

Tigray: one year of conflict

Casualties of the armed conflict, 2020-2021 – Tigray (Ethiopia)

Ethiopia: Civilian casualties increase in Tigray Crisis

Fresh airstrikes hit capital of Ethiopia's war-torn Tigray region

Tigray: the devastating toll of Ethiopia's vicious year of war – podcast

One year of war in Tigray: blockade, famine and counter-offensive

Tigray Forces Deny Reports of Mass Killings in Amhara

Pasha 130: The Ethiopia and Tigray conflict is worsening hunger in the region

November 4, 2021 12:10pm GMT

Former Tigray interim Government Top Official says Genocide 'Undoubtedly' committed on Tigrayans

October 27, 2021

Ethiopia: Investigation reveals evidence that scores of civilians were killed in massacre in Tigray state

Ethiopia: Eritrea troops killed 110 civilians in Tigray massacre

21 MAY 2021

Colophon

Date: 26 November 2021

Authors: Tim Vanden Bempt¹, Sofie Annys¹, Emnet Negash^{1,2}, Robin Ghekiere¹, Jan Nyssen¹

¹ *Department of Geography, Ghent University, Belgium*

² *Institute of Climate and Society, Mekelle University, Tigray, Ethiopia*

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ONLINE DATABASE OF INCIDENTS AND VICTIMS

This document serves as an explanatory note to the online database of massacres and civilian victims of the Tigray war: www.ethiopatigraywar.com



1. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of November 2020, one year ago, an armed conflict emerged in Tigray, Ethiopia's northernmost region, in the aftermath of a destructive locust plague and in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In the conflict, the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) and its allies – formal and informal military factions of the adjacent Amhara region, the Eritrean Defence Force – oppose the troops of the ousted Tigray Regional Government (further referred to as “TDF” for “Tigray Defence Force”), led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The TPLF is the political party formerly leading the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition. In an official communiqué on 29 November 2020, the Government of Ethiopia stated that the military operation in Tigray was completed, and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed appointed an “Interim Government of Tigray”. However, as from that moment, the armed conflict has continued at large scale for more than a year now, with the TDF capturing Mekelle on 28 June 2021 and setting up a counter-offensive.

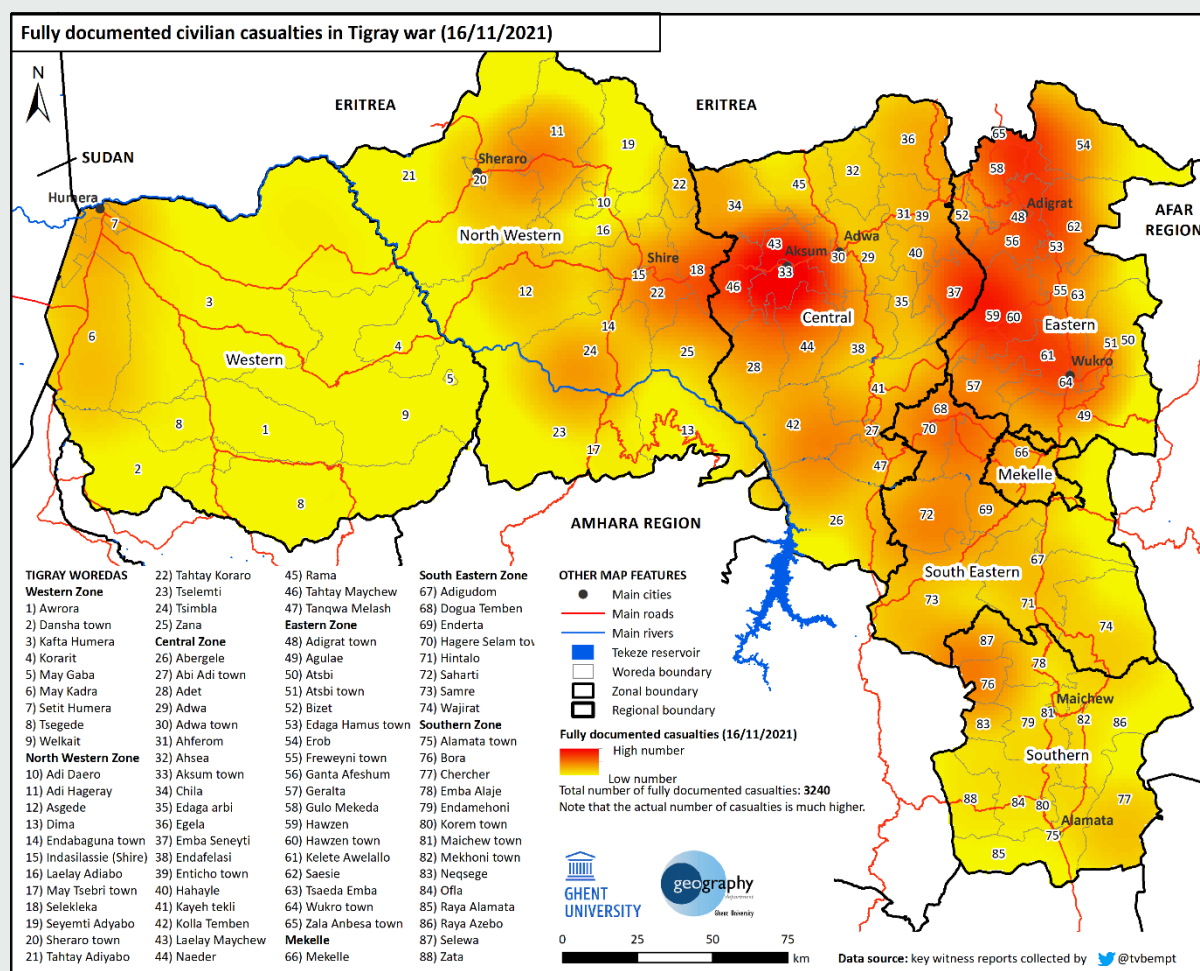
Reports systematically document massacres, widespread sexual violence, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, mass looting etc. As communication lines have largely been non-operational since November 2020, the existing reports likely only cover a minor part of the incidents, and the full scale of destruction has yet to become clear. In the conflict, the Government of Ethiopia, led by PM Abiy Ahmed, has for months denied the presence of Eritrean soldiers in the Tigray Region. On 28 June 2021, the Government of Ethiopia unilaterally declared ceasefire and withdrew most of its troops from Tigray. It is generally considered as a cover-up for a military defeat. The ceasefire stated to last until the end of the farming season (i.e., end of September) and intended to facilitate agricultural production and aid distribution, while allowing “rebel fighters to return to a peaceful road”. The ceasefire was unilateral as the Tigray government posed strict conditions; conditions to which the Amhara Region did not agree as they did not want to withdraw their forces from Western Tigray and parts of Southern Tigray. As communication lines have been fully blocked again, information on events and evolutions occurring after June 28 only surfaces slowly. An important confirmed event is that several bridges near the Tekeze river were damaged, which hinders the humanitarian response. Full war started again in September 2021.

The Ethiopian Government is denying access to humanitarian actors, worsening the man-made famine conditions, the current situation is considered a siege rather than a ceasefire by many. The conflict has moved beyond the borders of Tigray resulting in more reported incidents that have affected Tigrayan citizens as well citizens from the neighboring Amhara and Afar Regions. As a result of the conflict, many Tigrayans are in dire need of humanitarian aid, food as well as medical supplies and health care services. Up to June 2021, and despite the official line of the Government of Ethiopia, ‘formal’ humanitarian aid did not reach many of the people who needed it most, due to restricted accessibility. Starting from July 2021, the blockade of the entire Tigray Region and other areas controlled by TDF is nearly total, leading to the worst famine since a decade, worldwide. Full details are provided in our parallel [“Tigray: Atlas of the Humanitarian Situation”](#).

The aim in this work is to document and map as much information as possible about civilian casualties, more particularly those killed by military forces and warfare. With communication lines blocked, we document pieces of a bigger puzzle, yet to be fully reconstructed. By providing spatially explicit information, we hope to transfer useful information to human rights organisations and other humanitarian and development actors. This document also serves as an explanatory note to the online database of massacres and civilian victims of the Tigray war (www.ethiopiaticigraywar.com).

2. FULLY DOCUMENTED CASUALTIES

Whereas Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in his “victory speech” for the federal parliament on 30 November 2020 claimed that not a single civilian had been killed, the names of civilians who lost their lives because of warfare have slowly surfaced. The communication blackout and lockdown of the region make it very hard to get verified information, so the actual number of deaths is likely much higher than the sample that we have collected so far. Through Tim Vanden Bempt (@tvbempt on Twitter), we have collected a list of verified identities of civilian victims in the Tigray war. This list is populated from a mix of sources, ranging from social media posts, media reports, advocacy groups listings (for instance Irob Advocacy) and direct reports (as posted for instance on www.tghat.com).



Map 1: Heatmap of the fully documented civilian casualties in the Tigray War on 16 November 2021 (Source: Verified social media posts, media reports, advocacy groups listings and direct reports)

The social media posts are mostly from family members and friends who mourn the death of their loved ones, which they learnt about by telephone. For each victim, through our network, we have tried to contact one relative or friend to learn more about the circumstances in which the victim died. For this verification, some families also have provided a photo of the deceased person. It is noted, however, that there are many families who, for various reasons, do not report the loss of relatives, which limits our sample of fully documented casualties. Additionally, there may be casualties in very remote areas and/or victims may not be locals of the area, which makes it difficult to fully document

these deaths. Several reported casualties and massacres hence may not be well represented in our fully documented casualties list. Examples are the Hitsats (west of Shire), Debre Abbay (SSW of Shire), and Axum massacres.

Given this limitation, we represent the spatial distribution of civilian casualties in the form of a heatmap (instead of in absolute numbers), in which the varying colors visualize the intensity or magnitude and geographical distribution of casualties (Map 1). While no numbers exist for the total amount of civilian casualties, well-documented cases of **3240** deaths (by 16 November 2021) indicate that 8% of the dead are women, and 92% are men (Fig. 1). This is in line with an often-stated intention to “eradicate Tigray fighters, as well as the future generation of fighters”. Among the men, a small number of victims are priests and deacons, traditionally people with authority in the community. Casualties are dominantly (30%) victims of massacres, killing sprees, pointblank executions, in house searches, rounding up of civilians, or killings after arrests - including journalist Dawit Kebede - (classified under ‘Execution’ in Fig. 1).

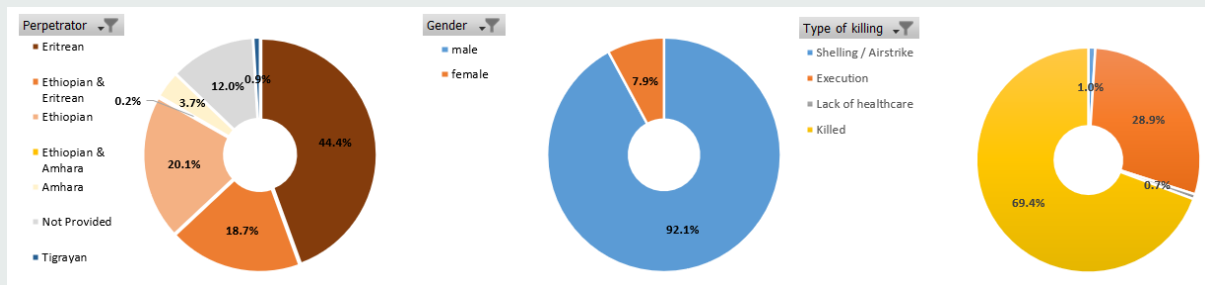


Fig. 1: Graphic representation of fully documented civilian casualties, by November 2021

Though impressive in video footage, only 1% of the known victims was killed during shelling and airstrikes, such as the one targeting the Togoga market (Central Zone) on 22 June 2021. People who died of hunger or due to the total collapse of the healthcare system are generally not reported and make up less than 1% of the fully documented victims. However, the number of people who died of hunger is expected to be in the ten thousands, as [353,000 people were reported to experience famine conditions in early June](#).

Among the victims, nearly all age groups are represented (Fig. 2), although there are deviations from the population pyramid. In our sample, fortunately, only 9% of the victims was under the age of 20 years, whereas this age group comprises approximately 50% of the Ethiopian population. Children are not frequently targeted, whereas many youngsters may have fled to safer areas in fear of reprisals or may have joined the TDF fighters and hence cannot be considered civilian victims in case they die. The most frequently targeted age group is the group between 20 and 29 years old (23%), followed by the group between 30 and 39 years old (20%).

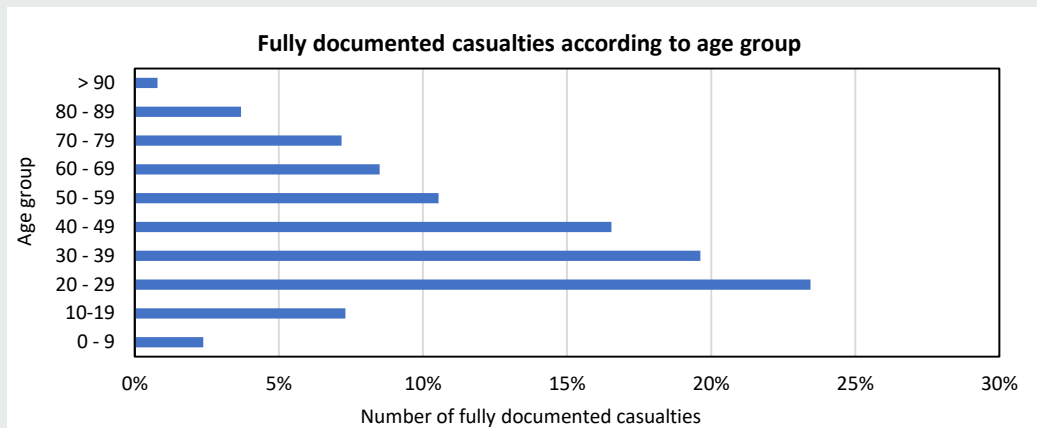
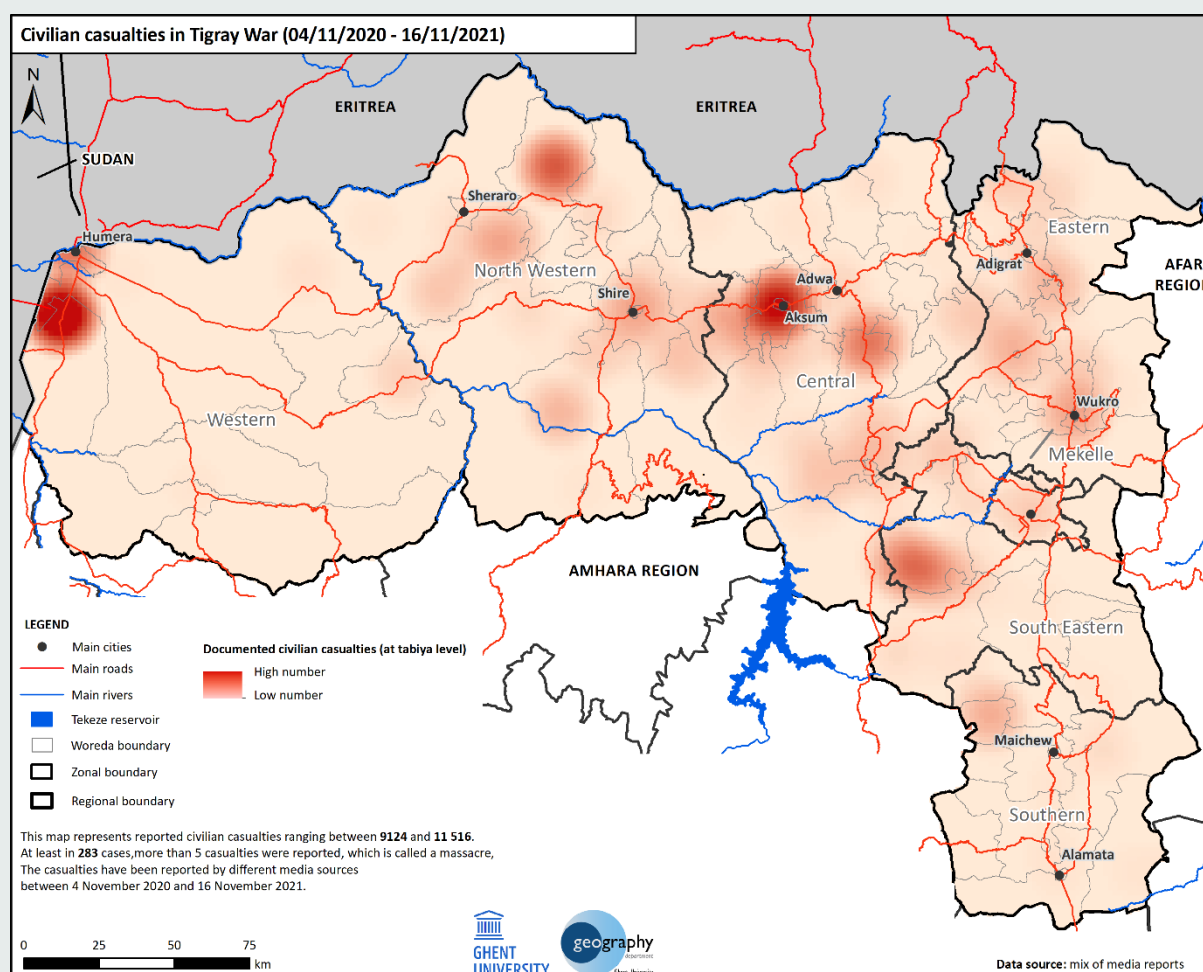


Fig. 2: Age distribution of the fully documented casualties, by November 2021.

In addition to the 3240 fully documented civilian casualties, at least 23 humanitarian aid workers also have been killed in the Tigray conflict. Among the 23 victims are three employees of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), who were killed in late June, a few days before the unilateral declaration of ceasefire, and 11 staff of the Relief Society of Tigray, highlighting the difficult and dangerous working conditions for humanitarians.

3. REPORTED CASUALTIES

In addition to the map on ‘fully documented civilian casualties’, the reported civilian victims are presented in Map 2; a total ranging between **9124** and **11516**, as derived from **886** (social) media reports, reports of different NGOs and humanitarian actors and press releases. These are other reports than the fully documented casualties, as mentioned earlier. As a lack of means of transportation and the communication blockage make reporting very difficult, the number of verifiable sources in the region is minimal, the number of casualties is most likely an extreme underrepresentation. For several events, different reports also hold a varying number of casualties.



Map 2: Heatmap of civilian casualties in the Tigray War up to 16 November 2021 (Source: Social media posts, media reports, advocacy groups listings and direct reports.)

Fig. 3 holds information on the timing of the reported killings, which are also mapped in ANNEX A

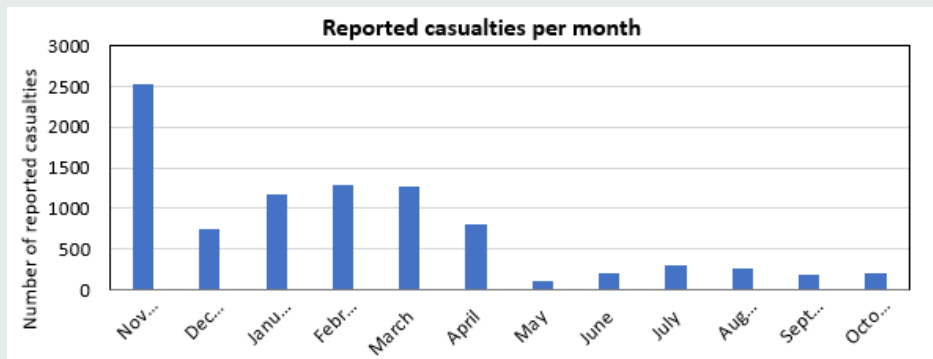


Fig. 3 Number of reported casualties between November 2020 and October 2021

4. INFORMATION ABOUT TYPE OF VICTIMS

An important remark is that these maps of civilian victims do not include deaths by starvation or lack of medical care. At this stage, this is still a totally under-documented aspect of the war.

In ANNEX A, as well as in Fig. 3, information on the timing of the reported killings can be found. As information often only becomes available some weeks or even months after the occurrence of a conflict incident, the presented number of casualties is not final and will be updated retroactively.

5. MASSACRES

5.1 Database of massacres

From the reported casualties, we have compiled a list of massacres. A massacre has been defined as ‘an incident in which at least 5 civilians were killed on the same day at the same location’. This definition comes from historical studies of massacres, including those committed during the Armenian genocide. Massacres were compiled through time and are online available. In the list, the largest massacres recorded are those in [Aksum](#) in December 2020 (around 800 casualties) and in [May Kadra](#) in November 2020 (around 600 casualties). Our summary on May Kadra mentions the multiple narratives of this massacre, as well as the sometimes conflicting media reports.

In Tigray’s holy city of Aksum, on 28 and 29 November 2020, Eritrean soldiers shot civilians on the street and carried out house-to-house searches, executing men and boys. This was carried out in retaliation for an earlier attack by a small number of local militiamen, joined by local residents armed with sticks and stones. For weeks there were rumours about a massacre in Aksum where Eritrean soldiers tried to attack Church of St. Mary of Zion, but none of the reports could be verified because communication was switched off and journalists were not permitted to enter Tigray. From 28 of November until the day after, Eritrean soldiers shot civilians on the streets and went house to house in search for fighters. In Aksum hospital there are also reports that patients were shot inside their beds.

Details of all massacres can be consulted in the online database: www.ethiopiaticraywar.com

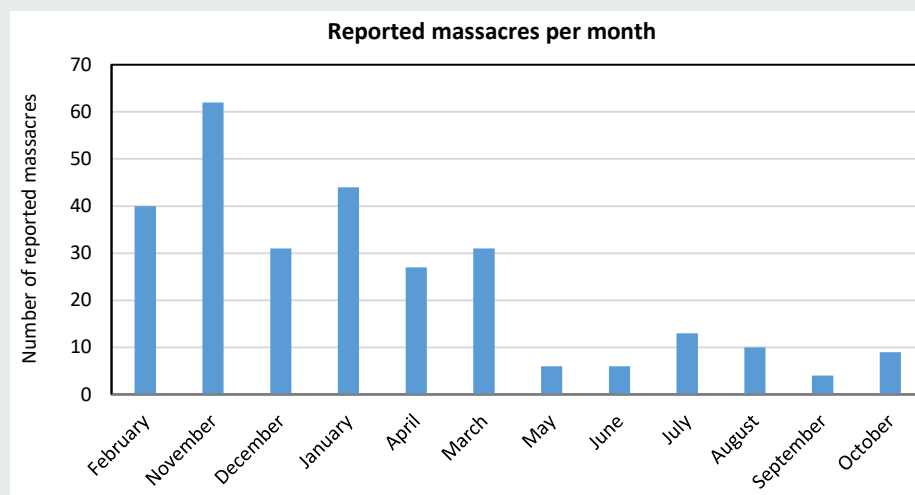


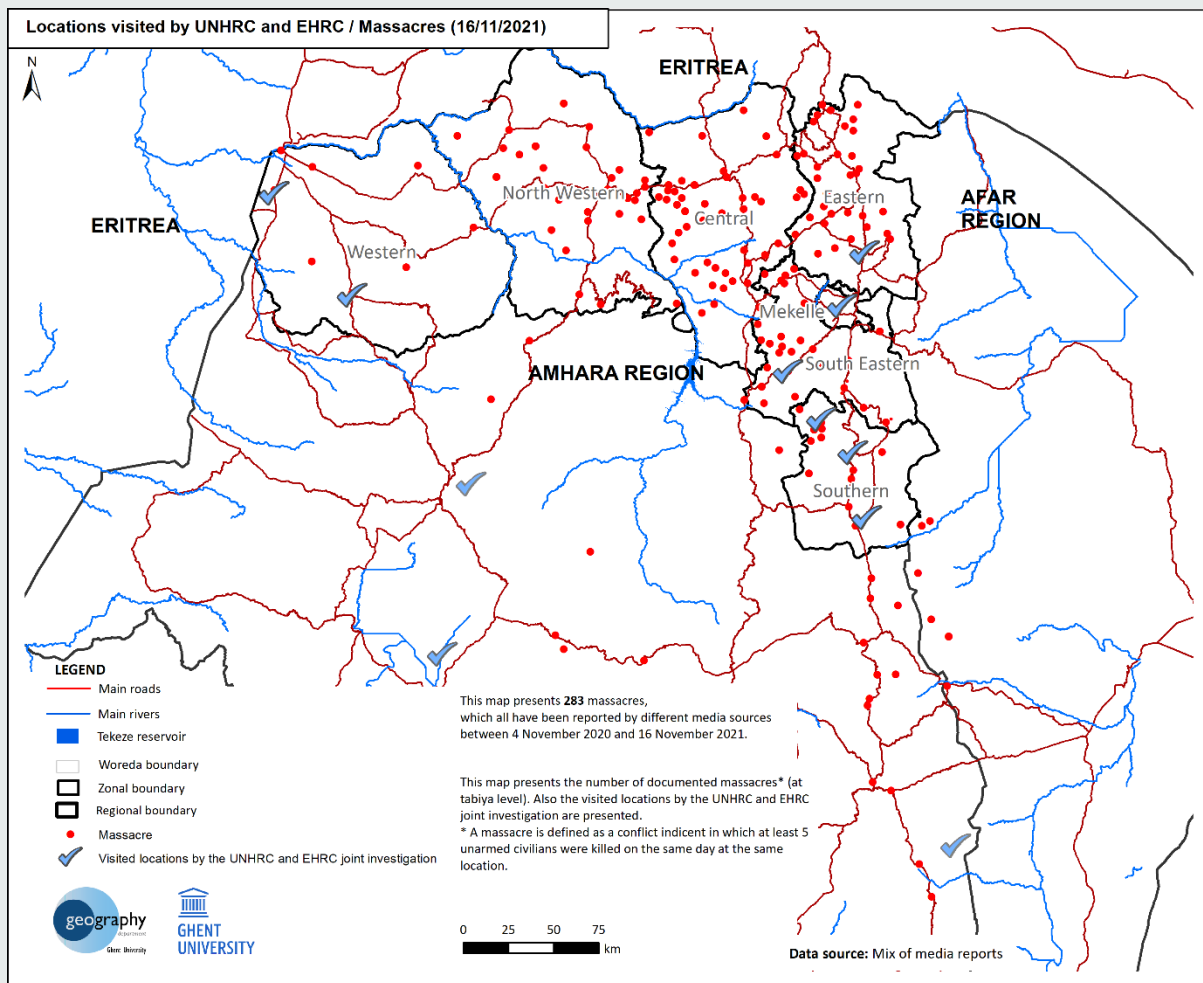
Fig. 4 Number of reported massacres between November 2020 and November 2021

5.2 Our findings contrasted to those of the EHRC- OHCHR joint investigation

A joint investigation on massacres in the Tigray war has been set up by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). The Joint Investigation Team (JIT) presented its [findings](#) on 3 November 2021. In a preliminary analysis of this report in [Bistandsaktuelt](#) (See: [English translation](#)), we particularly noted that we have mapped allegations of 260 massacres committed during the Tigray War. Many of which also have been thoroughly documented by the international press. It is then startling that the team behind this investigation has only visited nine of the places where massacres allegedly took place. The

widespread massacre in Tigray’s holy city of [Aksum](#) (around 800 people killed by Eritrean soldiers) – which has been [thoroughly documented by a number of media](#) and independent sources – was not investigated on the spot. Other major massacres have also not been investigated by the team, such as the well-documented massacres in [Mahbere Deگو \(73 killed\)](#), [Togogwa](#) (64 killed in airstrikes) and [Debre Abbay](#) (200 killed). Common to the last three is that Ethiopian forces are claimed to be behind it.

Map 3 contrasts the places the JIT has visited to localities where massacres have been reported, and ANNEX B contrasts massacre reporting by the JIT with the massacre inventory by our team.



Map 3: Occurrence of massacres in the Tigray War up to 26 November 2021, with sites visited by the joint EHRC-OHCHR investigation (Source: Social media posts, media reports, advocacy groups listings and direct reports.)

We further reached out to a lawyer, specialised in human rights, who summarised the report as follows:

1. The positive points:
 - a. The report is well drafted according to UN standards and is similar to the way UN Commission in Inquiry reports are drafted (including chapters and language).
 - b. The legal analysis seems almost flawless. Very much based on similar legal analysis in earlier reports.

2. Objective difficulties
 - a. The Commission had no experience investigating before mid-2020. Even after mid-2020 the Commission conducted a few investigations and the reports are not up to standards. Hard to ask from the Commission to produce a global standard investigation and report.
 - b. The JIT had only a few months to investigate and had for the most no access to Tigray.

3. The most critical comments are:
 - a. The investigation/report falls short in quality and quantity thus shaking the foundations of factual assessments, conclusions and recommendations. The report is a series of short anecdotal stories with often not the most serious incidents described and lacking sufficient level of detail in terms of time, place, persons, numbers etc. It is a serious question whether this report should have been published in the current shape and form. In case a mechanism will be established it has served its purpose and we can start new and forget this report. In case nothing happens, it may have served as a whitewash;
 - b. There are various shortcomings in the quality of the investigation although we cannot assess everything: severe under-collection, poor interview techniques, lack of diversity of types of information/evidence, lack of factual details, flawed recording and processing of information, lack of critical source analysis, inconsistent application of standard of proof, huge gaps in analysis of national law;
 - c. The biggest problem with the report is the quantitative flaws leading to a total misrepresentation of the totality of violations, abuses and crimes and attribution. There has been no attempt to give an overall picture. Insufficient transparency how witnesses and crime locations were [not] chosen. Factual assessments seem too anecdotal and lose meaning. Again, the report has the potential to be a whitewash for especially government-led crimes.
 - d. A compulsion to be balanced, confusing it with evenness, resulting in being unbalanced in terms of selection of incidents and thematic violations/crimes investigated. The JIT seems to have fallen prey to 'bothsideism' ignoring the correct attribution.
 - e. Insufficient attention for role of the government and military commanders and civil leaders including Governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea leading to a lack of command and superior responsibility.
 - f. Recommendations lack referral to the International Criminal Court.

Other researchers have also questioned the [independence and impartiality of](#) the report. The [AP news agency cited](#) anonymous sources at the Ethiopian commission who claimed that the Ethiopian commission leader had tried to downplay the Amharas' guilt in the abuses, while the Tigrayan side was to be highlighted as perpetrators.

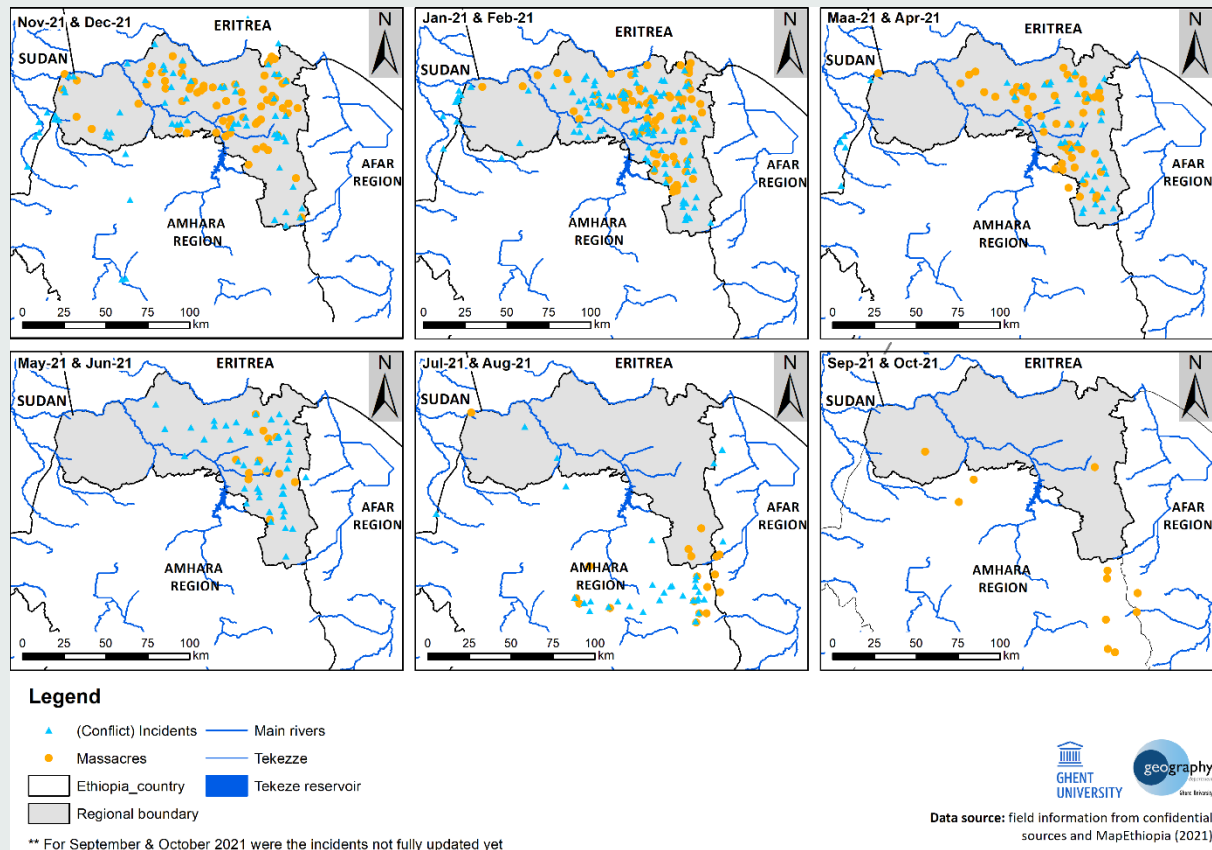
Finally, we note that, given the lack of transparency and fairness of Ethiopia's legal system, [UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet supports creation of an international investigative body](#) for Ethiopia along the lines of those already working on war crimes and atrocities in Syria and Myanmar.

5.3 Contrasting place and time of massacres and conflict incidents

In the first twelve months of the Tigray War, many conflict incidents have been reported. These include battles, ambushes, air strikes, drone attacks and shelling. Map 4 contrasts the locations where conflict incidents were reported (based on confidential sources & MapEthiopia) with the locations where massacres occurred, using a two-months time step. A drawback in our data collection is that,

despite the prevalence of peace in most of Tigray since July 2021, no further information on earlier massacres could emerge due to the blockade of internal and external communication lines.

In the first six months of the war, the spatial distribution of massacres fits quite well with that of conflict incidents.



Map 4: Occurrence of massacres & conflict incidents in the Tigray and Amhara Regions in Ethiopia. Source of conflict incidents: Field information from confidential sources and MapEthiopia (2021).

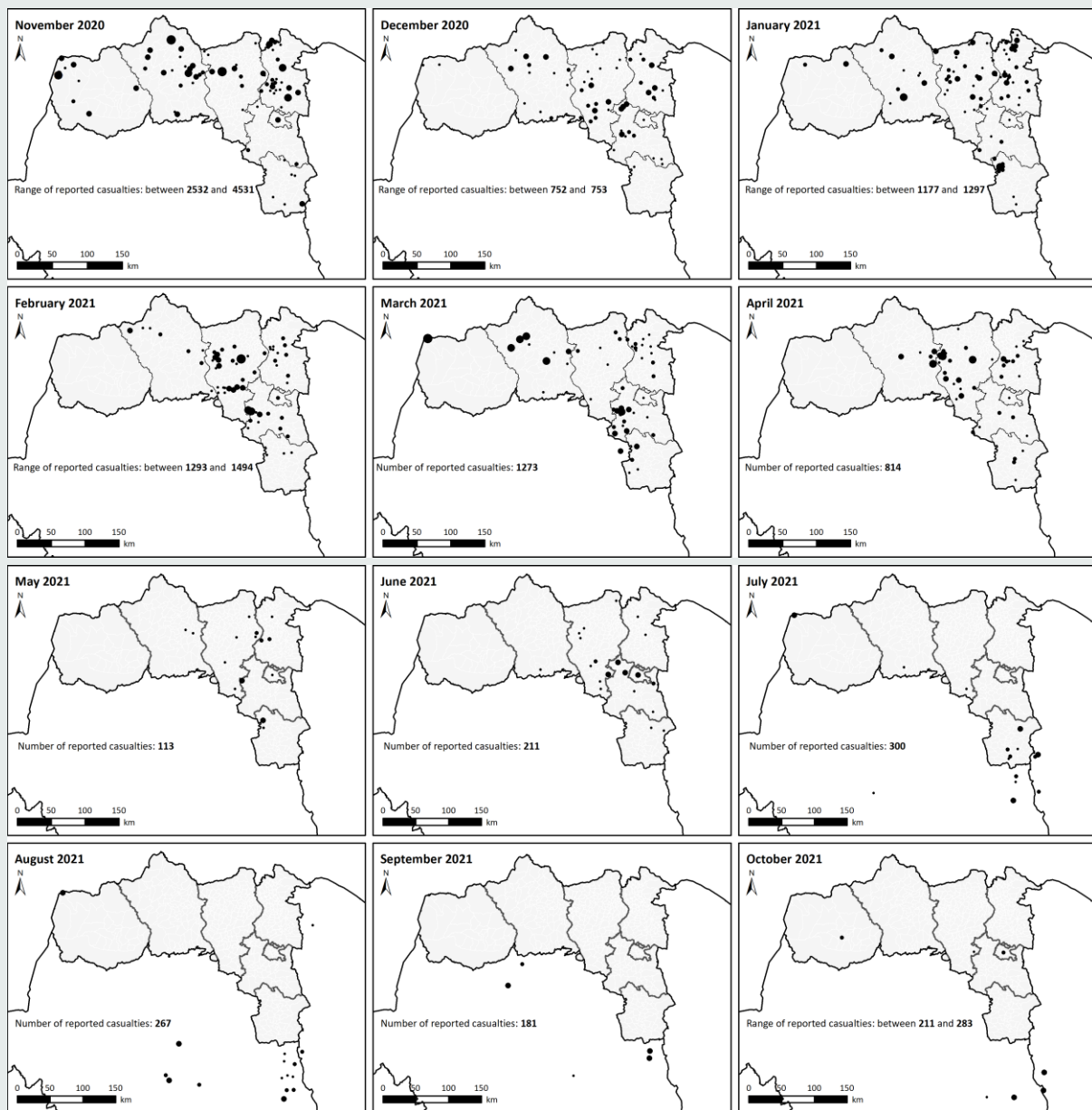
The decrease in the number of massacres starting from May-June is noticeable. It might be an artefact in the sense that communication lines in the central part of Tigray had been shut down again in May. Also, in these months, many fights were also more “distant” with shelling and airstrikes instead of direct combats. The fights were larger, with faster movements of the different armed forces. This could explain an underrepresentation of the number of massacres. Possibly, also, ENDF and EDF soldiers feeling defeat coming, might have been afraid of still involving in massacres, with a risk of being recognized after capture as prisoners of war.

Throughout the one year of Tigray war, Western Tigray, and particularly Humera remained a hotspot of massacres, unrelated to conflict incidents. Here, numerous killings of Tigrayans took place, as part of an intense ethnic cleansing campaign.

From July onwards, the armed conflict moved south, towards the Amhara Region (and potentially to Addis Ababa and Gondar), and southeast towards the Afar Region, potentially towards the Ethiopia-Djibouti road. The collection of information about fighting and massacres in the Amhara and Afar

Regions is complicated, because primary sources here are almost exclusively activists and government aligned media, such as ESAT and AMMA. More than two-thirds of the reports on shelling and massacres by TDF in the Amhara Region come from these media channels. Another source are Tigray-aligned media, especially when it comes to shelling of civilian areas in the Amhara Region by the ENDF. All this renders the verification of information on civilian casualties more complex, starting from August. For this period, we hardly have any reports coming from civilians mourning their direct relatives.

ANNEX A – Overview of reported civilian casualties at monthly time step (November 2020 – November 2021)



Incidents with civilian casualties – size of the symbol shows number of reported deadly civilian casualties per month and per *tabiya* (sub-district): from 1-4 (smallest symbol), over 5-19, 20-99, 100-249, to 250 and more (largest symbol)

ANNEX B – Contrasts between the massacre inventories by our team ([Tigray Atlas](#) & [EthiopiaTigrayWar.com](#) database) and by the joint investigation of EHRC and OHCHR

Incident	Atlas & online database	N° in online database	Joint investigation	Paragraph N°
<i>Adi Awsa/Awso massacre</i>	Massacre by EDF on 8/2/2021 with 5 civilian deaths	8	Short mention of “unlawful killings and extra-judicial executions attributable to the ENDF and EDF” (no dates)	120
<i>Adi Gibay massacre</i>	Not mentioned	N/A	Short mention of “unlawful killings and extra-judicial executions attributable to the ENDF and EDF” (no dates)	120
<i>Adi Hausen massacre</i>	Not mentioned	N/A	Short mention of “unlawful killings and extra-judicial executions attributable to the ENDF and EDF” (no dates)	120
<i>Adigrat massacres</i>	Massacres by EDF on 19-28 November and 6 December 2020 with approx. 50 civilian deaths; ENDF participated in one event	24, 29, 30, 36, 415	Short mention of “unlawful killings and extra-judicial executions attributable to the ENDF and EDF” (no dates)	120
<i>Adwa massacres</i>	Massacres by EDF on 20 November 2020, 11-14 February and 12 April 2021, with a total of 67 civilian deaths	235, 253, 254, 255, 377	Short mention of “unlawful killings and extra-judicial executions attributable to the ENDF and EDF” (no dates)	120
<i>Aksum massacre</i>	Massacres by EDF on 28-29 November 2021 with estimated 800 civilian deaths	165	Members of the EDF killed more than 100 civilians; ENDF was present but did not intervene	116, 117
<i>Berezba massacre</i>	Massacre by ENDF and EDF mentioned for 5 March 2021 with 46 civilian deaths	440	Short mention of “unlawful killings and extra-judicial executions attributable to the ENDF and EDF” (no dates)	120
<i>Bora Amdwha shelling</i>	Shelling by ENDF and EDF mentioned for 20 May 2021 with 22 civilian deaths	658	Shelling and airstrikes from December to May with >10 civilian deaths	97
<i>Bora shelling and massacre</i>	House-to-house killing by ENDF soldiers on 8-10 January 2021 with 170 civilian deaths	166, 354, 760, 805, 869 and 880	Members of the ENDF killed at least 70 civilian men	118, 119
<i>Dengolat, centre of tabiya Amdi Woyane</i>	Massacres by ENDF and EDF mentioned for 14 December 2020, 8 February and 9 April 2021 with 18 civilian deaths in total	8, 437 and 556	Short mention of “unlawful killings and extra-judicial executions attributable to the ENDF and EDF” (no dates)	120
<i>Gijet massacres</i>	Massacres by ENDF and EDF mentioned for 30 December 2020, 22-25 February and 14 March 2021 with estimated total civilian deaths: 336; more than 500 houses destroyed	138, 139, 297	Short mention of “unlawful killings and extra-judicial executions attributable to the ENDF and EDF” (no dates)	120
<i>Grizana massacre</i>	Massacre by EDF mentioned for 24 March 2021, with 11 civilians killed	324	Short mention of “unlawful killings and extra-judicial executions attributable to the ENDF and EDF” (no dates)	120

Incident	Atlas & online database	N° in online database	Joint investigation	Paragraph N°
<i>Humera shelling</i>	Shelling and massacres by ENDF and EDF mentioned for 9-11 November 2020, with estimated total civilian deaths: 46	193	15 deadly victims due to shelling by ENDF and TSF	94
<i>Humera massacres</i>	Massacres by Amhara militia, ENDF and EDF mentioned for 1-3 March, 16-19 and 25 July, 4-8 August 2021 with estimated total civilian deaths: 398	316, 680, 694, 757	Short mention of “unlawful killings and extra-judicial executions attributable to the ENDF and EDF” (no dates)	120
<i>May Kadra first killings</i>	Not mentioned; data now taken over from the joint investigation report	N/A; 868	17 civilians died by a TSF attack on a farm	98
<i>May Kadra massacre</i>	Massacres by TPLF and/or ENDF and Amhara militia mentioned for 9-10 November with estimated total civilian deaths: 660	880	More than 200 Amhara farm workers killed by Tigrayan youths; at least 5 revenge killings of Tigrayans by Amhara militia	113-115
<i>Mekelle shelling</i>	Shelling by ENDF killed 29 civilians on 28 November 2020	29	15 civilian facilities targeted by ENDF and 29 civilian deaths, 34 injured; no military targets in the surroundings	91,92
<i>Saharti December shelling</i>	Shelling and massacres by ENDF and EDF mentioned for 30 December 2020 with 33 civilian deaths	138, 508	Civilians were killed and injured because of shelling by ENDF and EDF.	96
<i>Saharti March shelling</i>	Shelling and massacres by ENDF and EDF mentioned for 8-14 March 2021 with estimated total 240 civilian deaths	284, 292, 297, 311, 343, 691, 806	Civilians were killed and injured because of shelling by ENDF and EDF.	96
<i>Wukro shelling</i>	Shelling and massacres by ENDF and EDF mentioned for 16-21 and 25-29 November 2020, with estimated total of 241 civilian deaths	199, 257, 258, 403	Multiple civilian deaths due to shelling on 25-27 November 2020; JIT was not able to attribute responsibility to TSF or ENDF	93
<i>Wukro massacres</i>	Massacres by ENDF and EDF mentioned for 30 December 2020, 10 February, 14 March 2021 with estimated total civilian deaths: 48	233, 259, 402	Short mention of “unlawful killings and extra-judicial executions attributable to the ENDF and EDF” (no dates)	120
<i>Endafelasi massacres</i>	Massacres by ENDF and EDF mentioned for 24-27 February 2021 with estimated 260 civilian deaths	600	Not mentioned in the JIT report	N/A
<i>Adi Hageray</i>	Massacres by ENDF and EDF mentioned for 12-18 November 2021 with estimated 200 civilian deaths	200	Not mentioned in the JIT report	N/A
<i>May Harmaz, Debre Abay</i>	Massacres by ENDF mentioned for 5-6 January 2021 with estimated 200 civilian deaths	108	Not mentioned in the JIT report	N/A
<i>Shire</i>	Massacres by ENDF and EDF mentioned for 17 November 2020 with estimated 200 civilian deaths	201	Not mentioned in the JIT report	N/A
<i>Cheli massacres</i>	Massacres by EDF mentioned for 15 February 2021 with estimated 180 civilian deaths	263	Not mentioned in the JIT report	N/A
<i>Others</i>	More than 200 other massacres		Not mentioned in the JIT report	N/A