# U.N. Officials Downplayed Sexual Violence in Ethiopia in Leaked Call

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For months earlier this year, the U.N. secretary-general and other top U.N. officials were raising concerns about widespread reports of sexual violence in Ethiopia’s Tigray region. But members of the United Nations’ team on the ground minimized such accounts during a call in March, contending they lacked sufficient evidence to support all claims and suggesting any U.N. report into sexual violence in the conflict would have to be approved and cleared by the Ethiopian government.

During an internal call among United Nations representatives in Ethiopia in March, several U.N. officials downplayed some instances of reports of rape as sensationalized “media hype” during discussions on how to reduce the risk of sexual violence for women and girls in Tigray. A recording and transcript of the call was first released by [Omna Tigray](https://omnatigray.org/omna-tigray-leaked-audio-recording-of-tigray-meeting-on-weaponized-sgbv-held-by-the-ethiopian-country-offices-of-various-un-agencies/%22%20%5Ct%20%22), a website focused on the Tigray conflict, earlier this month. *Foreign Policy* independently confirmed the authenticity of the transcript with four people familiar with the matter.

“The supposed escalating cases of sexual violence and rape being perpetrated against women and girls and, in some instances, also media hype—I would call it—around rape being used as a weapon of war, which we know sometimes is true, sometimes it’s not true,” said one voice identified as Letty Chiwara, the U.N. Women representative to Ethiopia and the African Union. “You take it with a pinch of salt, but there is always some element of truth sometimes in the things that we read out of [the] media.”

Pramila Patten, the U.N. special representative on sexual violence in conflict and undersecretary-general of the United Nations, was not on the call but dismissed assertions that, even at that time, reports of sexual violence may have been sensationalized or amounted to media hype.

“On the contrary, testimonies from survivors, taking enormous risks to report, including refugees in Sudan, and reports from health officials pointed to disturbing widespread patterns of sexual violence in Tigray,” she said in a written statement to *Foreign Policy*.

Chiwara, in a phone interview with *Foreign Policy* on Thursday, stressed her team’s intent was never to question whether sexual violence was occurring in Tigray but rather highlight how difficult it was to track the precise cases of rape or sexual violence. She said the purpose of the call was to coordinate U.N. messaging on the matter and help plan how to best provide support for survivors.

“We as U.N. women do believe and are aware that there are cases of violence against women in Tigray, but what we don’t know is exact numbers and by whom,” she said. “But we are not disputing the fact that there is violence against women and girls in Tigray. That is the message I was trying to send.”

She also voiced regret that the leaked call could distract from the United Nations’ work to help survivors of sexual violence in the Tigray conflict. “I feel a bit sad that there is so much talk about this one conversation we had, because now we have so many bigger issues on the ground,” she said. “I think we need to focus more on what’s happening now on the ground.”

Even months after the call, however, its impacts are still reverberating within the United Nations and human rights community as other U.N. officials and outside experts question the views voiced in the call and impacts on independent U.N. investigations into the conflict.

During the call in March, some participants also suggested U.N. Commission on Human Rights investigators would have to clear their report’s findings with the Ethiopian government, a key party in the conflict whose military and allied militias were among those accused of perpetrating atrocities against civilians in Tigray.

“Yes, these things are happening on the ground, but we are working on anecdotal evidence. I don’t think we have credible data to actually give … to say that ‘we know that so many women have been raped in this context’ and what have you. Because so far, we don’t have [that data] until OHCHR goes on the ground and produces their report,” Chiwara said, according to the transcript, referring to the acronym for the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

“Which of course will need to be presented to [the] government and verified and approved and cleared before we can even refer to it. You know the whole procedure and the sensitivity with the government,” she added. This is an assertion other U.N. officials have since disputed.

The call between U.N. representatives in Ethiopia took place just after the OHCHR [announced](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26949&LangID=E) it would launch a probe into allegations of human rights violations carried out by parties involved in the Tigray conflict, in partnership with the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. It came weeks after U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [assessed](https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/10/politics/blinken-tigray-ethnic-cleansing/index.html) that acts of “ethnic cleansing” were committed in western Tigray.

Several outside human rights advocates and other officials in the United Nations, some of whom spoke to *Foreign Policy* on condition of anonymity, said regardless of the context, U.N. officials should not downplay reports of sexual violence nor seek approval on what they report on the matter from a party in the conflict.

“There was this narrative of media sensationalization being used as an excuse to put a question mark on doing the work of documenting atrocities,” said Akshaya Kumar, director of crisis advocacy at Human Rights Watch. “It’s really important to document with rigor any allegations of human rights violations, but it’s also incredibly important to hold all perpetrators to account, including governments involved in the conflict.”

The views in the call come against the backdrop of a long-standing pattern by U.N. country teams acquiescing to host governments during conflicts or humanitarian crises to maintain smooth working relationships, according to several human rights experts. U.N. teams in Sri Lanka and [Myanmar](https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/16/for-years-u-n-was-warned-of-threat-to-rohingya-in-myanmar/) have been accused of dismissing or minimizing government atrocities to balance relations with top government officials.

The United Nations’ top development agency also came under scrutiny after distributing a confidential memo in March on the causes of the conflict, which echoed Ethiopian government talking points and urged foreign countries to focus more on humanitarian goals than reprimanding the Ethiopian government for its offensive in Tigray. The memo was first reported by [*Foreign Policy*](https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/09/ethiopia-tigray-conflict-united-nations-undp-memo-atrocities-ethnic-cleansing-allegations/).

The U.N. Ethiopia Country Team call also stands in stark contrast to what other senior U.N. officials said around that time about the conflict in Tigray, which fueled a widespread humanitarian crisis and prolonged fighting between the Ethiopian government, forces from neighboring Eritrea, and opposing forces from the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF).

“Women and girls are being subjected to sexual violence with a [level of cruelty](https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/remarks-srsg-pramila-patten-georgetown-university-virtual-event-crisis-tigray-women) beyond comprehension,” Patten said in a speech in April. “Health care workers are documenting new cases of rape and gang rape daily, despite their fear of reprisals and attacks on the limited shelters and clinics still in operation.”

Other call participants appeared to push back on assertions from some members of the call, according to the transcript. “I think it is odd that the procedure is that we do not accept reports as credible unless the investigation is verified by governments or done in partnership with governments,” said a voice identified as Kwesi Sansculotte-Greenidge, a peace advisor with the U.N. mission in Ethiopia. Sansculotte-Greenidge pointed out that the United Nations conducted its own investigations into sexual violence in Darfur, Bosnia, and Sri Lanka that were then submitted to the governments in question.

“Whether they accept it or not is a different thing because they’re a conflict [to the] party,” he said, according to the transcript.

Rupert Colville, the OHCHR spokesperson, told *Foreign Policy* in a statement that advance copies of draft U.N. reports are shared with relevant governments in advance to review for factual details only. “If they point out a genuine factual error, we will rectify it—but often no changes at all are made,” he said. “It does NOT mean we get our report ‘approved and cleared’ by a government before it goes out.”

“NO government gets to clear or approve our reports. The comments at the U.N. Country Team meeting were either somewhat misstated or misinterpreted (or perhaps a mix of the two),” he added.

The conflict in Tigray, which erupted in November 2020, has killed thousands of people, forced more than 2 million people to flee their homes, and sparked a humanitarian crisis. The Ethiopian government suffered a major setback in June, when TPLF forces recaptured Tigray. The U.S. special envoy for the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Feltman, told *Foreign Policy* in April that if the conflict continued to spiral, it could unravel [Ethiopia’s stability](https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/26/u-s-africa-envoy-ethiopia-crisis-tigray-jeffrey-feltman-biden-diplomacy-horn-of-africa/) and fuel a crisis that made Syria’s civil war look like “child’s play.”

U.N. Secretary-General [António Guterres](https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sgsm20866.doc.htm%22%20%5Ct%20%22) spoke about the conflict before the Security Council on Thursday, warning “​a humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding before our eyes.”

“I am also deeply concerned by reports of horrific sexual and gender-based violence from survivors, including women and children,” he said. “This is compounded by other serious allegations of human rights violations and abuses against civilians, reportedly perpetrated by all parties to the conflict. There must be accountability.”

In recent days, the United States has raised alarms about reports of forces from neighboring Eritrea reentering Tigray after they had previously withdrawn, a move that could escalate the conflict again. Eritrean forces have also been accused of widespread abuses, including rapes and civilian massacres, according to independent human rights watchdogs and the United Nations.

Newly displaced civilians who fled to the Amhara region of Ethiopia have also recounted to journalists and human rights watchdogs how TPLF forces [committed atrocities](https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210826-shell-shocked-survivors-describe-brutal-tigray-rebel-advance), including killing military-aged men, looting, and shelling populated areas in their recent counteroffensive. The TPLF has dismissed allegations of atrocities as Ethiopian government propaganda.

On Monday, the United States announced it [imposed sanctions](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-blacklists-eritrean-individual-linked-ethiopias-tigray-treasury-website-2021-08-23/) on a top Eritrean military leader, Filipos Woldeyohannes, the Eritrean Defence Forces chief of staff, over his role in serious human rights abuses in the conflict. The Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a statement rejected U.S. accusations as “utterly baseless.”

Ethiopian Prime Minister [Abiy Ahmed](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/01/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-sexual-assault.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22) proclaimed in April that ​​“anyone who raped our Tigrayan sisters, anybody who is involved in looting, will be held accountable in a court of law.” The Ethiopian government has previously denied that atrocities were widespread in the conflict, and in May, it said it had convicted four soldiers of rape and filed charges against 53 others for killing and raping civilians in Tigray.

Despite these steps, Patten told *Foreign Policy* that “more urgent actions are required to support survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in Ethiopia and prevent further atrocities from occurring,” saying there continues to be “daily reports” of new cases of rape, gang rape, and other acts of sexual violence.

“While initial steps have been taken, a long path of engagement is required with all parties to the conflict if sexual violence is to be both addressed and prevented,” she said.