News
An Ethiopian woman carries her child as she flees the ongoing fighting in the Tigray region ne

An Ethiopian woman carries her child as she flees the ongoing fighting in the Tigray region near the Setit River on the Sudan-Ethiopia border Nov. 22, 2020. Aid agencies say an escalation of the conflict has made it difficult to get aid to millions of people caught up in the violence. (CNS/Reuters/Mohamed Nureldin Abdallah)



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Some 14 months into the brutal conflict between separatists and government forces in Ethiopia's Tigray region, priests and Catholic relief workers are growing ever more vocal in their concern for the welfare of the millions of residents who have been caught up in the intense violence.

The World Food Program, a U.N. agency, said this month that the current "escalation of conflict" across northern Ethiopia meant none of its aid convoys has been able to reach the contested city of Mekelle since mid-December. Many other agencies, including Catholic ones, have also been affected.

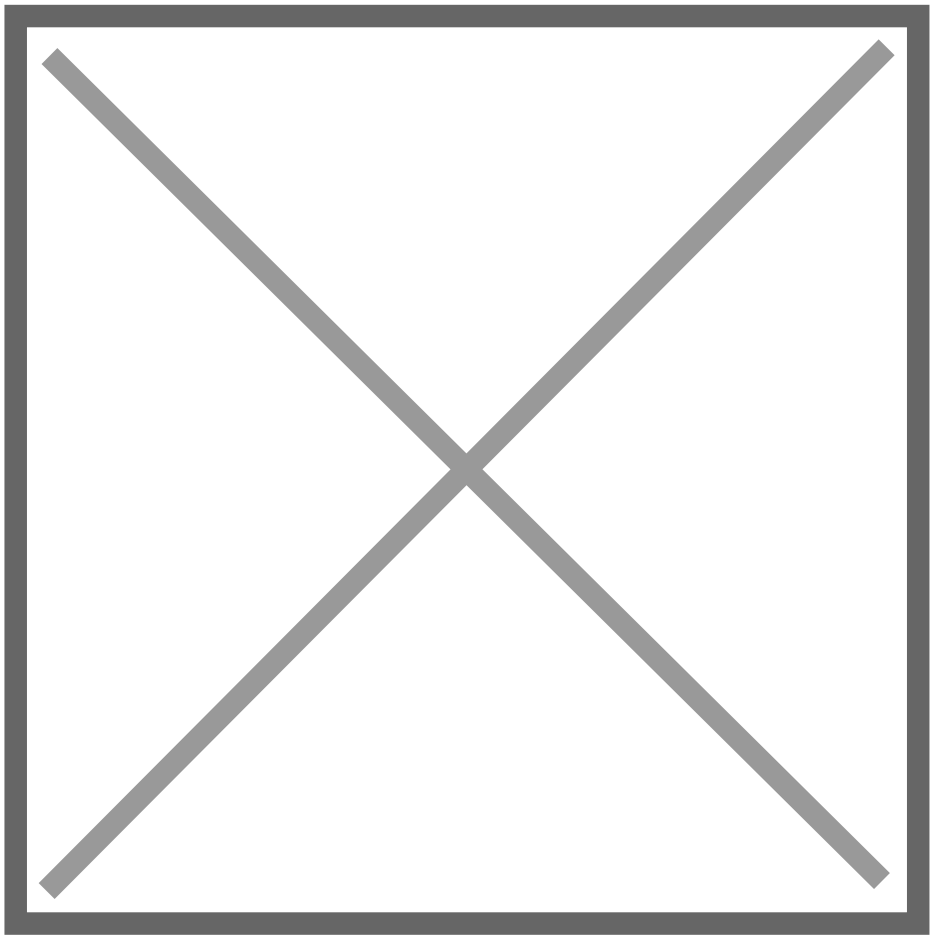
Consequently, stocks of food aid and crucial medicines are "now exhausted," with access largely cut off, warned the WFP. For its part, Catholic Relief Services said Jan. 11 that it has provided food to 3 million people in Ethiopia since the start of the conflict in 2020 but "these distributions have been disrupted due to security issues

and lack of access."

Security and safety risks for priests and Catholic humanitarian workers have escalated in Ethiopia at a time when millions of citizens need aid and relief. The internal displacement has affected women and children the most as they face rape, killings and bombardments in their quest to flee or hide from the war.

The conflict in Tigray, which began in November 2020, has escalated in the past two months. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has imposed a blockade on the region, trying to essentially starve out support for the opposing Tigray People's Liberation Front.

Ahmed, who was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for efforts to end a two-decade-long conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, has been widely criticized by Western leaders for his conduct during the conflict. Biden administration officials traveled to Ethiopia Jan. 17 to 20 to urge the prime minister to end air strikes and restore humanitarian access to Tigray.



A malnourished 3-month-old Ethiopian child looks on after being admitted to the Ayder Referral Hospital in Mekele, Ethiopia, Dec. 22. Catholic Relief Services has provided food to 3 million people in Ethiopia since 2020, but distribution has become more difficult.
(CNS/Reuters)

David O'Hare, a spokesperson for the Irish Catholic agency Trocaire, told NCR by email that although the agency has continued to work with partners in Ethiopia, it is increasingly becoming "a challenging environment." O'Hare said Trocaire is now focusing on "the safety of our partners and staff."

While access into most parts of Tigray has been near impossible, Catholic leaders were among a grouping of the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia that visited people affected by the violence in Amhara and Afar regions at the beginning of this year.

The two regions were the center of renewed fighting between government and Tigray forces in December, although federal forces later claimed that they had taken back control of the areas.

During the visit, Cardinal Berhaneyesus Souraphiel, president of the Catholic bishops' conference, met local church leaders and visited hospitals, universities and religious institutes that have been "looted and totally ruined" in the two areas, the Ethiopian Catholic Secretariat said.

But in Tigray, access remains largely restricted as fighting has continued. Moreover, some areas in Tigray such as Irob in the northeast "have not had access to telecommunications since November 2020," the Tigray Youth Network, a civic organization advocating for rights of Tigrayan youths, told NCR.

As millions of Ethiopians have fled Tigray and other worst affected areas into neighboring countries and other less affected regions within the country, communication between families and displaced relatives has been impossible.

Towns and districts near Tigray have also been caught up in the crisis as they suffer military raids and roundups of people fleeing.

A Catholic priest from one town bordering Tigray said Catholic religious were being rounded up by Ethiopian military forces, accused of aiding locals and separatist

fighters trying to escape the attacks in Tigray. The priest asked not to be named for fear of reprisal.

In the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, Catholic nuns and priests have in the past months been arrested and rounded up as the Ethiopian government intensified its crackdown on those of Tigrayan origin, even far away from the conflict regions.

Seven Catholic sisters were detained by government authorities for nearly two months, with little explanation for why they were being held. They were released on Jan. 15.

"We have very strong and committed religious men and women, some still within the conflict zones who are giving hope and assistance to those affected and those hopeless because of the situation," said the priest.

"We have priests, local church partners for humanitarian agencies and other religious who have been exposed to abuses, movement restrictions, singling out and harassment for doing the Lord's work through provision of help, aid and preaching hope."

In a letter addressed to Pope Francis in December, the Tigray Diaspora Inter-Religious Council revealed the large extent of the damage the conflict has wrought on Ethiopians. Reads the letter: "Civilians in many towns, including Mekelle, the capital city of Tigray, are being indiscriminately killed by air bombardments."

Bishop Abune Tesfaselllassie Medhin of the Diocese of Adigrat further underscored the impact of the conflict, recently saying that the Catholic Church of Tigray has been "highly affected by this war" with "attacks on our religious structures such as worship houses, health centers and development installations as well as looting."

A survivor of an airstrike by Ethiopian government forces receives treatment at the Shire Shu

A survivor of an airstrike by Ethiopian government forces receives treatment at the Shire Shul General Hospital in the northern region of Tigray, Ethiopia, Jan. 8. (CNS/Reuters)

More than a year into the conflict in northern Ethiopia, the food and emergency needs are escalating, with WFP saying as many as 9.4 million people require humanitarian food assistance. This represents an increase of 2.7 million from just

four months ago, worse still at a time when food distributions are at an all-time low.

A regional head of an international Catholic aid agency told NCR that they are having to work with local church and community leaders, often in "very difficult circumstances" to take available supplies closer to the Tigray borders. In most cases, this is the best they can do.

"The security situation is not conducive for our staff and we are having to work underground and under the radar and we are being very reserved about our operations in Ethiopia," said the official, requesting that he and his organization remain unnamed so as not to be targeted by government forces.

"Mostly we are working with community leaders and local church staff to take the few supplies we can manage, often once in two months or so," they said.

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Zaynab Mohamed, a political analyst with expertise on Ethiopia, said there have been mixed signals from the Ethiopian government about how the conflict will progress in coming months.

Mohamed, with the Oxford Economics Africa research firm, noted that the government recently released a number of opposition figures from jail, in an apparent gesture toward reconciliation. However, there is still "a long way to go before peace negotiations" can be held, with "deadly drone strikes in Tigray suggesting that fighting continues" within the most affected area, Mohamed said.

"[Prime Minister Ahmed's] response to the crisis has damaged his reputation among leaders of the West but he enjoys support from alternative international powers, such as China and Turkey," said the analyst. "He remains popular domestically, fuelled by anti-Tigray sentiment."

In addition to causing internal displacements, the war in Ethiopia has also "pushed millions into poverty," said Mohamed, while the crisis has also "delayed development plans, as resources are redirected towards acquiring weapons, and

heightened political risk has made investors wary."

In December, Ethiopia's Catholic bishops issued another plea for the halt of the conflict.

"Many have lost their lives, many are displaced, many have lost their properties, many are imprisoned, many girls and women are raped, social harmony which has existed between people have been seriously affected," said the prelates.

"As Christians, as Catholics, each and every one of us should be able to stand up and declare unreservedly and unconditionally, like the Psalmist, 'I am for peace,' " they said. "The way of peace reconciles conflicts and regenerates the beauty of fraternity, which heals all wounds."