from one another to eat until we were able to buy things for ourselves. We also used to share information about what was going on. We shared information about where the ENDF had reached while they were advancing towards Mekelle, and talked about fleeing Mekelle if things got worse. We comforted and encouraged one another when anyone got into a panic." (Hiwot)

"I had good relations with my neighbours. I borrowed 5,000 *birr* from someone. He's a good person, and he lent me this money without interest" (Hana)

> "I had also a good relationship with my parents and relatives. We supported each other as much as we could in order to be resilient when confronting the situation. Good relations with neighbours were also very important as a way to ease things and cope with the hardship. We were very close, which helped us cope with the stress caused by the war and its effects. The crisis was very complex. Most people were taken by surprise and faced challenges when it came to dealing with the situation. For instance, some households had no flour at all, and others had no access to firewood and no traditional stove to bake *injera* and cook food. People were sharing flour with those who didn't have any, or sharing firewood and traditional stoves with neighbours and relatives. This solidarity was one big asset of the community amidst the general crisis. We overcame the challenges at the time by sharing what we had with others and receiving support from others.
>
> […] For me, when I share a healing and comforting remark with someone I just met on the road, it's like a mental health treatment for him and me. We were all active and committed to comforting one another to deal with the mental stress arising from our experience of the war. This is a big asset of our community, and it makes me proud even now." (Teklay)

"We were helping one another with what any of us was missing. I had a neighbour who was giving me cash to buy milk for my child. Other neighbours giving me rice and macaroni. My neighbours were very supportive at that time, but because the war went on for a long time, everyone became needy. We were advising and comforting one another, saying things like '*This time will pass.*'

[1] Vegetables and other consumer items that are not bought in bulk.

[…] Once I told a neighbour I had been refused aid and she gave me eight kilos of wheat flour out of what she had received. I did this because I couldn't rely on my parents. This was a time when farmers were also facing food shortages. Also, unlike before, my parents were no longer in a position to help me, because even they weren't getting enough food. In 2021, their harvest was much smaller than usual because they hadn't used fertiliser. I didn't think the lack of fertiliser would cause such a reduction in their harvest to the extent that it caused a food shortage in my family." (Nigisti)

"I had a good relationship with my neighbours. There were a lot of them. We chatted about what was going on, about the war and about the increases in food prices. Sometimes I was having coffee with my neighbours when one of us happened to go to another's house while she was roasting or preparing coffee. The mutual support among neighbours increased a lot. The shortages forced us to borrow from one another and form stronger bonds. The fact that none of us had a job also meant we had more time to chat. Before the war, we were all busy and didn't have the chance to chat as much. Not all experiences with my neighbours were good; there were some who hid what they had or didn't want to mention what they had received because others might expect to be given something. This kind of behaviour came with the war, because of the shortages. Before that, people had had their own incomes and lived independently.

[…] Another neighbour went out to sell two items of clothing in the market on Monday, which was market day, but she couldn't sell them. When she got back home, her neighbour asked her what she had with her and she told her the story. The woman, who was financially better-off than her, told her '*Don't sell your clothes*' and gave her 25 kilos of *taff*. There was a lot of mutual support among people at that time. People who were better-off supported others regardless of whether they knew them or not. There were also people who coordinated the residents of the neighbourhood to collect contributions to give to people who were in difficult circumstances. This was common at the time. Whenever it was done, I made a contribution, because there were people in a worse condition than me, many women with chronic illnesses and other health problems.

[…] My neighbours were very supportive. They're all better off than me. I borrowed food and cash from them, and they also gave me a lot of things like *injera*, *shiro* and charcoal because they knew the situation I was in. One woman gave me 3,000 *birr*. She had a lot of children, but she shared what she had. I also received 25 kilos of *taff*. One of

> my neighbours bought me 50 kilos of firewood for 300 *birr*. I myself helped others who were worse off than me. For instance, I gave one of my neighbours 3 kilos of flour and some *injera*. Later, her husband sent her flour and she gave me 5 kilos of wheat. This is how we survived the bad times, by supporting one another." (Mebrihit)

"I noticed that the sense of supporting each other among community members, relatives and neighbours increased and strengthened after the war started. For instance, our neighbours, and mainly women members of the development army groups, were very actively involved in providing support for poor households by mobilising members of the community." (Kibreab)

> "I was also involved in giving financial support to the groups in the streets who provide children with breakfast. They collect money from people and buy bread and tea for children in the city who have no food. This was also a source of satisfaction for me. It was done during the war, and still goes on today." (Teklay)

Help among relatives

"I wasn't working before the war; I was a stay-at-home mother. My husband did some daily work and made some money, but it wasn't constant, and I was facing financial constraints. I was highly dependent on support from relatives. The situation continued for both of us when the war started. I had good relations with the members of my household and my relatives. We supported one other whenever some of us were worried. My family survived thanks to the support of our relatives, otherwise we would have died a long time ago." (Hiwot)

> "I was getting support from my parents because my husband and I had no income. They gave me *taff*, red pepper, *shiro* and other food items, which was very helpful. We also used to visit one another very frequently, as our houses were close to one another. We used to support each another with my neighbours. I supported them with food, even though I myself needed my parents' support." (Hana)

"Our relatives in Adigrat used to bring us grains, cereals, *taff* and other food items when they came to visit us. From our side, we gave them food items such as edible oil, pepper and *shiro*, as well as cash to support them." (Teklay)

> "I was also among those who faced economic hardship because I was a teacher and I couldn't get my salary. Previously, I had been economically independent and lived on my own. However, many friends

> and relatives helped me a lot to survive by supporting me in kind as well as giving me cash to buy food. Also, my landlord didn't raise my rent, but even so, I wasn't able to pay it for a very long time. […] My relationship with my relatives, especially with my sister, who has a well-to-do husband, improved and strengthened. (Samuel)

"I had a good relationship with my husband. We faced challenges, but we overcame them by talking and making sure we understood each other. We also had good relations with our relatives, and with my parents and parents-in-law. My parents were able to support me with food. My parents-in-law live nearby, and we have a close relationship, but that didn't help us because they are poorer than us, and they're the ones who need support.

[…] Even in this time of shortages I had a good relationship with my husband. We gave one another priority in terms of food. I also had a good relationship with my relatives. We lived in peace and love. I don't like hatred. My aunt helped me. I cleaned *taff*, and she gave me a quarter of a kilo of coffee and some sugar. We used to comfort one another with my parents. I said '*It'll get brighter*,' and they all said the same. We had good relationships with my relatives.

[…] My relatives supported me with cash and grains because I didn't have anything at the time. One aunt of mine, who was elderly, lived nearby. I went to her place often, because my shop was mostly closed as it wasn't very profitable. She used to give me food, and at the time, even three days of sugar or coffee was a big help. I also helped her do domestic chores like washing her clothes, cleaning *taff* and cleaning her house. My relatives made sure I could have good holidays." (Nigisti)

> "I communicated with my relatives, but had less good contact with them. Some of them were well aware of the situation I was in but didn't help me, and I was left wondering why. Going to their homes didn't give me any comfort because it might be perceived as if I was asking them for support." (Mulu)

"I had uncles who had the ability to assist me financially, but they didn't. We had a good relationship before the war, but I felt bad that they didn't help me back then, and I've ignored them since. I don't answer when they say hello." (Mebrihit)

Help among friends

> "I didn't have much of a relationship with my neighbours, but I had good relations with my friends, and we used to support one another financially. We talked about politics, went downtown to have some fun,

> and went for walks and drank tea. Sometimes the ENDF caught us during the evening curfew. Usually, they just advised us to go home.
>
> […] Sometimes my friends begged for money to support friends who were in financial troubles, like having nothing to eat or no money for healthcare, and I stood with them." (Menbere)

Problems with keeping up with the help

"As the blockade got worse, the mutual support seemed to decrease because people couldn't even meet their own basic needs, let alone help others. The price of basic goods was very high, and the food aid wasn't enough for everyone, so a lot of people were facing hunger, even in our cities. I heard that a mother committed suicide because she didn't want to see her children suffer from hunger. All this suffering was a source of distress for me and many people." (Teklay)

> "People like you when you have something, when you have enough to eat independently. Now I have better relations with my relatives. They didn't like me when I had nothing." (Mebrihit)

* * *



Living in Mekelle, a city at war

Managing urban life

Mekelle dwellers often were proud of their city. In their stories of the war time, the storytellers describe with sorrow the deterioration of urban services and urban life, highlighting the problems with accessing goods in the market, public transport or the mobile phone network, and the filth as garbage was no longer collected.

Going to the market

"About five months after TPLF controlled Mekelle again, I went to the market. I will never forget it for as long as I live. I had hoped to return home with a full basket. I also had to visit my grandmother, so I planned the two things by considering the heavy weight I was going to have to carry after I'd bought goods from the market. However, I wasn't able to get the food I had planned to buy. There had been a huge increase in the price of food like macaroni, pasta and rice. I decided not to buy them, as they weren't things we particularly wanted, and they were mainly going to be eaten by my husband. I also asked for peanut butter, which I had bought for 90 *birr* the previous time, but had gone up to 200 *birr*. I asked the shopkeeper if it was the same product as before or if there had been any change at all. She told me it was the same product, and the price was just because of general price increases for all goods. I wanted it, so that day I bought peanut butter and tissues, and I went to visit my grandmother with no worries about having to carry a heavy load." (Etsay)

> "Sometimes, I used to return from the market without what I had planned to buy because the price had suddenly shot up. In some cases, I went to the market to buy something, but it was too expensive so I changed my mind and bought something I could afford. For instance, if I had planned to buy rice but it was too expensive, I got bread or something else for my son." (Nigisti)

Public transport

"Just before the end of the blockade, the price of a trip into town went up from 5 *birr* to 20 *birr*. There was no rule or regulation to control this. It was decided by the drivers, and it was due to shortage of fuel in the city. In normal times the price used to be determined based on the distance people travelled, but during that period, drivers charged the same regardless of whether you were travelling from departure to arrival points, or half way or even less. Taxis were also carrying

many more people than the seats could accommodate, and it was very uncomfortable for the passengers. I used less transport and walked most of the time." (Menbere)

A temporary mobile network (November 2020)

> "A mobile network that only worked within Tigray was re-established, and I communicated with my friends and relatives with it. With my friends, it was usually to make appointments and meet up. With my relatives, it was to ask about their well-being. The network was blocked soon after the ENDF took over Mekelle." (Menbere)[1]

A weakened urban fabric

The storytellers discuss the disappearance of the city they used to live in, undoubtedly because of the decline in services, but mostly because of a deterioration in the urban social fabric. They sadly report the absence of the rule of law even after the peace agreement, and the tensions, conflicts and lack of solidarity at a city level. Although they value the support among people who know each other highly, they also regret the tough interactions at a wider scale, with 'the rich' not helping others or even people who profiteered from others' distress in various ways, and this, continuing to the day they told their story.

Theft and crimes

"Theft was a big problem for sellers, mainly around the *Kedamay Weyane* Market area. They used to have sticks bent at one end. At first, I didn't know their purpose, but I asked my brother when I saw them everywhere. I understood that they were to attack thieves in case of an attempt to steal. Many merchants used to bring their goods to their shops in small amounts in the morning, take them back to home at night and bring them back to the shop the next morning." (Etsay)

> "What was even more terrifying than the ENDF was thieves killing and stabbing people. I was afraid of them, and worried they would take my mobile phone. So, I was careful to prevent this from happening. I avoided talking on the phone when there were lots of people around, and also in the evenings when there were no people around and in places that were deserted." (Menbere)

"One of my relatives was caught by soldiers. They beat him terribly and took his smartphone in full daylight. In general, there were soldiers who

[1] In the first few weeks of the war when TPLF was still in Mekelle, telecommunications were cut by the federal government, but regional authorities managed to reestablish some network within the region. This was discontinued when ENDF took control of the city.

were robbing in broad daylight without hiding what they were doing. Also, some people who were angry with other rich people for some reason were telling soldiers where they lived and what they owned so soldiers would rob them. I once saw thieves attacking a merchant with a knife and taking money from him. Generally, there was no rule of law during this time, and insecurity was rife, and both soldiers and thieves were involved." (Teklay)

> "There were thefts and robberies. My neighbour was robbed by thieves who entered her house wearing clothes like the PP forces and acting like them, and yet these were young people from our neighbourhood—they were ours! That said, the PP forces were also acting as they wished, imprisoning young people and threatening our militias by going door to door. Some of our own people were reporting the presence of militias to the PP forces.
>
> [...] When I went back from my mother's house, I found that two of my satellite receivers had been stolen. I bought them back from the same people who had stolen them, who are neighbours. The person who stole them had given them to a friend to be sold and I bought them from his friend. I paid 1,200 *birr* for the two dishes. There is no rule of law so I couldn't recover my property. Thieves also cut away the electrical wires in the compound. Thefts were common in our neighbourhood.
>
> [...] The thefts are even worse than before. There are thefts in broad daylight, and the thieves threaten you with knives. The rule of law is there but it is not applied. Of course, sometimes thieves are imprisoned if they are caught red-handed. Last week, thieves broke into my house at 2 a.m. My son heard a sound and shouted '*Who is it?*' I told him '*Don't go outside! They'll harm you.*' My house is in a compound but there's no gate. After some time, I went out with my son and asked '*What are you going to take from me? I have nothing.*' They were close to us, hiding in the bushes. The next day I heard that my neighbour had been robbed. They took clothes that had been left outside to dry. So, everybody is afraid because they target everyone, even the poor. My son's mobile phone was stolen while he was riding his friend's bicycle. That afternoon, I had told him to leave his mobile at home, but he told me he wanted it. He doesn't remember where he lost it. I was very disappointed because we have no money to replace it. Thefts of mobiles have become very common, and there are a lot of thieves. The main problem is they aren't sent to prison. They're released after 24 hours." (Mebrihit)

A waning social life

"I wasn't participating in many of the social events like baptisms or mourning because it wasn't easy to cover the costs of the food and other items you have to take to attend. I was only going empty-handed to events I had to go to. Many people had the same experience, I mean like me, not having anything to take to participate in social events." (Mulu)

> "I wasn't able to take anything when I went to social events, as is the custom in our community. I was visiting sick people, women who had recently delivered and mourning ceremonies without anything." (Nigisti)

Rent: A challenge for some, but not for all

"Before the war, I had an income from renting houses, which was also possible during the ENDF occupation. However, during the time when TPLF was in control of Mekelle,[2] I couldn't get the rent paid on time. There was a government regulation the that homeowners couldn't force their tenants to pay, so I was only getting what they were willing to pay. Two of my tenants also quit, as one joined the TDF and the other, who had no income at all and couldn't even afford food, went to live with his parents, who lived in a rural area. Another two families used to pay my rent whenever they got money, after many long months. I was very disappointed because they were buying food and other things for themselves, but were reluctant to pay the rent, in spite of the fact that I asked them frequently. They were giving priority to their own expenses, and I felt this was unfair, and that people should worry about one another. The two men who had left my house earlier finally took their household goods and promised they would pay. One of them came by himself, and the other one's wife came and took his stuff. This was a good thing for me as at least I got my house back and I could rent it to others." (Sindayo)

> "I wasn't able to pay rent during this period because my family didn't have any income. The owner also didn't pressure us to pay the rent." (Hiwot)

"[…], my landlady was very supportive. She felt pity for me instead of asking for rent […]. I had no way to access money. I stopped paying my rent on time. Luckily, this didn't cause me too much stress because my landlady is a very good person, and she sometimes even gave me food

[2] The woman uses different terms to refer to when Mekelle was controlled by the TPLF (*ezi-atom*, meaning "these ones") and when it was controlled by the PP forces (*eti-atom* or "those ones").

instead […]. After the transitional government was established, I was able to pay 14,000 *birr* of the rent I owed her. I still have 34,000 *birr* to pay. Fortunately, my landlady is a good person, and she told me not to worry about it too much." (Samuel)

> "It wasn't easy to pay our rent regularly, and this affected my life. I was paying 2-4 months late. The owner of one of the houses I lived in kicked me out because I wasn't paying on time. I looked for another house, but I still could not pay my rent on time. This was a source of worry for me and my children, as I felt intimidated and lost confidence when I didn't pay on time. In most cases, I used to pay the rent when relatives gave me cash." (Almaz)

"Even though we could afford to live in survival mode, we weren't able to pay our rent for two years. The good thing is that our house is owned by the church, so we were not forced to pay the rent until the end of the war. However, many households in our area were very distressed by the behaviour of landlords, in addition to the generally bad economic situation." (Kibreab)

> "The other distressing thing is that after the peace agreement our landlord asked us to pay the accumulated rent. However, the money we have isn't much, and we give priority to buying food instead of paying rent. I have around two years of accumulated rent to pay." (Akberet)

Access to food aid

"The development team people used to refuse to include me. They told me my husband was able to work […]. I got food aid about three times, but had to face lots of arguing and conflict to get it. The development team leaders always put me last on the list. There were also times when they told me to send my husband to the battlefield as a condition for getting aid. '*Either send him to fight or let him work and feed you,*' they told me. The aid was 45 kilos of wheat, 1.5 litres of oil and 4.4 kilos of split peas for three family members. It was helpful, and I used it for about two months. I baked *injera* and sometimes mixed the wheat with the *taff* I received from the people who were supporting me." (Nigisti)

> "During this 'PP time,' I had no relation with the *kebelle*. In fact, I didn't even have any relationship with politics or *kebelle* administration issues previously. Some people from the *kebelle* came to our home and registered us for food aid, but I only received it once during this period." (Akberet)

"During the period when TPLF was back in control of Mekelle, I got food aid twice. I wasn't given food aid frequently like other people because I own a house. The rations included oil, wheat and peas. I used the peas and sold the wheat and oil because I don't eat them for health reason." (Sindayo)

The rich and those who profiteered, and us

> "In the beginning, the price of goods didn't increase excessively. As time passed, however, supplies ran out, so prices increased. When the blockade was at its fullest, some items were so expensive that they were unreachable for most people. Some goods couldn't be found at all anymore, and only rich people could afford those few items that continued to enter Tigray (via a very tortuous route). Others lacked the necessary cash." (Teklay)

"Celebrating holidays as I had done in times of peace was too expensive. Before the war, even if I couldn't buy a sheep like rich people, I used to buy a chicken and oranges, bananas and popcorn. During the war in the TPLF days, however I just bought 3 or 4 eggs. Holidays revealed the differences between the poor and the rich. When it was about getting aid, the rich and poor fought to get priority, but when there were holidays, the rich bought a sheep or a goat! I wondered why they were fighting to get aid." (Mebrihit)

> "The price of food and goods increased. *Taff* became very expensive because the merchants were hiding it and only selling it to people they knew. I wasn't affected by that price increase because I had bought some *taff* a week before the war on the advice of my friend from church. *Berbere* was one of the food items that became very expensive after the war broke out. I needed some, but I couldn't buy it because it was too expensive." (Sindayo)

"Food and goods were expensive. I wasn't even buying certain food items. The merchants used to raise food prices when they heard information like a road being closed and lower them when things went back to normal." (Nigisti)

> "My parents were able to carry on farming, except that once they weren't able to get fertiliser. It was very expensive and in the hands of merchants. My parents produce barley, *taff* and wheat, and for one rainy season they sowed their crops without fertiliser and got a reduced yield. For instance, with fertiliser they used to harvest 10 quintals of barley for a given piece of land, but this went down to 2 quintals

> without fertiliser. They replaced fertiliser with cow dung, but it wasn't effective." (Almaz)

[During the war] "In addition, there was a lack of cash, and you had to pay interest for everything—to buy something, to get cash from abroad, to get medical treatment or pay by bank transfer. There was extra interest to be paid for everything." (Samuel)

> "And I had to use some of my savings using the '50% transfer' system. This is a system whereby because you can't get your money from the bank, you transfer an amount into the account of someone who has cash, and he gives you cash, but only 50% of what you transferred to his account." (Kibreab)

"Many people had used bank transfers to buy things and get cash without it being properly recorded on the system. Many people became rich, while those who used their money solved their problems, but at a big loss. The rate that was demanded for transfers fluctuated, reaching up to 50% at times. This system is still being used in some cases, like if someone wants to buy a house and the seller wants cash. The banks don't give you millions in cash. Also, people don't trust banks, and want cash. All this means that people who need cash will get it from rich people who have it to hand in as large amounts as they need, and they transfer money from their bank account into the account of the person who gives them the cash. Many people have withdrawn their cash and are keeping it at home because they don't trust the banks." (Menbere)[3]

[After the peace agreement] "Over time, the price of goods started to drop slowly. The merchants in Mekelle were blamed for hiking prices artificially by hiding supplies and attacking people who brought goods directly to Mekelle. The government took important measures, allowing trucks from outside Tigray to sell their supplies directly to consumers. This led to a significant decrease in prices—in particular, the price of *taff* fell by more than 50%. I was able to buy *taff* much more cheaply, and oil at a slightly reduced price too. The price of *taff* increased again slightly after the Commercial Bank opened." (Etsay)

> "[…] the price of certain non-food items has risen, like cement, which was much cheaper during the blockade, although it tends to fluctuate—recently it has been 3,000 *birr* for 50 kilos. The rise in cement price is

[3] There were limitations on the amount of cash that a person could withdraw from her/his account for months after the signature of the peace agreement. In the first few months, the amounts allowed were very small. And since several years, generally in Ethiopia one cannot withdraw more than 50,000 *birr* in a day.

> because roads to other parts of Ethiopia have opened, and so merchants are exporting cement outside Tigray. Cement is expensive elsewhere in Ethiopia and they can sell it on advantageous terms. My family has a house that only needs some finishing work, but we haven't been able to do them because cement is too expensive." (Menbere)

"I saw that the queue at the commercial banks was smaller than I had expected, which was a topic of discussion with many people I know. One morning, I met my neighbour who works at a bank and she told me the secret behind this. As cash wasn't available to be withdrawn from the banks, there was a system called 'transferring,' in which a person who wanted cash transferred an amount to someone else's account, and got their cash from that person who had cash at hand, usually 50% less than the transferred amount. Basic items like *taff* were also bought by this 'transferring' system, which meant the price was a bit higher than paying in cash. Many people have already used all their money in this way." (Etsay)

Interacting with those in power in Mekelle

The storytellers' experiences are highly coloured by their interactions (direct or indirect) with the people in power in the town during the war. In the early weeks of the war, when the TPLF was still in Mekelle, local administration and neighbourhood bodies made people contribute to keeping Mekelle's security and supporting the Tigrayan forces. From the end of November 2020 to the end of June 2021, a period that the storytellers and Tigrayans call the "PP times,"[4] *the city was controlled by the Ethiopian National Defence Force, which was perceived locally as an occupying force. A curfew was imposed on the city. The third period—after Tigrayan forces re-took control of Mekelle—is seen as a time of freedom, but it was only relative, as the pressure on young people to join the struggle and on their families to make them do this increased over time. The storytellers narrate their experiences of involvement in public activities during that time.*

Before the TPLF retreat from Mekelle

> "I was new to the neighbourhood, and my neighbours were new. The security representatives in the condominium often asked for ID as we were new to the area. They weren't comfortable when they saw my ID from Addis Ababa." (Etsay)

"The local administration used to frequently ask for dried *injera*, or for help with pounding the dried *injera* and roasting *qolo*. I helped with

[4] Named after the "Prosperity Party" created by the current Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

the pounding of dried *injera*. As a community member, I also attended checkpoints to check people's ID cards for a few days. I did this in a pair with another neighbour." (Hiwot)

> "I contributed to the TDF when the development team requested. On one occasion, they said homeowners should contribute 500 *birr*, and renters 200 *birr*. I contributed 200 *birr*. The cash was collected by elderly people representing the community. This happened twice, so I contributed 400 *birr* in total. I also gave spoons, dishes, shoes and clothes, which were collected by the development team leaders, as well as dried *injera*, *shiro*, salt and hot pepper." (Hana)

A city under military control: "The PP time"

"We were very afraid of the soldiers so we couldn't go to church as usual. For instance, we didn't dare to go to church in the early morning. We also couldn't stay after 6 p.m. Because of the curfew, we couldn't stay out as long as we wanted. We used to close our gates and doors early. We never turned the TV volume up, and we sometimes turned the light off at night, fearing that soldiers might come if they saw it. The news we heard about atrocities and rapes in other parts of Tigray, and even in our city, was horrible and made us panic. I personally avoided wearing pants so the soldiers wouldn't focus on me. Instead, I wore long dresses like "*chiffon**" in order to avoid drawing the soldiers' attention. In the latter part of this period, things became more complicated, and the soldiers became more aggressive and harsher in their actions towards the people. We started hearing about young men being shot by soldiers in the city at nights so I was very afraid that my sons and I or other relatives might be shot. That was my great fear and a source of discomfort during the PP regime. As we feared, the soldiers came to our home three times and checked it out. I wasn't at home the first two times, but I was the third time, and they were about to break into our neighbour's house because it was locked. Finally, they listened to us when we told them there was no one inside and they left." (Akberet)

> "One day at 6 p.m. my brother was stabbed in the side by ENDF soldiers and they threw him into the road in broad daylight. They also killed his friend—a sniper shot him in the head. This was because the ENDF soldiers were angry as they had been defeated on the battlefield. My brother still hasn't fully recovered. He's still under medical attention and he's still in pain. He can't run, and he feels severe pain when it's cold.
>
> [...] There was no rule of law during the ENDF occupation of Mekelle. They used to imprison and kill people without any reason.

> Three young people from our neighbourhood were killed for no reason. One of them was killed two days before the TPLF came back while he was travelling through an ENDF camp on a motorbike, through no fault of his. He was an only child. The ENDF asked for cash to give the body back to the family." (Hana)

"Once, I was sitting with my friends in our neighbourhood playing a game when some ENDF soldiers came. '*What are you doing?*' they asked us. We answered, and they asked all five of us more questions like '*Who are you?*' and '*Where do you work?*' They manhandled us while they were questioning us. They beat two of my friends because one of them replied '*We're students.*' '*Why aren't you at school then? Why are you are playing if you're a student?*' they asked us. The other friends told the soldiers where they worked and the ENDF soldiers beat both of them with their fists. I felt very angry, and all my friends were also angry like me." (Menbere)

> "When I walked in the city, I changed my route if I saw PP soldiers from a distance. The members of my household were very worried about me, fearing I might be robbed or killed by the soldiers. This was also a source of distress for us as a household as well as for the community." (Teklay)

"I never stayed out after 6 p.m. I never wanted to confront the soldiers because I was very emotional, and I was afraid I might speak to them rudely and that they might kill me. One day, as I was walking with a friend in the street, two soldiers came up to us and asked me for my ID card, which I showed them. Then they asked me where the TDF were. I became very emotional and so I challenged them, and asked them why they were trying to find them here in the city when they were at the front. Then they got very angry with me too! But my friend begged them politely not to do anything and took me back home." (Samuel)

> "There was a curfew. It was a challenge, because people couldn't go to a health facility if they were ill. I was often ill in the evenings, but I couldn't go out to a health facility after curfew because the PP soldiers used to point their guns at people. One of my neighbours who had had a caesarean became unwell after a week, but there was curfew, and she couldn't call a *bajaj* and go to a health facility, and she died the next morning. She lost her life because of the curfew. I was scared to go out in the evenings because there was a camp near our house. My father stayed with me for some time. Sometimes he went near the camp fence and the soldiers took him by his coat and crushed him against the barbed wire fence. '*Please, he is my father,*' I told them. He doesn't know anything,

> but they shouted, '*you go away too.*' At that time, they suspected people like us of being spies, and thought that they were getting information. In normal times, my husband worked overtime, but he couldn't during the PP period. He used to come home at 6 p.m. because they would arrest him if he was late.
>
> […] Once, a PP soldier took some *areqe*, and when I asked him to pay for it, he told me to go away. At first, they called you peacefully, then they didn't pay, and mistreated you. I wasn't worried about the money, but about my life. On one occasion, my husband's father didn't come back from where he had gone, and my husband was worried. He went to look for him, but he couldn't find him. He couldn't carry on looking for him because it was curfew time. All he could do was to come home and say, '*Let him come whenever he comes*.'" (Nigisti)

"The aid committee arranged meetings at the *kebelle* to talk about aid, and the organisers were some of our own people, who were PP. I was afraid of the PP soldiers. I was afraid when I saw them at the bank when I went there to take out money. We hated them. I hated them so much that I was scared, and even seeing them was too much. Once, we were at a meeting to receive aid and a PP soldier called a young man over. We were worried he might kill him. One of the women said she wanted to rescue him, so she went over and called him. '*Come and get your aid,*' she told him. '*Get your oil and wheat. We're leaving.*' The soldier wanted to chase her away, and told her to go away, but she said '*We're leaving. Let him go because his oil and wheat could be stolen.*' We didn't follow the soldier and the young man, however, because we were afraid, and the soldier took the young man's smartphone from him. When the young man came back to where we were, another soldier who was there asked him what had happened, and when he was told, he said to the other soldier to give the mobile back to the young man, which the soldier did. We said, '*Everyone's not the same*'—one had no shame because he took the mobile in front of a crowd of people, and the other one was kind." (Mebrihit)

> "There was a curfew from 6 p.m. to 6 in the morning. Sometimes it was tightly enforced, but at other times it was loose. Once, I was outside with my friends, and we were caught by ENDF soldiers at 7 p.m. They checked our ID cards and told us not to do it again." (Menbere)

"I was very angry because I had heard that they were not only controlling Mekelle, but were also killing people. When I got back, I saw some changes, though. There was less chaos, and things had stabilised a little bit. There were some good things after the PP forces

came. Mobile phones started to work again. There were no air strikes, no heavy artillery fire and no gunfire. We were relieved from the sounds of weapons and gunfire." (Nigisti)

> "During the 'PP times,' some people denounced others to the PP authorities, accusing them of supporting the TPLF. They were false accusations against people they knew and wanted to take revenge on. The PP beat these people badly, to the extent that some of them became disabled. The ones who were doing this during the 'PP time' left Tigray when the PP forces withdrew, and those who stayed here were punished. There were also people who were involved in stealing aid food during the PP." (Mebrihit)

"There were no development team activities in those days because reportedly, the PP authorities put the development team leaders in prison." (Mulu)

The TPLF return to Mekelle: Contributions, food aid and enrolment in the TDF

> "The development team leaders sent by the *kebelle* administration asked for contributions in kind (flour or *injera*) and cash. I sometimes made a contribution whenever I had what they were asking for. They also came to invite me to community meetings, but I didn't attend them." (Hiwot)

"It was during that time that I got food aid twice—24 kilos of wheat, some soya beans and oil. In the beginning, I didn't want to take food aid because I was economically better-off, but my economic status deteriorated as time went by, so I really needed it. The provision of food aid was messy and unfairly managed, however. The development army groups were in charge of selecting the people who would receive food aid based on need, but those who really deserved it never got it." (Samuel)

> "Most people had a very positive relationship with the TDF fighters because they're part of the people and they went out to solve the people's problems. I never heard of TDF soldiers doing anything bad to our people, so I too have a good feeling towards them too.
>
> […] The reports of many atrocities also forced me to think about joining TDF.[5] In fact, it wasn't only me who was interested; at the time all the young people in Tigray were too. Even the older people

[5] Tigrayan media were reporting about mass killings, rapes etc. committed by the federal forces and their allies in the areas where there was fighting.

> regretted that they were old and couldn't join the fight for freedom and to resist genocide. It wasn't a matter of supporting the TPLF or not; it was a question of considering the atrocities and terrible war experiences that were common in Tigray at that time. In addition, victory was on our side, and so over time, the community's interest and motivation to join and support the war effort rose. However, this started decreasing when the TDF returned from Debre Birhan. That is because in both situations, people's reactions were just based on their emotions, not on anything rational.
>
> […] At the end of this period, unlike in previous times, the government put strong pressure on young people to join the fighting. Things became very difficult and distressing, especially for parents with youth. At the beginning of the war, I was also interested in joining TDF, but later on I couldn't decide because things took a turn for the worst on the front, and I wasn't clear about the purpose of the war, especially after the TDF returned from Debre Birhan.
>
> […] I remember that I was hidden at home for several weeks to escape being forced to join the fighting. Most young people spent their time hidden at home. The city looked like a desert, with no one at all around, even though it was actually full of people." (Kibreab)

"Young people were under heavy pressure to join the army, which was a source of fear and worry for me because I have brothers and cousins who were in the desired age range. They were under pressure from the local administrative bodies to join the army, which was worrisome for our family. Many young people were motivated to join the army when the Tigray forces were advancing to Addis, but I didn't see this same motivation when the Tigray army retreated from Debre Birhan. Seeing lots of young people travelling on big trucks to training centres or battlefields was very disturbing for me. People used to stand and watch them for a while, including me." (Etsay)

> "The local administration called frequent meetings for young people to convince them to join the TDF army, distributing invitations door-to-door to families where there were young people. Sometimes, the meetings were compulsory, and people were warned about fines or imprisonment if they didn't go. I took part in one of these meetings, which was about convincing young people to join the army. In around April 2022, near the Easter holiday, the administration began taking young people by force to go to the war. They called frequent meetings for mothers to send their children. On one occasion, they called a meeting, and my brother went. They told him that they wouldn't let him go if I didn't come. So, I went, and my brother was released. The

administration people told me and the other young people who were there that we wouldn't be allowed to leave if we didn't agree to go to the war. I had no choice, so I signed that I would go. They told me to go back after a few days, but I didn't. Fortunately, some kind of negotiations were under way with the federal government, and the forced recruitment became less intense. Initially, young people joined the TDF voluntarily, but this was less common after the TDF returned from Debre Birhan. Also, a lot of TDF fighters were coming back with injuries, and all this discouraged a lot of young people from joining the army. Many of them were also afraid of dying in drone attacks, as some young people faced drone attacks even before they could join the front.

[…] I was very worried about the forced recruitment. I stayed at home, and also spent some time at a relative's house when the forced recruitment campaign intensified. It was very boring, and the time went very slowly. It was even worse when there was no electricity. The city was also very quiet during this period because many young people were forced to stay at home. I got scared when there was a knock at our gate. I was afraid the local administration people might come one evening and take me. My mother also used to worry a lot. The *ḳebelle* and militia were going door-to-door and arresting young people and forcing them to decide to go to the front, and if not, they took them to prison. I had a medical condition that exempted me from joining the army, but I had to go to the training centre to prove it. Young people were fleeing from Mekelle and going to stay at their relatives' homes or holy water places, but at some point things became very serious, and even moving from one place to another was restricted, and young people had to stay wherever they were. Young people from rich families were paying huge amounts of cash to be released. The development team leaders knew the households where there were young people, and they wrote letters to these families telling them to bring their children. They and other leaders didn't send their own children to the front. They hid them, but nagged others to go. I went to a relative's house when the forced recruitment and detention of people who refused intensified. I wasn't able to go to church at that time because the men who were looking for and detaining young people were going everywhere to find them, even to churches." (Menbere)

"Also, during that time, my younger brother who had joined the TDF came back home because he didn't want to continue. He was living with my grandmother. The officers came and told our grandmother she had to send him to his military command. She said that she hadn't seen him and didn't know where he was, but she was arrested for two days, even though she's 60. In the end, my brother went to the police station and was arrested instead of her.

[…] People were afraid of the drone attacks and also that they could be forced to join the TDF, so there was less involvement in religious activities. There was a big push by the government of Tigray to force young people to join the fighting, but they had almost zero interest in doing so. So, people limited their movements, and we stayed at home all day. People couldn't go to work or church or other social events. Only old people were free to move around the city at any time. The young people hid at home to escape from joining the fighting. Many of my friends were forced to join the TDF against their will. Some were injured while trying to escape from the trucks that were taking them away by force. One of my friends was shot while trying to escape. This was the story of young Tigrayans at that time." (Teklay)

Being involved in public life

> "When the TPLF came to Mekelle I was elected to lead the women's development army group in my area. I'd had no previous experience of working in the *kebelle*. I agreed to serve my people because I wasn't working, and I wanted to solve my people's problems, at least as far as I was able to. It helped me to be introduced and have a good relationship with the community." (Akberet)

"I was a development team leader, and I was responsible for communicating with lots of different people in the community. I met many people, mostly to ask them to contribute cash and *injera,* and I helped collect contributions. I told people to go to community meetings, and I attended these meetings myself. I also supported the community by standing at security checkpoints, where my role was to check the IDs of people passing by. I did this for four days. I volunteered to treat injured TDF fighters, braid female fighters, clean rooms and wash their clothes. I collaborated with other people to contribute food from our homes and take it to the injured fighters." (Almaz)

> "At that time, I was selected to be a development team leader. I took messages from the *kebelle*. My role and that of other development team leaders was to call people whenever there were meetings. When the *kebelle* told us to prepare soup for the injured special forces (TDF), I was the coordinator. At that time, people contributed depending on what they had. Sometimes people gave *injera* and split peas and we prepared stews, while others gave *taff* and sugar and we made soup and took it to the injured forces. We organized this about five times. When the fighting was bad, there were more wounded fighters.
>
> […] I didn't have a good relationship with the development team people when they told me I had to send my husband to the front, or

they wouldn't give me aid. I attended social events like mournings and visits to sick people and mothers who had had babies. Once, I went to an IDP centre with some other neighbours. I didn't take anything as I had nothing, but I helped a woman from a well-to-do family who had prepared food for lunch there by carrying the food. I helped cleaning the rooms where the wounded *Weyane* fighters were staying. I went on a weekly basis. I also checked IDs every two weeks. It was more frequent than it was in other areas because there are only a few residents in our neighbourhood. However, this was only an irregular activity; it went on for two months and then stopped.

[…] Since the peace agreement there haven't been any meetings. I was given a certificate by the *kebelle* that said I served as a development team leader during the blockade." (Nigisti)

Mekelle and its rural surroundings

People's lives in Mekelle during the war were often connected with the town's surrounding rural areas. The nearby countryside was seen as a place of refuge in times of panic, to flee the shelling or the arrival of ENDF troops in town. They were also places that had resources when food and cash were scarce. These homelands were also at war, however, and the storytellers experienced a different type of hardship there.

Fleeing Mekelle

"I fled Mekelle after the PP entered the town on 28 November. They arrived in the morning, and many people fled. I heard about it at church. I decided to flee because I had heard they were beating and killing people. I decided immediately, but I wasn't ready to go. I hadn't prepared earlier because I didn't think the PP forces would capture Mekelle. I fled when the heavy artillery shelling became more intense. I decided by myself. I had some relatives with me. My brother and his wife, my sister, my sister-in-law and I travelled by taxi. It was quite close to Mekelle. I had got the key from my husband's brother, and we went to his house and stayed there for four days. My child's father and my son had already left for a place called Dingur, but then they moved again after three days to travel to his homeland. On my side, I had my sister, who was pregnant, and a 3-year-old child. I was very worried about having to move with my sister in this difficult situation, as I was afraid she might give birth. It wasn't the financial hardships that were worrying us at that time. It was scary to move in the city with the fear that the PP forces might harm us. Many people were getting out of Mekelle. There were lots of cars, *bajajs* and *mahindras*, and people were fleeing in different directions and scattering all over the place. Others were returning to Mekelle because there was fighting where

they had fled. One thing that I won't forget about this trip is how a pregnant woman had her baby on the way. There was an old woman in the taxi who was from the area, so she took the woman in labour to her house, cut the umbilical cord and treated the woman for seven days in her home. The woman returned to Mekelle when it was said that they weren't doing any harm." (Mebrihit)

The countryside as a source of food supplies

> "I used to bring grains from relatives in the countryside so I could afford to feed my kids […]. My relatives in Hagere Selam also sent me some money, which was a great help for me economically. They at least had some income from selling grain because they are farmers." (Akberet)

"I was also getting support from my parents, who are farmers. They gave me *taff*, about 20 kilos. '*We're better-off than you*,' they told me. I brought some home whenever I went to their place. I did this about three times.

[…] I was going to my parents' in the countryside, mainly to bring back *taff* from them. I usually stayed for about three days. A single trip cost 150 *birr*, which was expensive for me; it had been 25 *birr* before the war. There were checkpoints, and once they took away the *hambasha** bread I'd brought from my parents. The good thing was that the soldiers at the checkpoints didn't mistreat mothers with babies like me." (Nigisti)

The countryside as a haven?

> "My mother lives in the country. She's a farmer. She sent me a message to tell me to go to her place, so I went with my children in January 2022. In Mekelle we were really starving. It was a time of severe hardship, so when my mother said '*Come to my house*' I went with my three children. In normal times, I used to go to my mother's to celebrate commemoration holidays, and usually stayed for three days. This time I stayed there for three months. I went there at that particular time because it was harvesting season. I had a good time. There was no starvation. It was much better than here. I helped my mother with the farming activities, including cutting the grain and collecting it after threshing. My son also cut the grain, and my daughter herded the cattle. It was quite exhausting, and tough for someone who lives an urban life. I had been used to this type of work in the past, but I had forgotten it all. I returned to Mekelle in February, at the end of the harvest season, with grains, 50 kilos of ground wheat and 15 kilos of *shiro* prepared with peas harvested on mother's farm. I felt bad for my children when we were there. They found it hard. They weren't able to adapt to the cold

> weather or the water. The area is in the highlands, and it was very cold. The water was very thick and not easy to drink. The food wasn't easy to eat, either, and wasn't well prepared. There were times when they didn't eat because they didn't like the food. The *injera* was made from mixed grains, and my children didn't like it at all. They kept saying '*Let's go home.*' It was tough for them because they had never been in the countryside. Things were relatively better for me because I was born and brought up there." (Mebrihit)

"On 7 November 2020, I immediately left Mekelle to take my brother to the rural area where my parents lived. Getting transport was no easy matter as you needed to get a travel permit from the police and from the roads and transportation office. I took a medical certificate to the relevant offices, and in the end, I got a permit. That day I rented a car on a contract basis, which was a bit expensive, to go with my brother and children. I paid 800 *birr* for the transport. After staying with my brother for a few days, I went to the capital of the *woreda* with the idea of returning to Mekelle, but people there warned me and my husband not to go, and that people were actually fleeing Mekelle, afraid of the shelling. So, when I heard about the risks I went back to my parents' place. When the war broke out my husband was outside Tigray, and he was imprisoned for three days. He joined me at my parents' when he was released. […] I spent most of this time with my parents and family. I also had a close relationship with my parents in-law, who also live in a rural area. I was dependent on my parents for food and shelter. We used to comfort one another so we could face what was happening to the family, by which I mean my brother's injury and the war. While I was at my parents' place, I had new neighbours and it was a new community, although they weren't strangers, because I knew them from when I used to visit my parents before the war. But we had little contact with our neighbours, because there was heavy artillery fire some distance from our area, and many soldiers were passing through our neighbourhood. People were afraid of them, and many left their homes. But in my case, my father told us not to go anywhere, so we didn't leave, saying that death can happen anywhere. […] The administration bodies had moved away with the army. But there were still TDF fighters there who comforted us and told us to stay strong.

[…] I was at my parents' place in the country when the ENDF captured Mekelle. I spent about two months there after the federal government took control of Mekelle. My family and I returned to Mekelle after things got settled. Before we returned, we asked for information about the security conditions in Mekelle. I returned there

with my family on 14 January after celebrating Christmas with my parents in the countryside. I didn't celebrate the Christmas holiday happily because there were ENDF soldiers in the village. When I returned to Mekelle the price of many items had gone up, and also some food items weren't available from the market, even at a high price, such as *taff*. This didn't affect me, but it did affect people who bought *taff*. In my case, I had brought *taff* and grain from the rural area.

[…] In June [2021], my husband started farming for my parents and his parents, who are very old, to get grains in return. He weeded and tilled the land and harvested, spending weeks in the country whenever it was a peak time for farming. I didn't help with the farming because I had to take care of my children in Mekelle. So far, my husband has harvested for two rainy seasons. We got food from what we harvested by sharing with our parents.

[…] I was in the countryside during this period, buying things in shops and at the market, which takes place once a week. There were no noticeable price increases there, unlike what people told me was happening in Mekelle." (Almaz)

> "I went to my parents in the countryside a month after the war started, when the air strikes became frequent. Many people ran when the jets came but I wasn't able to because I couldn't pick my small baby up in my arms and run like the others, so that's why I left. I travelled by car and on foot to reach the village. The PP forces entered Mekelle a week after I arrived at my parents' place. There were lots of people from Mekelle and other rural areas there. After a week I moved again to another location because there was fighting where I first arrived. I was facing starvation, and my son caught pneumonia because of the cold and the wind. The PP forces captured the area after a week, and there was heavy artillery fire where we were, so we were forced to flee. There was no transport, so I walked to this other place, this time I moved with my parents and relatives. I stayed in this other place for about a month, and then returned to Mekelle when things settled down. In this second place I stayed with a family who were willing to host us. They gave us shelter but we had to provide our own food. […] Many people were scattered here and there around the rural areas. My parents were afraid their crops might be stolen. Lots of people died in the rural areas, especially those who had stayed at home when others fled to escape the shelling and conflict like we did." (Nigisti)

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The war outside Mekelle and from outside Tigray

INSIGHTS INTO THE WAR OUTSIDE MEKELLE AND FROM OUTSIDE TIGRAY

Stories are dominated by the storytellers' personal experiences and feelings, and their experiences and perceptions of the war as it affected their loved ones, neighbours, community and Mekelle as a city. But they were also aware, albeit to a lesser extent, of the war and its effects elsewhere in Tigray, and the war did not cut off all of their links with the world outside of Tigray. This section presents the storytellers' insights related to this most outward circle.

The war in Tigray: information, mobilities, the TDF and IDPs

The war and blockade severely limited access to information, leading to confusion about what was happening in different places in Tigray (and even in Mekelle, as we have shown in earlier stories and extracts). However, there was enormous distress and anxiety about what Tigrayan people were experiencing outside the city. Mekelle's residents' connection to the experience of war elsewhere in Tigray came from their own mobilities in the region, from witnessing IDPs and the TDF in town and from different kinds of mass and social media.

Accessing the news

"The media showed a lot of disturbing images and videos and that shocked me very much. They included people being burned or stoned. At one point I used to follow the media regularly just to keep updated on the situation in Tigray, but later on, I stopped. There were many stories of rape, hunger, destruction and they were very hurtful, especially when I learned about the issue for the first time. Seeing the images of severely malnourished children and watching interviews with people waiting for their deaths was so heartbreaking.

[…] I felt fear, a lack of protection and a great eagerness to see the end of the conflict. Our daily lives, talking to people and the media all involved stories of sorrow, whether they were happening to people close to us or anyone else […]. I had access to social media in Addis like everyone, and the information, images and videos coming out of Tigray were really disturbing. I remember a heartbreaking documentary on the Mariam Dengelat Church massacre produced by an international media outlet. There were also many other stories that were heartbreaking and crushed the reality I had built for decades." (Etsay)

> "The mobile network allowed me to communicate with my friends more easily. There were also things I only did on the phone, like exchanging screenshots and videos. People exchanged screenshots and

videos in hiding from the ENDF, because it wasn't allowed. Many people had access to Wi-Fi during the ENDF period. Most of the information on the screenshots was updates about the TPLF's positions on war front. Most of the news was about the progress being made by the TPLF, bringing down ENDF military planes and defeats of the ENDF. Like other people, I expected the TPLF to capture Mekelle before the rainy season. There was also some information about what was going on in the world. There was fake news from unknown sources, like about the death of key officials, which was shocking and made people lose hope. I only listened to credible sources like Stalin and Kassa Hailemariam,[1] but the fake news still disturbed me somewhat, until it was proved.

[…] Before the TPLF returned there was already news that they would retake Mekelle. One activist on Facebook also said the TPLF would occupy Mekelle on Monday. I got information about what was going on from screenshots. There had been a lot of news about the TPLF advancing to Mekelle. Screenshots were an important source of information during the blockade. I used to get them from video centres, computer centres and from friends who worked in offices with internet access. There were also people who sold videos and screenshots on the street by showing them on their laptops." (Menbere)

"The Ethiopian media also repeated that one TDF military leader or the other had been killed, so when we saw them in Mekelle we were very happy. I was also very pleased whenever I saw heavy weapons that had been taken from the Ethiopian military forces.

[…] I was […] in contact with a hidden opposition youth movement called "Remetse." They were members of the TDF, but they were in contact with young people in urban areas. I was in contact with them, getting text messages from them and sending them to other young people in our city.

[…] I also contributed to sharing the atrocities committed in Tigray with the international media. Numerous killings and atrocities were committed by Eritrean soldiers, especially in Western Tigray. I had close relatives in rural areas who were direct victims of these atrocities. I was told that a relative of mine, a priest living in the countryside, was killed by Eritrean soldiers, who took all his property, including his house. They slaughtered his ox while it was fasting time and forced him to eat the meat, because they knew he was a priest. Then they killed

[1] A well-known and at the time widely trusted Tigrayan journalist (Stalin) and activist (Kassa).

him. I told this story to the international media via the Tigray Medial House (TMH)." (Teklay)

> "There were groups of people called *ḳerabit** who used to disseminate information about the *Weyane*. The PP soldiers used to say, '*The Weyane have gone, they've disappeared*,' so we were confused and unsure if they were still operational. But messages were spread at churches and then by people who had heard them at church, which reassured us that they still existed. In their messages the *Weyane* also warned people against doing bad things. They were saying '*We're coming, those of you who are doing undesirable acts should refrain*.' People celebrated Yekatit 11 in February,[2] flying red and yellow balloons in the sky. This angered the PP soldiers, and I saw them running after the balloons to make them burst. It was funny." (Nigisti)

Getting around in Tigray

"On one occasion, I went to Alamata to be able to communicate with people without any limits.[3] Alamata was a centre of communications and a place where people received money that had been sent by relatives and friends. The cost of transport to Alamata was very high. I went there with my brother, and we met someone who could help us in many ways. He took us to a hill called Enda Felesti to get mobile coverage. The hill was very crowded with small food stalls, people who wanted phone communications and people who provided them. It was very noisy, and the people who provided the service were yelling loudly to attract callers. Some said there had been a light clash on the Amhara-Tigray border and the mobile network had been blocked for some time that day. My intention was to make phone calls directly from my own mobile, but my mobile didn't have a network, so I took other people's phone to call, and paid them. The mobile network still had some limitations, even with these phones. The phones that worked best belonged to people who lived in the area. I managed to contact friends and relatives that day, and I went back into town to look for a room, but the hotels that were said to have a mobile network were already occupied, so I went to another one, a multistorey building that was also said to have coverage in the evening. I waited until then, but there was no network, so I planned to go to one of the places with network in the

[2] Yekatit 11 (18 February, or 19 February in leap years) is the anniversary of the founding of the TPLF. In 2021, this anniversary was celebrated whilst ENDF was in control of Mekelle. [3] Alamata is not very far from the Tigray border with the Amhara region, and some network connection was possible through telecommunication masts serving Amhara areas.

morning. It had rained heavily in the evening, and it was inconvenient to go to the hill, so I asked for other locations in town. We took two options. One of them didn't work at all, but the second one seemed to be working because there was a crowd of people standing at one spot. Because of the poor coverage, the people providing the service were holding their mobile phones up in the air attached to sticks,and talking with earphones. There was a little rain, which interrupted the phone calls a bit as it was difficult to hold the mobiles high on a stick from under an umbrella, but I managed to make the remaining calls I wanted to make. Of course, I was also a little bit disappointed when some people didn't answer my calls." (Etsay)

> "I went to my parents' house in a rural area outside Mekelle. I was saddened to see what had happened to my neighbours' and grandparents' houses during the occupation of the area by Eritrean forces between November and December 2020. My neighbours had been killed, and my grandparents' house, which had many rooms, had been burned down by the Eritreans. They also harmed my younger brother, taking him from his house and beating him badly, but in the end, he was released and returned home alive. I still feel shocked when I think about his suffering. During those months, my family had fled to a nearby rural area to escape the fighting, but they returned after seven days […]. When I travelled to my parents' area, I could see the effect of the war on the transport system. There was no law enforcement and no one who enforced the rules about the maximum numbers of people in vehicles. When I travelled there were three people sitting on a seat which had only been for only people, and there were many people standing in the empty spaces." (Hiwot)

"The battlefield was also near the village where I was staying, so I was expecting the ENDF to pass through the village. In the end, they came, and they stayed there for more than a week. The ENDF captured Mekelle on 28 November 2020, and occupied our village next, on 4 December. The people in the neighbourhood who knew the ENDF were coming had left earlier, but not my parents and family. In the beginning, we thought they were TDF soldiers, because it was usually the TDF who travelled frequently on that route, and my mother started baking *injera*, for them thinking they were TDF. But later on, we realised they were ENDF. After a while, ten ENDF soldiers came to our house and asked for coffee. I was shocked to see that they were ENDF soldiers, and my other family members were shocked too. There were two rooms in the house, and I locked my two sisters away in one of them. I prepared coffee and served it to the soldiers,and gave them

injera as well. One of the soldiers told my father, "My friends and I came from Moyale border. We didn't know there was a war on. We were just told to come here for peacekeeping. Don't stay at home like this when the soldiers come, they can kill or rape. I lived in Tigray for seven years, and my wife is Tigrayan. We have children and she's living in Addis." My neighbours used to leave their house at 6 in the morning to hide and come back to sleep at 6 in the evening, when the soldiers were not around. But in my case, we had met the soldiers, who told us not to worry, so we didn't leave the house to hide from them." (Almaz)

Witnessing the suffering of the TDF back in Mekelle

> "We were going to visit injured fighters, preparing food and contributing *injera*. Although I didn't have much time, like anyone else I listened to the development team leaders, who were active again. They mainly asked for contributions of flour and *injera*. I had good relations with them. I felt good towards the TDF, and I helped by giving whatever I had. I felt profoundly sad when I saw TDF fighters who had been injured." (Mulu)

"It became common to see young people with a disability, mostly an arm or a leg, in the city, and it was really very touching to see productive young people end up like this. People from all walks of life joined the TDF, and people from all walks of life died in the fighting. Worse still, there wasn't enough medication in the health facilities. The shortage of supplies got to the point that gloves had to be reused." (Etsay)

> "The injured TPLF soldiers were brought to Mekelle on 30 June 2021, and we were told to contribute as development teams. Many had been injured, lost their minds or become blind. We saw many challenging issues at the hospital. I felt very sad to see the ones who became disabled. They were young people who would have been able to work and get an income, but now they just said '*I'm here*' when we took them food. They were almost begging. Some were severely injured. I looked for my two relatives because I'd had no news at all. I was told to check on them among the critically injured soldiers. Honestly, I would have preferred death. They will have so many problems with leading a normal life, which in itself creates psychological problems. Of course, some of them had lost their minds, and didn't realise what had happened to them or where they were.
>
> […] There was a lot of news about the deaths of young people who were in the army. Three of my son's friends died. They went to school with him, they went everywhere with him. You feel bad when you

> miss your son's friend who always used to be with him. You feel sad when you see your neighbours grieving. There are four families in my neighbourhood who were told about their children dying, and there are others who didn't come back and whose whereabouts are unknown. In my homeland, news of deaths began to be given last year, and there are so many young people who died in the fighting, both young men and young women. I feel very sad about this. These people were working so hard to feed their children. I feel so sad for the children too, not only for the parents, because the children also suffered during the bad times. Their parents were expected to feed them, and now they won't be able to, as they died in the fighting." (Mebrihit)

"Two family members, my son and my nephew, joined the army when our forces took control in June 2021. One of them is still in the army. My son first came back when the TDF returned from Debre Birhan, then he went off again and he came back once, again, because he got sick. Finally, he was injured, and came back in August 2022. I was worried about their survival, I worried not only for them but also for everyone at the front. I was praying a lot. [...] It was my son's and my nephew's own decision to join the army. I knew about it after they had made their minds up, and it was only when I met them while they were waiting for a bus that I realised they were going. There were so many young people with them, waiting for a bus." (Mulu)

Witnessing the misery of the internally displaced people

> "After the PP soldiers entered Mekelle, we heard that there were many IDPs who had come from other parts of Tigray and settled in Mekelle's schools. I didn't understand the extent of the war until I visited the IDPs in one of the schools. We got food aid for Christmas and decided to prepare food and visit the IDPs from Western Tigray in Mayweyni school. We contributed flour to bake *injera*. We also contributed beans, edible oil, groceries to prepare *tsebhi**. We came from around 10 neighbourhoods and were able to prepare plenty of *injera* and *tsebhi*. We called a *bajaj* owner whom we knew to transport the food to the IDP centre. He decided not to be paid for the service as a contribution to support the IDPs.
>
> We gathered around five women who represented all the neighbours and went to the IDP centre. When we arrived, most of us were very surprised that the school was full of people—old men and women, pregnant women, women who had given birth recently, toddlers, newborn babies and adolescent boys and girls. When we arrived with the food, everybody there was very thankful and happy with the support

because they were in need of food and were waiting to eat. The school had lots of rooms and pregnant women and women with children had a special room to stay in for protection. We visited all of them and chatted with some women. I remember I had a chat with a woman from Humera, who explained what had happened to her on the way. I cried with her, and other neighbours also cried when they heard the ups and downs of the IDPs on their way to Mekelle. That was when I understood the extent of the war and got some sense of what was going on in Tigray.

On our way home, some PP soldiers passed by us in a car. We were returning with the containers in which we had taken the food to the IDP centre. They asked us where we had been. One of us replied that we had been at a christening ceremony and had taken *injera* and *tsebhi* because it is the tradition. She told us later that she'd lied to minimise any risk if we'd told them we were visiting IDPs.

In the early stages of the war, people were very committed to supporting IDPs in all sorts of ways. Later, it became normal, because lots of people were coming to our house and begging for food or clothes. They all said they were IDPs, but some of their stories were fake. We became used to this and became more suspicious. Also, Mekelle's residents were running out of everything for themselves, let alone being able to provide support for others. I even heard some people complaining about the IDPs and blaming them for the rent increases in Mekelle, because some IDPs who had money were renting houses for a lot of money." (Kebedech)

"I saw IDPs only a few days after the war started. My first encounter with them was in Shire, where I was for research work when the war broke out, while I was walking along the street with a friend. I was looking for any possibility of getting information to get out of Shire and I saw people who seemed to be waiting for transportation. My friend and I asked a group of young people with travel bags, and they told us that they were waiting for a car to travel out of Shire. They said they'd came from Sheraro on foot fleeing the war. They had rucksacks and other materials on the ground where they stood. I also saw people travelling away from Shire when we started travelling to Axum. I remember a group of people walking together, and I still remember a large woman who seemed to have difficulty walking.

There were IDP centres in my neighbourhood in Mekelle and I visited one of them with my neighbours. Food, clothing and shoes were gathered by the women in the neighbourhood to give these to the IDPs. The place they were in was a multistorey building, and people were all over the building.

There were leaders who we heard coordinated the IDPs and kept support from people in one storage place. However, this wasn't acceptable to the IDPs, and some people we met on our way also told us to give the support to the people directly. The complaint was that the IDP leaders were keeping the support in the storage place while many IDPs were in need of it. We gave the support we brought to the people directly. Many of the IDPs, particularly children, asked us, and they followed us as we went from one room to another. The children were happy to take clothes and shoes. There were also old people who needed support but who chose to take better clothes. The young men and women simply watched what was going on. I gave a piece of clothing to a young woman who was watching us quietly.

We distributed what we had and reached the corridor and the IDPs showed us oil packed in jerrycans that had been left in the corridor because it was near its expiry date. The IDPs said they wouldn't use it.

After the TPLF returned to Mekelle, the presence of so many IDPs was an issue for the humanitarian organisations and the host community alike. IDPs were going door to door to get support. Some were from rural areas and others were from towns, which I was able to understand from their clothing and the way they begged. The IDPs from rural areas usually had a lot of children with them and they begged continuously. The IDPs from urban areas only begged at certain times when they were in critical need. Sometimes, a group of young IDPs came together to gather support for women who had recently had babies.

The residents of Mekelle also organised support for the IDPs. Young people came to our neighbourhood gathering *injera* during holidays. People were very sympathetic and willing to provide support for IDPs. People also organised themselves and took food and non-food items by going to the IDPs and giving directly to them.

There were IDPs from many areas including those reoccupied by the TPLF. They stayed in more than 27 schools and other spaces. The government forced people from areas under TPLF control to return home, and the NGOs helped them by providing transport and facilitating other kinds of support. Only those who were not able to return due because their area was occupied by the federal and other forces remained in IDP camps.

Some IDPs had been separated from their families, who had fled to Sudan. I got the information about Tigrayan refugees in Sudan from the IDPs themselves and the media. The Tigrayan refugees in Sudan had the chance to be visited and supported by people from the Tigrayan diaspora.

After some time, the IDPs were relocated from the schools where they'd stayed when they arrived to a place called *Seba Kare*. This was partly because primary schools had reopened. The IDPs were unhappy to be relocated there as it was isolated and a long way from the community they were getting support from. The shelters were tents, and it was very cold during the rainy season. Many IDPs started living in Mekelle, renting a house or staying with relatives, and those who had no other option remained in the IDP centre and suffered from starvation, cold and rain.

I went to the IDP centre several times with my work colleagues. I felt very bad when I saw the *Seba Kare* IDP centre. The size of the settlement and the fact that so many IDPs were living in tents made me feel really bad. So many people who used to live in comfort were now restricted to a small tent with limited provisions. One lady who used to work with Eritreans refuges told me '*It's more painful to see our own people like this*.' I was happy to go to the IDP centre with any project work or food support, although the fact that you can only support a limited number of people made me feel a bit bad too. Going to the IDP centre during the time of the critical food shortage with nothing to provide was really tough. Many people were talking about the food shortage even when I was going for other project work.

With the coming truce, humanitarian aid trucks were allowed in after a very long blockade. The IDPs were the first targets for food and non-food items when the road was opened. I saw non-food items like dignity kits being sold near an IDP centre. The IDPs sold the support they'd been given and bought what they actually needed. There wasn't enough food support, and it was given to the more vulnerable people. At that time, once people knew that trucks with humanitarian aid would be coming, asking people about the number of trucks with humanitarian aid was a main topic of conversation and in people's exchanges. My house is not far from the main road where the aid trucks passed by, and I was able to get updates on when they arrived. In some cases, I was able to see big aid trucks and also the relatively smaller trucks with the Red Cross logo.

When the fighting erupted again, more IDPs arrived in Mekelle to flee from the war and the advance of the federal forces. This became a source of worry for many people, including me, as it was a real indicator of the progress the federal forces were making.

With the peace agreement, the IDPs and their host community in Mekelle had big hopes that the IDPs would be able to go back to their homes, but it didn't happen. It became one of the indicators that the implementation of the Pretoria Agreement had failed. The IDPs

expressed their disappointment and anger in demonstrations and to the groups of national and international delegates who came to visit them. It was also seen as a failure by the interim government. The host communities related the increase in the cost of living, mainly in rents, to the presence of so many IDPs in the city. Many of the IDPs from Western Tigray came from a better economic position because they were involved in the production of sesame, which is one of Ethiopia's key exports. People also say that the extra cars and *bajaj* that have overwhelmed the city are linked to the IDPs because they're owned by people who have been displaced from other parts of Tigray (although not necessarily from Western Tigray)." (Etsay)

Outside Tigray: perceptions of Ethiopia and the world

The blockade largely isolated Mekelle and Tigray from the rest of Ethiopia and the world. Relations with Addis Ababa and Ethiopia and its leaders, and for some of the storytellers with people they knew outside Tigray too, were profoundly affected by the war. However, for some these relations somehow resumed after the peace agreement, mainly through family ties. Relations with the world are also expressed through these family ties, with family members abroad who sometimes offered great support to the storytellers, and in some cases through a perceived bond with the broader Tigrayan diaspora.

Addis Ababa, Ethiopians and us: Broken and surviving ties

"I was also able to communicate with my landlady who rented me a room in Addis. I told her I'd transfer the accumulated rent. She called back and told me that, after having talked about it with her husband, she would exempt me from one month's rent (7,500 *birr*). She said she understood the bad situation I was in. I was so grateful for this, not only in terms of the amount of money, but also for encountering kind people who understood my situation.

[…] Air transport also resumed soon after the ENDF occupation, which was very good news for many people, including me. I travelled to Addis after the Christmas holiday and returned to Mekelle in March. I completed most of my job-related assignments in Addis and came home. […] Transport by land was also possible, and I transported my household goods by road. I was in a hurry to send them because I was afraid something like a road blockade or a return of the TPLF forces might happen. I brought the smaller and fragile items with me on the plane, and I finally got completely settled in Mekelle. I went back to Addis for a research project I had agreed to work on before the war. I was very unsure whether to go to Addis or not because even though the ENDF controlled many parts of Tigray, there was still fighting

in many areas. There was also news of the ENDF being defeated by the TPLF, which might have led to air transport being shut down at any time. The other reason is that I felt it wouldn't be safe for me to travel outside Addis Ababa for the research. […]. Finally, I decided to go and do the work. This was in April 2021. I returned to Mekelle the same month. My stay was full of concerns because I was very frightened in case anything happened before I returned to Mekelle. My experience at the airport was a bit odd I showed an ID card but the person at the checkpoint asked me to show another ID, and I was confused. After searching for something in my wallet I found a business card from my previous office. I showed it to him and he let me pass the checkpoint. My eyes were full of tears as it was quite unfair to be treated that way in my own country." (Etsay)

"What was also distressing during that time was the hatred of Ethiopians that was being exposed in the media. I had previously believed we were the same people and shared the same country. However, back then we fully understood that most, but not all, Ethiopians hated us and wanted us to be eliminated from this land. I'll personally never forget the hate speech I heard from Ethiopian religious leaders, especially priests and bishops." (Akberet)

"The bad experiences of the war forced me to develop feelings of hatred towards these ENDF soldiers. I even developed a hatred for Ethiopians, as if all Ethiopians were supporting the war. These feelings arose because the war was mainly aimed at civilians.

[…] At that time, and even before then, our relations with Ethiopians had been spoiled. We don't believe that all Ethiopians have a negative attitude towards us on principle, but in these two years of war most were hateful and negative towards the Tigray people. For instance, I have friends who studied with me at Mekelle University and went back to their homes. They knew Tigray and its people well, and yet, what they wrote about us on social media during the war was surprisingly bad and full of hatred." (Kibreab)

"All this was due to the shortage of medicine as a result of the blockade. I was able to make sure my baby got treatment because I had money, but many were losing their lives in hospital due to the lack of medicine and money. How can anyone expect us to forget this! Personally, I'll never forget the sadism of the Ethiopian government and its allies who caused all this suffering, never ever!

[…] I […] had business links by phone with Ethiopian merchants to buy electronic materials. I wasn't convinced about these links, but

> I thought it would benefit my household and community economically. Also, I had no other choice.
>
> […] I also reached out to some Ethiopian friends by phone and on social media, and unlike earlier, some of them feel positive about us." (Teklay)
>
> "After the peace agreement I contacted my landlord from when I was living in Addis and other people I knew in Addis by mobile phone, and they sent me money." (Almaz)

"My sister, brother and father migrated to Addis to sell cleaning materials. My father went first, and my brother followed. My sister went there to be with her husband. She took her children with her. I communicate with them regularly. I call every Sunday to ask how they are.

[…] My relatives who live in Addis called me soon after phone communications resumed, but they haven't called me since. Many people come from Addis to visit their relatives but ours haven't come at all." (Nigisti)

The diaspora and its support

> "I was in contact with friends and relatives who live in Canada, Sweden and Addis Ababa. Three people sent us money from Sweden and Canada. This was very meaningful, and it helped us to be able to afford food and other items for a year. I bought 2 quintals of *taff*, 25 kilos of macaroni, rice, wheat flour and other consumer items." (Hana)

"I managed to get cash from Sweden twice, from a friend and from my brother, within a week. The first transfer was on 4 November 2022. I was communicating with the senders via someone I knew who was working at an NGO. I got the transfer with a fair deduction which compared to the rate applied for transfers through Alamata. My mother once got a cash transfer from Canada via Addis Ababa through Alamata, and she only received 50% of the cash that had been sent." (Menbere)

> "In addition, I have relatives abroad and they supported me and my parents financially, sending money via bank transfers. I have a brother in South Africa, a sister in Sudan and another sister in Sweden, and they joined hands to send me money. It was very helpful for my household as well as my parents,' and allowed us to at least afford to satisfy our basic needs. Thanks to the money I received from my siblings I was also able to support my friends, relatives as well as neighbours who were in need of money, food and clothing…

> […] I used it to improve my financial position. I also shared it with friends and relatives who live in the countryside." (Teklay)

"Many organizations which used to support people are active again. For instance, Don Bosco was closed but after the peace agreement it has started supporting people again. My son is beneficiary of a project, and he gets to eat breakfast and lunch there. There is also weekly provision of soap. Also, air strikes stopped, and air transport has resumed." (Mebrihit)

> "The other thing I remember is the many kinds of support from the diaspora. Especially after we had access to the media again, we were very proud of our diaspora and impressed by their energy and their efforts to show the atrocities that were being carried out to the international community. They're also very committed to providing economic support, especially for people in need in every area of Tigray. I personally received 15,000-*birr* support from the diaspora, from my niece who lives in one of the Arab countries. I was able to buy 50 kilos of *taff* and other food items. I also supported a relative whose husband had joined the TDF and she and her baby had nothing to eat." (Akberet)

"The Tigrayan diaspora was also very committed to Tigray, and very concerned about us. This was very helpful. It gave the people of Tigray strength, and also helped make the atrocities, killings and sexual violence known by the world." (Teklay)

Glossary

Areqe	A local Ethiopian distilled drink
Arsema mahiber	*Mahiber* of Saint Arsema, one of the most venerated Saints in Ethiopia
Asbeza	Small food items for cooking *tsebhi*, which is bought more regularly (weekly, for example) than staple food (such as *taff*), which is bought in bulk and requires more cash to be available at the same time
Bajaj	An Indian brand name used as a generic appellation for three-wheeler cars to transport people
Berbere	A spice mixture that usually includes chili pepper, coriander, garlic, ginger, nigella seeds, fenugreek and other spices, a key ingredient in Ethiopian cuisine. It can also refer to chili pepper itself
Birr	The Ethiopian currency
Chiffon	A fabric that can be made of different materials but is typical for its flowing nature, and is used to make usually ample dresses or blouses for women
Costa	Swiss chard
Dabo qolo	A snack and finger food consisting of small pieces of spiced fried dough (*dabo* is bread)
Dantel	The Tigrigna (and Amharic) word for crochet, which is commonly used in Ethiopia to make traditional handcraft table and seat ornaments
Derg	The military socialist government between 1974 and 1991
Dishqa	A colloquial name for the DShK, a Russian heavy machine usually deployed with a two-wheeled mounting and a single-sheet armour-plated shield
Eqqub	A rotating savings group in which the sum of its members' regular contributions is given to each member in turn according to a sequence determined by lottery
Etswan Kiban	Used to describe the blockade. Literally, a juxtaposition of two concepts, *etswan* (a closed place one cannot escape from) and *kiban* (encircled)
Ferenji	A foreigner in Tigrigna. The term is widely shared across Ethiopian languages

Hambasha	The Ethiopian celebration bread, often shaped as a wheel with indentations to create spokes. It can be made plain or with cardamon seeds
Iddir	A funeral association
Injera	A flat sourbread, a staple food in Ethiopia's highlands, traditionally made of taff
Junta	The original meaning is a military or political group that rules a country after taking power by force. In the Ethiopian context of the war in Tigray, Ethiopian officials and media initially used the word to refer to the TPLF. It was then widely used as derogative term referring to Tigrayans as enemies during the war
Kale	A type of cabbage
Kebelle	The smallest unit of government administration
Kerabit	Match. A name given to youth groups tasked with passing urgent messages from the TPLF/TDF to residents of Mekelle under cover during the PP period
Kedamay Weyane	First *Weyane* or first uprising of Tigray, then a province, against Emperor Haile Selassie's centralisation policy (1943). It's now also the name of the central market in Mekelle
Ketena	A neighbourhood or cluster of houses, smaller than a *kebelle*.
Qicha	Traditional bread
Qolo	Corn or roasted barley, chickpeas, sunflower seeds, other local grains and peanuts
Mahiber	A religious and social association named after a saint
Mahindra	An Indian brand name used as generic appellation for three-wheeler cars for transporting goods
Mihilela	A large group prayer during time of crises such as droughts or conflicts that unite believers in a shared request to God for blessings and mercy
Militia	An armed force raised from civilians to supplement an army in an emergency. In many parts of Ethiopia, militia are permanent local law and order structures
Mittin	A spiced flour made with beans ready for making sauce
Moqmoqo	*Rumex abyssinicus*—a medicinal plant used to prepare a reddish tea as a traditional treatment
Richittes	Fireworks
Sergenya	A type of *taff* halfway between the white and red varieties
Shabia	Initially the name of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which fought for Eritrea's independence, including against the Derg alongside the TPLF. Used in this context to refer to the Eritrean armed forces and security agents

Shebett	Plastic sandals, usually worn by poor people or peasants
Shiro	A split-pea sauce. A staple dish, especially for poorer people
Siwa	A local Ethiopian fermented drink
Tabia	The equivalent of *kebelle* in Tigray
Taff	*Taff* in Tigrigna, *teff* in Amharic. A small round cereal endogenous to Ethiopia, it is the basis for *injera*, a staple food in Ethiopia's highlands
Tahini	Local flour made from roasted barely used for drink mixed with water and sugar
Tahini	Local flour made from roasted barely used as a drink mixed with water and sugar
Tewahedo	Word meaning "united as one" in Ge'ez (an ancient Semitic language, the ancestor of Amharic and Tigrinya and the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahedo* Church), referring to the Oriental Orthodox belief in Christ's one perfectly unified nature, the complete union of the divine and human natures into one
Tezkar	A commemoration ceremony for a deceased person
Timket	The Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahedo* Church's celebration of Epiphany on 19 January
Tsebel	Holy water, which is considered by the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahedo* Church to be a healer from demons, and is used by many Ethiopians as a remedy for illnesses that are believed not to be treated effectively by "modern medicine." It can also mean drinks and food served during religious feasts.
Woreda	A district-level administrative unit between the *kebelle* and the Zone and Region
Tsebhi	Sauce of different types usually accompanying *injera*
Weyane	Name used by the Tigrayan rebels who took arms against Haile Selassie in 1943 to call themselves. It was borrowed from a local game between groups of young men from different villages, and connotes a spirit of resistance and unity. The second *Weyane* was the fight against the Derg. Many in Tigray consider this war to be the third *Weyane*. The term was also used to designate TDF fighters

Acronyms and abbreviations

COHA	Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (signed in Pretoria on 2 November 2022, bringing an end to the war)
COVID-19	The Coronavirus disease of 2019
ENDF	Ethiopia National Defense Forces
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
ETV	Ethiopian Television
HoF	House of Federation (the upper chamber of Ethiopia's parliament)
HoPR	House of People's Representatives (the lower chamber of Ethiopia's parliament)
ID	Identity (card)
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
KG	Kindergarten
MA	Master of Arts
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
PP	Prosperity Party (established by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2019)
TB	Tuberculosis
TDF	Tigray Defense Forces
TIRA	Tigray Interim Regional Administration
TMH	Tigray Media House
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front (*Hewahit* or Hiwaht in Tigrigna)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (commonly known as the UN agency for refugees)
V-8	Eight-cylinder piston engine arranged in two banks of four cylinders laid out in the shape of a V. The term is used to describe cars that are thought to have such a type of engine (usually 4-wheel drive cars)