

Axum Massacre

Axum, Centray Tigray, Ethiopia

14° 07' 47"N 38° 43' 11"E

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Incident Date: November 28-29, 2020

Fatalities: 240+

Injured: UNK

Aggressor(s): Eritrean military forces

Victim(s) Profile: Axum civilians and pro-TPLF militia fighters, many unarmed or carrying makeshift weapons

This report investigates a large-scale civilian massacre in Axum, Ethiopia, between the 28-29th of November 2020, allegedly carried out by Eritrean military forces. Using eyewitness accounts, satellite imagery, and burial site analysis, we identify patterns of shelling, looting, and executions in the city. The findings provide strong evidence of deliberate attacks on civilians and suggest the existence of multiple mass grave sites near religious locations.

In November of 2020, Ethiopian and Eritrean military forces took control of Axum, a city of religious and historical importance.

- Witnesses and OSINT sources reported the presence of Eritrean troops, identified by licence plates, distinctive camouflage and footwear patterns.

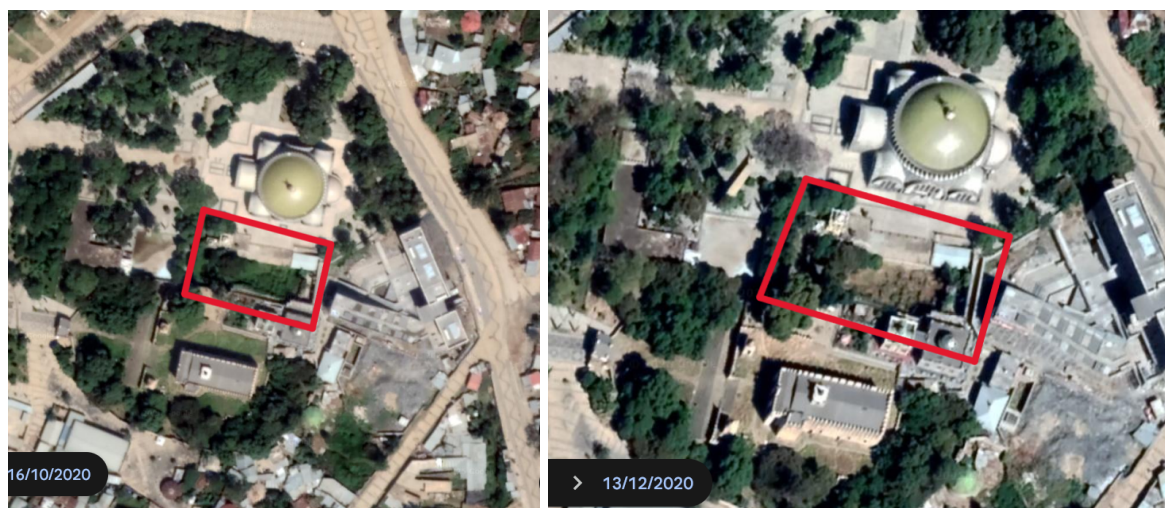
On the 28 - 29th of November after pro TPLF militia men attacked a base on Mai Koho mountain a massacre broke out. Forces shot at civilians killing more than 240 people.

Burials took place on the 30th of November in surrounding churches.

- Video footage confirms military presence at Axum during this time.
- Witness accounts describe troops firing on fleeing civilians, including individuals carrying sticks or no weapons.
- Local residents reportedly moved bodies on carts to burial sites.

- Burials took place on the 30th of November at Axum Tsion St Maryam, Arba Eetu Ensassa and Abune Aregawi churches.

On November 19th, 2020 military forces forcefully took over axum, which is a significant religious location, killing and displacing civilians. Shelling attacks lasted for five hours and targeted civilian structures, such as churches, cafes, hotels and homes ¹. On the 28th of November, after a group of 50-80 pro- TPLF militia fighters allegedly attacked an Eritrean military base near Mai Koho hill, Eritrean troops launched a sweeping retaliatory attack. Many of the militia members were reportedly unarmed or carrying makeshift weapons such as sticks. Witnesses described soldiers firing at fleeing individuals. More than 240 civilians were reportedly killed in the massacre. On the 30th of November, residents used carts to transport the bodies to nearby churches for burial ². Ground disturbances consistent with mass graves have since been identified as Axum Tsion St Maryam, Arbu Eetu Ensessa and Abune Aregawi churches.



Axum Tsion St. Mary's church located at 14°07'47"N 38°43'11"E, was assessed using Google Earth's historical imagery function. A comparison of satellite images captured approximately two months apart (16th of October 2020 - 13th of December 2020) reveals ground disturbances in the church yard. The identified aberrations, visible in the highlighted area of the image, is consistent with mass burial indicators, including surface disruption and changes in terrain texture.

¹ Amnesty International. "Ethiopia: Eritrean Troops' Massacre of Hundreds of Axum Civilians may amount to crime against humanity."

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/02/ethiopia-eritrean-troops-massacre-of-hundreds-of-axum-civilians-may-amount-to-crime-against-humanity/>

² BBC Africa. "Ethiopia's Tiray crisis: How a massacre in the sacred city of Aksum unfolded." BBC News.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/02/ethiopia-eritrean-troops-massacre-of-hundreds-of-axum-civilians-may-amount-to-crime-against-humanity/>



Pictured above is Arabtu Ensessa Church located at 14°07'45"N 38°43'02"E. The satellite image on the left, captured on the 16th of October 2020 while the image on the right was taken shortly after the massacre on the 13th of December 2020. To the north of the church structure, ground disturbances are visible, including elevated terrain and surface irregularities not present in the earlier image. These aberrations are consistent with known mass burial patterns, supporting a high likelihood that this location was used as a burial ground following the events of the 28-29th of November 2020. These findings also align with video footage showing individuals carrying a man on a stretcher towards the church³.



Pictured above is St. Abune Aregawi Church, located at 14°07'59"N 38°43'18"E. The satellite image on the left, captured on the 16th of October 2020 while the image on the right was taken

³ Haile Berhane. “ኣብ ኣክሱም ከበዕሉ ግፍፍ።”. Facebook, 13 January 2021.
<https://www.facebook.com/haile.berhane.1/posts/4259743337388241/>

shortly after the massacre on the 13th of December 2020. Due to the resolution of the available imagery, identifying potential burial sites is more challenging at this location. However, ground aberrations observed in the circled areas are consistent with patterns identified at confirmed burial sites, suggesting a moderate likelihood that individuals were buried at this site. The visual indicators are less pronounced than those observed at Axum Tsion or Arba Eetu Ensessa, but remain noteworthy for further analysis.

This massacre occurred during the Tigray War (2020-2022) which began as a result of the wider Ethiopian Civil Conflict (2018 - present).

Ethiopia as a multiethnic state has had a commitment to “ethnic federalism” since at least the ratification of its 1995 constitution. This commitment to ethnic federalism allowed different ethnic regions within Ethiopia to practice a degree of self-determination and be represented in the federal capital of Addis Ababa.

This constitution came about with the creation of a one party dominant state in Ethiopia by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) which was a political party composed of 4 major ethnic groups including the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF).

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed disbanded this party in 2018 in favour of all 4 groups joining his new Prosperity Party that aimed to remove the emphasis on ethnicity in Ethiopian politics. This is often cited as the beginning of the Ethiopian Civil Conflict (2018 - present).

The Tigray People’s Liberation Front refused to join Abiy Ahmed’s Prosperity Party and disagreed with its policies. One such policy was the postponing of the 2020 federal elections; the TPLF instead held regional elections in the Tigray region in 2020. This disregard for the federal government as controlled by the Prosperity Party resulted in Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) and Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) amassing on the border of the Tigray region. When a large-scale attack was carried out by the TPLF against the ENDF’s Tigray regional headquarters the Federal Government designated the TPLF as a terrorist organization and began a military assault on the region on the 3rd of November 2020. This date is often cited as the beginning of the Tigray war.

The town of Axum is located close to the Ethiopian border and so was disputed between TPLF and EDF/ENDF forces early in the war, beginning with the EDF claiming control over Axum airport on the 11th and ending with the TPLF regaining control on november 29th (before ultimately being re-integrated into the state of ethiopia at the end of the war).

Extrajudicial killings began with EDF forces retaking control over the city on november 19th but significantly increased from the 28th of november just before TPLF commander Debretsion Gebremichael announced that the TPLF had regained control over the city on the 29th of november.

We have identified patterns consistent with shelling, looting, and executions in Axum that could be tied to the early Tigray war.

Bibliography

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