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(translated from Dutch)

Interview JAN NYSSSEN and SOFIE ANNYS

'Teenagers killed to avoid revenge later': Ghent geographers monitor civil war in Ethiopia

For Ghent geography professor Jan Nyssen (63), the civil war in Tigray is not a far-away event. With a team of companions, he collects testimonies of massacres, executions and organized food shortages. His report reads like a crushing indictment of Addis Ababa. Partisan? 'It's facts we report.'

[Erik Raspoet](#) 30 March 2021, 3:00



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♦ Interview Jan Nyssen

“Tieners vermoord om te vermijden dat ze later wraak nemen’: Gentse geografen monitoren burgeroorlog in Ethiopië



Een schoolje in Wukro, Tigray, werd begin maart totaal vernietigd bij beschietingen door troepen die de centrale Ethiopische regering steunen. De burgeroorlog in Tigray startte in november. Beeld AFP

In normal times, UGent's physical geography research group focuses on the links between geomorphological processes and human-environment interaction. Typical publications deal

with the impact of land and water management on soil and relief. But in recent months, much research dedicated to a very different kind of interaction: the civil war in the north Ethiopian province of Tigray.

Since the start of the conflict on 4 November, a team around professor of geomorphology and hydrology Jan Nyssen has been trying to map the humanitarian toll. This may be taken literally, according to the [Tigray: Atlas of the Humanitarian Situation](#) published on 9 March. Massacres, artillery shelling, air and drone strikes: the entire crime *scene* of the civil war was captured on map. The authors tracked flows of refugees and displaced people and recorded the often-alarming level of food supplies per district. The most striking map provides a geographical overview of confirmed civilian casualties.

"We have already collected more than 1,900 names," says mapper Sofie Annys (28). "All are victims of whom we do not only know the identity, but of whom we also know where and in which circumstances they died. Our atlas is the result of 2,000 telephone calls, of which about 100 are in-depth interviews with witnesses. By the way, we have a second list of more than 7,000 victims that we filtered out of social media posts and websites. Not fully confirmed with their names, but very disturbing."

Grand Canyon

Annys is a research associate at the Department of Geography. In recent years, she spent several months in Ethiopia for her recently defended PhD on the downstream impact of dams in Tigray and the neighbouring Amhara region. For her promoter, the catastrophic situation is possibly even more personal. Jan Nyssen lived in Tigray for almost ten years, initially as project officer of the Leuven professor of soil science Seppe Deckers, a pioneer of Flemish academic cooperation with Ethiopia. Also, after his appointment as professor in Ghent, Nyssen remained very familiar with the area.

Ethiopia emerged as an international *donor darling* after the fall of the military-communist dictatorship in 1990. Belgian development cooperation also allocated several millions into a range of large and small projects, mostly focused on agriculture and food safety. Scattered all over the country, but the centre of gravity was not coincidentally in Tigray. The northern region had been the epicentre of the apocalyptic famine that claimed at least one million lives in 1984-'85 and gave rise to the legendary benefit concert Live Aid.

The anxiety about the civil war lives in academic circles. In November, the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) published a sharp open letter, signed by all rectors. But no one stuck their necks out as far as Nyssen, who also has a small house in Hagere Selam, a town of 10,000 people in Tigray.

"I don't think I can go there any time soon," Nyssen said during a joint video call with Annys. "In Ethiopian media and on social networks, I am portrayed as a puppet of the Tigray ruling party TPLF. That naming goes to large extents. Two years ago, I published a scientific book about geo-trekking in Tigray. The Tigray Ministry of Tourism had grand plans for it. The described area is not inferior to the Grand Canyon, there is a lot of potential for adventurous travel. Now in Ethiopia it is rumoured that I made the book on purpose to show the TPLF the way to hidden caves from where they can organize the guerrilla warfare against the central government. It is as if two years ago I was already part of a plot to unleash an uprising against Addis Ababa."

It can be guessed that the Ethiopian authorities are not happy with the Ghent report on the humanitarian emergency. The authors say they received compliments from various NGOs and embassies. "In all discretion," Nyssen said. "NGOs and diplomats have finally gained limited access to the war zone. They don't want to risk it by irritating Addis Ababa."

Officially, the civil war is over. On November 28, after four weeks of intense fighting, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed cried victory. Mekelle, the capital of the insurgent region, had been recaptured and the leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) had fled to the mountains with their troops. According to Abiy Ahmed, not one civilian was killed in the recapture. The Ethiopian leader, who had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for his democratic reforms and, above all, his peace deal with neighbouring Eritrea, often takes a few liberties with the truth. Until last week, and despite damning evidence, he continued to deny that his troops were supported by the army of former arch-rival Eritrea.



A small school in Wuqro, Tigray, was completely destroyed in early March in shelling by troops supporting the central Ethiopian government. The civil war in Tigray began in November. Image copyright AFP

Ark of the Covenant

At the end of February, Amnesty International published an emblematic report on a massacre that was caused in Aksum on 28 and 29 November. Hundreds of civilians were massacred at home or on the streets. By Eritrean soldiers, according to the testimonies that Amnesty International was able to collect. Nyssen and Annys were by no means surprised. Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) run like a thread through the testimonies they were able to explore.

"We investigated the Aksum massacre ourselves," Nyssen said. "We managed, with great difficulties, to reach a sacristan of the cathedral. This is not just a church, but the place where, according to Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, the Ark of the Covenant is preserved. In former times, places of worship were sacred, they were the places where people took shelter from

violence. In this civil war, however, nothing is spared. Dozens of people were killed in and around Aksum Cathedral. The sacristan was so emotional he couldn't get out of his words.

"We tried to comfort him by considering that at least the Ark of the Covenant had remained intact. That clicked, he began to tell a hundred stories about the horrors that had taken place before his eyes. Civilians were executed in the street. For example, he had seen a man cut off his legs with the sickle he carried as he was on the way to harvest crops on his field. Our newsletter with his story was picked up by The Associated Press. They contacted the sacristan through us to thoroughly check his story again. That's how the Aksum massacre became world news even before the Amnesty International report was published."



Tigrayan refugees fill their jerrycans with water. Nyssen: "Food is a weapon in this civil war." Image copyright AP

Sofie Annys distilled patterns from the morbid numbers. Three percent of the confirmed casualties were killed in aerial bombardment or artillery shelling. Surprisingly little; mass killings and summary executions weigh much more heavily, as do murderous searches and fatal arrests.

"More than half of the executions were attributed to Eritrean soldiers," Annys said. "In a quarter of cases there is no conclusive answer about the perpetrators, the rest are on the account of the Ethiopian army and members of Amhara militias who use the civil war to settle old accounts with Tigray."

Strikingly, 93 percent of the victims are men, which Nyssen says points to a strategy to preemptively eliminate potential recruits for the Tigray guerrilla. "Even teenagers are not spared, perhaps to prevent them from taking revenge later."

Annys and Nyssen spoke to their own network for collecting testimonials. Academic colleagues in the cities, project employees in the field, personal acquaintances. They received

help from the Leuven citizen scientist Tim Vanden Bempt, himself married to an Ethiopian from Tigray. Still, it wasn't easy. Tigray has been cut off from the outside world since the beginning of November. Borders are closed and the internet is down. Recently, mobile phone traffic is again possible, but only in the larger cities.

"Fortunately, Tigrayans are very adept at finding loopholes," Nyssen says. "The first calls were made via satellite telephones from some rare NGO employees in the region. Others sought out the regional boundaries where the network did work. The biggest obstacle was the fear. Especially at the height of the war, people were afraid to speak out. When we asked for details, they hid behind platitudes. That very bad things were happening, that's all they got. But over time, we heard more and more explicit stories. Here, the law of the number plays: the more stories, the less restraint because the less likely the authorities are to be able to trace the source. I think there will be a lot of shocking material coming up in the coming months."

Mercy shots

Like the YouTube video of a mass execution at the edge of a cliff in the town of Mahbere-Dego, 15 kilometres from Aksum. Corpses of young men are dumped over the edge by government soldiers, in the background one sees other soldiers carelessly giving the final mercy shots. The video, distributed from the United States by Tigrayan satellite channels, fell like a bomb three weeks ago during a staged visit by diplomats to the town of Mekelle.

"Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is trying to convince the international community that the situation is under control," Nyssen said. "Then, such a movie comes at a very inconvenient time. Yet, there has been a semblance of normality. In Mekelle, an interim government with a CEO was appointed, a Tigrayan who is considered a collaborator by the population. The looted university has reopened, even though several professors have fled to Addis Ababa or abroad. Through intermediaries, I have shown a few diplomats the way to some interesting places outside Mekelle. This allowed them to visit a village where even the beehives had been set on fire. That is not unique either, in many places harvests were burned down, and livestock slaughtered. Food is a weapon in this civil war."

He shares the link of a newly received video clip. A 5,000 emaciated people flowing into the central provincial town of Shire. The picture says a lot about the current situation in Tigray. At the beginning of February, the number of refugees and displaced persons was estimated at 2.5 million, almost half of a population of 6 million. Now that acute warfare is over and the conflict is evolving into a guerrilla phase, a return movement is underway.

"The invasion by the Ethiopian army and its allies has driven the urban population on the run en masse," Nyssen said. "Remote villages in the mountains or in the woods were flooded. There is traditionally a lot of solidarity, but it stops when there really is no food left. The ragged people now arriving in Shire may have had an odyssey past several villages until they saw no other way out but to return to occupied territory. Authorities are using food aid to lure people back. Not for humanitarian reasons, but to weaken the TPLF's supporters. We have heard stories of women who were refused food aid because their husbands were still in the mountains."

Nyssen may be called a victim himself. His home in Hagere Selam was thoroughly looted in November. "By Eritrean soldiers," he learnt through sources at the scene. "Ethiopians are picky, they only take valuables such as jewellery and mobile phones. Eritrean soldiers are

looting everything, even my clothes and plastic kitchen buckets are gone. Apparently, their wives are travelling behind them. Behind the front line, they bundle the loot into large ballots that are transported by trucks to Eritrea. It says a lot about the bitter poverty in that country."

He shrugs for the material losses. Much worse are the 60 civilians who were massacred at the time of the town's capture, including three acquaintances who ended up on the list of confirmed victims.

New famine

With such a background, it is understandable that he looks at the conflict with a committed eye. In a war, however, every side has its truth. However, his report does not specifically mention the Mai Kadra massacre on 9 and 10 November, attributed to the TPLF by Amnesty International based on three testimonies. It is said that there were hundreds, mainly Amharic victims, but only about fifty names of Tigrayans made it to the list in the Ghent report. "No names of the Amharic victims have been confirmed," Nyssen explained. "Not even by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, which has been on the ground. The last word on Mai Kadra, one of the 94 known massacres, has not been said. Very different versions are circulating than what is stated in the first Amnesty report."

Nonetheless: Nyssen realizes that he is being subjectively rubbed, on social media he is called out as a TPLF terrorist. To such critics he strikes back every time. "I ask them if my commitment changes anything about the facts I report. They don't have an answer for that."

A few weeks ago, professor Seppe Deckers of KU Leuven warned in *Knack* for a repeat of the disastrous famine of the 1980s. "Rightly so," Nyssen says. "The previous harvest had already half failed. First, the locust infestation obliged farmers to harvest their immature crops prematurely, then the civil war broke out. The next few weeks are crucial, the soils must be ploughed, fertilized and sown. Because of the ongoing chaos, this becomes impossible, many farmers have eaten their seeds as a last resort. A second failed harvest threatens to become a catastrophe."

Rebels

Meanwhile, international pressure on Addis Ababa is increasing to end the occupation and allow international observers. The sharpest sounded was U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who accused Ethiopia of ethnic cleansing. The question is whether it all makes a big impression. The conflict precedes a complex history with domestic sectarian contradictions and regional geopolitical agendas as centrifugal forces. Ethiopia transformed after 15 years of state economy into an African tiger with annual growth rates of 6 percent and more. That economic miracle took place under the authoritarian leadership of a unity party that pretended to reflect all populations and regions.

However, there is no doubt: until the arrival in 2018 of Abiy Ahmed – mixed Amhara and Oromo origins – the centre of gravity of political and economic power lay with the Tigrayan TPLF. Here, history also speaks: the TPLF acquired that power after it overthrew the Mengistu dictatorship, together with the Eritrean EPLF. Their alliance didn't last for a long time. EPLF leader Isaias Afwerki declared independence, and not much later a protracted and very bloody border war broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea. It's precisely that history that makes the anti-TPLF coalition so murky. Is the Eritrean dictator looking for expansion of

territory? Did Abiy Ahmed make concessions in the knowledge that the Ethiopian army was not up to the military arm of the TPLF? And was this all perhaps already contained in the negotiations on the peace agreement between the two former archenemies?

Nyssen and Annys can only speculate about it, but sectarianism has few secrets for them. "I've been amazed by that a lot," Annys said. "Especially in the Amhara region, I often noticed a deep hatred of Tigrayans. Not with the villagers, it bubbled up during conversations with interpreters or colleagues at the university. The belief that they were exploited by the TPLF was really ingrained. And that was before the war."

The forecasts are not rosy. Tigray is in danger of becoming the scene of one of the many endless conflicts on African soil. "Thirty years of progress is in danger of being lost," says Nyssen, who notes the sad spectacle that all ongoing cooperation projects have stalled. "I fear that Abiy Ahmed has made a serious error of judgement. The TPLF was on its way back in Tigray. Over the past few years, I did hear more and more criticism about their authoritarian and bureaucratic approach. Because of the war, that criticism has fallen silent, all Tigrayans now support the TPLF. Or more precisely, they support the armed wing, the Tigray Defence Forces. "Woyane" means as much as a rebel in Tigrinya. Well, all of Tigray feels *woyane* now.

"Of course, there is a chance that Abiy Ahmed can break the resistance with his supremacy, as happened with the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. But that won't bring peace. After the horrors of this war, a new generation of *woyanes* will rise, and it will resolutely go for Tigray's independence."