

June 2021 Newsletter

News and updates

There has been a reversal of fortunes in the Tigray region of Ethiopia where Eritrean troops were conducting operations and accused of human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law. The Tigray Defence Forces re-entered Mekelle, that region's capital, on Monday 28 June, as well as other key towns. The Ethiopian government has declared a unilateral ceasefire in a conflict that has caused the internal displacement of millions, refugee flows across borders, and was threatening to plunge hundreds of thousands into famine. ([Source](#)) This follows last week's federal Ethiopian elections – from which Tigray was excluded – and deadly Ethiopian government airstrikes which hit civilian targets. ([Source](#)) The scale of the diplomatic and humanitarian challenges in Tigray remains enormous, and these could be helpfully raised with the UK government during debates and via Parliamentary Questions. Please email APPG Secretariat Maddy Crowther for a briefing.

19 June marked International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict. It was used by campaigners to call for an end to the use of devastating sexual violence in the Tigray region of Ethiopia and for the UN Security Council to establish of a tribunal to investigate the allegations of sexual violence in Tigray as a war crime, a crime against humanity, or a constitutive act of genocide. [A letter](#) signed by our co-chair Lord Alton of Liverpool as well as other notable and high-profile signatories including Rt Hon Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand and Administrator of UN Development Programme; Helena Kennedy QC, Baroness Kennedy of the Shaws; the Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP, Former Secretary of State UK Department for International Development; and Caroline Lucas MP, Green Party; featured in The Guardian ([here](#)) and contributed to Tigray becoming a worldwide trend on Twitter that day.

This built on pressure added by [Early Day Motion 112](#) tabled by Helen Hayes which additionally called for an international tribunal into sexual violence in Tigray. As we send this email the EDM has 46 signatures. Please add your name if you are able.

We've been watching/reading

A PBS Frontline documentary has been repackaged for the Channel 4 Dispatches audience, featuring secret footage from inside Eritrea's prison network. Watch '[Undercover: Africa's Secret State](#)'.

Parliamentary Questions, debates and business

There was a [debate in the House of Commons](#) this afternoon which considered Official Development Assistance.

House of Commons Library briefing on the Tigray conflict - [Ethiopia: Situation in Tigray](#)

Urgent Question on Tigray 14 June

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs said, "A region-wide famine in Tigray is now likely if conflict intensifies and impediments to the delivery of humanitarian aid continue."

Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict debate 17 June

Our co-chair Fiona Bruce MP pushed on access for the UK's relevant team of experts on sexual violence in conflict to have access in Tigray to investigate alleged Eritrean troop actions.

Written Question 17 June

Fiona Bruce MP

Q: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what support his Department is giving to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to help ensure that that agency's joint investigations with the Ethiopian High Commission into atrocities in Eritrea are (a) independent, (b) transparent and (c) impartial, and whether those investigations address specifically the situation of ethnic and religious groups.

James Duddridge MP

A: We are appalled by systematic killing of civilians, widespread rape, including of children, indiscriminate shelling and the forcible displacement of ethnic Tigrayans. Those responsible for such abuses and violations need to be held to account.

We welcome the joint Enquiry of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR) and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) into human rights violations and abuses in Tigray, and continue to press for unfettered access to the region and victims. Investigators must be given unhindered access to Tigray, be able to speak to the victims of the religious and ethnic groups most affected, and allowed to report their findings in full. We have lobbied in Asmara for Eritrean cooperation with the UNOHCHR Joint Investigation. The EHRC has previously shown its willingness to act independently and must continue to do so through the joint investigation, which we judge is the most credible prospect available for holding the perpetrators of atrocities in Tigray to account. The UK will therefore support the UNOHCHR to ensure that their joint investigation into atrocities in Tigray with the EHRC is independent, transparent and impartial. We will also continue to press the Eritrean government to cooperate with the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Eritrea to enable him to fully carry out his mandate.

The UK further welcomes the proposed African Union Commission for Human and Peoples' Rights, calls for the Government of Ethiopia to allow access to this inquiry and is in touch with the African Union on how we might support this effort.

Written Question 17 June

Fiona Bruce MP

Q: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps the UK is taking in Eritrea to help ensure that UN investigators have the necessary access to conduct an assessment of atrocities.

James Duddridge MP

A: We are appalled by systematic killing of civilians, widespread rape, including of children, indiscriminate shelling and the forcible displacement of ethnic Tigrayans. Those responsible for such abuses and violations need to be held to account.

We welcome the joint Enquiry of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR) and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) into human rights violations and abuses in Tigray, and continue to press for unfettered access to the region and victims. Investigators must be given unhindered access to Tigray, be able to speak to the victims of the religious and ethnic groups most affected, and allowed to report their findings in full. We have lobbied in Asmara for Eritrean cooperation with the UNOHCHR Joint Investigation. The EHRC has previously shown its willingness to act independently and must continue to do so through the joint investigation, which we judge is the most credible prospect available for holding the perpetrators of atrocities in Tigray to account. The UK will therefore support the UNOHCHR to ensure that their joint investigation into atrocities in Tigray with the EHRC is independent, transparent and impartial. We will also continue to press the Eritrean government to cooperate with the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Eritrea to enable him to fully carry out his mandate.

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Written Question 17 June

Fiona Bruce MP

Q: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps his Department is taking in Eritrea to help ensure that (a) perpetrators of sexual violence are brought to justice and (b) to ensure that evidence of sexual violence is (i) collected and (ii) preserved.

James Duddridge MP

A: We are appalled at the prevalence of sexual violence in Tigray. We have raised this issue in a variety of multilateral fora, including the G7.

To strengthen justice for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, we are finalising the deployment of personnel from the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative UK Team of Experts. We are signing contracts and hope to deploy within the next few weeks. Recommendations from an initial scoping mission will outline options for supporting the Government of Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and other key stakeholders to safely collect and preserve evidence, and bring the perpetrators of sexual violence to justice. We continue to explore options for addressing the immediate needs of survivors, preventing further sexual violence and delivering justice and accountability. The UK is also supporting the International Committee of the Red Cross, UN agencies, specialised NGOs and civil society partners to provide adequate essential services to survivors as well as supporting refugee survivors through the UN High Commission for Refugees.

Written Question 17 June

Fiona Bruce MP

Q: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what progress he has made in deploying UK Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict experts to Eritrea.

James Duddridge MP

A: We are appalled at the prevalence of sexual violence in Tigray. We have raised this issue in a variety of multilateral fora, including the G7.

To strengthen justice for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, we are finalising the deployment of personnel from the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative UK Team of Experts. We are signing contracts and hope to deploy within the next few weeks. Recommendations from an initial scoping mission will outline options for supporting the Government of Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and other key stakeholders to safely collect and preserve evidence, and bring the perpetrators of sexual violence to justice. We continue to explore options for addressing the immediate needs of survivors, preventing further sexual violence and delivering justice and accountability. The UK is also supporting the International Committee of the Red Cross, UN agencies, specialised NGOs and civil society partners to provide adequate essential services to survivors as well as supporting refugee survivors through the UN High Commission for Refugees.

Written Question 16 June

Alyn Smith MP

Q: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment he has made of the relevance of (a) the Responsibility to Protect doctrine and (b) the UK Government's Protection of Civilians policy to the ongoing situation in Tigray.

James Duddridge MP

A: The UK Government has been at the forefront of the international response throughout the conflict in Tigray, engaging directly with the Government of Ethiopia, and that of Eritrea, to press for protection of civilians, unfettered humanitarian access and an end to the conflict, in line with our approach to protection of civilians and commitment to Responsibility to Protect. We have continued to engage core international partners and raise concerns in international fora, most recently through the G7 leaders' communique of 13 June. We have also raised the issue in UN Security Council open discussions on conflict and famine, the annual Open Debate on Protection of Civilians, in five 'AOB' items on the UNSC agenda, and the Interactive Dialogue of the UNSC of 16 June. The UK's longstanding position is that any determination of genocide is an issue for competent courts, rather than governments. Our focus is always on securing an end to violence and protecting civilians.

Written Question 10 June

Stephen Doughty MP

Q: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, how much bilateral Official Development Assistance has been allocated to (a) Ethiopia, (b) Djibouti, (c) Eritrea, (d) Rwanda and (e) Uganda in the 2021-22 financial year

James Duddridge MP

A: Full budgets per country and a final audited spend for 2021/22 will be published in due course, including in our regular Statistics on International Development and in the FCDO Annual Report and Accounts.

Written Question 10 June

Baroness Kennedy of Cradley

Q: To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the impact on the UK's diplomatic soft power of the BBC World Service in Africa.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:

A: The FCDO strongly values the work of the BBC World Service and its independent and impartial broadcasting, which helps to promote UK values overseas. We support the BBC's mission to bring high quality and trusted news to African audiences, including where free speech is limited. FCDO investment into the BBC World Service via the World2020 programme has seen six new language services launch across Nigeria, Eritrea and Ethiopia, and has contributed to an increase of over 40% in weekly audience since 2016.

Written Question 7 June

Lord Alton of Liverpool

Q: To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the UN Human Rights Council report by Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker Special Rapporteur on

the Situation of human rights in Eritrea, published on 12 May; and what steps they will take to address the human rights situation in Eritrea.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:

A: We welcome the report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Eritrea, which is of continued concern. The UK Government takes every opportunity to voice these concerns, and has done so directly with the Government of Eritrea, at the Human Rights Council and publicly through our annual reporting on human rights.

Written Question 7 June

Lord Alton of Liverpool

Q: To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of allegations of (1) incommunicado detention, (2) arbitrary arrest and detention, (3) inhumane prison conditions, (4) indefinite military service, and (5) human rights violations, in the Tigray region of Ethiopia by the government of Eritrea; and what assessment they have made of the undermining of (a) freedom of expression, (b) freedom of opinion, (c) freedom of association, (d) freedom of religious belief, and (e) rule of law, in the Tigray region of Ethiopia.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:

A: We have consistently made clear our concerns about the human rights situation in Ethiopia, particularly in Tigray, both publicly and in direct discussions with the Governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea. We continue to call for an end to the conflict.

Written Question 7 June

Lord Alton of Liverpool

Q: To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they will take to ensure the UN Security Council supports the work of Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea; and what assessment they have made of the recommendations in his report Tigray Situation Update, published on 3 June.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:

A: We note and welcome the recommendations made by the UN Special Rapporteur in his report on the situation in Eritrea. We fully support all efforts to fulfil his mandate as stated by the UK's Ambassador for Human Rights, Rita French, at the 46th Session of the Human Rights Council.

Written Question 7 June

Lord Alton of Liverpool

Q: To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they will take to raise the issue of access to Eritrea for the UN Special Rapporteur at the UN Human Rights Council; whether this issue has been raised by the British Ambassador to Eritrea; and if so, what response they received.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:

A: We are concerned and disappointed that the UN Special Rapporteur continues to be

denied access to Eritrea. We have raised this issue at the UN Human Rights Council and directly with the Government of Eritrea, and will continue to press for the Special Rapporteur to be given the access that they need.

Written Question 27 May

Helen Hayes MP

Q: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what representations the Government has made to the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea on the forced return of Eritrean refugees.

James Duddridge MP

A: The UK has been consistent in calling for the protection of civilians in Ethiopia, unfettered humanitarian access, and respect for human rights. We are concerned at reports that Eritrean troops entered Ethiopian refugee camps in Tigray and forced a number of refugees to return to Eritrea. If proven, this would be a serious violation of international law. Alleged violations of international law must be investigated and we have consistently called for independent investigations into such allegations, and that perpetrators are held to account. We will continue to do so and support the efforts of the joint investigation between the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission.

The British Ambassador in Eritrea raised our concerns with the Eritrean Foreign Minister in December 2020, who denied that Eritrean forces had forcibly returned Eritrean refugees to Eritrea. We are extremely concerned that humanitarian agencies, including the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), do not have access to refugee camps in Tigray, meaning our understanding of the humanitarian and protection context in camps and refugee hosting areas is limited. It is the responsibility of the host state to protect refugees on their territory and this was acknowledged by the Government of Ethiopia when we raised the matter.

There are numerous shocking reports of atrocities committed by Eritrean forces in Tigray, and their continued presence is fueling insecurity. These forces must leave Ethiopia immediately. We continue to press hard for this commitment to be delivered.

Written Question 27 May

Helen Hayes MP

Q: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment the Government has made of the (a) status and (b) whereabouts of the Eritrean refugees who are reported to have been forcibly returned to Eritrea.

James Duddridge MP

A: The UK has been consistent in calling for the protection of civilians in Ethiopia, unfettered humanitarian access, and respect for human rights. We are concerned at

reports that Eritrean troops entered Ethiopian refugee camps in Tigray and forced a number of refugees to return to Eritrea. If proven, this would be a serious violation of international law. Alleged violations of international law must be investigated and we have consistently called for independent investigations into such allegations, and that perpetrators are held to account. We will continue to do so and support the efforts of the joint investigation between the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission.

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Written Question 27 May

Helen Hayes MP

Q: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps he is taking to help ensure that (a) UNHCR and (b) other humanitarian agencies have full access to Eritrean refugees in Tigray.

James Duddridge MP

A: The UK has been consistent in calling for the protection of civilians in Ethiopia, unfettered humanitarian access, and respect for human rights. We are concerned at reports that Eritrean troops entered Ethiopian refugee camps in Tigray and forced a number of refugees to return to Eritrea. If proven, this would be a serious violation of international law. Alleged violations of international law must be investigated and we have consistently called for independent investigations into such allegations, and that perpetrators are held to account. We will continue to do so and support the efforts of the joint investigation between the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission.

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Written Question 27 May

Stephen Doughty MP

Q: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment he has made of the presence of Eritrean regular or irregular forces in Ethiopia.

James Duddridge MP

A: We continue to closely monitor the situation and are clear that the withdrawal of Eritrean forces must be swift, unconditional and verifiable. However, despite Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy's commitment that Eritrean troops would withdraw from Tigray we are yet to see any evidence that this is happening. There are numerous shocking reports of atrocities committed by Eritrean forces in Tigray, and their continued presence is fuelling insecurity. These forces must leave Ethiopia immediately. We continue to press hard for this commitment to be delivered. I made this clear on my call to the Eritrean Ambassador on 16 March.

Written Question 26 May

The Lord Bishop of St Albans

Q: To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of religious freedom in Eritrea; and what representations have they made to the government of Eritrea about the ongoing house arrest of Abune Antonios.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon:

A: We remain concerned about the human rights situation in Eritrea, including the arrests of religious figures such as Patriarch Abune Antonios of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewadho Church who has been detained for over 15 years. The Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief raised Patriarch Abune Antonios' case with the Eritrean Ambassador on 20 May, and our Ambassador in Asmara tweeted to call for the Patriarch and others detained for their faith to be released.

The UK Government takes every opportunity to voice our concern about arbitrary arrests and detentions in Eritrea on the basis of religion or belief, and has called for the release of such worshippers. We have done so directly with the Government of Eritrea and publicly through our annual reporting on human rights and at the UN Human Rights Council. The UK raised Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Eritrea in a statement by the UK's International Ambassador for Human Rights, Rita French, at the 46th Session of the Human Rights Council. We also encouraged Eritrea to make progress on their commitment to the Universal Periodic Review process including the promotion of

FoRB. Eritrea remains a priority country under our annual human rights reporting, and we will continue to monitor the situation there. The Minister for Africa raised human rights when he met the Eritrean Ambassador to the UK on 16 March.