

Dengelat Church Massacre

Dengelat, Tigray, Ethiopia

14°09'52"N 39°31'16"E

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Incident Date: Nov 30 - Dec 2, 2020

Fatalities: 100

Injured: UNK

Aggressor(s): Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), supporting Ethiopian National Defence Forces

Victim(s) Profile: Displaced Tigrayan civilians sheltering at the church

This report details graves surrounding the Maryam Deneglat church in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. Specifically regarding the Dengelat Massacre where Eritrean Defence Forces supporting Ethiopian National Defence Forces in regaining control of Tigray during the Tigray war (2020-2022) opened fire at civilians during a religious festival. We registered one continuous attack and identified the possible location of 1 mass grave (although graves surround the site). Using this methodology we conclude that there is a high likelihood that there is a mass grave at 14°09'52"N 39°31'16"E.

On 30 November 2020 during a religious festival of Tsion Maryam a group of Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) soldiers opened fire on Maryam Dengelat Church. The church is located in Dengelat, a village situated in a valley surrounded by cliffs. Due to ongoing threats of violence people had been fleeing to Dengelat village from the town of Idaga Hamus. The people who fled sought shelter at the Maryam Dengelat Church.

- Idaga Hamus appears on a google maps search. The Dengelat village does not appear in a google maps search but a school titled 'Dengelat School' does.
- When searching churches surrounding the school they all are in a Tigrinya language. Using google translate ቤተ ክርስቲያን ማርያም ደንግላት search result roughly translated to the Church of Mary Dengelat.
- Applying satellite imaging on to the churches location showed rust-coloured cliffs surrounding a white building. The church seen was the same as the picture provided in the CNN article "Massacre in the Mountains".
- The church is just located at 14°09'32"N 39°30'59"E

Our findings concluded that the massacre lasted 3 days with the burial occurring on 2 December 2020. An estimated 100 people were buried in shallow graves. The graves were covered with tree branches and bushes. Shoes were placed on top of burial mounds as memorials and identifiers. We are unable to identify each individual grave site, however, graves are in the surrounding area at 14°09'52"N 39°31'16"E.

- CNN was the first news organization to release an article on the Dengelat massacre in 2021 titled, "Massacre in the Mountains". During the Tigray there was a media blackout and the international world was left in the dark.
- CNN got in contact with Abrham, a man who lives in Dengelat and buried bodies after the massacre on 2 December 2020.
- Abrham shared videos of the grave site with CNN and placed a set of blue blocks on the grave site for CNN to locate on satellite imaging. CNN found these blocks at 14°09'52"N 39°31'16"E, however, due to the shallow nature of the graves satellite imaging is not able to conclusively identify the individual sites.

Based on open-source intelligence (OSINT) analysis including satellite imagery, media reports, and witness accounts, the Khthon team has assembled the following key findings in regards to the events on 30 November 2020 at Maryam Dengelat Church.

Maryam Dengelat Church is located in a small valley surrounded by rust-coloured cliffs. The location of the church makes it isolated for both worship and refuge. Due to widespread violence nearby towns took advantage of the church, particularly civilians from Edaga Hamus, and sought shelter at Maryam Dengelat Church.

On 30 November 2020 soldiers reportedly opened fire on civilians at the church. The soldiers are believed to be Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) by witnesses due to the uniform they were wearing and the language that they spoke. The attack occurred on the day of Tsion Maryam, an annual religious festival within the Tigrayan Orthodox community. The attack did not have a clear target with women, children, men, and the elderly all being victims. The massacre continued for 3 days taking the lives of an estimated 100 civilians. A resident of Dengelat village, Abrham, provided eyewitness testimony to CNN in early 2021. Information about the massacre had not been brought to the international community until this point due to media blackouts imposed by the Ethiopian government. Abrham described that the bodies of victims were left in the open over the course of the 3 day attack. On 2 December 2020 the EDF soldiers allowed a group of volunteers to bury the bodies, one of these volunteers was CNN eyewitness Abrham. Abraham shared the harsh conditions of the burials, the EDF soldiers did not allow for individual graves or for the bodies to be buried at the church. Additionally, an urgency to bury the deceased was prevalent as some had been left for days. Mass shallow grave sites were dug by volunteers. The community covered the graves with branches and bushes. Shoes and pieces of clothing were placed atop burial mounds both to honor the dead and to provide a means of identification.

The massacre has left deep psychological scars on the community. Although the massacre has reached an international audience, intervention from international organizations and governments has yet to occur. Traditional burial practices of individual church graves were disrupted leading to the shallow mass graves. Community members in Dengelat are still waiting for help to

relocate the graves to the church and give the deceased individual sites. This relocation is also important beyond cultural respect as the mass graves are in close proximity to people's homes which is causing a heavy mental toll for many residents.

The Dengelat Massacre occurred during the Tigray War (2020-2022) which was a part of the wider Ethiopian Civil Conflict (2018 - present). This civil conflict began with the dissolution of the ruling “Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front” (EPRDF) coalition. This coalition consisted of multiple parties representing ethnic groups within Ethiopia with the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), often cited as being the most influential group within the coalition.

Prime minister Abiy Ahmed’s decision to merge all parties in the coalition into a united “Prosperity Party” in 2019 was met with opposition from the TPLF as they argued it was illegal and breached the longstanding commitment in Ethiopia to “Ethnic Federalism” as enshrined in the 1995 constitution. When Abiy Ahmed called on the TPLF to disband and join the prosperity party they instead left Addis Ababa and began governing from the regional capital of Tigray.

The rise in tensions saw Abiy Ahmed’s government (now allied with the Eritrean government) move Ethiopian and Eritrean troops to the border of Tigray in 2020, and when the TPLF’s forces attacked the Tigray headquarters of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) the national parliament designated the TPLF as a terrorist organization and declared a state of emergency cutting off all government services in the region. The TPLF then declared themselves the interim government of Tigray and fighting between TPLF, Ethiopian, and supporting Eritrean forces ensued.

Massacres during the Tigray War by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces often occurred for one of four reasons; to exact revenge when a battle was lost, to terrorise and extract information about whereabouts of the TPLF, to murder suspected family of Tigray Defence Force fighters and to terrorise Tigray society as a whole. The massacre in Dengelat includes all of these characteristics.

A report from Simon Fraser university highlighted the affects the Dengelat massacre has had on the local population and highlighted a dire need in the community for culturally inclusive counselling.

Evidence gathered through satellite imagery, eyewitness statements, and media reports corroborate the massacre at Maryam Dengelat Church on 30 November 2020. The event stands as a tragic human rights violation. Victims of the massacre are still awaiting international support as it has not yet been given. For healing to occur in the community both psychologically and culturally assistance in relocating the bodies to individual graves on the church grounds needs to occur.

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