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A large brown adult hand holds two incredibly skinny and small brown newborn hands and ar

A father holds the hand of his severely malnourished newborn son at Samre Hospital in the Tigray region of Ethiopia June 23, 2023. The U.N.'s celebration of World Food Day was Oct. 16. (OSV News photo/Tiksa Negeri, Reuters)

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On the day the world celebrates efforts to combat hunger and food insecurity, a bishop in Ethiopia was warning that his people were still dying of hunger, a year after a ceasefire ended a deadly conflict in the northern region of Tigray.

Bishop Tesfasellassie Medhin of Adigrat said he wanted the world to know the situation in the region was still critical, and deaths were occurring due to serious food shortages and malnutrition.

"The situation is very bad. Many parts of the region experienced failed harvests due to drought, and food aid distribution had also stopped," Medhin told OSV News in an interview ahead of World Food Day, observed annually. "People are dying of hunger. The hospitals are also reporting increased cases of malnutrition. It is very frustrating."

More than 20 million people need food assistance in Africa's second most populous nation after the Horn of Africa's worst drought in decades and a two-year conflict in the Tigray region on top of it.

On Oct. 16, the globe rallied to mark the World Food Day, an annual awareness and action day against hunger and malnutrition, reminding of the importance of food security and access to nutritious food for all. It also addresses the importance of sustainable agriculture and food production. Launched to celebrate the founding of the U.N's food agency, the Food and Agricultural Organization, its main focus is that "no one should go to bed hungry."

This year’s theme was "Water is Life. Water is food. Leave no one behind."

The following day, Oct. 17, the world observed International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, celebrated this year under the theme: "Putting dignity in practice for all."

Tigray, a semi-autonomous region in northern Ethiopia that is recovering from a deadly two years' war, also suffers from extreme poverty. The conflict killed thousands and displaced millions into camps -- making it impossible for farmers to produce food. Church sources estimate that 1 million people may have died in the war and 5 million to 6 million may be displaced.

In August, a study by local health authorities and Mekelle University reported that at least 1,300 people had died of hunger since the ceasefire. According to news reports, the researchers from the two had found out that hunger accounted for 68% of the deaths they investigated.

"It is a helpless situation in Tigray, while the world looks on and sits comfortably," said Medhin.

Tigray slid into war in November 2020, when Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali accused Tigray People's Liberation Front, the rulers of the region, of over-running a national army based in Tigray's capital, Mekelle. A peace treaty ended the fighting in November 2022.

The pact allowed humanitarian access, among other mandates, including uniting families separated by the conflict and the return and re-integration of internally displaced persons and refugees.

However, Medhin expressed concern that agreement implementation was lagging behind, as thousands continued to live in camps in the region. According to the bishop, the people have been unable to return to their farms to produce food or go home, where they can send their children to school.

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According to the bishop, Eritrean soldiers and regional forces from the neighboring Amhara state were still occupying parts of Tigray and were blocking everyone from accessing those parts.

"Children are not attending school. The school buildings are still in bad condition," he said, while explaining that there was a lot of political intrigue being played around the issues of Tigray.

Meanwhile, Fr. Timothy Ploch, interim director of Salesian Missions, the U.S. development arm of the Salesians of Don Bosco, highlighted water projects run by the Salesians.

"Salesians know how important water is for food production and sustainability, which is why they have made building wells and providing fresh, clean water a priority," the priest said in a statement for World Food Day. "In addition to water projects, Salesians also provide nutritional support for its schools and centers."

The Salesians have 14 houses in Ethiopia, and in August 2022, the order moved to address the food shortage in Tigray, providing food items, including wheat, rice and cooking oil, as well as nonfood items such including blankets, sanitary items and soap.

After suspending aid, the U.N. World Food Program and the U.S. Agency for International Development resumed food distribution to refugees in the camps across Ethiopia.

But food supplies will remain suspended for millions of Ethiopians until the government takes steps to root out corruption.

WFP had suspended the food distribution in Ethiopia in June -- alleging widespread theft of food aid in Tigray and other regions -- a day after the U.S announced it was

doing the same because of diversions of aid.

The suspension had triggered passionate appeals from both local and global religious leaders and agencies on the two to resume the distribution of life saving food distribution immediately.

"The effect of delay in taking appropriate action to resume the food support will strongly affect the poor and the needy people that may lead to further catastrophe on their children, elderly and the vulnerable people in the IDPs (Internally Displaced People camps)," said Cardinal Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphiel, the archbishop of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in a joint statement with the Rev. Yonas Yigezu, the president of Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus.

"Food is a lifeline for refugees living in unimaginably hard conditions, and it’s a relief that we now have measures in place to resume vital support," said Valerie Guarnieri, WFP's assistant executive director in a statement posted on X Oct. 10.

But Medhin is not sitting comfortably, until his people can access food, and more importantly -- peace.