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Conflicted commitments: Assessing human rights adherence of Ethiopia's rebel groups

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the commitment and compliance of two key rebel groups in the Ethiopian Civil War—the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the Oromo Liberation Front—to international human rights norms, utilizing the Jo and Bryant framework of human rights commitment and compliance for non-state actors as an analytical tool. A systematic secondary document analysis was conducted, with data sourced from national and international media outlets, as well as reports from humanitarian organizations. The Tigray People's Liberation Front is characterized by a more centralized and disciplined organizational structure, which has facilitated greater accountability for its actions. In contrast, the Oromo Liberation Front has faced significant internal fragmentation and weak command, complicating the attribution of responsibility. Despite these organizational differences, both groups share a record of serious human rights violations, including the mistreatment of prisoners of war, mass civilian killings, forced displacements, and the use of child soldiers. While neither group fully adheres to human rights standards, the Tigray People's Liberation Front has demonstrated a relatively greater capacity to facilitate humanitarian aid, although this aid is frequently diverted for military purposes, undermining its intended support for civilians. This diversion reflects a troubling pattern of aid misappropriation that compromises the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts in conflict zones. Conversely, the Oromo Liberation Front's lack of cooperation with humanitarian agencies further exacerbates the suffering of affected populations, underscoring the need for both groups to reassess their commitment to humanitarian principles and the protection of civilian rights. The study calls for international actors to exert pressure on both groups to ensure compliance with at least a minimum standard of human rights norms.

1. Introduction

1.1. A brief background of recent civil war in Ethiopia

Ethiopia's federal system emerged in the 1990s following the overthrow of the socialist military regime by a coalition of ethno-nationalist rebel groups, primarily the Tigray People's Liberation Front (here after abbreviated as *TPLF*) and the Oromo Liberation Front (here after represented by *OLF*). The transition culminated in the adoption of the 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution, which established a federal system based on ethno-linguistic and settlement patterns, initially creating nine regional states and two autonomous city administrations (Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995; Aalen, 2002; Abbink, 2011; Mattias, 2019). Since 2021, Ethiopia's federal structure has expanded to include two additional regions, with further changes anticipated (Mekonnen, 2022).

The FDRE Constitution grants regional states significant autonomy, including the power to establish their own legislative, executive, and judicial institutions, and form regional police forces accountable to local authorities (Adegeh, 2009; Alem, 2003). In 2007, Ethiopia introduced paramilitary special police units in regions such as the Somali Regional State, which later expanded. These forces, now rapidly growing in number and capacity, are viewed by regional states as a key solution to security concerns. However, the proliferation of these forces has contributed to increasing inter-communal violence (Alene & Worku, 2016; Bereket, 2021).

Ethiopia's political landscape, particularly under the authoritarian Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (here after I used *EPRDF*), was marked by widespread human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, political imprisonment, and torture (Worku, 2018). However, starting in 2015, mass protests and a student movement led to significant changes. A faction within the EPRDF, advocating

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for reform, triumphed, leading to the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister in late 2018 (Mattias, 2019; Blanchard, 2020; Worku & Ephram, 2020).

Abiy's leadership initially inspired hope, with promises of constitutional amendments, political prisoner releases, and efforts to hold former officials accountable for human rights abuses. Despite this, his reform efforts were hindered by the political turmoil and resistance from former TPLF leadership, leading to a deepening conflict. The TPLF's refusal to join the newly formed Prosperity Party (PP) and its challenge to the legitimacy of the PP marked the beginning of tensions that led to war in November 2020 (Assefa, 2019; Negash, 2020).

Tensions escalated when the TPLF conducted unilateral regional elections in September 2020, citing self-rule rights under the FDRE Constitution (Addis Standard, 2020). Despite federal government efforts to undermine these actions, including cutting funding to the TPLF-controlled region, the situation escalated. The TPLF considered these moves unconstitutional and vowed to mobilize the Tigrayan population against the federal government.

The outbreak of war became inevitable when the TPLF launched an attack on the northern bases of the national defense forces on November 3, 2020, seizing significant military resources (Addis Standard, 2020; DW, 2020). This attack marked the beginning of the civil war, which led to widespread humanitarian crises and violent clashes between federal forces and TPLF-backed regional militias (Addis, 2020).

In June 2021, the Ethiopian government designated the TPLF and its allied group, the OLF, as terrorist organizations. The OLF, which had maintained an armed faction in western Ethiopia, also engaged in violent activities against both civilians and security forces. These actions led to the displacement of thousands and further exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in the region, particularly in Wollega provinces, where the OLF's activities were concentrated (Smith, 2021).

The OLF, which has maintained a military presence in the western part of Ethiopia, continued to recruit fighters and engage in attacks against government forces, further intensifying the conflict. These groups have contributed to the destruction of lives and infrastructure, causing further displacement and increasing the strain on Ethiopia's already fragile humanitarian situation.

The federal government's response has primarily been military for both groups, but despite these efforts, the situation remains volatile. The conflict continued until November 2022, when a ceasefire agreement was reached in Pretoria, South Africa between the federal government and TPLF. The ceasefire marked a significant, albeit fragile, attempt to halt the violence and initiate peace negotiations. The war has, however, left deep scars on the Ethiopian population, with hundreds of thousands dead and millions displaced.

Although the exact number is difficult to confirm, estimates from different institutions suggest that over 600,000 people may have died, and more than 2 million people have been displaced internally, primarily from the Tigray, Amhara and Afar regions, due to direct violence, starvation, and lack of access to basic healthcare. The TPLF combatants are primarily responsible for most of the atrocities, although government forces have also made significant contributions, particularly through mass killings, sexual violence, and the obstruction of humanitarian aid (Borkena, 2021; HRW, 2021).

However, the exact figures on civilian deaths directly attributable to the OLF are difficult to ascertain, as the group has often been involved in both guerrilla warfare and ethnic-based violence, leading to clashes with government forces and other ethnic militias. However, during periods of heightened conflict, especially since 2018 when the OLF re-entered Ethiopia, numerous reports have cited deaths linked to their activities, including clashes with government forces, attacks on civilians, and ethnic violence. However, it is responsible for the displacement of millions of civilians, mass killings, and the abduction of women, including students, across the Oromia region (HRW, 2018). According to Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) (2020), in 2020 alone, an estimated over 1 million people were displaced from Oromia due to

ethnic violence, mainly ethnically Amhara selectively displaced.

This article is therefore, aims to evaluate the level of compliance of two rebel groups, the TPLF and the OLF, with international human rights standards, drawing on the framework established by Hyeran Jo and Katherine Bryant in their 2013 work, *Taming the Warlords: Commitment and Compliance by Armed Opposition Groups in Civil Wars*, as part of the *Persistent Power of Human Rights* (PPoHRs). The analysis will specifically examine the conduct of these groups in four critical areas of human rights: the treatment of prisoners of war, the recruitment and use of child soldiers, the protection and treatment of civilians, and the use of land-mines. Moreover, the impact of their actions on civilians and humanitarian efforts are also examined. By assessing their adherence to these norms, the article will shed light on the extent to which these armed opposition groups have respected or violated international humanitarian law during the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia. In the following section, I will try to shed light on the historical and philosophical foundations of each group.

1.2. The political and ideological history of the Tigray People's liberation front

The TPLF was established in 1975, one year after the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie I, who was overthrown by the military junta known as the Derg in 1974. The party's primary social base is the Tigray region, a province within modern federal Ethiopia. Initially, the TPLF was founded as a separatist group with the aim of uniting Tigre-Tigrigna speakers into a greater Tigray. Ideologically, the group was guided by Marxist-Leninism, a strong sense of national identity, and the era's oppressed-versus-oppressor rhetoric. At a time when there was debate among elites about whether oppression was based on nationality or class, the TPLF argued that nationality oppression was the primary issue, with the Amhara as the oppressors and other ethnic groups as the oppressed. According to Aregawi, a senior TPLF member, ethnicity was the key mobilizing factor for the people of Tigray, while Marxism served as an ideological tool for organizational and policy matters and to attract other 'oppressed social classes' beyond Tigray (Aregawi, 2010a, 2010b; Henze, 2000).

However, this idea was not universally accepted, even among its members, though they continued to use it for mobilizing the people effectively. In its founding manifesto, the TPLF labelled the Amhara as the historic enemy of the Tigray people, advocating a complete neutralization and weakening (Aregawi, 2010a, 2010b). Rallying support from an ethnic group is often more effective when grounded in historical grievances rather than ideological arguments (Henze, 2000). Consequently, by the late 1970s, the TPLF's membership grew steadily, reaching approximately 2000 fighters (Kirk, 2004).

After the socialist regime came to power, the TPLF, along with allied leftist nationalist rebels from the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), began resisting the military regime. They fought for seventeen years and eventually seized central power in 1991 after the Derg regime fled to Zimbabwe. This marked a dramatic shift from their separatist stance to becoming a key player in central power, which they believed was a significant improvement over the previous regime. A month later, on June 1, 1991, they formed a coalition with affiliated parties to create the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The EPRDF then controlled all civil, political, and military apparatus of the state for about thirty years until it lost power in March 2018 (Matthew, 2004; Worku & Ephram, 2020).

1.3. The historical background of Oromo Liberation Front

The OLF was established in 1974, slightly earlier than the ideologically similar TPLF. The OLF emerged as a nationalist organization with the primary goal of advocating for the self-determination and rights of the Oromo people, who inhabit the Oromia region of Ethiopia. Like the TPLF, the OLF views the Amhara ethnic group as a historic enemy of the

Oromo people (Aregawi, 2010a, 2010b; Mulugeta, 2014).

The OLF's ideology focus on Oromo nationalism and self-determination. It promotes the belief that the Oromo people have historically been marginalized and oppressed under successive Ethiopian governments. Its objective is the complete liberation of the Oromo nation from its mother land and articulating its manifesto with a vision of a liberated Oromia, where the Oromo people reclaim their land, culture, and political rights. It framed the struggle for Oromo self-determination as a fight against both ethnic and colonial domination (Smith, 2016).

To achieve its objectives, OLF had begun a low-scale armed struggle against the Ethiopian government in 1976. The group initially operated from bases in neighboring Sudan, conducting guerrilla warfare and other forms of resistance (Dicke, 2015). However, unlike the TPLF, the OLF has struggled significantly to sustain organizational unity. In recent years, the group has become fragmented into different factions. For example, one faction led by Dawed Ibssa has chosen to pursue its goals through peaceful political means by registering as a legal political party. In contrast, another faction, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), led by Jaal Merro, continues to pursue its objectives through armed struggle. Currently, the federal parliament has designated the military wing of the OLF as a terrorist organization (Dicke, 2015; Medhane, 2017; Mulugeta, 2014).

2. Theoretical argument

According to the spiral model¹ of human rights outlined in the power of Human Rights (PoHRs), an authoritarian regime can progress through all five phases if there are strong domestic and transnational actors involved in human rights norm socialization, as well as significant pressure from major powers and international human rights organizations against the violating regime. With effective boomerang effects and pressures from both above and below, including naming and shaming, sanctions, and material incentives, the authoritarian regime may eventually relent and align with international human rights norms (Risse & Sikkink, 1999).

Sometimes, regimes that violate human rights deflect criticism by attributing the violations to third parties, such as rebel groups. They may claim that they did not commit the violations themselves but that the rebels are responsible. Furthermore, the regime might argue that it cannot prevent rebel attacks due to its own limitations and the rebels' uncontrollable nature. Nevertheless, all parties involved in a conflict are required to adhere to international humanitarian law. This law imposes the same obligations on both states and armed groups (La Rosa &

Wuerzner, 2008).

However, the effectiveness of compliance can depend on the structure and understanding of international law within the rebel organizations. For armed rebel groups to comply with human rights norms, they must have a clear command structure and a reliable reporting system (Pablo, 2002). An effective organizational hierarchy and strong command, with clear responsibilities for enforcing rules and addressing violations, are crucial for ensuring that lower-ranking soldiers adhere to international law and for taking appropriate measures in the event of violations (La Rosa & Wuerzner, 2008).

Another crucial factor in ensuring that rebel groups comply with international human rights norms is their degree of control over a specific territory. Effective territorial control allows these groups to establish institutions and enforce laws, including implementing penal sanctions. However, having a well-organized hierarchy and territorial control alone does not guarantee compliance. In addition to these factors, the willingness of an armed group to adhere to the law and its readiness to address instances of non-compliance are often fundamental (La Rosa & Wuerzner, 2008).

Self-initiative, rather than reliance on sanctions, can sometimes guide rebel groups toward compliance. However, sanctions may be ineffective if the rebel group's goal involves ethnic cleansing, which is pursued through instilling a culture of demonization and dehumanization of the enemy among their soldiers and supporters (La Rosa & Wuerzner, 2008; Risse & Sikkink, 1999).

Another effective mechanism for ensuring that rebel groups comply with international humanitarian law is to provide their members with thorough training on the laws, their implications, and their obligations during operations. Through such training, soldiers can internalize the importance of adhering to the rules and understand the sanctions they could face for non-compliance. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) plays a crucial role in this process, as it has greater access to armed groups compared to other organizations (La Rosa & Wuerzner, 2008; Pablo, 2002). Hence, rebel groups are more likely to comply with international human rights norms if they allow ICRC access to detainees and humanitarian aid for civilians (Jo and Bryant, 2013).

Similar literature in the Persistent Power of Human Rights (PPoHRs) also indicates that rebel groups with a strong centralized administration are more likely to be committed to and compliant with human rights norms (Jo & Bryant, 2013). Following the fall of the socialist regime, two powerful rebel groups emerged with extensive demographic support and a substantial number of soldiers committed to liberating their people from authoritarian rule and achieving recognized statehood. These groups are known for their strong chain of command, extending from top military leaders to lower-ranking soldiers. However, in the ongoing Ethiopian civil war, these rebel groups have been accused of serious human rights violations, including the indiscriminate massacre of civilians and the abuse of war prisoners (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Regarding the TPLF and OLF, both groups possess a significant historical background of party establishment and leadership, which contributes to their strong internal command structures. The TPLF, established in 1975, and the OLF, founded in 1973, have developed well-defined hierarchies and command chains over the years. Their organizational experience has equipped them with robust mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing discipline among their members (Aregawi, 2010a, 2010b; Henze, 2000).

Historically, these rebel groups have demonstrated a unique system of oversight and strict punitive measures to maintain discipline within their ranks. This system includes regular followups on the activities of their members and the implementation of severe penalties for breaches of conduct. For instance, the TPLF was known for its rigorous internal controls and disciplinary actions, which played a crucial role in maintaining cohesion and order during its time in power (Teshome, 2014). Similarly, the OLF has employed stringent measures to ensure the compliance of its members with its organizational standards and operational directives (Kebede, 2016).

¹ According to Mayer (2001), The Spiral Model of Human Rights provides a framework for understanding the evolution of human rights standards and the varying stages through which states progress in their compliance with these norms. The model posits that the trajectory of human rights improvements is not linear, but cyclical, with states periodically advancing or regressing in response to both internal and external pressures. It emphasizes the dynamic and iterative nature of human rights development. The model consists of five phases. The first, **Repression**, involves widespread and systematic human rights violations, typically driven by government actions aimed at repressing dissent and opposition. The second phase, **Denial**, sees the state either downplay or deny these abuses, often justifying them as necessary for national security or other state interests. In the third phase, **Tactical Concessions**, the state, under domestic or international pressure, may make limited and strategic concessions, such as granting minor reforms or permitting international scrutiny, without fundamentally altering its policies. The fourth phase, **Prescriptive Status**, occurs when the state begins to recognize the importance of human rights norms, adopting legal frameworks or implementing more substantial reforms to align with international standards, although full implementation may remain incomplete. Finally, in the **Rule Consistency** phase, the state fully integrates human rights norms into its legal and political system, ensuring consistent enforcement and adherence to international human rights standards.

These strong command structures and disciplinary mechanisms suggest that, despite their internal order, the TPLF and OLF have been implicated in significant human rights violations. This contradiction between their organizational discipline and the reported abuses raises important questions about the factors contributing to such violations and the extent to which internal command structures influence compliance with human rights norms (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Therefore, this research seeks to address the question: “Why have rebel groups, believed to possess a strong command structure, been involved in gross human rights violations?” The activities of the two rebel groups—TPLF and OLF—will be analyzed within the theoretical framework proposed by Hyeran and Katherine, 2013, p. 253) in the Persistent Power of Human Rights (PPoHRs) book. Specifically, this study will assess the behavior of these groups with regard to four critical human rights issues: the treatment of civilians, the treatment of detainees, the use of landmines, and the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

2.1. Rationale of the study

There is a scarcity of studies and sources addressing rebel groups’ commitment to or violations of international human rights norms, despite growing interest in exploring this topic. Existing research has primarily focused on the relationship between state actors and human rights norm compliance. Until recent decades, human rights scholarship paid limited attention to the status and behavior of non-state actors concerning these norms.

Hence, one of the key rationales of this study is to address the gap in existing literature by providing a detailed analysis of rebel groups’ adherence to human rights norms, particularly amidst the increasing global scrutiny of non-state actors in humanitarian contexts. This contribution is crucial for developing more effective mechanisms to promote compliance with international humanitarian law in conflict zones. Additionally, the study aims to deepen our understanding of complex conflict situations and their broader human rights implications, offering valuable insights into the impact of these groups on local populations, the role of international oversight, and the responses of the international community.

2.2. Why are two groups taken as a point of discussion?

As I mentioned above, both groups share many similarities regarding their establishment, triggering factors, political manifestos, and ideological orientations. They both interpreted historic Ethiopia as a colonial empire where the emperor exploited and colonized the Oromo, Tigray, and other ethnic groups. Ideologically, they adopted Marxist-Leninist principles combined with ethno-nationalist concerns and self-determination as central elements in their mobilization strategies. Their ultimate goal was to establish independent states separate from Ethiopia.

Similarly, both groups began their struggles by classifying and characterizing ethnic groups as either oppressors or the oppressed. The Amhara ethnic group was commonly depicted as the oppressor, while the Tigray, Oromo, and other ethnic groups were seen as the oppressed. Both groups viewed historic Ethiopia as an imperial colonizer, with the Abyssinian north imposing Amhara culture and language on the rest of the country. They aimed to reshape the political economy of Ethiopia through an ethno-nationalist framework, envisioning the creation of de facto regional states.

Moreover, both parties played significant roles in the formation of the Transitional Government in 1991 following the fall of the Derg regime. However, the OLF eventually left the transitional government, alleging that its members were being intimidated, jailed, and killed in various parts of Oromia by forces led by the TPLF. Following their secret destabilization efforts and alleged sponsorship of various conflicts all over the country, both rebel groups were simultaneously designated as

terrorist organizations by the Ethiopian parliament.

Both groups had a tactical alliance aimed at removing the central government from power and weakening their common enemy, the Amhara ethnic group. However, they differ significantly in terms of their influence, territorial control, and legitimacy.

Unlike the OLF, the TPLF controlled the entire Tigray region with a significant degree of popular support and had a substantial influence on the military and political economy. In contrast, the OLF had limited territorial control, minimal legitimacy, and insignificant political influence, remaining primarily a guerrilla force. The TPLF, with its broader social base and established influence, was a key architect of the 1990s Ethiopian political landscape, while the OLF’s impact remained comparatively narrow.

3. Methodology

This study employs a document analysis technique with a case study design to provide an indepth analysis of the behavior of the TPLF and the OLF concerning key human rights issues. The approach is particularly effective for exploring complex phenomena such as human rights violations within conflict zones through exploring various documents. It allows for a nuanced understanding of the context, motivations, and actions of these groups, which is essential for grasping the intricacies of their behavior. This approach also captures the rich, contextual details of the situation. By examining diverse sources, including media reports, findings from human rights organizations, and legal investigations, document analysis approach offers a comprehensive view of how these groups operate and how their actions align or diverge from international human rights standards.

Since my focus is to assess the level of rebel groups’ conformity to international human rights norms in the areas of the treatment of prisoners, the recruitment of child soldiers, the treatment of civilians, and the use of landmines, each of these issues requires a unique methodology to address. For instance, a thorough content analysis was made in order to analyse their practices on the treatment of prisoners using reports from international human rights organizations, government documents, and testimonies from former prisoners who made an interview in medias. Similarly, video productions featuring interviews with former child soldiers, produced by various media outlets, were collected, contextualized, and analyzed in order to look in to the extents of child soldiers recruitment behaviours. Testimonies from NGOs like Save the Children and UNICEF, along with reports from international monitoring bodies were consulted extensively to assess the alignment of their practices with international child protection norms.

A combination of media analysis, including both local and international news outlets, and reports from humanitarian organizations such as Human Rights Watch, was employed to assess the treatment of civilians. Finally, I reviewed landmine monitoring reports and testimonies from both military personnel and civilians to gather evidence on landmine usage during the conflict.

The methodology of this study is strong due to its flexibility, which enables the researcher to explore various dimensions of human rights violations. This flexibility is particularly advantageous in dynamic and evolving conflict situations, as it allows for a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the actions of the groups involved.

However, I must acknowledge the limitations of my methodology. While the study utilizes a wide range of sources, the exclusive reliance on secondary data due to security concerns, combined with the inability to gather primary data through interviews, may affect the depth and reliability of the information, potentially impacting the overall quality of the analysis.

3.1. Data sources

This research is primarily reliant on secondary data sources due to the challenges associated with conducting interviews stemming from

security concerns. Consequently, secondary data were sourced from the following references:

1. **Local and International Media Outlets:** This investigation will scrutinize the reporting from a diverse array of local and international media entities. These outlets furnish real-time accounts and continuous coverage of the ongoing conflict, thereby providing critical insights into the actions and reported violations perpetrated by the TPLF and OLF. Notable media platforms encompass both traditional and digital formats, which present a variety of perspectives regarding the conflict. Various photos were taken of from the media's page after they were released to the audience. I believe that originally, the media may have ensured the privacy of the photo, and I used it for my analysis with dully acknowledgement. Hence, I cannot take any photo in person due to security reason, but rather incorporate it just to reinforce my argument.
2. **Reports from National and International Human Rights Organizations:** This analysis will draw upon documents from esteemed human rights organizations, including: i) the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, which delivers country-specific evaluations and in-depth investigations into human rights transgressions within Ethiopia; ii) Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International, which provide exhaustive reports and analyses concerning human rights infringements, particularly those enacted by armed factions in conflict-ridden areas.
3. **Legal Investigative Results:** This study will also integrate findings from legal inquiries undertaken by legal practitioners and investigative bodies. Such investigations frequently encompass thorough assessments of human rights violations, incorporating testimonies, legal evaluations, and evidence amassed from conflict-affected regions.

To achieve this, I engaged with collecting a wide range of sources, both local and international, spanning from the start of the war in October 2020 to the conclusion of the ceasefire in November 2022. As an inclusion and exclusion criteria, the selection process involved considering broadcasting, print, and online media to capture a diverse array of perspectives.

For local media, both state-owned and private outlets were included to ensure a balanced view. International media outlets were chosen based on their reputation and coverage of the region during the specified time period. Additionally, reports from international human rights organizations were considered due to their expertise in documenting such issues, and their investigative journalism provided an important layer of triangulation.

To avoid bias, the perspectives presented by local media and human rights reports were cross-checked and validated through the inclusion of international media outlets and reports from global human rights organizations. This triangulation process helped ensure a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of the situation, allowing for a comparison of local narratives with broader, internationally recognized viewpoints and investigative findings.

3.2. Data analysis

Upon the completion of data collection via a systematic review of the relevant sources, the analytical focus is directed towards the Patterns of Abuse, which delineated and classified specific human rights violations, encompassing the treatment of both civilians and detainees, the deployment of landmines, and the conscription of child soldiers. Furthermore, an examination was conducted regarding how these insurgent groups are affected by external influences and the way they react to international oversight and advocacy initiatives.

4. Findings and discussions

4.1. Commitment and compliance of the two rebel groups

Unlike the OLF, the TPLF demonstrated a robust internal organization with a tightly structured hierarchy extending from top commanders to lower-level soldiers. The TPLF enforced strict discipline during its prolonged guerrilla warfare, taking severe actions against rule violations. This strict enforcement extended even to top leaders suspected of breaking their promises or engaging in espionage activities (Abbink, 2011; Hassen, 2020; Keller, 2008; Mulugeta, 2002).

In contrast, the OLF experienced significant disorganization in its later stages, characterized by weak internal order, sporadic information flow, and mistrust among top members, resulting in a fragile central command. Frequent divisions and factionalism became common. Currently, the group's leadership is somewhat unclear, lacking unified command, allowing members in different districts to act independently. Lower-level soldiers have committed serious crimes without the knowledge or approval of top leaders, leading to the group's marginalization and criticism, even from its own constituents. The group's actions, including the destabilization of the region and selective murders of ethnic groups such as the Amhara and Gurage, have been condemned by local leaders and elders. These terrorist acts, carried out under the pretense of liberating Oromia, have been widely denounced as abhorrent crimes, further alienating the OLF from the people (Abdi, 2017; Holt & Lawrence, 2000; Human Rights Watch, 2020a, 2020b; Keller, 2019; Lefort, 2016).

For decades, the OLF has been responsible for serious human rights violations, with particularly severe abuses reported in the last six years since 2018. Despite this, no faction within the group has accepted responsibility. Instead, there has been a diffusion of accountability, with different factions issuing press releases to distance themselves from the abuses and deny culpability (International Crisis Group, 2021; Human Rights Watch (2020a, 2020b).

However, by far TPLF is much better in its organizational unity, although it has committed serious human rights violations against civilians and war prisoners during the two-year civil war. Unlike the OLF, where internal divisions and fragmented leadership (Lefort, 2016) complicate the attribution of responsibility for crimes, the TPLF's unified structure allows for more straightforward accountability (Keller, 2008). The TPLF's centralized command and cohesive organization make it easier for international communities to hold it accountable for any crimes committed by its forces (Hassen, 2020). This centralized approach contrasts with the OLF's disorganized and divided nature, where assigning blame and enforcing responsibility is more complex.

1. War prisoners' treatment

Prisoners of war, according to **Geneva Conventions** (1949), are individuals, including military personnel, combatants, and occasionally civilians who engage in hostilities, captured and detained by an opposing force during an armed conflict. Under international law, particularly the **Geneva Conventions**, Prisoners of wars are granted legal protection, ensuring they are treated humanely and not as criminals. They are entitled to protections against torture, abuse, and degrading treatment, as well as access to food, medical care, and the right to communicate with their families. While detained for the duration of the conflict, Prisoners of war must be released and repatriated once hostilities end. They cannot be prosecuted solely for their participation in the conflict (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1949; International Committee of the Red Cross, 2024).

One of the key indicators of a rebel group's commitment during a civil war is how it treats prisoners of war. In this regard, both combatant groups have earned a poor reputation. As reported by local investigative media Walta Corporation (2021), during the Ethiopian National Defense

Force (ENDF) attack that began on November 4 and the following days, TPLF soldiers committed severe abuses against captured members of the national defense forces.

According to the report, seventeen soldier hostages were killed in a collision with a Sino truck, while others were murdered, dragged by a vehicle, and beheaded by TPLF soldiers. Female soldiers were raped in pairs, took off their uniforms, and threw out their deadly bodies to wild animals (Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 2020). Other hundreds and thousands of detained national defense soldiers were slaughtered by the TPLF's paramilitary in a barbaric way; the remaining are starved and suffer from a lack of essential services (Isaias, 2021).

The OLF has similarly engaged in brutal practices, including the hanging, beheading, and burning of detained soldiers in concentration camps. There is substantial evidence of the OLF committing such heinous acts, including burning the bodies of deceased soldiers and beheading them.

2. Civilian Treatment

The TPLF, utilizing looted heavy artillery, including missiles and rockets, has attacked civilian targets and infrastructure, such as airports, highway bridges, and investment areas. During their southward advance to neighboring regions, TPLF soldiers committed severe human rights violations, including indiscriminate mass killings, extensive rapes of teenagers and elderly women, and widespread looting and destruction of civilian infrastructure. Over 3500 women were raped by TPLF combatants (Osman, 2021). The indoctrination from TPLF leadership portrayed the Amhara as enemies, leading to attacks on individuals of all ages. Notably, in Maikadra, over 1600 civilians were massacred using knives, axes, machetes, and shovels. Additionally, TPLF forces targeted airports in Eritrea, Gondar, and Bahir Dar with missiles and rockets, causing numerous civilian injuries (Amnesty International, 2020; Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 2020; Walta, 2021).

The TPLF has diverted substantial amounts of international aid, including oil, powder, and medicine, from civilians to their soldiers. Notably, the group looted approximately 570,000 L of fuel from UN World Food Program warehouses in Tigray and Konbolcha (Fana Broadcast Corporation, 2022). Satellite images from The Telegraph reveal that in Agamsa town, TPLF fighters shelled villages, conducted house-to-house killings, systematically destroyed farming communities, and set fire to hundreds of traditional homes. These actions displaced over 200,000 civilians in a series of devastating attacks in Ethiopia's Amhara region (AAA, 2022; TheTelegraph, 2021a, 2021b).

During the two-year conflict, TPLF rebel soldiers demolished significant civil infrastructure, including over 3500 health institutions, schools, and various public facilities in some districts of the Amhara region. Human Rights Watch confirmed in its investigative report that TPLF forces were responsible for civilian killings, sexual violence, looting, and widespread property destruction (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Similarly, the OLF has been implicated in gross human rights violations, including selective mass killings of ethnic Amhara individuals in occupied areas. The group has also been responsible for forced displacement of millions of farmers and the expropriation and burning of civilian properties. According to a Human Rights Watch report, several villages were indiscriminately set ablaze, displacing over 500,000 people who were unrelated to the conflict. This destruction led to the loss of essential services: health institutions and schools were burned, clean water supplies were cut off, and power interruptions left pregnant women giving birth in the streets. Additionally, individuals who depend on regular medication, such as those with HIV, diabetes, or requiring kidney dialysis, were left without necessary treatments (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

According to AAA (2022), both the TPLF and OLF were accused of for the deaths of over 3133 civilians and approximately 1133 injuries. The majority of the casualties, over 2,500, were attributed to the TPLF,

followed by the OLF, which accounted for 1688 casualties. Additionally, more than 1009 women were raped by TPLF militias in the Amhara region, while the OLA was involved in 123 abductions (AAA, 2022).

According to Human Rights Watch, aid groups face significant difficulties accessing the Wollega region, where the OLF predominantly operates, due to strict access restrictions and a lack of cooperation from the OLF (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Both groups frequently targeted the Amhara civilian population, but their methods and objectives differed. The TPLF's attacks were transboundary, extending beyond its immediate area of control, while the OLF's assaults were confined to its controlled territory. The OLF aimed to displace civilians to create a more homogeneous state. It has blocked humanitarian aid access, hindering relief efforts for affected populations (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The TPLF utilized several UN World Food Program trucks for transporting militants and military supplies. Of the 466 trucks that entered the Tigray region carrying humanitarian aid, only 38 were returned (Borkena, 2021).

3. Child soldier

Globally, the minimum age for soldiers typically ranges from 16 to 18, varying from country to country and often determined by national laws and international treaties. In the United States, the minimum age is 18, but 17-year-olds can enlist with parental consent. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, individuals can join at 16, but can only serve in combat roles at 18. In Russia, the age for conscription is 18, and countries like India, Australia, and Canada allow voluntary enlistment at 17 with parental consent (World Bank, 2021).

Similarly, Ethiopia establishes 18 as the minimum age for joining the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF). As outlined in Proclamation No. 1100/2019, the Military Service Proclamation of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the minimum age requirement for enlistment in the ENDF is set at 18 years (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Proclamation No. 1100/2019).

Despite national military recruitment laws stipulating that soldiers must be a minimum of the ages of 18 the TPLF has been notorious for its disregard of these regulations. The group routinely recruited children under the age of 15 as soldiers throughout the conflict. Utilizing outdated 'human wave' tactics, which require large numbers of troops regardless of age or physical condition, the TPLF exploited child soldiers to overwhelm the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF). Children rescued by the ENDF reported being recruited under the principle of 'one child soldier per family.' The TPLF recognized that the ENDF would be reluctant to target children, leading the group to use them as human shields during attacks. Moreover, the TPLF's distribution of humanitarian aid was perversely linked to the number of children a family provided to the rebel forces, with the slogan "no children offered as soldiers, no aid" reflecting this brutal policy (World peace organization, 2021; Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 2022).

In contrast, the OLF has not faced accusations of using child soldiers; its recruitment practices generally involve individuals above the legal age limit and are often based on voluntarism. Unlike the TPLF, the OLF has not engaged in conventional warfare but instead relies on guerrilla tactics with a relatively small number of fighters. Despite an increase in numbers through ongoing training, the group's activities have included bank robberies and attacks on civilian property. University graduates seeking employment have joined the group, which has been involved in kidnapping students, blocking highways, looting passengers, and holding children and the elderly hostage to demand ransoms from their families.

4. Landmine

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC, 2020), a landmine is an explosive device placed on or just beneath the ground, which remains inactive until triggered by pressure, proximity,

or a timer. Landmines are commonly used in warfare to restrict enemy movement, create barriers, or protect specific areas. As noted by the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS, 2021), landmines are especially hazardous because they can remain active long after a conflict ends, continuing to pose significant risks to civilians, humanitarian workers, and military personnel. The immediate impact of landmines includes injury and death, while the long-term effects involve hindering the safe return of displaced persons, delaying reconstruction, and obstructing economic and agricultural development due to fear of contamination. The use of landmines has serious humanitarian consequences, disproportionately affecting civilians, especially children, who are more likely to encounter unexploded ordnance. Additionally, landmines can cause lasting environmental and socio-economic damage, contaminating land and restricting access to vital resources (Human Rights Watch, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

Ethiopia ratified the 1997 Ottawa Convention on Anti-Personnel Mines on December 17, 2004. This was later incorporated into the country's criminal code under Article 276, which stipulates that anyone using landmines against the enemy in violation of international conventions can face imprisonment from up to three months to life, or even the death penalty, depending on the severity of the crime (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2004). Despite this, rebel groups have continued to use landmines as a tactic in warfare.

Due to its prolonged history of conflict, Ethiopia is one of the most landmine-infested countries in the world. This situation began with the Italian invasion in the early 1930s and escalated significantly following the Ethio-Eritrea war of 1998–2000. In the current civil war, the TPLF has extensively used landmines as part of its military strategy. Unlike the OLF, which has not been as involved in landmine deployment, the TPLF's extensive use of landmines during its southward expansion has left a dangerous legacy. After the TPLF's withdrawal from these areas, civilians are now facing frequent accidents caused by unexploded ordnance. Explosives are prevalent, and daily activities are often disrupted by landmine accidents (Reuters, 2022).

Hospitals in war zones report receiving up to 25 injured children per week, with most casualties involving adults and teenagers who are often unaware of the dangers posed by unexploded ordnance. After the TPLF withdrew from the Amhara and Afar regions, there were 50 reported injuries from unexploded ordnance. This situation continues to obstruct humanitarian activities, hinder agriculture and construction efforts, and prevent the safe resettlement of displaced populations. As confirmed by Reuters from hospital workers, 'there are explosives everywhere, and when people begin their daily work, accidents are happening' (Reuters, 2022). As far as permission from the ICRC is concerned, the TPLF has been somewhat more accommodating to humanitarian staff operating in its controlled areas compared to the OLF. In contrast, the OLF has significantly restricted humanitarian access, preventing both international and local Red Cross workers from reaching and assessing the needs of those affected in its territories.

4.2. Comparative analysis

Similar findings are also found among several Sudanese and South Sudan rebel groups. During the Darfur Conflict since 2003, rebel groups such as the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) were formed in 2003 to improve discriminations and marginalization and attack on non-Arab Darfur tribes. They are accusing the government of neglecting the region and using Arab militias (Janjaweed) to oppress non-Arab ethnic groups (Abdel-Rahman, 2009).

Regarding their internal structure, Justice and Equality Movement has generally been considered more strategically organized and internally cohesive compared to the Sudan Liberation Army. The group has maintained a centralized leadership and clear hierarchy over the years, which has allowed for more effective decision-making and the coordination of military operations. Its leadership has been seen as more disciplined, and the group has historically enjoyed better military

training and equipment (Abdel-Rahman, 2009; U.S. Department of State, 2006).

Unlike Justice and Equality Movement, the Sudan Liberation Army has historically been more fragmented and divided into several factions. This has weakened its overall internal organization, making coordination more difficult. Leadership disputes, competing factions, and a lack of a unified command structure have sometimes hindered the group's ability to present itself as a cohesive force (Horne, 2011; International Crisis Group, 2007).

Both groups have been accused of committing significant human rights violations during the conflict, alongside the Sudanese government and allied militias. These include attacking civilians, recruiting child soldiers, committing acts of sexual violence, obstructing humanitarian aid, and engaging in tactics that exacerbate the suffering of the population. Both rebel groups have been criticized for its lack of cooperation with humanitarian organizations in certain instances. Some reports suggest that it obstructed access for humanitarian aid to civilians in areas under their control, either by directly attacking aid convoys or by denying aid workers access to civilians in need (International Crisis Group, 2007; U.S. Department of State, 2006). This lack of coordination has limited their responsiveness to humanitarian needs.

Comparatively speaking, the TPLF of Ethiopia and Justice and Equality Movement of Sudan have demonstrated stronger organizational cohesion. However, both have still been accused of more coordinated and organized human rights violations, including attacks on civilians and the recruitment of child soldiers. In contrast, the OLF and Sudan Liberation Army are more factionalized and internally divided, struggling with greater disorganization. All four groups have faced accusations of recruiting child soldiers, a common issue in African conflicts, and have been criticized internationally for violating humanitarian law. Moreover, all the groups have been accused of mistreating prisoners of war and using landmines as a fighting tactic. These actions have led to significant violations of international humanitarian law, including the indiscriminate harm caused to civilians and the failure to adhere to proper treatment standards for Prisoners of Wars (Human rights Watch, 2005/2021).

Regarding cooperation with humanitarian organizations, Justice and Equality Movement and TPLF have participated in political negotiations that resulted in partial cooperation with humanitarian agencies at certain points during the conflict. However, both have also been accused of obstructing humanitarian aid to some extent. The OLF and Justice and Equality Movement have also faced criticism for hindering aid access, with reports of denying aid or attacking aid convoys. However, the Justice and Equality Movement's internal factionalism has made it more difficult for the group to present a unified stance.

4.3. The role of international actors and great powers

Both international organizations and major powers have played crucial roles in addressing the human rights violations and fostering peace during Ethiopia's civil war. Their efforts in the deescalation of the war and improving human rights conditions have been significant. The UN has encountered significant difficulties accessing areas controlled by the OLF due to the group's restrictions. Its efforts have primarily focused on advocating for humanitarian access and documenting abuses (Human Rights Watch). The EU has employed an indirect strategy by addressing broader conflict issues and applying pressure on the Ethiopian government, which in turn impacts the OLF. The EU condemned the widespread human rights abuses occurring throughout the country and employed a strategy of public naming and shaming through numerous press statements and resolutions (Anne, 2022; Nielsen, 2021).

In an effort to pressure the Ethiopian government to improve its human rights record, the European Union, as a global actor, suspended €88 million in budgetary support to Ethiopia. Additionally, the EU imposed sanctions on Ethiopian officials and called for an independent investigation into the human rights abuses, emphasizing the need for

accountability. Other European countries, including Germany and France, also reduced aid and canceled agreements in response to violations of international humanitarian law (Anne, 2022; Daniel, 2021).

The America-Ethiopia relationship worsened as human rights abuses escalated during the conflict. In response, the U.S. imposed travel restrictions on Ethiopian officials and key TPLF leaders. It also pushed for an inclusive national dialogue involving all rebel groups, including the OLF, although its influence was constrained by the OLF's secrecy and reluctance to engage (Borkena, 2021). Overall, the U.S. used a 'carrot and stick' approach, playing a significant role in the ceasefire negotiations and efforts to improve human rights conditions.

International and national humanitarian organizations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, and the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, have significantly contributed to highlighting human rights abuses on the global stage. They achieved this through a series of detailed reports and by holding the Ethiopian government accountable before the UN Security Council.

In comparison, international communities have had more success in compelling the TPLF to comply with human rights norms, largely due to its longstanding global engagement and established power reputation. In contrast, addressing the OLF's actions has been more challenging because of access restrictions and its less prominent role on the global stage. Consequently, international responses such as sanctions, humanitarian aid restrictions, and diplomatic efforts have been less effective in pressuring the OLF to adhere to human rights standards.

5. Recommendation

Based on the findings and analysis, the following academic recommendations can help address the challenges posed by the OLF and TPLF, and enhance their adherence to international humanitarian law and human rights standards:

- Strengthen Internal Cohesion:** Both the OLF and TPLF should enhance their internal structures to ensure clearer command chains and enforce discipline. The OLF could adopt centralized leadership practices similar to the TPLF to improve coordination and oversight.
- Accountability for Human Rights Violations:** Both groups must take responsibility for war crimes and human rights violations. Establishing independent internal mechanisms to investigate and hold perpetrators accountable is crucial.
- Adhere to International Laws:** The OLF and TPLF should comply with international humanitarian laws protecting women and children, particularly by prohibiting sexual violence and child soldier recruitment.
- Facilitate Humanitarian Access:** The OLF should lift restrictions on humanitarian organizations to ensure unimpeded aid delivery to the conflict zone. Both groups should be held accountable for obstructing humanitarian assistance.
- Initiate Inclusive National Dialogue:** A comprehensive national dialogue should involve the OLF, TPLF, Ethiopian government, and civil society groups. Facilitated by international mediators, the dialogue should aim for a political resolution addressing ethnic, and political grievances.

6. Conclusion

This research has investigated the commitment and compliance of two prominent rebel groups in the Ethiopian Civil War—the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)—to international human rights norms. The findings reveal that despite their strong organizational structures and disciplinary mechanisms, both groups have been implicated in significant human rights violations, including the mistreatment of civilians, the use of child soldiers, the employment of landmines, and the abuse of war prisoners. The Tigray

people's liberation front, in particular, has exhibited a troubling record regarding child soldier recruitment and the treatment of civilians, even as it has allowed some humanitarian access. Conversely, while the OLF has refrained from recruiting child soldiers, it has been largely uncooperative with humanitarian aid efforts. The Tigray people's liberation front's use of landmines has also caused considerable harm to civilians. These findings underscore the complexities of human rights compliance among rebel groups and the need for effective mechanisms to promote adherence to international humanitarian law in conflict settings. The misappropriation of humanitarian assistance by the Tigray people's liberation front for military purposes further exacerbates the plight of affected populations, while the OLF's lack of cooperation with humanitarian organizations worsens the situation. Although international humanitarian organizations and great powers have brought human rights abuses to global attention, their efforts are less effective in holding the rebel groups accountable and ensuring their compliance with human rights norms.

6.1. Limitation of the study

The researcher has acknowledged that this study has the following limitations: First, the research is confined to two specific rebel groups, the Tigray People's Liberation Front and OLF, which may not represent the broader spectrum of rebel organizations in Ethiopia or elsewhere. This narrow focus limits the generalizability of the findings, as different groups may exhibit varying behaviors and compliance levels based on their unique contexts and motivations. Additionally, due to the difficulty of being present in the area in person for security reasons, the researcher relies on secondary data sources alone, which may compromise the quality of the information. These sources may not always provide a complete or objective picture of the situation on the ground. Hence, I suggest future researchers integrate their source with primary data as a triangulate purpose. Furthermore, the study does not delve deeply into the historical and socio-political contexts that shape the actions of these rebel groups, which could offer critical insights into their compliance with human rights norms. Lastly, the qualitative nature of the research, while rich in detail, may lack the quantitative rigor that could strengthen its claims. These limitations highlight the need for caution when interpreting the results and suggest areas for further research to enhance the understanding of human rights compliance among rebel groups in conflict scenarios.

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Declaration of competing interest

I thus certify that this work is entirely original and my own. Furthermore, there is no conflict of interest and it has not been submitted to any journals.

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