Warning over fuel and food stocks as ‘hellish’ Tigray reels from airstrikes

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Humanitarian organisations in the Tigray region of northern [Ethiopia](https://www.theguardian.com/world/ethiopia) are running perilously low on food and fuel stocks as an intensified wave of airstrikes further hampers a threadbare aid effort already stymied by lack of access.

In what it calls a de facto blockade, the UN says fighting between Tigrayan rebels and forces loyal to the Ethiopian government has rendered the main supply route into the war-torn region unusable since mid-December.

Diminishing supplies of fuel are causing particular concern as, without sufficient supplies, humanitarian workers are unable to distribute already meagre food stocks to a region where hundreds of thousands of people are thought to be [living in famine-like conditions](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/03/over-400000-people-in-ethiopias-tigray-now-in-famine-un-warns).

The UN says it needs to distribute basic food supplies to 870,000 people in Tigray every week to reach 5.2 million in a six-week cycle. It says, however, that it only has enough food in the region for 200,000 people, and there is not enough fuel to deliver even that.

As of Monday, the UN said its food partners had less than 7,000 litres of fuel left in Tigray, excluding contingency stock. To deliver the food supplies it would require 60,000 litres.

An aid worker said: “We need 90 trucks of food every day and another 10 trucks of other supplies every day. So that’s 100 trucks every day. We haven’t had that since July.” Since mid-December, when the road from Semera in the neighbouring Afar region to the Tigrayan capital, Mekelle, became unusable, even that trickle of supplies has dried up.

Claire Nevill, WFP’s spokesperson in Ethiopia, said: “WFP hasn’t been able to get humanitarian supplies into Tigray since mid-December and our food and fuel stocks are running perilously low. We’ve already had to scale down food distributions to the communities and prioritise remaining fuel stocks for delivering urgently needed nutrition treatment for children.

“We need guarantees from all parties to the conflict of safe and secure humanitarian corridors via all routes into the region immediately, so supplies can flow in and reach millions in need of life-saving assistance at scale.”

Aid workers say the shortage of fuel is also further impeding healthcare services, which are already extremely stretched because of a lack of supplies. A measles vaccination programme for children under five, for example, will have severe limitations, one humanitarian worker said, because staff will be unable to travel to rural areas.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director general of the World Health Organization, said on Wednesday he was deeply concerned about the deadly combined effect of airstrikes and a lack of medicine and food on the civilian population of Tigray.

“There is a blatant measure that’s being taken – a blockade and siege – for more than a year, [affecting] 7 million people, and since especially July, no medication was allowed from WHO. None whatsoever,” said Tedros, himself from the northern Ethiopian region. “Nowhere in the world are we witnessing hell like in Tigray,” he said.

Dr Mike Ryan, executive director of the WHO health emergencies programme, said it was an “insult to our humanity, to allow a situation like this to continue, to allow no access, zero access”.

Since the prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, [ordered military action](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/04/ethiopia-on-brink-as-pm-orders-military-response-to-attack) in Tigray in November 2020, the conflict has been marked by accusations of widespread human rights abuses, some of which the [UN has said](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/03/possible-war-crimes-on-all-sides-in-ethiopian-conflict-report-tigray) may amount to war crimes.

On Thursday the Norwegian committee that awards the Nobel peace prize issued a very rare admonition to Abiy, who won in 2019 in part for making peace with neighbouring Eritrea. “Abiy Ahmed has a special responsibility to end the conflict and contribute to peace,” the committee said. “It is unacceptable that humanitarian aid is not emerging to a sufficient degree.”

As the fighting has spread, so too has the humanitarian strife, with the number of people classed as “food insecure” in the region of Amhara, south-west of Tigray, doubling, from 1.5 million in June to an estimated 3.7 million now.

In recent days repeated airstrikes are believed to have resulted in the highest civilian casualties since October, with more than 70 people killed in multiple strikes so far this year, according to medical and aid workers.

A strike on a refugee camp on 5 January reportedly killed three Eritreans, two of them children, while a strike on a flour mill in Mai Tsebri on Monday [killed 17](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/11/ethiopia-19-people-killed-in-latest-drone-strikes-in-tigray), mostly women. On 7 January a night-time drone strike on a camp for internally displaced people in Dedebit [killed at least 56 people](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/08/ethiopia-people-killed-in-airstrike-at-camp-for-internally-displaced), injuring dozens more, aid workers and medical staff said.

The Ethiopian government has previously denied targeting civilians. The Dedebit airstrike came just hours after Abiy was credited with making a [gesture towards peace](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/7/ethiopia-announces-pardons-for-high-profile-political-prisoners) by releasing several Tigrayan political prisoners.

Gezahegn Kebede Gebrehana, the country director of Oxfam in Ethiopia, said: “We are alarmed by the continued reported deaths of unarmed people in the northern Ethiopia conflict. The continued violence means that humanitarian agencies in northern Ethiopia are unable to provide lifesaving assistance to the best of their abilities.

“Oxfam calls on all parties to de-escalate the conflict, prioritise the safety of civilians, re-establish basic and adequate public services, and allow communities in affected areas to safely access available assistance and resources to survive and rebuild their lives.”