

Mahbere Dego

Tigray, Ethiopia

13° 59' 55"N 38° 47' 24"E

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Incident Date: March 2021

Fatalities: 50+

Injured: UNK

Aggressor(s): Members of the
Ethiopian National Defence Force
(ENDF)

Victim(s) Profile: Unarmed civilians

This report details a massacre site and mass graves in Tigray, Ethiopia, from November 2021 – November 2022. We identified two likely mass grave sites and the site where the massacre took place using satellite data from google maps and earth as well as open source intelligence (OSINT). These findings contribute to evidence of potential war crimes during the Tigray war¹.

In March 2021, armed men believed to be members of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) killed at least 50 unarmed Tigrayan civilians at a cliff site.

- Videos show men in ENDF uniforms. Identified via pocket and sleeve insignia.
- Resident accounts and victims speaking Tigrinya, confirming they are from Tigray.
- The killing occurred at the edge of a cliff, and bodies were pushed over after shooting.

Six months after the killings the people of the nearby villages were able to retrieve the bodies and bury them in two nearby churches.

- People were identified using identity cards, shoes and clothing.
- Sources from the surrounding areas identified one of the churches: Mahbere Tsadkan.

¹ Martyna Marciniak, "How to Crack Complex Geolocation Challenges: A Case Study of the Mahibere Dego Massacre," Evidence Lab, April 9, 2021, <https://citizenevidence.org/2021/04/09/geolocation-mahibere-dego/>.



Google Earth Terrain image showing the location of the massacre.

The massacre site is located at 13°59'55"N 38°47'24"E, on a rocky cliff in the Tigray region (See Figure 1). Open-source videos released in March 2021 appear to depict the mass killing of at least 50 unarmed individuals believed to be Tigrayan civilians. Armed men, thought to be Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) soldiers, are seen executing the civilians by shooting them and pushing their bodies over the cliff edge.

Visual analysis of the footage, including comparisons of the ridgeline with satellite imagery and 3D terrain models, confirms the location (See figure 3 & 4)². The soldiers' uniforms are consistent with ENDF attire, including the pocket design and Ethiopian flag insignia on their sleeves. The victims speak Tigrinya, supporting the assessment that they are from the region. The massacre site is also marked as a point of interest on Google Maps, further reinforcing identification³. Figure 2 shows a monument that has been erected at the site.

² Africa Eye, "Evidence suggests Ethiopian military carried out massacre in Tigray," BBC News, April 1, 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-56603022>.

³ Google, *Memorial Monument of Mahbere Dego*, N/A. "Google Maps" June 3, 2025. https://www.google.com/maps/place/%E1%8C%A8%E1%8D%8D%E1%8C%AB%E1%8D%8D+%E1%88%9B%E1%88%95%E1%89%A0%E1%88%A8+%E1%8B%B4%E1%8C%8E+%7C+Martyrs'+Memorial+Monument+of+Mahbere+Dego/@13.9989046,38.7904322,96m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m6!3m5!1s0x166be7bf2d9dc18b:0xcb25323f76061eee!8m2!3d13.9989129!4d38.7901758!16s%2F11vdqIn7n6?entry=ttu&_ep=EgoyMDI1MDUyOC4wKXMDSoASAFQAw%3D%3D



Figure 3: Still from execution video showing identifiable ridge structure. Source BBC news.



Figure 4: Still from execution video showing further identifiers of the ridge structure. Source: BBC news.

Six months after the incident, local villagers reportedly retrieved the remains and conducted burials at two nearby churches. One of these is Mahbere Tsadkan Church, located at 14°01'56"N 38°46'42"E. According to the Guardian⁴, this site was used for mass burials. Satellite imagery of the church's perimeter shows multiple ground disturbances within the courtyard, consistent with grave-digging activity (See figure 5). These findings support the assessment that the churchyard may contain the bodies of the victims from the cliff massacre.

⁴ Fred Harter, "Rounded up, massacred and posted on social media: Can Ethiopia bring justice for atrocities in Tigray?" The Guardian, November 7, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/nov/07/ethiopia-justice-tigray-atrocities-crimes-violence>.

The second burial site has not been confirmed by name in open source reporting but there is a moderate likelihood that it is St. Mary's Church, located at 13°59'58"N 38°45'49"E. This assessment is based on the visual similarity between the structure and layout of the churchyard compared with Mahbere Tsadkan (See figure 6). Ground disturbances in the yard match burial patterns, and the perimeter wall's design aligns with common regional churchyard architecture. Although not as definitively identified in media coverage, this site likely served as the second mass burial location.



Context Analysis

The Tigray war is one of the most severe conflicts occurring at this time. However, due the media blackout imposed by officials, there is not much information or footage from this war. The Tigray war started in November of 2020 when tensions between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the federal government led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed⁵.

The TPLF were the dominant party in Ethiopia's ruling coalition for nearly 30 years and in 2018 Abiy Ahmed became prime minister, pushed to dissolve the EPRDF and form a new party. The TPLF refused and accused him of centralising power and marginalising Tigrayans. This led to the TPLF retreating to Tigray where they held local power. In September 2020 the TPLF held its own regional elections, which defied the federal government. The TPLF allegedly attacked a federal army base in Tigray to seize weapons. In response, the federal government launched a military offensive. Joined by Eritrean forces and regional militias millions of people from both sides were raped, killed and displaced. In November 2022 a ceasefire was signed, but tensions are still high in the region.

Conclusion

This investigation confirms the existence of a massacre and mass grave sites in Tigray, Ethiopia, supported by visual evidence, open-source videos, and satellite imagery. The armed

⁵ BBC, "Ethiopia's Tigray war: The short, medium and long story," BBC News, June 29, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-54964378>.

men seen executing unarmed civilians are likely members of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), based on uniform features and insignia. At least two mass grave sites were identified near local churches, one of which is Mahbere Tsadkan and the second is likely St. Mary's Church, based on visual and structural comparison.

We recommend that further investigation be conducted at both church sites to confirm the number of victims and the circumstances of their deaths. Ground-level interviews with local villagers and forensic analysis of burial sites could strengthen the evidence base. Due to the consistency across multiple sources and the clarity of visual data, we assess this report's findings with high confidence and high likelihood that ENDF soldiers were responsible.

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