

# MSF review of the killing of three MSF staff in Tigray region, Ethiopia, on 24th June 2021



## Executive summary

### Overview

On 24 June 2021, three Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) staff, María Hernández Matas, Tedros Gebremariam Gebremichael, and Yohannes Halefom Reda, were brutally killed in central Tigray, Ethiopia.

This report presents the findings of an internal review carried out by MSF to try to understand what happened to our colleagues. The review was started in the days immediately following the incident and was carried out over more than a year. This is standard practice at MSF following a critical incident with a review aimed at understanding who conducted the attack, how, and with what motive, and to provide facts to inform MSF's engagement with parties to the conflict about what happened that day. The internal review was also important for the families of those who were killed, as it enabled MSF to share its understanding of the circumstances in which their loved ones lost their lives.

Over the past four years, MSF has relentlessly tried to understand the full circumstances in which María, Tedros, and Yohannes lost their lives and obtain an acknowledgement of responsibility for their deaths. MSF has tirelessly attempted to engage with both the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) — whose forces were both present in the area where the killings took place — and asked specific questions regarding the presence of their respective armed forces and their potential involvement in the incident. As this review found that an Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) convoy was present

on the road at the time of the attack, MSF asked the FDRE to fulfil its obligation to carry out a thorough investigation into the killings and to clarify its understanding of the events and the potential involvement of its armed forces. Given the findings of this review, MSF invested heavily in bilateral engagement with the FDRE in relation to these elements and the FDRE repeatedly assured MSF that an official investigation was underway. MSF also requested the TPLF to carry out its own investigation into the incident.

Despite repeated assurances from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) that the FDRE was conducting a credible and impartial investigation into the circumstances surrounding the killing of our colleagues, to date, neither MSF nor the victims' families have received any official communication or substantiated answers from the Ethiopian authorities about what happened that day.

In the absence of receiving the outcome of any credible and transparent investigation from the FDRE, MSF is making the findings of this internal review public to share what we were able to establish about what happened to our colleagues, including the potential involvement of the ENDF. MSF feels a moral obligation to make these findings public out of respect for our colleagues, whose lives were taken while they sought to assist people in need.

## Events on 24 and 25 June 2021

The conflict in northern Ethiopia started in Tigray region in November 2020, with fighting between the ENDF, its allies, and Tigrayan fighters affiliated with the political party, the TPLF.<sup>1</sup>

On 24 June 2021, three MSF staff, María Hernández Matas, Tedros Gebremariam Gebremichael, and Yohannes Halefom Reda drove south from the town of Abi Adi in central Tigray to assess medical needs in the surrounding area.

That afternoon, the MSF base in Abi Adi lost contact with the team. This was reported to the Tigrayan Forces (TF) in Abi Adi and, in the absence of any ENDF presence in Abi Adi town, MSF's team in Mekelle informed the head of security for the Interim Government. An MSF search team was sent from Abi Adi town but was unable to locate their colleagues and had to turn back due to the tense security situation in the area and the evening curfew in place in and around Abi Adi, which prohibited the movement of vehicles.

Later that evening, the GPS coordinates from the car's tracking device were retrieved and, the following day, an MSF search team was able to locate the MSF vehicle and the three MSF colleagues, who had been killed. The killings took place on the main road south of Abi Adi towards Yech'illa, just south of Gerebgiba bridge.

## Main Findings

The information gathered in the course of this internal review allowed MSF to piece together crucial elements of what happened on 24 June 2021. The main findings are as follows:

### **In the weeks leading up to the killings, there was increasing hostility from ENDF and allied forces towards aid workers**

The review clearly found that, in the weeks prior to the incident, not only was the conflict intensifying, but the attitudes of ENDF and Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) personnel were becoming increasingly hostile towards humanitarian workers operating in Tigray region, including in Abi Adi. MSF teams experienced increasing harassment from ENDF and EDF soldiers, including frequent searches, accusations of non-neutrality, physical violence and harassment, including in and around Abi Adi. It also came at a time when the FDRE's public rhetoric towards humanitarian organisations was becoming increasingly aggressive.<sup>2</sup> MSF believes that this contributed to a climate of mistrust towards the few international humanitarian organisations working in Tigray.

### **The killings occurred at a time when the conflict in Tigray was shifting dramatically**

In the days preceding 24 June 2021, the TF was making significant military gains and the ENDF and its allies were retreating from Tigray region.<sup>3</sup> Between 18 and 21 June 2021, there was heavy fighting in Abi Adi and Yech'illa towns and the TF took control

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1 This armed group, the self-proclaimed Tigray Defence Forces, will be referred to as Tigrayan Forces (TF) in this report.

2 During this time, senior representatives in the FDRE made a series of unsubstantiated public accusations against humanitarian organisations, including allegations that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had been smuggling weapons to the TF and hiding TF fighters in their vehicles. For example, on 12 June 2021, a senior FDRE official announced that the government had "credible evidence, indicating that some actors have attempted to smuggle weapons to arm the terrorist cell under the guise of humanitarian assistance". Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Ethiopia, H.E. Demeke Mekonnen's message on undue pressures on Ethiopia regarding the situation in the Tigray Region (12 June 2021), available [here](#).

3 See Katharine Houreld, Giulia Paravicini, and Maggie Fick, 'Analysis: Ethiopia govt withdrawal from Tigray capital opens new chapter in war', Reuters (2 July 2021). Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopia-govt-withdrawal-tigray-capital-opens-new-chapter-war-2021-07-02/>

of Yech'illa on 20 June 2021 and Abi Adi town on 22 June 2021.<sup>4</sup> Following these military losses, ENDF troops retreated from the Abi Adi area. On 21 and 22 June 2021, the MSF team in Abi Adi saw a large contingent of ENDF personnel leave and move out of town in a convoy of hundreds of vehicles carrying soldiers and weaponry, after which there was no further presence of ENDF in the town.

### **The attack was an intentional and targeted killing of three clearly identified humanitarian aid workers**

The review clearly established that the attack on María, Tedros, and Yohannes was an intentional and targeted killing of three clearly identified humanitarian aid workers. The bodies of María, Tedros, and Yohannes were found at distances of 100 to 400 metres from the MSF car, each with multiple gunshot wounds. They were shot at close range, facing the direction of their attackers, and were all found wearing white vests clearly marked with the MSF logo, meaning they were clearly identifiable and recognisable as humanitarian workers and civilians at the time of their deaths. The car in which they were driving was also marked with the MSF logo and flag; it had been shot at multiple times and extensively burned.

### **ENDF was present on the road where the killings took place on the day of the incident**

MSF found a large body of corroborating evidence that placed a convoy of retreating ENDF troops on the road where the killings took place on the day of the incident.

The information gathered in the review indicated that on 24 June 2021, military presence was divided along the road where María, Tedros, and Yohannes were killed. From 23 June 2021, the TF was in control of Abi Adi town and the perimeter. While the TF was likely present in the wider area, MSF could find no evidence that the TF was present on the stretch of road where María, Tedros, and Yohannes were killed.

When the ENDF convoy retreated from Abi Adi on 21 and 22 June 2021, they left in a large slow-moving convoy, comprising hundreds of vehicles. Multiple public sources confirm that the ENDF convoy was ambushed by the TF just north of Yech'illa on 26 June 2021, two days after the killing of the MSF staff and four days after the convoy left Abi Adi. There are no other accessible roads in this area linking Abi Adi to Yech'illa, clearly indicating that between 22 and 26 June 2021 the convoy was present on the road where the MSF team was killed.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, civilian sources with whom MSF spoke at the scene of the incident reported that ENDF soldiers travelling at the end of the convoy had occupied houses next to where the MSF colleagues were found and had not moved south towards Yech'illa until late on 24 June 2021 or early on the morning of 25 June 2021. This information would place ENDF at the precise location where MSF's staff were killed on the day of the attack.

### **Beyond the confirmed presence of the ENDF in the area, what remains to be clarified is the level and nature of their involvement in the attack**

MSF received some concerning witness reports that directly implicated ENDF soldiers in the incident.

4 See Reuters, 'Grim Aftermath of Ethiopian battle offers rare clues of brutal war', 27 July 2021 [updated on 24 August 2021], available at <https://www.reuters.com/story/grim-aftermath-of-ethiopian-battle-offers-rare-clues-of-brutal-war>.

5 Several publicly available sources report the withdrawal of the ENDF convoy and the attack on or around 26 June 2021. See Reuters, 'Grim Aftermath of Ethiopian battle offers rare clues of brutal war', 27 July 2021 [updated on 24 August 2021], available at <https://www.reuters.com/story/grim-aftermath-of-ethiopian-battle-offers-rare-clues-of-brutal-war>. Additional photographs of the ambushed convoy from the Reuters report are available on Twitter, posted on 27 July 2021, <https://twitter.com/giuliaparavicin/status/1420024788987305990?lang=en>. See also Tigray Media House, 20 July, 'Aftermath of a TF ambush on an ENDF convoy ዜና ትግርኛ News | July 2021', available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BbW-jB9tZx-o>. Twitter feed, 27 July 2021, "video showing the Aftermath of Ethiopian Army convoy ambushed by TF is geolocated at southern Tigray, at Yechilay @ 13.30067,38.99713" <https://twitter.com/quen10tarantino/status/1420069100873732096>

Several eyewitnesses separately approached MSF to provide accounts; these included civilian witnesses who had been part of the withdrawing ENDF convoy in different capacities.<sup>6</sup> All of the witnesses proactively approached MSF to present their accounts and were under no pressure to provide a statement.

One witness reported overhearing a conversation on a military radio between an ENDF commander standing near one of the vehicles in the main convoy and a soldier from another ENDF unit – likely to be a spotter team of soldiers stationed at the very end of the convoy (and therefore closest to the location where the three MSF staff were found). The witness overheard the soldier informing the ENDF commander that a white car was approaching. The ENDF commander gave an order to shoot. The next incoming message on the radio from the soldier informed the ENDF commander that the unit had tried to shoot, but the car had turned back towards Abi Adi and stopped, at which point the ENDF commander reportedly gave the order to “go and catch them” and “remove them”.

### **MSF’s search for answers**

Over the past four years, MSF has extensively engaged in bilateral high-level meetings with both the FDRE and the TPLF. MSF held over 20 face-to-face meetings with FDRE officials and sent numerous written communications, repeatedly urging the FDRE to provide a credible account of what happened to our colleagues. A comprehensive overview of MSF’s engagement over the past four years is included at the end of this report in Annex I.

Throughout this four-year engagement, MSF received conflicting information from the FDRE about whether an investigation was underway. After initial reassurances that an impartial, civilian-led inquiry was being conducted by the MoJ, on 11 July 2022, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) orally shared several preliminary conclusions from the FDRE investigation with

MSF, which MSF considered to be insufficient and unsubstantiated. This included the FDRE’s conclusion that the ENDF was not present in the area at the time of the incident and the FDRE’s presumption that the TPLF was responsible. The MFA advised MSF that while the case remained open, the findings could be shared with the bereaved families as the official account, and that no further meetings would be held to discuss the case. However, in June 2023 – following the second anniversary of the killings – MSF was told the case was still under investigation. In support of this process, MSF submitted a full written copy of its internal review, along with supporting materials, to the MoJ on 23 October 2023.

Despite MSF’s repeated follow-up, as of June 2025, there has been no further communication from the MoJ. All indications point to the fact that the promised investigation has stalled. In the absence of receiving the outcomes of a credible investigation after four years, MSF deems it time to publicly release its internal review of the killing of María, Tedros, and Yohannes.

Today, humanitarian workers are being killed in growing numbers while carrying out life-saving work and these attacks continue with impunity. Across the board, States are failing to properly investigate incidents or hold perpetrators to account for gross violations of international law. MSF hopes that by pursuing the truth of what happened to our colleagues in Tigray, we can contribute to building a safer environment for humanitarians – not only in Ethiopia, but in conflict zones around the world.

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6 To protect the identity and security of the witnesses, this review does not disclose the details of the circumstances in which these individuals were travelling with the ENDF convoy that day. MSF can confirm, however, that all of the witnesses interviewed for this review approached MSF voluntarily and were under no pressure to speak, and that none of the sources were detained by the TF or any other group at the time of providing their accounts.