

Conflict at the source of the Blue Nile

How Ethiopian rivaling
forces coordinated to
amplify political narratives
against each other on
social media.

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The Authors

Code for Africa (CfA) is the continent's largest network of non-profit independent civic technology and open data laboratories, with teams of full-time technologists and analysts in 13 African countries. CfA's laboratories build digital democracy solutions that give citizens unfettered access to actionable information to improve citizens' ability to make informed decisions, and to strengthen civic engagement for improved public governance and accountability.

The African Network of Centres for Investigative Reporting (ANCIR) is a CfA initiative that brings together the continent's best investigative newsrooms, ranging from large traditional mainstream media to smaller specialist units. ANCIR member newsrooms investigate crooked politicians, organised crime and big business. The iLAB is ANCIR's in-house digital forensic team of data scientists and investigative specialists who spearhead investigations that individual newsrooms are unable to tackle on their own. This includes forensic analysis of suspected digital disinformation campaigns aimed at misleading citizens or triggering social discord or polarisation using hate speech or radicalisation or other techniques.

The iLAB subscribes to CfA's guiding principles:

1. **We show what's possible.** Digital democracy can be expensive. We seek to be a catalyst by lowering the political risk of experimentation by creating successful proofs-of-concept for liberating civic data, for building enabling technologies and for pioneering sustainable revenue models. We also seek to lower the financial costs for technology experimentation by creating and managing 'shared' backbone civic technology and by availing resources for rapid innovation.
2. **We empower citizens.** Empowering citizens is central to our theory of change. Strong democracies rely on engaged citizens who have actionable information and easy-to-use channels for making their will known. We therefore work primarily with citizen organisations and civic watchdogs, including the media. We also support government and social enterprises to develop their capacity to meaningfully respond to citizens and to effectively collaborate with citizens.
3. **We are action oriented.** African societies are asymmetric. The balance of power rests with governments and corporate institutions, at the expense of citizens. Citizens are treated as passive recipients of consultation or services. We seek to change this by focusing on actionable data and action-orientated tools that give 'agency' to citizens.
4. **We operate in public.** We promote openness in our work and in the work of our partners. All of our digital tools are open source and all our information is open data. We actively encourage documentation, sharing, collaboration, and reuse of both our own tools, programmes, and processes, as well as those of partners.
5. **We help build ecosystems.** We actively marshal resources to support the growth of a pan-African ecosystem of civic technologists. Whenever possible we reuse existing tools, standards and platforms, encouraging integration and extension. We operate as a pan-African federation of organisations who are active members of a global community, leveraging each other's knowledge and resources, because all of our work is better if we are all connected.

This report was authored by the iLAB's team, consisting of investigative manager **Allan Cheboi**, senior data analyst **Robin Kiplangat** and data analyst **Jean Githae**. The report was copy-edited by **Amanda Strydom** and approved for publication by CEO **Justin Arenstein**.



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Glossary

Detailed descriptions and explanations of terms and abbreviations relevant to this report are listed below. These serve to clarify how such abbreviations and terms are used in our report and are not intended to be authoritative.

Abbreviation	Description
ANCIR	African Network of Centres for Investigative Reporting
CfA	Code for Africa
CB	Coordinated Behaviour
CIB	Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
PM	Prime Minister

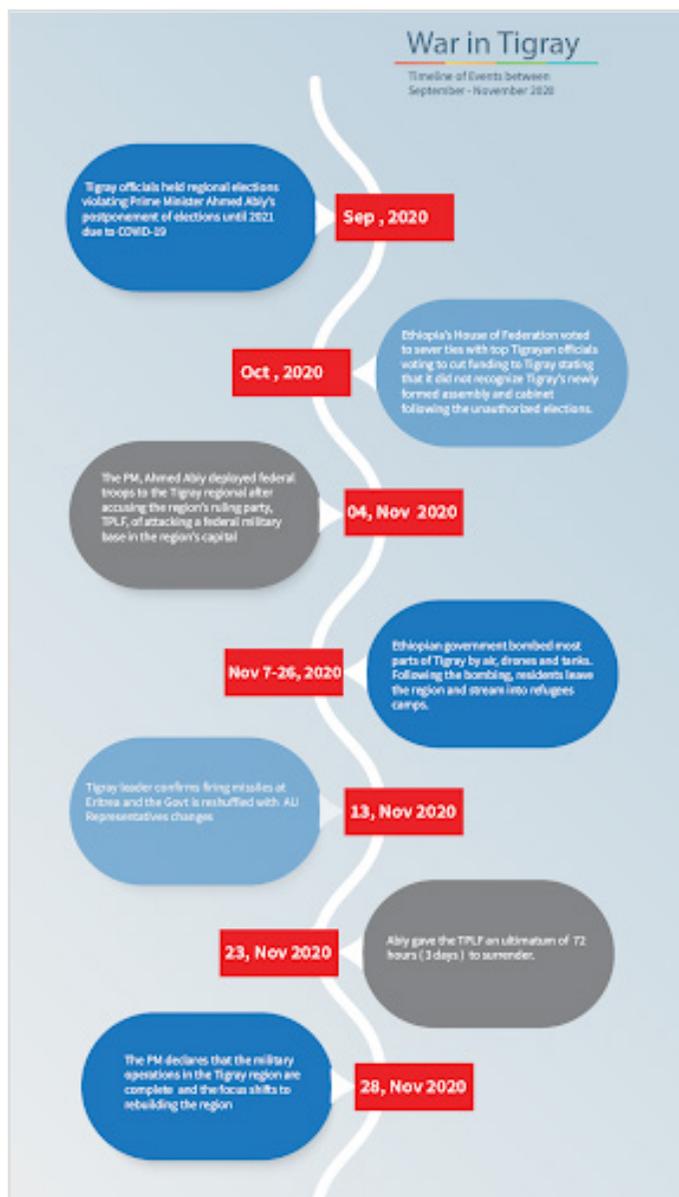
The context

In March 2020, the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), temporarily postponed the national and regional elections scheduled for August 2020 due to COVID-19 concerns. However, in defiance to the federal government, the Tigray regional government held its own elections in September 2020, to which the federal government declared illegal.

The Federal government accused the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) leadership of inciting unrest and seeking to reclaim power. Both governments regarded each other as illegal.

A reported TPLF attack on federal forces stationed in the region was the **immediate trigger** for the conflict, but it was clear that both sides had been preparing for confrontation for a while.

On the 4th of November 2020, the Ethiopian Prime minister, Abiy Ahmed **ordered** a military operation in Tigray in response to attacks on a federal army camp.



Executive Summary

Tigray crisis: How Ethiopian rivaling online communities are expressing hostile sentiments online.

Strained relations morphed into war within a country where the citizens' opinions were torn into two opposing factions. On one side, there were those who believed that the new regime was bringing the much needed political reforms as well as "law and order" to the country which had been dealing with ethnic tensions for decades. Others insisted that the violence which escalated since early November 2020 had been marred by human rights abuses and Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia's Prime Minister, was just another tyrant persecuting his people.

The war was considered exceedingly worrying and volatile, having a significant negative impact on civilians. There have been concerns voiced highlighting the **Ethnic profiling** of Tigrayans. The conflict also undermined the ability of humanitarian actors to operate in insecure areas therefore hindering aid projects that would assist in alleviating the suffering of the victims of war.

To voice these campaigns, both sides took to the online spaces, using multiple hashtags on Twitter and Facebook in an effort to shape the narrative. The hashtags #TPLFMustGo (which was highly pro-Government, was one of hashtags that garnered high social interactions and shares. The hashtag peaked in response to military action in the Tigray capital after the Tigray regional leadership and local forces failed to surrender within a 72-hour-ultimatum imposed by Abiy.

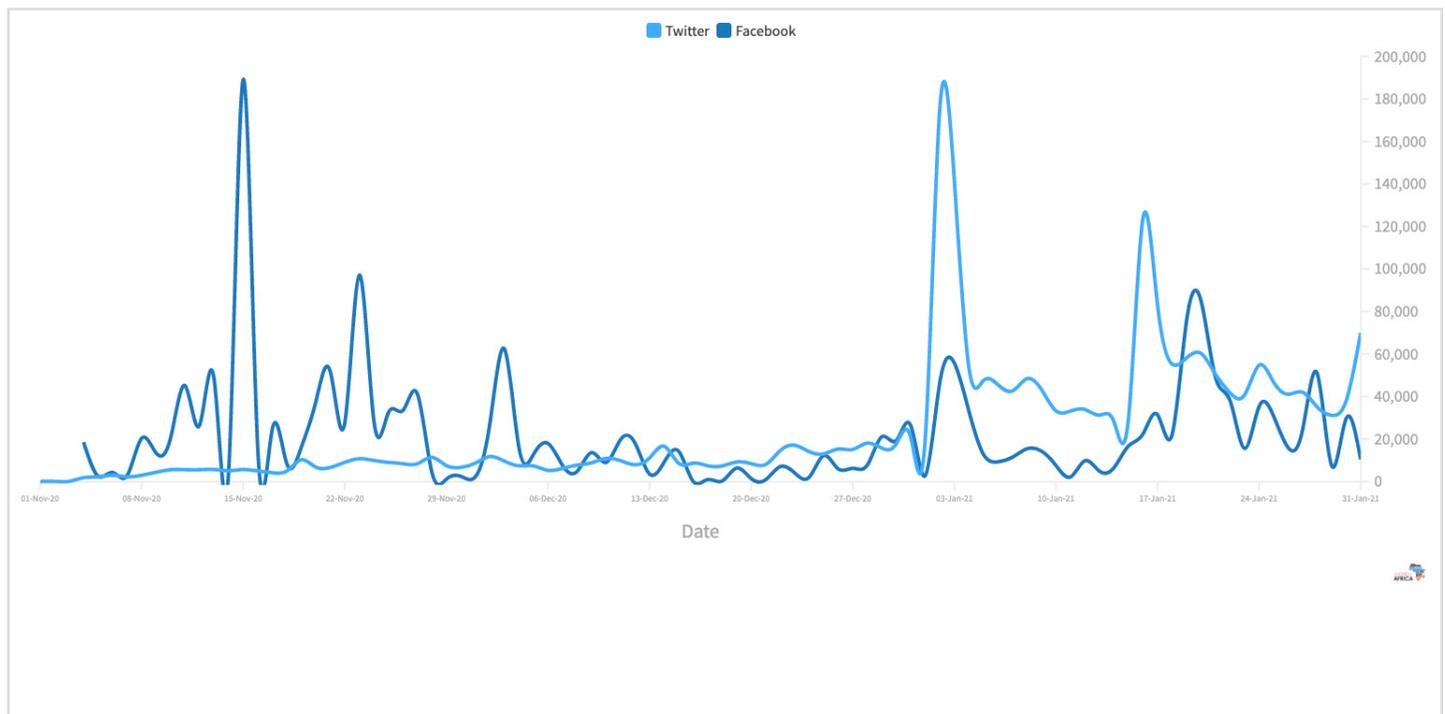
A CfA Analysis revealed that the Pro-Tigray hashtags (#IStandWithTigray & #Tigraygenocide), were used to voice concerns about the violent conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region and have been used consistently in criticising the federal government's actions and the need for going to war.

The Network

Using Meltwater, we collected 75,161 tweets using the hashtags #TPLFMustGo, #TigrayGenocide, #StoptheWarinTigray, #UnityForEthiopia and #IStandWithTigray posted within a 3 month period from 01 November 2020 - 31 January 2021. The tweets originated from 12,493 unique accounts.

Using CrowdTangle, a Facebook monitoring tool, we collected and analysed a total of 8,606 Facebook posts from 684 unique pages and groups using the hashtags #IStandWithTigray, #TPLFMustGo, #TigrayGenocide and #UnityForEthiopia between 01 November 2020 to 31 Jan 2021.

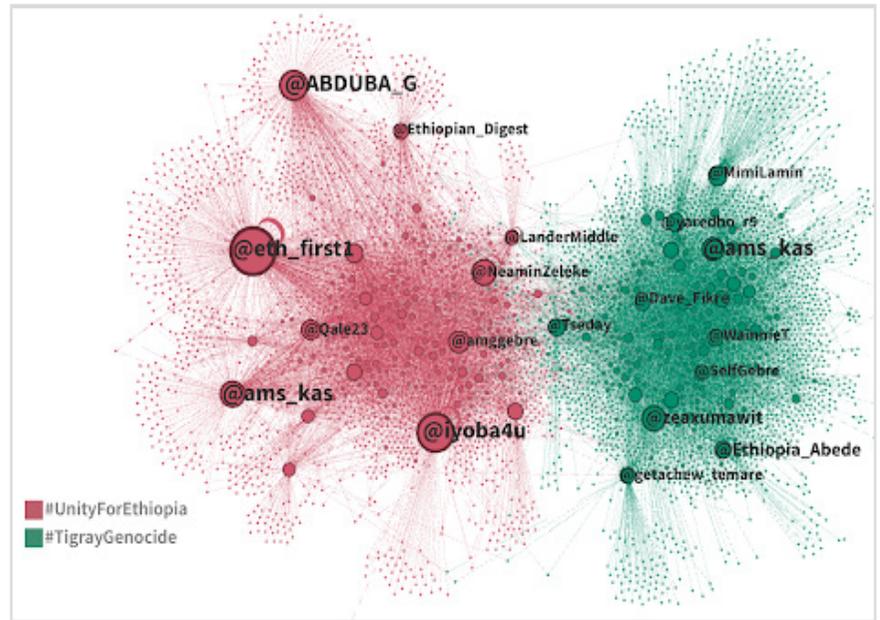
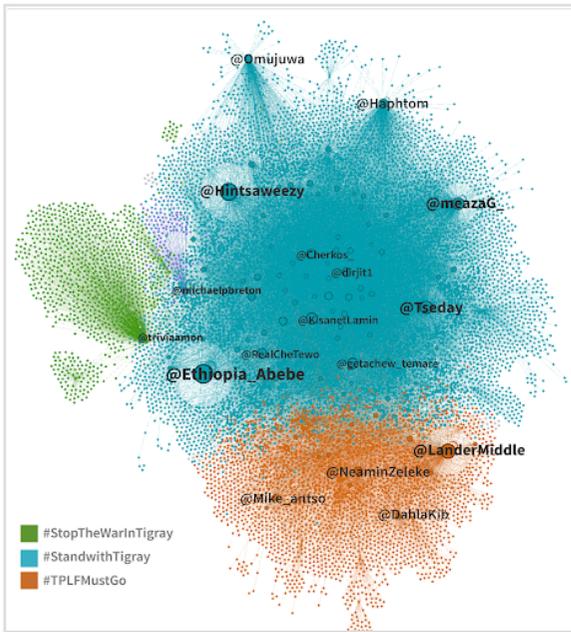
Plotting the data on a timeline enabled the iLAB to observe several spikes that corresponded to real world events happening in the country.



Twitter and Facebook interactions from 01 Nov 2020 to 31 Jan 2021 (Source: Flourish / CfA)

The Ethiopian government did set up social media accounts on **Twitter** and **Facebook** with the purpose of sharing accurate information on government operations in Tigray in an effort to make them the sole provider of reliable information. It was immediately evident that social media was instrumental in shaping public opinion with the Ethiopian Federal Government and the TPLF both striving to control the narrative.

A network analysis of the Twitter conversation showed that there were different segregated communities led by key influential accounts that coordinated to amplify the hashtags.



Network visualisation of key accounts used to spear head each hashtag (Source: Cfa)

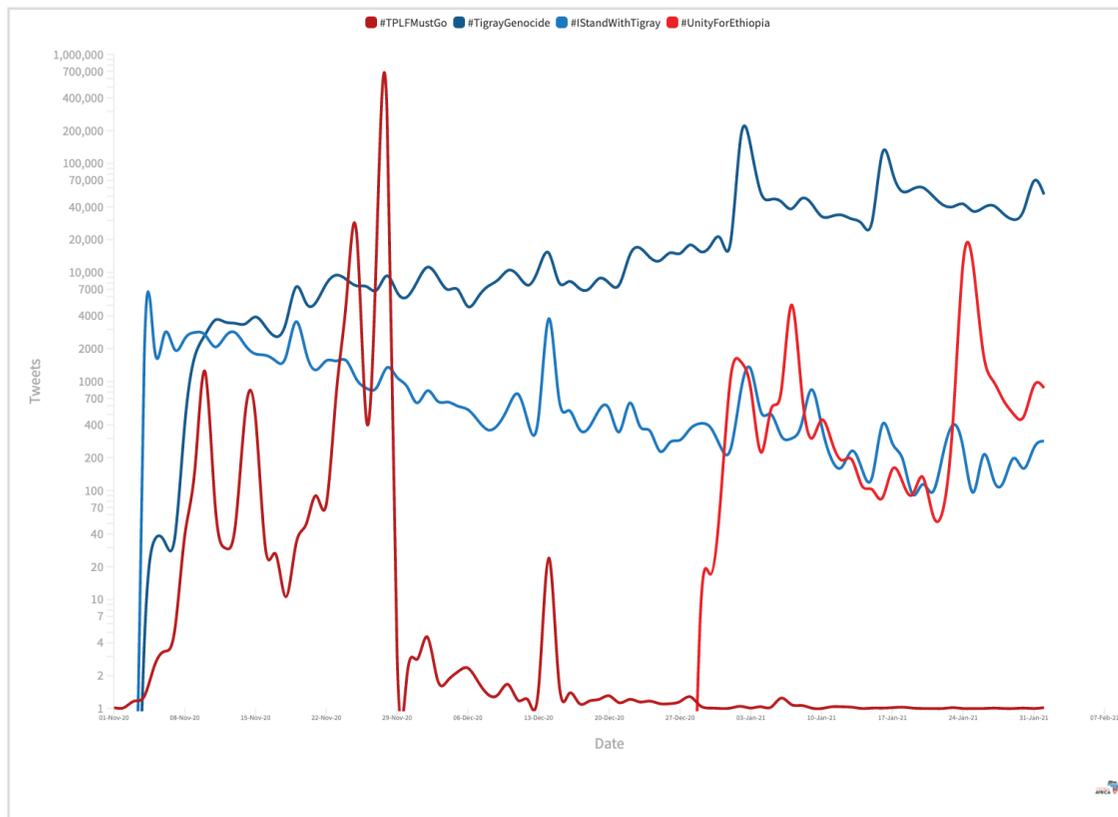
On Facebook, the top three pages/ groups with the highest number of posts mentioning the hashtags included:

Page / Group	A No of Posts	Membership
አዋጅ ማህበረ ጾታ	322	100.8 K
ድህረ ምረቃ ትግል	237	102.3 K
ትግል ማን ለኢያ ሐሲማ ክትሐዋ	177	42.1 K

Table showing top three accounts with the highest number of posts (Source: Cfa)

The hashtags

The iLAB analysed four key hashtags which were used to highlight the situation in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. The hashtags were categorised as either pro-government or pro-tigray based on the level of support from either side of the divide.



Timeline of conversations using hashtags #StandWithTigray, #TigrayGenocide, #TPLFMustGo and #UnityForEthiopia on Twitter (Source: Flourish/ CfA)

We conducted an in depth assessment of each hashtag to determine the key narrative and support for each of the political divide.

#IStandWithTigray

The ‘patient zero’ post was identified to be a tweet posted in October 2020 after the Ethiopian Parliament moved a **motion to cut ties** with the Tigray Administration as a response to the ‘illegal’ Tigray elections that had been held the previous month in defiance of the directive from the government.

The hashtag built enormous momentum in the month to follow. It was popularly used to declare allegiance to the Tigray leadership as a legitimate government and to stand with the people of Tigray region.

#UnityForEthiopia

The hashtag #UnityforEthiopia was created by the Ethiopian Advocacy group allegedly as a counter narrative campaign to deter the intensified disinformation campaigns allegedly originating from the TPLF .



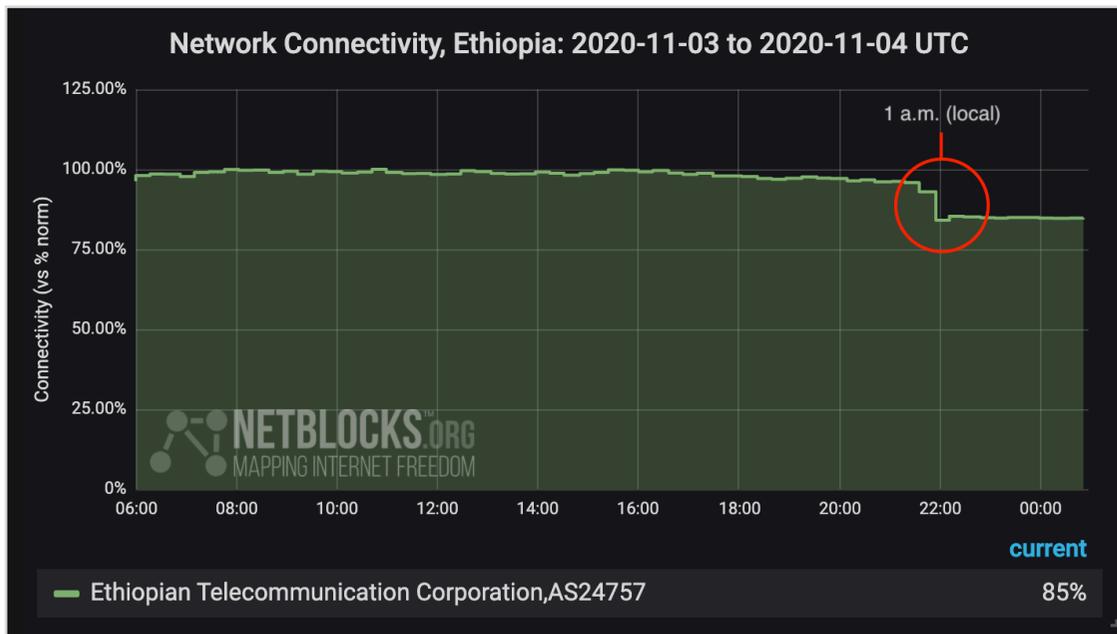
Screenshots of tweets posted under the #UnityForEthiopia Campaign (left, right) (Source: Meltwater, CfA)

Key findings

Internet shutdown in November 2020

Communication technology is a double-edged sword. It can empower people to access and share information globally, or be used as an instrument of political and economic control. In the past ten years, the practice of jamming cyber communication has become a new tool used by a number of nations and governments.

Network data from the NetBlocks internet observatory **confirmed** that the internet was been shut down regionally in Ethiopia from 1 AM Wednesday 4 November 2020 east African time. This corroborated widespread reports of a data and telephony blackout in the northern region of Tigray. Minutes after the network disruption was registered by the observatory, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, through his verified Twitter and Facebook accounts **announced** that a “red line” had been crossed and that military action was being taken to “save the country” from restive groups.



Network data showing internet accessibility in Ethiopia from 30 June 2020 to 23 July 2020 (Source: Netblocks/CfA)

The internet and phone shutdown made it difficult for the media and the in-country citizens to highlight what is happening within the country and to cover the conflict. With the communication blackout in place, pro-TPLF and Tigray campaigns were observed on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, mentioning instances of **humanitarian atrocities**.

CfA identified a set of websites with pre-drafted tweets, which were used to amplify the narratives.

Throughout the conflict period, the government continued to use the newly created accounts to share an official position of the situation in the country. Notably, the accounts were also used to allegedly debunk a number of claims on the situation.

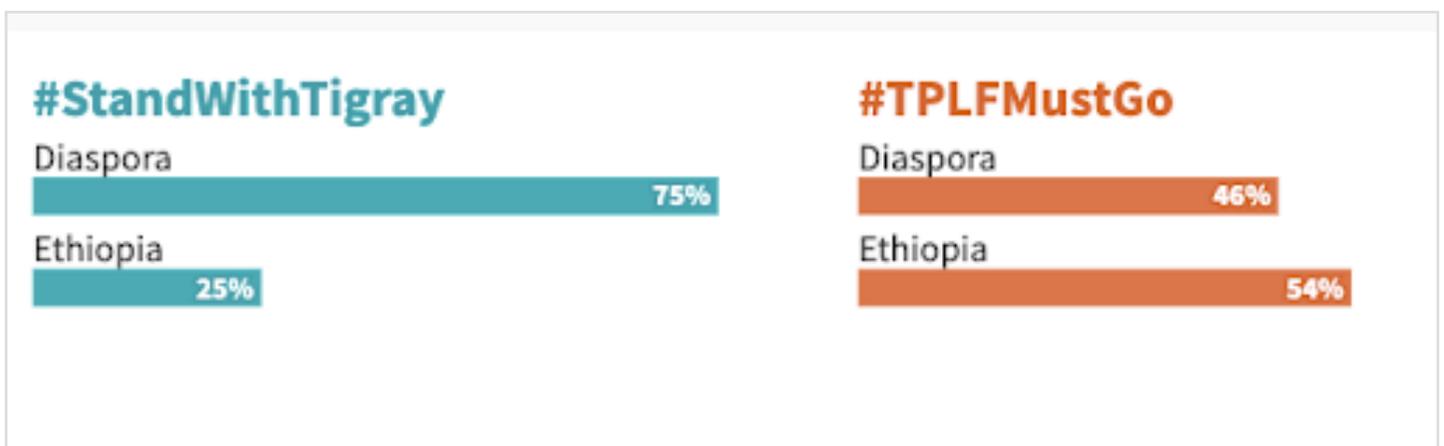


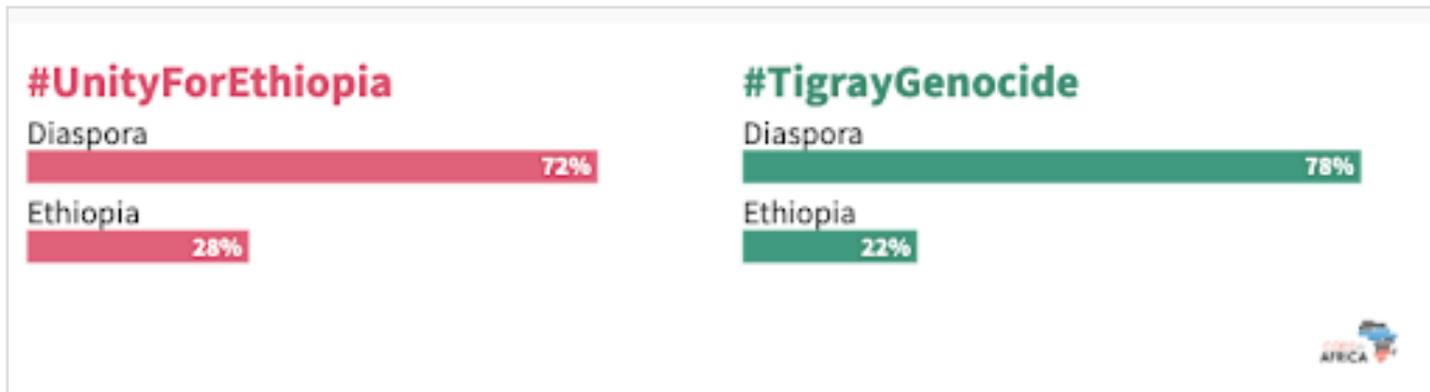
The internet shutdown resulted in an information vacuum which created a ripe environment for disinformation and propaganda to be used in shaping public opinion of the situation in the country.

Diaspora community influence

The Ethiopian diaspora newsrooms and communities in foreign countries used social media to great effect in shaping coverage of events back home, especially the Oromo protest movement that has been witnessed in Ethiopia for a long period of time.

Our analysis revealed that majority of the accounts that amplified the different hashtags with the exception of #TPLFMustGo, were mainly from the Ethiopian diaspora communities.





Distribution of accounts with location enabled, for the hashtags under analysis (Source: CFA)

Documenting coordination

Use of Click to Tweet campaigns

We observed that several websites had been created by both the pro-Tigray supporters and pro-Government supporters to amplify specific tweets and coordinate a synchronised message. This was also a tactic used to ensure that the hashtags result in trending topics on platforms like Twitter.

- #TPLF cyber force are misinforming the 🇪🇹 gov't. They are manufacturing a humanitarian crisis in #Tigray as they did in the 80s TPLF destroyed telecoms, attacked aid convoys @CanadianPM @MarcGarneau @CanadaFP #RebuildTigray #Peace4Ethiopia

Click To Tweet
- ▶ #TPLF are raping & killing #Eritreans in @Refugees camps in the north ▶ Now TPLF won't allow aid convoys to enter areas of #Tigray unhindered ▶ These are crimes against humanity #UnityForEthiopia #AllowAccessToTigray pic.twitter.com/i3W2JZPEvZ

Click To Tweet
- This is how #TPLF forces left infrastructure in #Tigray on their way out. Roads, runways & bridges destroyed. Instead of smear campaigns against our gov't, ask how you can help make Tigray accessible again #UnityForEthiopia #Peace4Ethiopia pic.twitter.com/tQaGnZgtJl

Click To Tweet

1. #Abiy's "Law and Order Operation" has left 50K+ Tigrayan refugees fleeing to Sudan with hundreds reported dead. The war on Tigray must stop. @UNReliefChief #StopWarOnTigray #TigrayGenocide #StopAbiy #OpenTigray
<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.nytimes.com/2020/11/28/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-Mekelle-assault.amp.html>

Tweet
2. "Parents and spouses would break into tears describing their efforts to find loved ones. A 70 y/o man recounted how he carried his wife's clothes w/ him as he fled to Sudan, searching for her on the way, hoping they would be reunited."
 #StopWarOnTigray
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/23/interview-uncovering-crimes-committed-ethiopia-tigray-region>

Tweet
3. The trauma the people of #Tigray have faced & the devastation they will continue to endure is deeply troubling. These are real people with lives & families & the urgency to intervene is NOT there. Why?
 #StopWarOnTigray #TigrayGenocide @EUCouncilPress @UN @JosepBorrellF

Tweet

Sample of tweets from left **Unity for Ethiopia** (Pro-Govt) and right **Stand with Tigray** (Pro-Tigray) (Source: CFA)



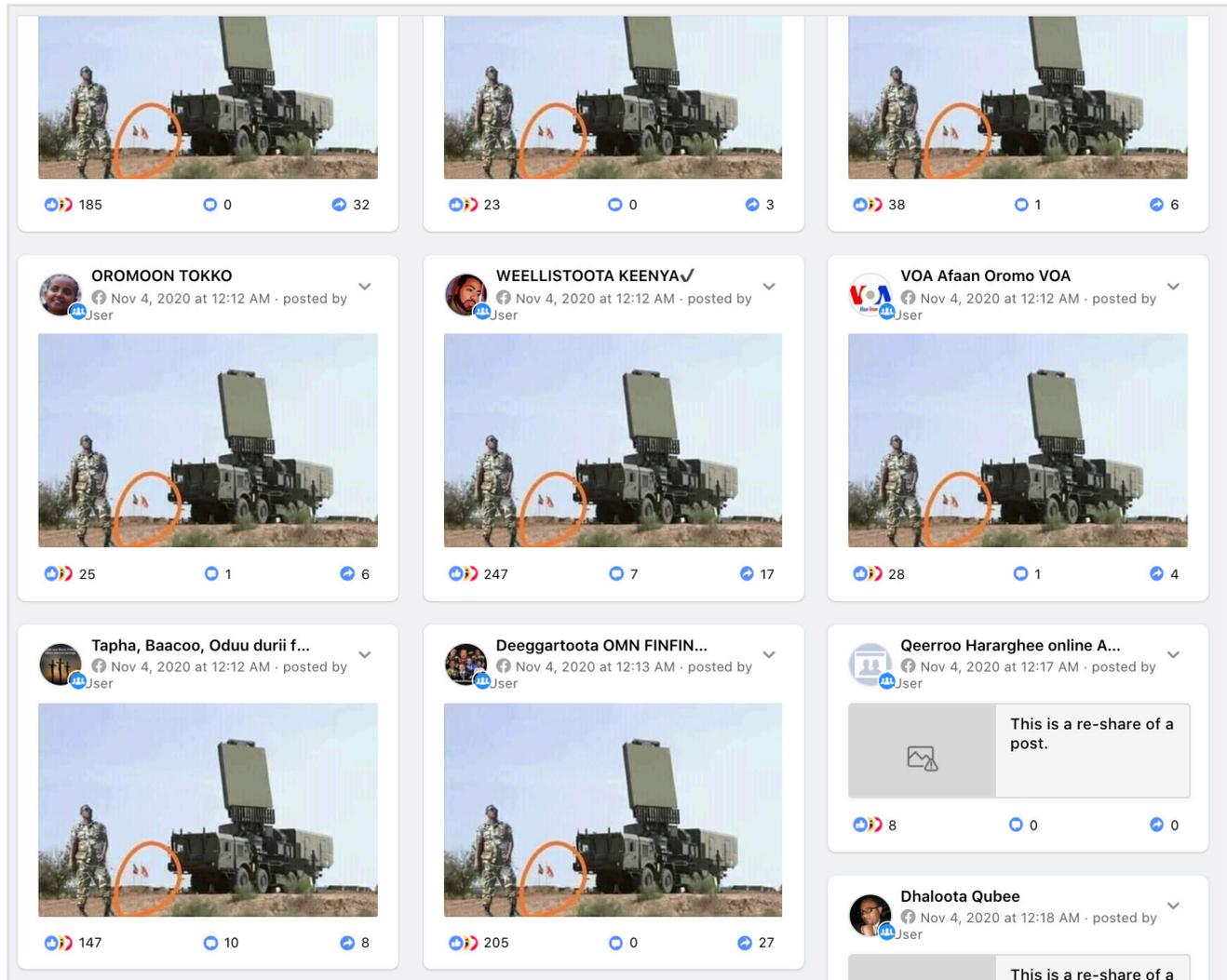
The websites also shared detailed instructions with flyers created and shared on other social media platforms such as Facebook, redirecting users to the websites containing pre-drafted tweets. This also included instructions on how to create a Twitter account, for users who did not have one.

Disinformation actors

We also observed cases where individuals used the hashtags and similar narratives within the hashtags to share false content or false information that could potentially polarise citizens in the country or across the diaspora. Below are the documented examples of such cases.

Anti-aircraft missile systems

The image below shows representatives of the popular front for the Liberation of Tigray posing against the background of an anti-aircraft missile system. The post claimed that the TPLF had captured an S-125 air defence system equipment belonging to the Ethiopian Government.

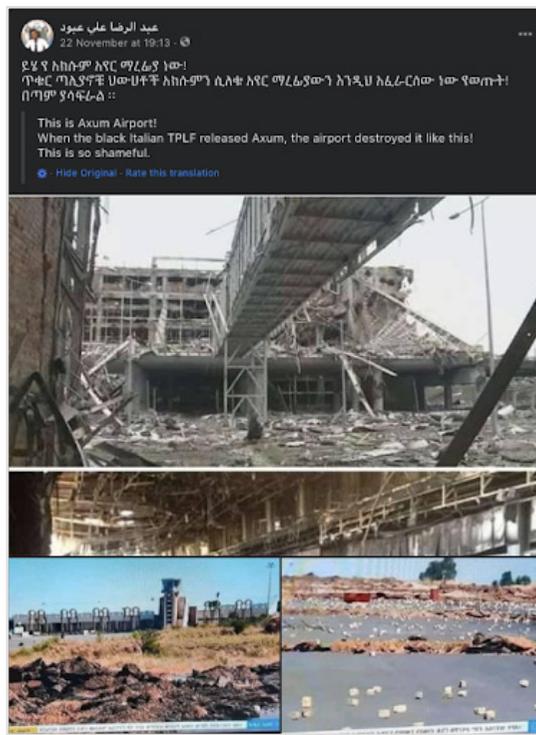
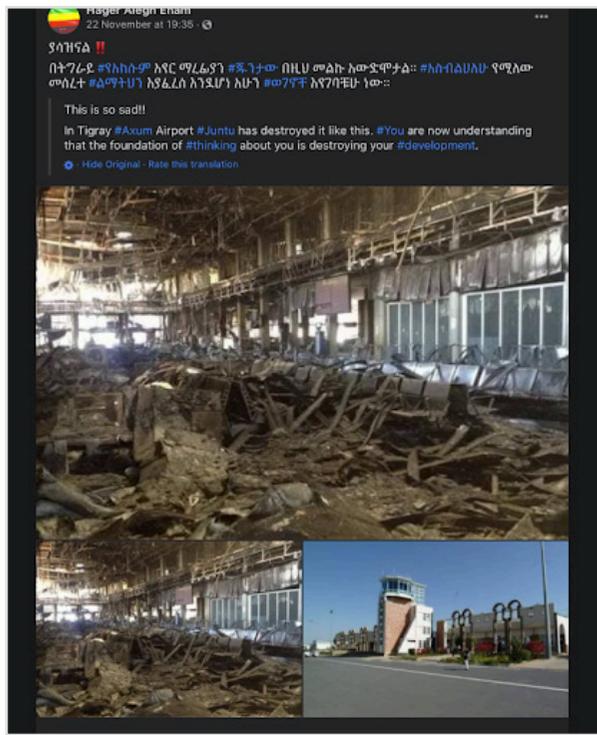


Screenshot of shared image on public pages and groups of Facebook-Source (CrowdTangle/ CFA)

The manipulated images were sourced from a [Russian armed forces exercise video \(Archived link\)](#) and the claim had been further debunked by [BBC](#).

Destruction of Aksum Airport

We also observed a cluster of posts which shared photos showing ruins of buildings claiming that they were the remains of Aksum airport, after being torn down by TPLF soldiers.



Sample of deleted polarising tweet (Source : TrollTracker/CfA)

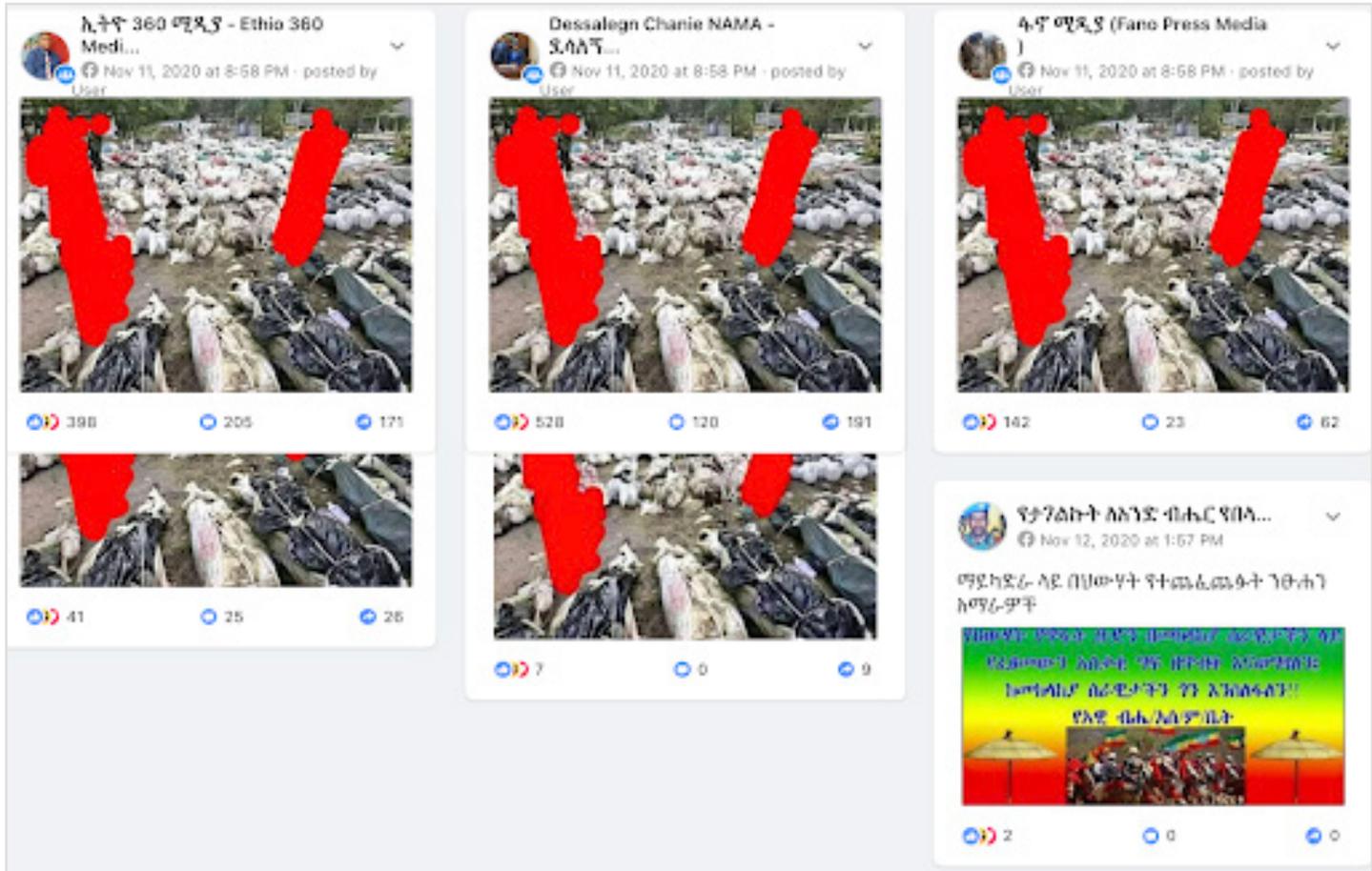
While it is reported that the TPLF indeed destroyed parts of the airport’s runway, this photo was actually taken in Libya in 2014 and had since been debunked by [The Observers](#).

Bombing of Tekeze Dam

A Facebook [post](#) from a TPLF supporter claiming that the government military had bombed the Tekeze Dam and subsequently led to a power cut in the region, was immediately [refuted](#) by the government.

Fake Images depicting Massacre in Makadra

An image shared by a Facebook user captioned in amharic with a message that translates to “Innocent Amharas massacred by the Wahhabi in Maikadra” was determined to be false. The post accompanied by the image was subsequently shared over 930 times on Facebook alongside the claim that it showed victims of a massacre perpetrated against Amharas – a major ethnic group in Ethiopia. The image was traced back to a tsunami that hit Thailand and other Asian countries in 2004 and had since been debunked by PesaCheck.

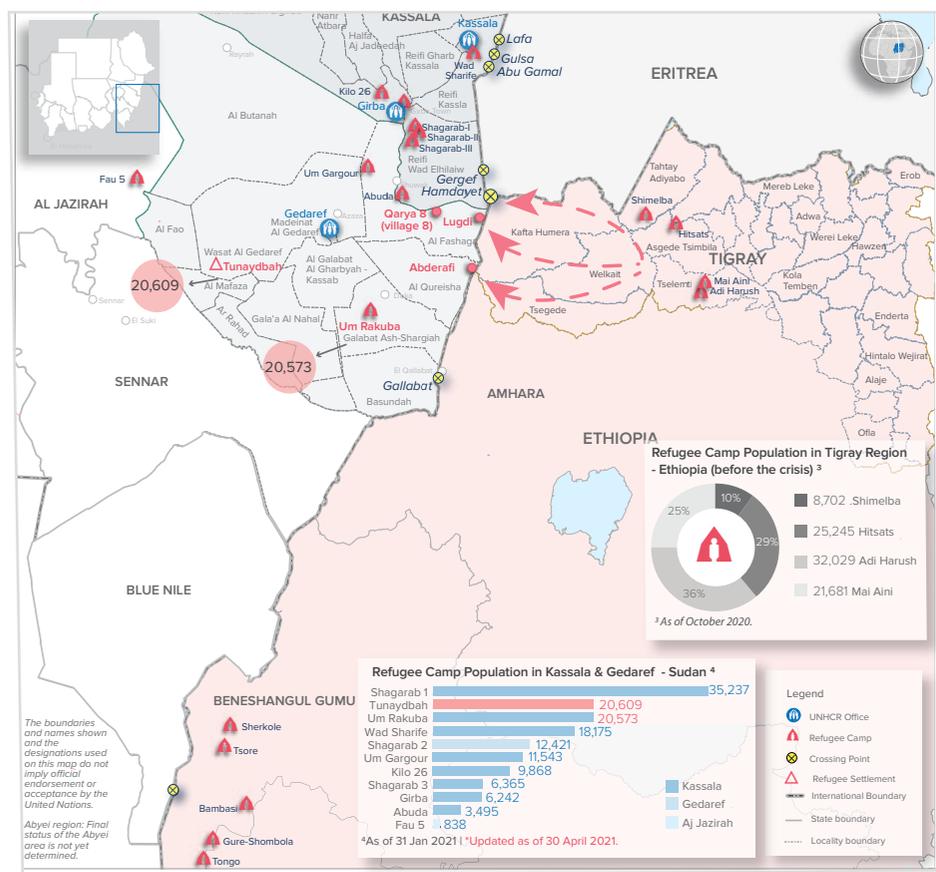


Screenshot of shared image on public pages and groups of Facebook - Source (CrowdTangle)

Impact of the conflict

Humanitarian Crisis

With the military action in the Tigray region, UNHCR recorded an influx of asylum seekers at border entry points in East Sudan from November 2020. As at 09 February 2021, 60,992 individuals have been reported to have crossed the border and were in refugee camps. This averaged approximately 663 individuals per day.



UNHCR reports on the number of refugees leaving Ethiopia (Source - UNHCR Ethiopian Situation/ CFA)

UNHCR also **report** that refugees who ended up in Hamdayet, had been victims of rape, killing, looting of property including harvests. There were also claims that young men had been forced to join the military in Ethiopia.

An **investigation conducted by Amnesty International** confirmed that a high number of civilians had been massacred. The report claimed that they appear to have been day labourers and were in no way involved in the ongoing military offensive.



Tweet from Amnesty international sharing the report on Tigray investigation (Source: Twitter/ CFA)

As at the time of this report, the war in the region had created a humanitarian disaster, reportedly leaving 4.5 million people in need of emergency assistance. There were also reports of Salafi-jihadi militants exploiting the growing security vacuum in Ethiopia to operate within the region and were reported to have been arrested as **disclosed** by the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS).

Destruction of infrastructures and looting of properties

It was also reported that main infrastructures, including government and private investments, factories, and public service premises had been looted and destroyed. Among the top public institutions looted were Axum University, Adigrat University, and Mekelle University.

Conclusion

The investigation revealed a set of hashtags that were used by both sides of the Tigray war to coordinate campaigns aimed at shaping public opinion about the situation in the country. A major component of the campaign was facilitated by the diaspora community amid internet shutdown in the country.

The shutdown also created a fertile environment for disinformation with actors using the trends to share false images claiming to show the situation in Tigray. The claims were debunked by fact-checking organisations.

The report also highlights the key impacts of the war as reported by several humanitarian organisations.

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