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We cannot allow Ethiopia to become this generation's Rwanda

The conditions that led to ethnic cleansing in Rwanda are rapidly emerging in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia.



Tigray men sit atop a hill overlooking part of the Umm Rakouba refugee camp, hosting people who fled the conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, in Qadarif, eastern Sudan, Monday, Dec. 14, 2020. (AP Photo/Nariman El-Mofty)(Nariman El-Mofty)

By Rob Curran

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It's the great humanitarian shame of our age — the moment, in 1993, when the international community turned its back on Rwanda and allowed genocide to happen.

It's time to avert a potential repeat of this epic mistake, this time in Ethiopia.

The same volatile mix of ingredients that led to ethnic cleansing in Rwanda are rapidly emerging in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia.

People fleeing the area for Sudan have told reporters from *The Guardian* and elsewhere that the roads were littered with the bodies of civilians killed in bombardment by Ethiopian national forces. Last month, Tigrayan militia armed with machetes allegedly killed hundreds of civilians from other ethnic groups, in the so-called Mai Kadra massacre, a horrific echo of Rwanda. BBC reports indicate that tit-for-tat killings are already happening in the agricultural hub of Humera.

Both Tigrayan and Ethiopian forces deny targeting civilians.

As in Rwanda, there has been an abrupt power shift in Ethiopia along ethnic lines after decades of political stagnation. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, elected in 2018, is the first national leader from outside the Tigray ethnic group since the 1980s. As in Rwanda, the government is opposed, along ethnic lines, by a well-trained army — in this case the Tigray People’s Liberation Front. And, as in Rwanda, the international community is so far sitting on its hands even as non-governmental organizations document slaughter and atrocities.

Contact your local representative to Congress: The government of Ethiopia must be pressured into a cease-fire before it’s too late.

Ethiopia claims that the war is over, but reports on the ground show that fighting continues in and around cities in Tigray, including the largest, Mekelle. The conflict has also spilled into Eritrea, the desperately poor nation to the north that broke away from Ethiopia in the 1980s, and another homeland of the Tigrayan people. The Tigray People’s Liberation Front has reportedly fired missiles at the Eritrean capital of Asmara, while Eritrean forces are making incursions into the Tigray region of Ethiopia.

There are fears that the Eritrean security forces are seizing people from refugee camps in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, said John Stauffer, president of the America Team for Displaced Eritreans, who taught in Eritrea with the Peace Corps while the country was still part of Ethiopia. The United Nations high commissioner for human rights has appealed for access to the camps, which have been cut off from Red Cross and other assistance during the fighting.

“The safety of the camps is a big concern,” Stauffer said.

Kidane Okubay, an ethnic Tigrayan who fled Eritrea in 2015 and now lives in Canada, fears for the safety of his parents in the border village of Bihat. His wife, Hiwet, and son Yoel, are in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, where there have been reports of Tigray people being refused service in banks and elsewhere.

Okubay sent me footage of women lying in what appeared to be hospital beds in Adigrat, Ethiopia, a town where Ethiopian forces recently drove out the Tigray rebels.

“In my opinion, this is genocide over one ethnic group,” Okubay said.

As in 1993, the peace-making bodies of the international community have frozen. Two years ago, Western powers threw their weight behind Ahmed, the prime minister, after he portrayed himself as the broom that would sweep out corruption in the Ethiopian political system.

He even won the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, for ending the war with Eritrea, something that now looks like a gambit to strengthen Ahmed's hand in the Tigray region.

“The Amharas were traditionally the top dogs, and their language has been the official language of the country,” said Stauffer.

Ethnic conflict — in Rwanda, in Yugoslavia, and in Ireland, where I was born and raised — is the natural outcome of generations of animus. When your enemy is your neighbor, time is more of a slow-cooker than a healer. Communities soak in the juices of resentment for centuries.

History classes often become exercises in bringing these resentments to a boil. Every current and historical event gets poisoned with concoctions about the old enemy's role. The resentment bubbling in the blood creates an immediacy of anger, like what you might feel in the instant after a sibling has wounded you.

The history of Ethiopia follows a similar recipe of ethnic conflict and shifting borders so familiar to those of Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

Tigrayans have grievances going back to the 19th century Abyssinian empire. Separatist groups formed during Haile Selassie's dictatorship in the 1960s, and the TPLF began their armed independence struggle during Communist Derg party era of the 1970s and '80s.

There is even evidence that the impact of a drought in Northern Ethiopia in 1983 was exacerbated by the Derg's efforts to divert grain from the Tigray rebels. The result, of course, was the most devastating famine of the 20th century.

Bloodshed in the region continued after the fall of the Derg. The city of Adigrat, now once more under attack, was bombed by the Eritrean air force during the prolonged conflict between the breakaway nation and its former parent.

Meanwhile, the Tigray group came to dominate Ethiopian politics, with the government reportedly growing more corrupt.

Representatives of the United Nations recently told Agence France-Presse that humanitarian aid intended for the 96,000 Eritrean refugees and other needy parties in the Tigray region is still held up. Ethiopian guarantees of access are not viable under the current conditions, the U.N. said. In other words, the Western world is standing by with assistance. But we cannot stand by and watch.

Rob Curran is a writer in Denton. He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.