

## Rusted screws, metal spikes and plastic rubbish: the horrific sexual violence used against Tigray's women

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Rusted screws, metal spikes and plastic rubbish: the horrific sexual violence used against Tigray's women

**Warning: this article contains extremely graphic and distressing testimony and images**

Tens of thousands of Tigrayan women report brutal wartime abuse by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers, such as gang-rape and the insertion of objects into their uteruses. But justice seems a distant prospect

- Photographs and reporting by Ximena Borrazas

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**[Tess McClure](#)**

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For two years, Tseneat carried her rape inside her. The agony never faded. It attacked her from the inside out. The remnants of the attack stayed in Tseneat's womb – not as a memory or metaphor, but a set of physical objects:

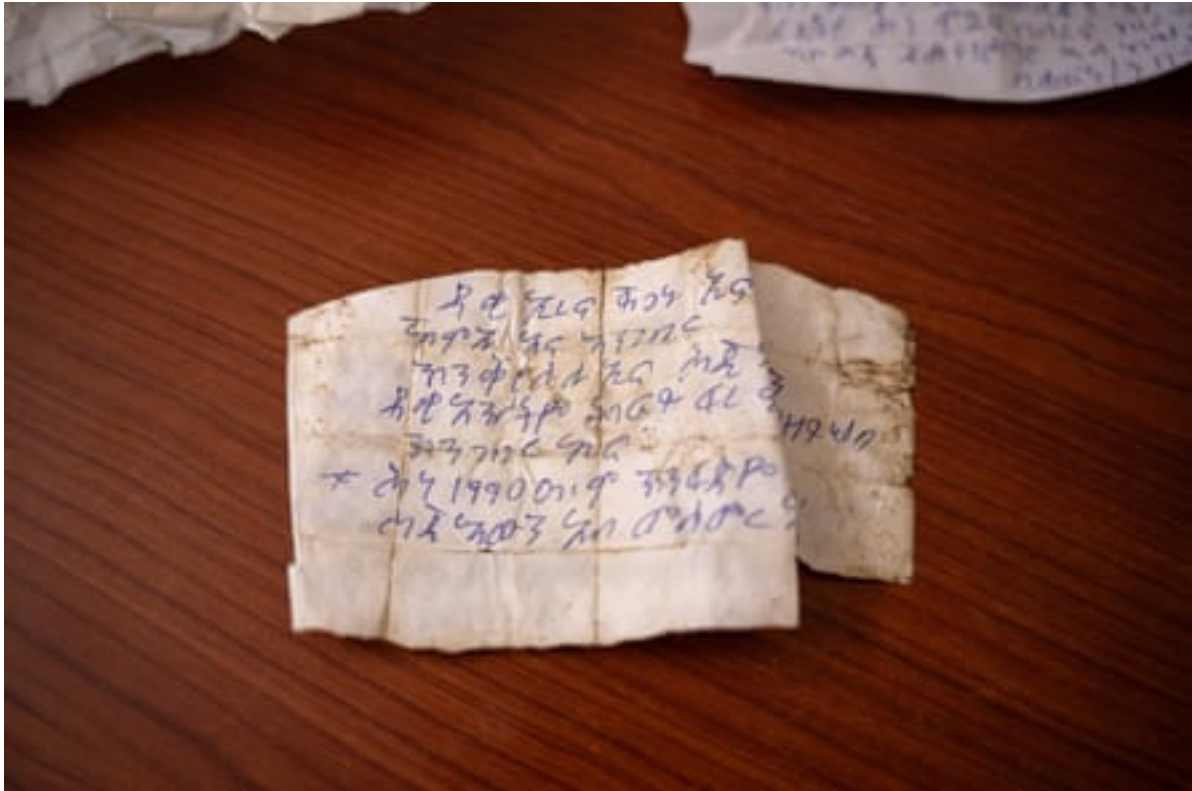
Eight rusted screws.

A steel pair of nail clippers.

A note, written in ballpoint pen and wrapped in plastic.

"Sons of [Eritrea](#), we are brave," the note reads. "We have committed ourselves to this, and we will continue doing it. We will make Tigrayan females infertile."

The objects, revealed by X-ray and surgically extracted by doctors more than two years later, were forced inside Tseneat as she lay unconscious after being gang-raped by six soldiers.



[View image in fullscreen](#)

A handwritten note by Eritrean soldiers, extracted from the uterus of a rape survivor. Translation: ‘Sons of Eritrea, we are brave. We have committed ourselves to this, and we will continue doing it. We will make Tigrayan females infertile. We are still determined to retaliate for 1998’. Photograph: Ximena Borrazas

She is one of tens of thousands of Tigrayan women subjected to the most extreme forms of sexual violence, in attacks designed to destroy their fertility. Medical records and X-rays obtained by the Guardian and reviewed by independent medical specialists show a pattern of cases where women have had foreign bodies forced into their reproductive organs, including nails, screws, plastic rubbish, sand, gravel and letters. Under international law, [it is genocide](#) to destroy fertility or prevent births with the intention of wholly or partly destroying an ethnic group.

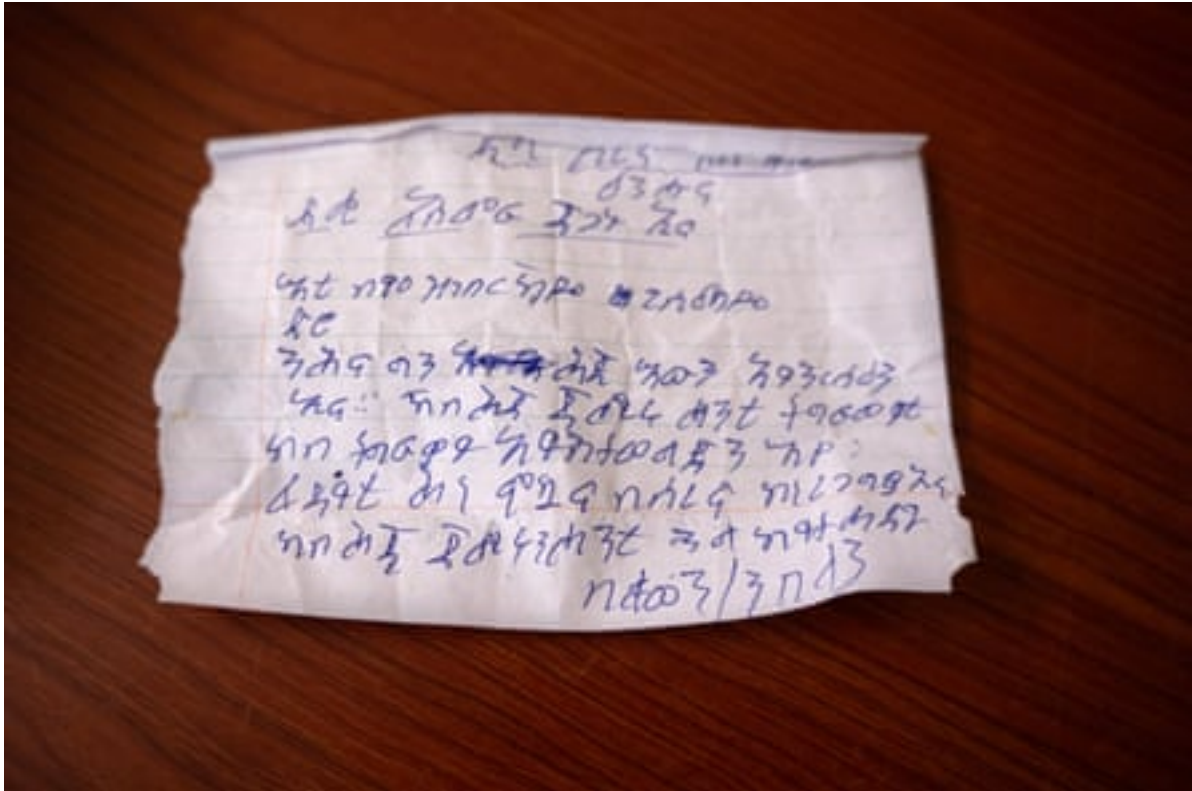
*From now on, no Tigrayan will give birth to another Tigrayan*

*Note extracted from a woman’s uterus*

The letters – written by their rapists, wrapped in plastic and inserted into the women’s uteruses – make their intentions clear. Several mention bitter border disputes with Tigray in the 1990s, and promise vengeance.

In another note, extracted by the hospital from a different woman, is written:

“Have you forgotten what you did to us in the 90s? We did not forget. From now on, no Tigrayan will give birth to another Tigrayan.”



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A letter from Eritrean soldiers, extracted from the uterus of a second rape survivor. It reads: ‘People from Asmara, Eritrea, we are brave. Have you forgotten what you did to us in the 90s? We will never forget. From now on, no Tigrayan will give birth to another Tigrayan. We are ready for revenge. We will not leave any woman behind.’ Photograph: Ximena Borrazas

Tseneat had given birth to twins seven days before the attack, and was breastfeeding when the men arrived. She lived in eastern Tigray, in Zalambessa, a town bordering Eritrea. The soldiers arrived at her home on 25 November 2020, shortly after the war began. After questioning her about the whereabouts of her husband, the men dragged Tseneat outside.

“I tried to resist and I cried and they beat me,” she says, weeping. They kicked her in the head with their military boots until she bled out of her ears. “Then they all raped me.” At some point during the attack, she says, a soldier injected something into her leg, and she lost consciousness.

As she came to, the soldiers were talking. “I heard one saying, ‘She has given birth to twins, who are like her. Kill her.’” Another replied. “No, she is already dead. Leave her and she will die herself. She does not need a bullet.”



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Tseneat did not receive medical help for almost two years after she was raped and beaten by six soldiers, who forced objects including nail clippers into her womb. Photograph: Ximena Borrazas

Tseneat did not die. For six months, her mother nursed her. There were no medical facilities functioning in the area but she knew something was terribly wrong: she was in constant pain, and fragments of plastic and debris would occasionally pass from her vagina. It was almost two years before Tseneat finally approached a medical clinic for help.

“I was stressed, I had a bad smell and the other women were not willing to be with me. I was crying outside the clinic. The sister asked me, ‘If you are willing, let’s check your womb.’”

After removing the materials visible through her cervix, the staff performed X-rays to check for more foreign bodies. The image they produced is difficult to comprehend: at the centre of Tseneat’s uterus, between her hip bones, lies a pair of metal nail clippers. When they were removed, they were rusting, says Sister Roman, who treated her. Tseneat says she thinks often of ending her life. “I think of dying,” she says. “I think of committing suicide.”

She says she has one enduring desire: “Justice must be served and those who are responsible must be accountable. I would be happy then.”



[View image in fullscreen](#)

Nail clippers and screws removed from the wombs of survivors of sexual violence in Tigray. Photograph: Ximena Borrazas

Tigray is often described as a forgotten war. If it has been forgotten, it is not by those who endured it, but by the global powers that looked away from one of the most brutal conflicts of this century. It began in November 2020, after Ethiopia's prime minister, the Nobel peace prize laureate Abiy Ahmed, sent in the army to oust Tigray's regional ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, which he alleged was a threat to national security. The Ethiopian military invaded, joined by forces from the country's then-ally, Eritrea, and militias from the nearby Ethiopian region of Amhara.

#### **Quick Guide**

What was the conflict in Tigray, who was fighting, and why?

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In the months that followed, [Ethiopia imposed a blockade on Tigray](#), prohibited foreign journalists from visiting and stopped aid, plunging the region into an [escalating hunger crisis](#). Even with a near-total information blackout, reports of human rights abuses emerged, including massacres of hundreds of civilians and the widespread rape of Tigrayan women by government-affiliated forces.

By the time a ceasefire was signed in November 2022, between 300,000 and 800,000 civilians had been killed, [researchers from the University of Ghent estimate](#) – either directly in the violence, or by starvation as a result of the blockade. There is evidence of abuses committed by all parties, but by far the largest number of alleged atrocities were by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces. Randomised surveying [conducted by BMJ](#) found that about 10% of Tigray's women were subjected to sexual violence. About 70% of those were gang-raped.

When the war broke out, Dr Abraha Gebreegziabher was the head of pediatrics at Tigray's largest hospital, Ayder in Mekelle. Abraha began working with colleagues in gynaecology and obstetrics as women and children who had been raped by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces began to arrive. The first were a group of six girls – all under 18, he says. "That was very painful."

When they detected their first case of a woman with objects inserted into her womb, Abraha says staff were shocked. "To us, it was a very painful new phenomenon: we had never heard of this gang-rape and insertion of foreign bodies into women," he says. "Even witnessing one case was too painful to bear."



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X-rays of Eda\*, reveal nails inside her abdomen. She alleges they were forced into her womb by soldiers. Photograph: Ximena Borrazas

But the women continued to arrive. Abraha, now the hospital's chief clinical director, recalls treating three, and says the clinic attached to the hospital was able to produce medical records for at least five who were operated on.

The true number will be many, many times higher. Large numbers of women would not survive the initial attacks, or their aftermath, he says. "When they have sharp ends, [these objects] are known for migration," Abraha says. One woman treated in the hospital told staff that nails and screws had been pushed into her uterus. When the medical team performed X-rays, they found the nails in her gastrointestinal tract. "They may perforate large vessels – bleeding of which can be fatal automatically," he says. For the survivors, rape remains extremely stigmatising, and women avoid seeking medical care or disclosing their injuries. Many were told by soldiers they would be killed if they sought help. Of those that did make it to hospitals, a significant proportion are unrecorded: medical notes were destroyed in the conflict, or not kept at all in clinics where health workers were threatened for treating survivors of rape. "The combined invaders during that period were threatening any healthcare providers assisting such women – any healthcare worker assisting the survivors in any way was assumed a traitor. So there was an attempt to hide scared survivors," Abraha says.

Raped women told hospital staff how "Ethiopian National Defence Forces soldiers warned them not to visit healthcare facilities, otherwise they would find them and kill them", Abraha says. "Some didn't finish basic lab tests and post-exposure prophylaxis. They just went out and disappeared."



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At a clinic in Tigray's capital, Sister Mulu shows copies of X-rays of Tigrayan women who had foreign bodies forced into their wombs. Photograph: Ximena Borrazas

At a clinic in Mekelle, a team of nuns who provided medical care during the war maintained a single, locked cupboard where they kept a cache of evidence of the crimes against these women: X-rays, medical records, and even the objects themselves. "These foreign bodies are documented and also held in our storage – a lot of foreign bodies, anything, either plastics, metal objects, anything around them are introduced into their reproductive organs," says Sister Mulu, who led the clinic. She leafs through X-rays, pulling out imaging of yet another abdomen – bisected by a sharp, curved metal spike and a thick bolt.

"This was intentional," Sister Mulu says. "Intentionally they make them carry [these objects], for the suffering."

This tiny clinic, in a single-storey, four-room house, received 7,000-8,000 survivors of sexual violence, cases extreme in their brutality. Those being interviewed by the Guardian include women who were wrapped in plastic and set on fire, shot in the genitals, mutilated with scissors or disfigured with acid.

"I'm very traumatised," Sister Mulu says. "Thousands of these stories are in my head, in my mind. I'm psychologically disturbed. I can't sleep, and my appetite is very poor because in the night, I see and I hear their stories. I have a big scar in my mind.

"They need justice. We need justice throughout the world."



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Tseneat (a pseudonym she chose, meaning ‘strength’ in Tigrinya), says only justice will make her happy once more. Photograph: Ximena Borrazas

Justice may be a long time coming. Tseneat, along with other Tigrayan women speaking to the Guardian, says she was raped by Eritrean soldiers working alongside Ethiopian troops. Eritrea is not a party to the peace deal between Tigray’s leaders and the Ethiopian government, nor will it be participating in the “transitional justice” project currently touted by Ethiopia’s leadership.

Eritrea’s president, Isaias Afwerki, has dismissed the allegations as make-believe. “Everybody talking about human rights violations here and there, rape, looting, this is a fantasy,” [he said](#) in 2023. (Isaias rarely responds to non-state media; this 2023 comment constitutes his latest substantive response to the allegations.) The Eritrean government has refused to engage with the international investigation team set up to examine human rights violations in Tigray and, [according to the UN](#), there is “no likely prospect that the domestic judicial system will hold perpetrators accountable for the violations”.

Physicians for Human Rights, which has gathered hundreds of medical records and health worker interviews about the war, says it has “very serious concerns” about the transitional justice process.

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“The Eritrean military was a primary perpetrator of very brutal conflict-related sexual violence in Tigray, and they are not party to the transitional justice process,” says Lindsey Green, PHR’s deputy director of research, who has overseen its medical record reviews in Tigray. “This leaves a huge gap for survivors in accessing justice and accountability if this entire group of perpetrators is not included in the process at all.”

*They first locked me in a room. Then, over four days, I was raped repeatedly. At the end, they poured acid on my head*

*Hana, aged 21*

Abiy, Ethiopia’s prime minister, faces allegations of war crimes by his military forces but has had no charges or sanctions laid at his door. A handful of soldiers have been charged for participating in massacres or raping women. Ethiopia repeatedly pushed to defund a UN-backed probe into the abuses, and the commission was finally [disbanded in 2023](#) with no resolution to continue its mandate. Two advisers to the joint UN-Ethiopian human rights investigation, Aaron Maasho and Martin Witteveen, [wrote last year](#) that the transitional justice policy had become a “farce”, making it “all but certain that the Ethiopian government will successfully sweep its atrocities in Tigray under the rug”. The Ethiopian and Eritrean governments did not respond to Guardian requests for comment.



[View image in fullscreen](#)

Azera\* is one of many survivors who requires urgent and ongoing medical treatment for her injuries. She was raped and beaten by three Eritrean soldiers, who wrapped her in

plastic sheeting and set it alight. “They left me for dead,” she said. Here she is tended by Sister Mulu, nurse at the clinic in Mekelle. Photograph: Ximena Borrazas

While the war is officially over, the violence in Tigray continues. Research since the ceasefire shows sexual violence by security forces has continued unabated. According to the Office of the UN high commissioner for human rights (OHCHR), Eritrean soldiers [continue to occupy](#) significant parts of Tigray, particularly eastern regions, where they are “committing violations, including abductions, rape, property looting and arbitrary arrests”. And now, rising tensions between the Ethiopian government and armed groups in Amhara and Oromio leave the [entire region vulnerable](#) to toppling into civil war again.