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In the Tigray region of Ethiopia, women and girls are being systematically raped and subjected to sexual violence with a level of cruelty beyond comprehension. Numerous reports describe cases of rape and gang rape on a daily basis since the beginning of the conflict in November 2020. Those daring to seek care are confronted with the destruction of health care facilities.

Quoting a service provider in Tigray: “Women are being prevented from seeking medical support as the intention was to infect them with HIV so that they will not give birth to healthy children. Other victims are told their blood is being cleansed”.

Last week, referencing Tigray, United Nations (UN) Aid Chief Mark Lowcock briefed the Security Council and stated that: “there is no doubt that sexual violence is being used in this conflict as a weapon of war”. Moreover, he stressed to the world body that “nearly a quarter of reports involve gang rape, with multiple men assaulting the victim; in some cases, women have been repeatedly raped over a period of days. Girls as young as eight are being targeted”.

Dr. Fasika Amdeselassie, top Ethiopian regional health officer, recently told the press that “women are being kept in sexual slavery and at least 829 cases of sexual assault had been reported at five hospitals since the conflict began. Most of the women who have come forward are either pregnant or sustained severe physical injury from the rapes”, Dr. Amdeselassie added.

In response to the UN and other disturbing reports of atrocities in northern and central Tigray regions of Ethiopia, the Mukwege Foundation, an international human rights organisation dedicated to end sexual violence as a weapon of war, is deeply concerned about the scope and scale of the atrocities described by these horrific testimonies. It can be assumed that these cases are only the tip of the iceberg, as sexual violence is generally underreported because it carries huge stigma. Additionally, in Tigray many of the region’s health facilities have been destroyed or are not safely reachable by survivors.

The Mukwege Foundation commends the commitments of the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict to support the national authorities in their prevention and response efforts. Further, the Foundation deplores that, despite the strong normative framework of its Women Peace and Security Agenda, the UN Security Council failed to take timely action to prevent such atrocities and sanction them unequivocally.

In a parliamentary address on March 23rd, Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed acknowledged for the first time that atrocities like rape had been committed during military operations and promised perpetrators would be punished.

The Mukwege Foundation recognises recent commitments made by the Government of Ethiopia to hold accountable those responsible. In addition, the Foundation raises high hopes

that the announced joint investigation of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights will be conducted without delay. Investigations will shed light into the systematic use of sexual violence and other human rights abuses and breaches of international humanitarian law. Victims and survivors of these violations must not be denied their rights to truth, justice and reparations.

There are crucial needs in Tigray that must be immediately addressed: unconditional access to humanitarian aid, lifesaving assistance and service provisions for survivors including post-rape kits, treatment to prevent HIV and other STIs and psychosocial support. Accordingly, enhanced funding is critical to scale-up the provision and coverage of those essential services.

Time has come for the international community to draw a red line against the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. “We need to increase the financial and political costs for those behind these heinous crimes. It is crucial that once this red line is crossed, this immediately triggers financial and political sanctions and judicial prosecutions, and thereby, ending the climate of indifference, inaction and impunity which prevails across the world.” said Ms. Katrien Coppens, Co-Director at the Mukwege Foundation.