

Welcoming work

Tesfu Gessesse

The Welcoming Association, Edinburgh

Introduction

In this article, I aim to provide an overview of the Welcoming Association, my own experiences and the causes of forced human displacement.

I was born to a working-class family in 1960s Tigray, Northern Ethiopia. My father died when I was nine years old and I was brought up by my courageous mother, supported by my uncles. Throughout my secondary school education, I was brainwashed by Marxism, Leninism and Maoism. I was taught about the evolution of systems from primitive communal society to 20th century communist systems in my mother tongue, Tigrinya.

Attendance at youth groups four evenings a week and listening to the government's cadre propaganda was mandatory, as Ethiopia fashioned itself as a Socialist country under the then military dictator Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam.

That said, my childhood nurtured resilience - while growing up in a dictatorship, my peers and I also learned to avoid dangerous animals (hyenas, baboons etc.) – and an ambition for a fairer society. I escaped Ethiopia in 1982, living as a refugee in Sudan before moving to the UK in 1986. Throughout my career I have been lucky to work with and support marginalised groups through community work and advocacy.

The Welcoming Association Edinburgh.

The work of the Welcoming Association started in 1999, supported by the City of Edinburgh Council's Community Learning and Development workers, who delivered a cultural integration programme to the most marginalised and isolated New Scots to

Edinburgh. New Scots are asylum seekers, refugees, migrants and the black and minority ethnic communities who made Edinburgh and Scotland their adopted home.

In early 2000 the Welcoming was born as an independent association. One of the primary objectives is to enable New Scots to integrate and forge friendships with local Scottish people living in their communities. The Welcoming envisions an inclusive society where all feel welcome and empowered to achieve their full potential.

The association recognised that the large and growing Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities living in Edinburgh were also experiencing varying levels of marginalisation, racism, discrimination and inequality. As a result, the Board decided to include these communities and offer them the services of the Welcoming Association.

The Welcoming has offered New Scots opportunities to build confidence, socialise, develop English language skills and much more. Since then, it has continued to grow and respond to the demands of supporting New Scots to the city, including some of the most isolated and vulnerable. Pre-pandemic New Scots and local people used to get together within the Welcoming's offices to share a wide range of activities including English language classes, employability support and guidance, home energy advice, creative arts workshops and social and cultural outings. However, since the pandemic we have been providing many of these services online. The Welcoming also coordinates and supports a range of activities across Edinburgh, from one-to-one befriending, Women's groups, health and wellbeing activities and family-friendly community events. The central aims of our activities are to foster opportunities to create friendships and build supportive networks. All activities are free and accessible on a drop-in basis.

Pre-Brexit, we connected with over 1600 households from 80 nationalities. Currently, the Welcoming serves more than 700 households from 65 different countries and we

are supported by more than 40 volunteers from the local community. To learn more about the Welcoming please visit our website - www.thewelcoming.org

Why do people flee their country?

People leave their country of origin when faced with religious, ethnic and political persecution, war or natural disaster. However, in my view, inequality is the common denominator for the majority of human displacement. The world's poor and marginalised are the most at risk of displacement and the most likely to seek asylum in other countries. Many are educated, skilled and in some cases wealthy, but still fall victim to persecution in their home countries.

The social breakdown caused by inequality can also lead to war, which in turn leads to people fleeing their country. The war in Darfur was the world's reminder that genocide was still possible in the 21st century, even after promises from world leaders to learn from the massacres in the former Yugoslavia in 1991 and Rwanda in 1994. The death toll in Darfur was estimated to be 300,000, and almost 3 million people have been forced to flee their homes.

When I left Ethiopia and became a refugee in Sudan in 1982, there were about 7 million refugees in the world. According to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, there were 26.9 million refugees and 84 million forcibly displaced people in 2021.¹ 35 million of these are children under the age of 18. The same report also stated that from 2018-2020 between 290,000 and 340,000 children were born as refugees per annum.²

When elephants fight the grass gets trampled³

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html>

² <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>

³ A Swahili proverb which asserts that when two nations fight, the people are the ones to suffer.

The U.N. Security Council (UNSC) is the body with the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. It consists of 15 members, 5 of which are permanent and have veto power (the P5), namely the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, China and France. These were considered the leading military powers when the U.N. was founded. Their veto right would prevent them from going to war against each other while creating a necessary balance when taking decisions on security issues that would be collectively enforced. This illustrates how the group itself was based on peace and security considerations, and there has, in fact, never been a direct physical war between the P5 since the U.N.'s beginning.

Many UNSC resolutions have also been passed to support peace processes, solve disputes, respond to illegitimate uses of force and enforce sanctions in situations where peace and security have been threatened. This involvement ranges from Bosnia in 1993 to Afghanistan in 2001 to its Anti-Piracy resolution in 2008. However, recently, the UNSC has been criticised for its lack of immediate and effective intervention in the humanitarian crises in Yemen, Myanmar, Ethiopia, and now Ukraine. Many say this is because the UNSC is divided, with China and Russia often opposing Western decision-making concerning international peace and security. Another criticism is the commercial self-interest of P5 nations, which dictates much of the UNSC actions.

Yemen – The war in Yemen began in 2014. The Houthis - with links to Iran and a history of rising against the Sunni government - took control of Yemen's capital city Sana'a demanding lower fuel prices and change of government. In March 2015, a coalition of Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia, and with U.S. logistical and intelligence support, started a campaign of economic isolation and airstrikes against the Houthis. According to the UNHCR, more than 337,000 have been killed, and a further 4.6 million Yemenis have fled to neighbouring countries. There has been little response from the UNSC, and there has been no action against the Saudi-led coalition or U.S. government.

Myanmar – On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar military detained senior civilian government members after claiming the country’s November 2020 elections were fraudulent. Mass protests have continued relentlessly since, despite hundreds of demonstrators killed and many more detained. As a result, nearly 1 million Rohingya ethnic Muslims in the predominantly Buddhist nation have fled violence from Rakhine State to Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. Despite the UN Human Commission confirming that the conflict in Myanmar is a civil war and calling the UN Security Council to take more decisive action to put pressure on the military and restore democracy, the response from the UNSC has been very disappointing. NGOs like Oxfam, Save the Children, Islamic Relief, and others continue to support the people Rohingya while the UNSC remains inactive.

Tigray, north of Ethiopia – I could not write this article without discussing the ongoing genocidal war in my birthplace, Tigray.

On 4th of November 2020, a civil war started between the current PM Abiy Ahamed’s government and the Tigrayan government. Before I go into the war, I would like to provide some historical context.

Tigray is home to more than 6.5 million people and 121 rock-hewn churches, believed to represent the single largest group of rock-hewn structures in the world. These churches date from the 5th-14th century and also include some of the oldest surviving timber structures in the world (6th-10th century).⁴

In 1974, the Ethiopian monarch King Haileselassie was deposed in a military coup led by Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam. A pseudo-socialist military dictatorship ensued from 1974 - 1990.

⁴ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6301/>

The Tigrayan people, under the leadership of the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) engaged in an armed struggle for self-determination. At the same time, the Eritreans who were also part of Ethiopia then – began fighting for their independence. The Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (EPDM), the Oromo People’s, Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People (SNNP) were also fighting against Mengistu Hailemariam’s government.

In May 1988, the TPLF, EPDM, OPDO, and SNNP formed a united front called Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and in 1991 Mengistu Hailemariam’s government was overthrown by the collective struggle. In 1993 Eritrea became an independent country and separated from Ethiopia.

The EPRDF governed Ethiopia from 1995 until 2019 with the TPLF leading the coalition until 2018. The TPLF were a dominant force in the EPRDF, particularly under the leadership of Meles Zenawi. The country experienced impressive development in the years that followed but unemployment, drought and corruption were ever present challenges.

In 1998 a border dispute between Eritrea and neighbouring Tigray led to the Ethio-Eritrea war. Ethiopia won the war and President Isaias Afewerki held long standing grievances against the TPLF and the Tigrayan people.

Following a leadership election in 2018, Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister, forming his Prosperity Party in 2019. The TPLF abstained from joining this new coalition and became increasingly ostracised during PM Ahmed’s premiership. Following delays to the 2020 general election, the TPLF held its own regional elections in September 2020, against directives from the central government.

On the 4th of November 2020, the civil war started in Tigray. PM Ahmed blamed the Tigrayans for starting the war, accusing them of killing civilians and raiding an

Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) battalion that were stationed at a depot in Tigray. All communications to the region were cut soon after that.

It is suspected by many in the Tigrayan diaspora, and journalists, that PM Ahmed and President Afewerki had been planning this attack for several years. This suspicion is predicated on the many months of anti-Tigrayan rhetoric from politicians and media outlets and PM Ahmed's clandestine meetings with President Afewerki.

As reported in the *New York Times*, PM Ahmed sent troops to Tigray and military cargo planes to Eritrea in the months before the war, with generals opposed to the war subsequently interrogated and dismissed.⁵

This month will mark over 500 days of The Ethiopian Government's war on Tigray. All forms of communication, food and medicine have been cut off to the region since 2020, before the fighting started. Prisoners were released from jail in Eritrea on October 30th 2020 and were sent to Tigray to fight.⁶

Tigray was unprepared for what happened on November 4th. The Ethiopian army, Amhara state special force and militia attacked Tigray from the south, Somali mercenaries – invited by PM Abiy Ahmed - attacked them from the east and the Eritrean army attacked Tigray from the north. Turkey, Iran and the UAE also supplied the Ethiopian military with drones.

As reported in the *Guardian*, Facebook and Twitter were used to spread ethnic hatred. Facebook has since acknowledged that its platform was used for hate speech in Ethiopia and Myanmar.⁷

⁵ [The Nobel Peace Prize That Paved the Way for War in Ethiopia - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/17/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-war.html)

⁶ [https://www.africanews.com/2021/02/17/ethiopia-s-tigray-region-hit-by-power-blackout//](https://www.africanews.com/2021/02/17/ethiopia-s-tigray-region-hit-by-power-blackout/)

⁷

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/oct/07/facebooks-role-in-myanmar-and-ethiopia-under-new-scrutiny>

Tigrayans all over the country have been targeted, some killed. Many have had businesses closed down or lost their jobs and thousands have been detained in camps. There is a small community of Tigrayans in Scotland, and many of our relatives have been arrested for no other reason than their ethnicity. The biggest airline in Africa, Ethiopian Airlines, dismissed their Tigrayan staff. More than 60,000 have fled to neighbouring Sudan and another 1.2million West Tigrayans have been forcibly displaced to other parts of Tigray as displaced people. ⁸

The destruction, death, and misery the war in Tigray left in its wake are unprecedented. It is a cruel and savage humanitarian crisis as the Ethiopian Government continues to use blockades and weaponised famine as its primary tools.

The University of Ghent has compiled *The Humanitarian Map of Tigray*, which lists over 260 separate massacres in Tigray. Professor Jan Nyssen (University of Ghent) has collaborated with Tigray's Mekelle University for over 25 years.⁹

Stories have also emerged of horrific state-sponsored Gender-Based Sexual Violence (GBSV). Many women reported that soldiers had told them that they were instructed to wipe out the Tigrayans. The Finnish foreign minister Pekka Haavisto returned from talks with the Ethiopian government and gave a report saying that he was told directly, "We are going to wipe out Tigrayans for the next 100 years". ¹⁰

8

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/12/04/ethiopia-airlines-accused-ethnic-profiling-civil-war-tigray/>

⁹ <https://www.researchgate.net/lab/Physical-Geography-Research-Group-Jan-Nyssen>

10

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/18/ethiopian-leaders-said-they-would-wipe-out-tigrayans-eu-envoy>

Reports of GBSV have emerged from all over the region but once Tigray's electricity and phone lines were cut, the government's briefings dominated early international reports. Foreign journalists were very quickly banned from entering Tigray and many were made to leave the country. Nima Elbagir (CNN), produced comprehensive reports from the region when it was still possible.

China has repeatedly vetoed any action by the UNSC that could have saved Tigray from almost total destruction for its commercial interest and strategic dominance in the region. Factories, schools, churches and hospitals have been deliberately targeted and destroyed. Since last July, food and medicines have been withheld from the region and were limited before that. Banks have been closed for 16 months, so we cannot send money to our families. Civil servants, doctors, nurses and other workers have worked with no salaries for over ten months. Phone lines and internet remain cut off.

On 15th January 2022, Director for the World Health Organisation, Tedros Adhanom, tweeted '...people in Tigray are living under de facto blockage for over a year, are dying from lack of medicine & food & repeated drone attacks'.¹¹

Last month (February 2022), insulin ran out in Tigray. There are 6,000 Type 1 diabetics in the region, of which 2,500 are children. Following pressure from the International Diabetic Federation, the *British Medical Journal* and an article in the *Lancet*, the government was shamed into sending some drugs.

China is building a relationship with Eritrea and seeks greater influence in the region and access to the Red Sea.¹² Russia has also agreed to build a naval base in Eritrea.¹³

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/drtedros/status/1482435374144278528>

¹² <https://thediomat.com/2020/01/through-eritrea-china-quietly-makes-inroads-near-the-red-sea/>

¹³ <https://www.greynomics.com/naval-expansionism-russia-to-establish-navy-bases-in-eritrea/>

Both China and Russia have opposed effective sanctions against the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments. The UNSC has repeatedly stated its concern over the war but the P5 have been unable to prioritise human life over their commercial interests in the region.

Ukraine – Before Ukraine declared itself an independent country on 24th August 1991, the United States and its European allies wanted to separate Ukraine from the Soviet orbit and incorporate it into the West and make it a member of NATO. Russia saw the incorporation of Georgia and Ukraine into NATO as a threat to its sovereignty and security. In his response to the 2008 Bucharest Declaration, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Viktorovich Lavrov said, 'Georgia's and Ukraine's membership in the NATO alliance is a huge strategic mistake which will have most serious consequences for pan-European security'.

The invasion of Ukraine on 22nd February 2022 has been brewing since 2008, and so far, 1.2 million people have fled to neighbouring countries. The UNSC has done little to challenge Russia on its war on Ukraine - of which Russia is a permanent member with veto power- while Ukrainians continue to suffer. The crisis in Ukraine has also exposed the UNSC's fragility as Russia vetoed a resolution that would have demanded that Moscow immediately stop its attack on Ukraine and withdraw all troops.¹⁴

There has been a uniquely positive response from Europe to the crisis. People in the UK have fundraised to help Ukrainians, and donors have asked charities how they can help newly-arriving Ukrainians. I did not see this level of response during the Libyan, Syrian or recent Afghanistan crisis. As reported in the *Guardian*, 'Europe has discovered compassion for refugees- but if they are white.'¹⁵

¹⁴ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/02/1112802>

¹⁵

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2022/mar/10/europe-compassion-refugees-white-european>

Conclusion

If the fight against inequality is going to be won, and we want to have a stable world, more work needs to be done to mobilise the victims of discrimination and support those who are forced to leave their country. As Charles Alphin, argues 'there is no easy route to change. You cannot take the lift, and you have to take the stairs'¹⁶. Advocacy, campaigning and public mobilisation should not be left to trade unions or campaigning agencies. We can all effect change, and the power of the people is stronger than the people in power!

Tesfu Gessesse

tenaygessesse@gmail.com

¹⁶ Ben Phillips, how to fight inequality, pp110.