

International

Shell-shocked survivors tell tale of brutal Tigray advance

'They want to suppress and rule us, their deed is ethnic cleansing'

DESSIE, Ethiopia: After seizing the farming village in northern Ethiopia, the rebels roamed the streets searching for young, able-bodied men who had fought alongside government forces. Anyone with a militia ID was a suspect. So were men with marks on their shoulders left by rifle straps, even though it is common for farmers in Ethiopia's Amhara region-militia fighters or not-to carry Kalashnikovs. Before the day was over, the rebels had fatally shot two men in their homes and marched a third to a nearby river where they fired rounds into his back, according to 49-year-old Adisse Wonde, who told AFP he buried all three.

"They want to suppress and rule us. Their deed is ethnic cleansing," Adisse said of the rebels who hail from Ethiopia's northernmost region of Tigray. The alleged killings earlier this month in the village of Hara are just one example of gruesome abuses described by witnesses of Ethiopia's widening war. Long confined to Tigray, the conflict has recently spread to two neighboring regions, Afar and Amhara, with heavy weapons fire killing an untold number of civilians and displacing hundreds of thousands more. The rebels, known as the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), have dismissed allegations they have committed atrocities as "groundless" pro-government propaganda. Yet newly displaced civilians in Amhara tell a different story. They blame TPLF fighters for killings, widespread looting and the indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas.

'We don't know who is alive'

Northern Ethiopia has been wracked by violence since November when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops into Tigray to topple the TPLF, then the region's ruling party. The 2019 Nobel Peace laureate said the move came in response to TPLF attacks on army camps and prom-

ised a swift victory. Instead, though, Tigray became engulfed in a grinding war marked by massacres and mass rapes.

In late June, the TPLF stunned the world by retaking the regional capital Mekele, then pushed into Amhara and Afar, vowing to end what it describes as a humanitarian blockade of Tigray and prevent pro-Abiy forces from regrouping. The TPLF advance forced Muchayu Degin, a 55-year-old mother of seven in the northern Amhara town of Kobo, to hide in her home for a week, trembling in fear as artillery booms drew nearer.

Starving and desperate, she finally summoned the courage to flee on foot with her family, walking 15 hours south on roads strewn with bullet-riddled bodies. Eventually she reached the city of Woldiya, then found transportation further south to the city of Dessie, a fast-booming hub for the newly displaced. Like thousands of other survivors, she now sleeps on a thin mat in an overcrowded classroom at an elementary school, depending on food and other handouts from local residents.

It has been a month since she fled, and she still hasn't managed to reach the nieces and nephews she left behind in Kobo. "There is no network there," she said, tears rolling down her cheeks. "We don't know who is alive or not."

No mood for talks

The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, a government-affiliated but independent body, said this week it was deploying a new mission to investigate reports of attacks on civilians in Amhara, including a recent shelling incident that killed five members of the same family, the youngest victim just four months old. The TPLF backs investigations but says they must be independ-



DESSIE, Ethiopia: Recruits for reserves of Amhara regional forces stand during their graduation ceremony, in the city of Dessie, Ethiopia. —AFP

ent and UN-led.

Meanwhile, the fighting drags on, with a recent internal EU document seen by AFP identifying four different fronts in Amhara. Aid workers warn the hostilities will only worsen the humanitarian consequences of a conflict that, according to the United Nations, has already driven hundreds of thousands of people in Tigray into famine-like conditions. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) is now providing food to more than 136,000 people "impacted by conflict" in Amhara and Afar, its boss Samantha Power said this week, while calling on the TPLF to withdraw from the two regions and negotiate. —AFP

Doctors warn over dangerous viral milk crate challenge

LOS ANGELES: Health experts warned Wednesday that people should not attempt the latest viral challenge—walking over a pyramid of precariously balanced milk crates. TikTok and other social media sites have been flooded in recent days by videos of people in the United States and beyond trying — and mostly failing—the climb the crates. Most videos end with what looks like a painful fall onto the collapsing crates, or the ground, as on-lookers film on their phones in what some dubbed an event in the "Hood Olympics." "You're at risk for... hitting your head and getting a head bleed," said Dr Chad Cannon, an emergency room doctor at the University of Kansas Health System.

If "you land on the milk crate, you will break your back and be paralyzed," Baltimore City Health pointed out that hospitals are already under strain from the pandemic. "With COVID-19 hospitalizations rising around the country, please check with your local hospital to see if they have a bed available for you, before attempting the #milkcratechallenge," the official account tweeted. While the hashtag was readily searchable on Twitter and Instagram on Wednesday, searches on TikTok returned no results.

"This phrase may be associated with behavior or content that violates our guidelines. Promoting a safe and positive experience is TikTok's top priority," the search result page said. The videos — and photographs of some appalling injuries—were reminiscent of an earlier internet sensation that had doctors tearing their hair



CALIFORNIA: A man falls down of a pyramid of milk crates while he participates in the Milk Crate Challenge, in Venice, California. —AFP

out. The 2018 Tide Pod Challenge saw young people biting into a liquid laundry detergent packets. Some social media users pointed out the likelihood that not all of those appearing in these videos in the United States would get free medical treatment. "People doing this like they have the best health insurance" tweeted @ogmike.

Others contrasted the willingness of people to attempt something so patently dangerous with the attitude to getting a coronavirus jab that has proven safe and effective. "You'll do the milk crate challenge but won't get the vaccine. Got it," quipped 'Star Trek' actor George Takei. Just over half of Americans are fully vaccinated against COVID-19, despite the shots being free and widely available. —AFP

Egypt re-opens Gaza crossing as Zionists ease restrictions

RAFAH: Egypt yesterday partially re-opened the Rafah crossing with the Gaza Strip, allowing one-way traffic into Palestinian enclave, as the Zionist entity eased import restrictions for the territory it has blockaded since 2007. Rafah, Gaza's only gateway to the outside world not controlled by Zionists, was shuttered on Monday by Egypt, which gave no reason for the move. But it came after Gazans on Saturday staged protests and violent riots along the border with the Zionist entity, which killed one Palestinian, left dozens of others injured and a Zionist soldier in critical condition from a gunshot wound. Egypt, a key mediator between the Zionists and the Hamas Islamists who control the coastal enclave, has previously used Rafah closures as a punitive measure against Hamas.

Late Wednesday, Hamas's interior ministry announced that Rafah would open to incoming traffic yesterday and to two-way traffic on Sunday. People had begun to cross after midday, an AFP journalist said. Border protests and riots on Wednesday in southern Gaza left 20 Palestinians following confrontations with Zionists troops, but the violence was more muted than on Saturday. Hamas police made efforts to contain Wednesday's unrest by preventing people from approaching the border fence. —AFP