



## Tigray Conflict Coding Methodology

The Tigray conflict in northern Ethiopia began on 4 November 2020, and continues today. Information about the events within this conflict has been difficult to gather for two main reasons:

1. Few, if any, reporters were allowed to access the region, and communications were cut off early in the conflict. This has improved since March 2021, and reports aim to establish what has transpired since November.
2. The information that was released by both the forces loyal to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) was often biased, exaggerated, unproven, or knowingly false. Both parties spent considerable time denying each other's reports, and information from different branches of the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF)/TPLF and the ENDF often contradicted each other.

To gather information on what did happen since the beginning of the war has been an effort in triangulating information, using first-hand trusted sources, corroborating events after the fact, and generally piecing together an incomplete narrative. ACLED and EPO continue to amass information from sources, checking for corroboration, and adding to the narrative of the conflict — especially in the earlier period.

In March 2021, we can assess the following phases of the war, and can note how this has directly affected coding of the conflict via incident events specifically.

**November-December:** ENDF and TDF engaged in many battles and airstrikes (over 100 coded locations with events) across the state, but the information on casualties is unknown. It is unlikely that information on the human cost of these battles will be released.

Amhara militias (i.e. Fano) and Amhara special forces moved into Western Tigray, and the Raya Valley where they established control quickly. The Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) also joined early in the conflict, from the north.

The war was declared over within four weeks, with the government taking Mekelle on 29 November. In the following weeks, the TDF/TPLF engaged in different tactics, including rarely holding towns and instead retreating mainly into Central Tigray. However, the conflict continued in various forms, including local militias fighting the ENDF, EDF, and Amhara forces in different parts of the country, and a campaign of violence against civilians that continued from urban to rural areas across the state.

Many mass killings were reported during this period. These attacks were often in urban centers, and were concentrated in the Eastern and Central zones. The attacks closely correspond to the arrival and presence of Eritrean troops in these zones. However, mass killings in Mai Kadre are associated with the Tigray youth militia against Amhara residents, and those protecting their Amhara neighbors. Other acts, including the killings in Axum, have been reported differently by several sources and on different dates.

***Coding incidents during this time:*** To assess this period, we have few sources and they differ with respect to the level of reliability we have accorded each. We have privileged first hand field information on clashes that are reported from ‘field sources.’ However, the overall source material is also associated with speculative and very high fatality counts with little evidence at present to support those counts. Several external sources have relied on the reporting of pro-TPLF/TDF media — who were likely outside Tigray during this period. Finally, reporting from the federal government is limited during this period.

To that end, we have added information on the occurrence of battles by the University of Ghent (Atlas of Conflict in Tigray), BBC Tigrinya, VOA Tigrigna, and other credible sources of information. However, many sources do not provide more than reports of the occurrence of events, their general date, and the presumption that the contest is between ENDF/EDF and TDF/TPLF. For that reason, when we have integrated information from these sources, and we have estimated the time and date based on the reporting, we note these decisions in the ‘Notes’ category of the data. While there are speculations that these sources may also have biases, the information we are extracting does not concern the measures that are most biased, including who prevailed in battles, how many deaths resulted on each side, and whether territory is assumed to change hands. Further, all sources have biases, as noted in the [Ethiopia Sourcing Methodology](#) brief.

The result is that for the period of November-December, we have recorded distinct events as they appear in trusted media. We have also recorded other reported events, such as those from the University of Ghent. These sources created maps for November/December, January, and February separately. They report that ‘fighting occurred’ in areas highlighted on these maps. From there, we have estimated the position, agents, and duration of conflict. As these events are reported with more limited temporal precision, we record them in ACLED data with the following dates: 15 November, 30 November, 10 December, and 30 December. For the period of November-December, only these dates are used when referring to ‘general’ events to emphasize the repeated nature of the clashes, and to minimize the over-reporting of activity during this period. While in ACLED data we would typically estimate continued events for a month on the 1st, 15th and 30th, in this case, we chose to use different dates as the conflict did not start until the 4th of November; and so the 15th is the time when we began to see more widespread contests. Further, reporting conflicts as occurring on the 30 November and 1 December would ‘overcount’ in our attempt to show continuity. We made these decisions because without incorporating these less precise times and areas of active contests, the reporting from Tigray would demonstrate very few events due to the media blackout. However, this limits what is possible with these data: from this source, the continued action in Tigray can be observed, but it is not advisable to use these occurrences for counts, nor as discussed below, as

measures of intensity. Each event includes the following note in the 'Notes' section: *"The occurrence of conflict across Tigray was ongoing from Nov 4 2020 and into 2021. The details of the exact events are not known, but active conflict locations were discerned via field interviews. ACLED recorded the dates of the ongoing early conflict to represent the ongoing violence. All locations affected by violence are repeated for Nov 15, 30, Dec 10 and 20. These are estimates of the ongoing and repeated clashes between the ENDF/EDF and the Tigrayan forces, represented by TPLF/TDF"*

The Atlas source materials are also recorded in ACLED solely as battles between the ENDF/EDF and the TPLF/TDF. They act as placeholders until better, more precise information can be ascertained as to the specific dates of activity, the event details of what occurred, and who was involved. No fatalities are reported in these events, as the fatality information is generalized across the country, or is exaggerated from knowingly biased sources; this is in line with ACLED's efforts to always defer to reporting the most [conservative fatality estimates](#). Again, these events act as placeholders for the four dates noted above and the multiple locations estimated from reports available at that time.

Outside of the specific events noted in other media and reports about direct acts of civilian targeting, the events above are not coded as 'violence against civilians' over 'battles'. Battles are chosen because these spaces were sites of active contests, and battles often involve violence against civilians within their larger context, while [violence against civilians is defined solely as direct attacks on an unarmed population](#).

When we add information from other sources about 'contentious' events, we have ensured that the events are triangulated with at least one other source that did not gather the original information from the same primary source. This is a feature that allows us to mitigate the pervasive effects of sole 'reporting' and bias that has defined much of the information gathering of this conflict.

**January-February 2021:** During this period, attacks on civilians were numerous and often reported to be perpetrated by Eritrean troops in rural areas. After conducting mass killings in towns, Eritrean troops concentrated on looting in those spaces, while others went through rural villages looking for, and killing, suspected militia members — which resulted in the deaths of many men. This period is also associated with a widespread sexual violence campaign targeting women, believed to be perpetrated by both Eritrean and Ethiopian troops. The extent of this rape campaign is staggering, and suggests that civilians across the region were terrorized by killings, rapes, and severe food shortages. The leadership of the TPLF were often found and killed or imprisoned during this time, while the active, and absent, senior leadership encouraged people to continue fighting and supporting their cause.

**Coding incidents during this time:** Reports during this period are similar to those from November and December, and they suggest a mobile insurgency campaign. There are, at present, few ways to determine which events were battles and which were direct attacks. The default position for coding events from the University of Ghent's Atlas of Conflict in Tigray is to code battles, with the assumption that civilians are often killed in the process of armed groups fighting; this is similar to events from the November-December periods. There is speculative evidence that battle events are

also being reported as civilian targeting events rather than conceding to losses by the armed parties. Until further confirmation comes to light indicating that those events were indeed targeted civilian attacks and not within the context of battles, the coding remains as repeated events in locations for the following set dates: 10 January, 20 January, 10 February, and 20 February. Again, these events are repeated to emphasize the active battle space and not to overcount; they are coded as contests between ENDF/EDF and the TPLF/TDF. No fatality information is provided as it has not been verifiable during this time, meaning that fatalities are coded as 0 in the data.

Additional acts against civilians, battles, airstrikes, sexual violence, assassinations, etc. that are reported separately from the University of Ghent's Atlas of Conflict in Tigray — such as reports from OCHA, for example — are coded specifically and in addition to the events noted above. The general events above are each accompanied with a general note to emphasize that these details are estimated and will be changed and updated as more information becomes available. This appears as such in the 'Notes' column within ACLED data: *"The occurrence of conflict across Tigray was ongoing from Nov 4 2020 and into 2021. The details of the exact events are not known, but active conflict locations were discerned via field interviews. ACLED recorded the dates of the ongoing early conflict to represent the ongoing violence. All locations affected by violence are repeated for Jan 10, 20/Feb 10, 20. These are estimates of the ongoing and repeated clashes between the ENDF/EDF and the Tigrayan forces, represented by TPLF/TDF."* Depending on the month of the event, the specific dates (i.e. 10 Feb, 20 Feb) are changed.

**March onwards:** In March, Tigray opened up significantly to international representatives, development agencies, and journalists. The conflict has moved as uncoordinated TDF groups have operated in Central, Southern, Northwestern and Eastern districts. Conflict hotspots are moving quite frequently, and no territory is held at present by small insurgent bands.

Development agencies are very much central to relaying information about where across the country it is safe and unsafe to engage and, relatedly, whether fighting is ongoing. We have privileged information from agencies working across the region about where, when, and who is engaged in battles.

**Coding incidents during this time:** We include references to towns and villages within areas we are informed are 'active' areas of contestation. Again, similar to above, we have coded battles rather than civilian attacks if the information does not specify which has occurred. We supplement that information with accounts of targeting, sexual violence, other battles, and cases of looting when available from trusted sources, and whose events have been triangulated with others.

However, we again estimated the times of activity based on the time specified in the assessments we received. To that end, this appears as such in the 'Notes' column within ACLED data: *"The occurrence of conflict across Tigray was ongoing from Nov 4 2020 and into 2021. The details of the exact events are not known, but active conflict locations were discerned via field interviews. ACLED recorded the dates of the ongoing early conflict to represent the ongoing violence. All locations affected by violence are repeated for Mar 10 and Mar 20. These are estimates of the ongoing and repeated clashes between*

*the ENDF/EDF and the Tigrayan forces, represented by TPLF/TDF*” The reason these times are chosen is because we receive bi-monthly updates referring to the recent previous period, and these dates reflect the time periods of the reporting.

When further information becomes available, and when greater detail is released, we will update this information and the event coding to most accurately reflect the reality of the conflict from 4 November 2020 onward.