

Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention Ep. 38_

Mehret Okubay

Fri, Jan 31, 2025 8:41AM 41:44


SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Humanitarian crisis, Tigray region, atrocity prevention, human rights, conflict reporting, telecommunication blackout, humanitarian assistance, internally displaced persons, transitional justice, accountability, international community, Ethiopian government, Eritrean forces, gender-based violence, documentation.

SPEAKERS

Mehret Okubay, Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Speaker

 00:00

 Speaker 00:00

 Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:06

Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Research Director at the Global Center.

 Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:23

This podcast features one on one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention, allowing us to explore challenges, identify best practices and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively.

 Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:49

Today, I am joined by Mehret Okubay, a Tigrayan journalist and human rights advocate. She's contributed to various publications, including The Telegraph and Addis Fortune, highlighting the humanitarian crisis and challenges faced by the Tigrayan people. Mehret is also a member of

Omna Tigray, an organization focused on bringing awareness to the violence committed against civilians during the war. Thank you for joining us today.

M

Mehret Okubay 01:14

Thank you for having me.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 01:15

Can you share a bit about how you became a journalist in Tigray and how you came to work with Omna.

M

Mehret Okubay 01:27

So my journey in journalism started with Addis Fortune. Addis Fortune is one of, one of the English newspapers in Ethiopia, widely, widely circulating English newspapers in Ethiopia. I had started to work in Mekelle and started doing reporting from the Tigray region at the time.

M

Mehret Okubay 01:49

So this was, this was around 2019 the beginning of the the beginning of 2020, I'm sorry. And so we had just there was, there had started to be some, some, some tension between the federal government and the regional authorities at the time. So we were basically trying to document the political, the social-political situation in the region. From then on, there were... There was also COVID. So the Tigray regional state was also, was also had different policies, I would say, in regards to how it approached the COVID-19 pandemic at the time and and I think it was also used as a form of defiance by the regional state ahead of the conflict. And we also covered the Tigray regional election at the at the time, I think Addis Fortune had the most comprehensive coverage of the conflict at the time, the most comprehensive coverage of the of the regional elections. So that's how, that's how my that's how my journalistic career started. It's it started here in Tigray, covering the social political, the social political circumstances that led to the conflict that started in November of 2020. Omna Tigray was established by concerned Tigrayans at the outset of the conflict. It's, it started from from understanding that there were many Tigrayans on the ground that wanted to do the part of of advocating for Tigrayans in the Tigray region. So it was mostly to grants outside the Tigray region at the time. So it was people that really wanted to get to come together and do advocacy on behalf of Tigrayans, but did not have, but did not have the know how or the skills at the time. So it was about knowledgeable advocacy. It was it was about empowering. It was about empowering the great deal of the community that was that was really hoping to be a voice for the voiceless at the time. So that's how Omna Tigray started. There's a lot of different organizations with that nature. I think, I think at the time of the onset of the conflict, there was a telecommunication blackout, a comprehensive telecommunication blackout, which meant there were no phones, and there was no internet communication, and there was a blockade, basically, for people coming in and out of the region. And so there was very little information coming out of the region. And so it really highlighted the need for people outside the region to be able to advocate for the

humanitarian situation for people in Tigray. So that's how Omna got started. And I think that's that's what, it played such an important role in terms of advocating for the humanitarian for the in the context of that humanitarian situation.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 04:51

From what I understand, you lived in Mekelle for part of the conflict and reported on the abuses you were seeing there. Can you tell us a bit about your experience and about the mass atrocity crimes the region endured throughout the conflict.

M Mehret Okubay 05:07

So I was, I lived in the region throughout most of the conflict. I think there was about maybe three or four months where when I wasn't here, but I was, for the most part, in Mekelle between November 2020 up until the end of the siege, which was sometime around December 2022 and then I was able to leave in February of 2023. So I think there's multiple layers to the atrocities in Tigray. So I would say the first is the nature of the blockade and the siege. I think it's one of the most comprehensive blockades to have taken place. And usually when I try to explain it, when I try to explain the blockade and the blockade and the siege on the region, I want to tell people, because people usually can't imagine what we mean when we tell them there was a telecommunication blackout. So I try to explain this story of a neighbor that I had that was trying to go to the hospital while she was in labor. So she had walked for quite a bit, and at this point she was maybe 150 feet away from the hospital, but she couldn't move anymore. She was she was exhausted, and so it was midnight, and she she went into labor and she gave birth on our doorsteps. So we heard screaming and shouting and some commotion, wondering what was happening. We went outside to see a woman giving birth. And so here is the conundrum of, you know, the six or seven people that half a dozen people that were there, we couldn't call anyone because there were there, our phones don't work. You can't call an ambulance to come to come help her. And even if we were able to call an ambulance, we don't have fuel, so the fuel can't get there. And nobody in our vicinity also had there were there might have been neighbors that had vehicles, but nobody had fuel. There was no more public transportation because there was no fuel. And even once you approached the hospital, there were serious medical, there was there was a shortage of medical supplies, something as basic as gloves were running out in the Tigray region at the time. And so doctors and nurses were washing and and putting, putting them up on like they were trying to disinfect it with the sun to reuse gloves. So there was a blockade on on there was a medical there was a blockade of health supplies. There was a blockade of humanitarian assistance. No food was coming into the region, and no basic supplies were coming into the region. And there was also a block because of the blockade on telecommunication, there was also a discontinuation of banking services in the region. So people that had salaries would not be able to access them, so you would not be able to access your your life savings. So it was a very comprehensive siege that had a significant impact on the livelihoods of ordinary of ordinary people on every your everyday life was disrupted and it was weaponized. So I feel that that's like one part of the one part of the humanitarian crisis that was exasperated, the human rights abuses that were that were a significant feature of the conflict, and it also made it very difficult for human rights organizations to report or discuss or bring to light the situation in Tigray. Another layer was the presence of foreign forces, foreign forces, Eritrean soldiers and Ethiopian soldiers in the Tigray region during this telecommunication blackout. I think, so so there were active atrocities

occurring in every village across the region. One of like, a prominent aspect of this was also sexual assault and the weaponization of the weaponization of gender-based violence during this conflict. So I think there were, like, multiple layers of this. There was active human rights violations and all there was the withholding of services. So I think that's what that's one way to look at the nature of the abuses at that time.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 10:15

It's really, really hard to imagine living through that. And you know, we talk in the abstract from New York and Geneva about, you know what it means to withhold humanitarian aid and that it's a crime. But you know, when you put it in such concrete terms, as, you know, doctors didn't even have gloves anymore, and the impact of lack of fuel. It really kind of captures how devastating crises like these are. You know, you mentioned that the telecommunications were cut off during the crisis. You know, as a journalist, how were you able to access the outside world and get your story out under those circumstances?

M Mehret Okubay 11:10

I think that was the most difficult aspect of being a human rights advocate or being a journalist and trying to discuss atrocities in Tigray. Because I feel like so much of advocacy today depends on social media discussion, on the amount of evidence that is able to come out of a particular place. But when, but when a blockade is so comprehensive and it's so effective, people I don't, I don't think it's within people's natures to want to know about the suffering of others, particularly when they when it, when it feels so disempowering, when you're not sure what you can do. And I think the fact that, the fact that there was such little information coming out of the out of Tigray, just made it all the more easier to ignore, and all the more that that image of, you know, children running out of burning building, that's usually as a journalist, that's what your editor is looking for. That's what your producer is looking for. And when you're not able to provide that, then you, like you become the story becomes less, less and less and less less and less relevant. So I think one of so in June of 2021, I would say more stories, relatively, were coming out of Tigray ahead of that, and there was some level of interest. But as the days went on, and it was very difficult to prove, to prove as to what exactly was going on, so there was not enough humanitarian presence. There was not enough presence of international bodies within the Tigray region that that enough reporting could be going out of Tigray. So for example, you know, there would be an airstrike in Mekelle, there would be an airstrike, and there would be 1000s of witnesses to the airstrikes. airstrikes. But if a journalist is trying to confirm that, but they can't reach even a single person to communicate with, and the only, the only source of information they have is maybe like a social media post from somebody that's maybe considered pro-government or pro-TPLF or pro something. And if that's the only source of information they have, and they don't have anyone they consider to be an ordinary civilian, or someone they consider to be neutral, enough to have a neutral, a neutral understanding of what happened, then they're more likely to let a new story slip by. And so I think that was kind of one of the fundamentals of what the telecommunication block outs did. I think its implications on public life, on the day days and ins and outs of individuals, is unimaginable. I think it was very difficult for people to like to continue on their daily lives without without being able to do that, because so much of our daily lives depend on being able to call people and to be connected to the internet, but then that extra layer of having to prove what had happened to you or or the gravity of the implications

that the that these with the withholding of public services and the active, the active violence of these soldiers had on you, it becomes even more difficult when you can't when you don't necessarily have the ability to prove it, when you don't have that evidence. And I think there's another layer is that there are soldiers feel a sense of, I think there's less accountability for what soldiers are doing on the ground as well, because it's very difficult for you to capture it. Another element of it is that we also did not have electricity, so even if people had phones, they couldn't record it because of the of the because there was no electric power, so they couldn't charge their phones, they couldn't upload it to the internet. So account so that possibility of accountability, or that possibility of you being held accountable for your crimes, it was just so much more unlikely. Under those circumstances, it was so much more difficult for people to write down names, keep records of what had happened to them and who had done it and what it looked like. I think we based a lot of our advocacy work today on the very little that was recorded. I think the very little that's available, for example, like Mahbere Dego massacre is consistently discussed by inter by by international human rights advocates and Tigrayan advocates, because Ethiopian soldiers themselves recorded, recorded themselves murdering Tigrayan civilians, and they were they happened to end on the hands of a Tigrayan advocate, and then we were able to triangulate that information and and capture what happened. But that's one of the very few instances where atrocities were recorded. And there's so many like, there's so many instances like, where very little we know about the gravity of the human rights abuse that happened in Tigray was because of Ethiopian or Eritrean soldiers that were that were careless with their documentation of atrocities. And so I think it has a very big impact in people being able to tell their story and articulate and articulate what happened. I think it creates this sense on the side of the soldiers that they don't have to be accountable for what that it's very unlikely that they'll be ever be held accountable for their actions.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 17:25

The impunity for all of the abuses is really significant, and I think that that contributes to the circumstances that are related to my next question, which is, you know, the federal government and the TPLF signed a cessation of hostilities two years ago, two years ago this month, actually, and despite this, I think for much of the world, because of the agreement, the situation in Ethiopia is past tense. But for many civilians, abuses continue. So what is the current situation for populations in Tigray?

M Mehret Okubay 18:05

I think first and foremost is the humanitarian situation. The humanitarian situation in the region is exasperated by by the over 800,000 internally displaced persons living across the Tigray region. So that as humanitarian assistance is only trickling down into the region, and it's not able to meet the needs of these internally displaced persons, and they are not able to mobilize their own resources and their communities for for development, but are forced to continue to live off of humanitarian assistance, as they're forced to stay in internally displaced persons and are not able to return to their homes. So I sense that that is the biggest humanitarian crisis. That is a looming humanitarian crisis that is, it's an existing humanitarian crisis that is sure to be exasperated as it goes on longer. And there's also the situation of communities living in border areas with the Eritrean with Eritrean forces, where Eritrean forces continue to commit human rights violations against civilian populations. There's also the threat this causes to communities such as the Irob community and the Kunama community that live

around these border areas and whose continued existence is being put under threat by the continued existence of these human rights violations. Unfortunately, the permanent cessation of hostilities has not had any international body or civil society organizations overseeing its implementation, which has led to a situation where much of, much of its much of its, much of the responsibilities on behalf of the Ethiopian government to the civilian population, particularly that of internally displaced persons is yet to be completely applied. So that has created a serious strain on the day to day lives of the grants.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 20:47

You know, while the federal government and the TPLF have signed the cessation of hostilities, many parties to the conflict were left out of the agreement. The agreement served as an outline for a variety of different processes to take place, including on transitional justice, disarmament and reintegration and more. From your perspective, what is the current state of these initiatives as they relate to victims and survivors?

M

Mehret Okubay 21:16

There are multiple conflicts happening throughout the country at this point, and there are many, very many actors that should be negotiated, that that should be on the negotiating table to discuss with the federal government, to come to some sort of settlement for a more peaceful, peaceful existence for Ethiopian civilians everywhere. I think on the issue of justice and accountability we should probably look at it as a scale of what we can do of what is plausible. So I think Omna will continue to advocate for a situation where all parties are able to be held accountable, which means Eritrean forces, militia from from from various regions, including the Amhara region and Ethiopian forces. And for that to happen, an internationally-led transitional justice process must take place in Ethiopia. I think that would be, I think that would be the most ideal forum for a justice and accountability, for a justice and accountability system moving forward. Currently, the transitional justice process for, I think, for, from what we understand of it, there has been a green paper that's been discussed throughout the country, and from our observation and the discussions we've had, the transitional justice process does not really have, most civilians in Tigray do not believe that that kind of process would sufficiently address the issue of accountability, especially because Eritrean forces who are foreign forces that could not be held accountable through a national justice system. So it would fully remove them from accountability, and which would make Eritrea less likely to participate or less likely to be held accountable through this process. So I think we are arguing for, and we believe that justice process, that garners legitimacy from all bodies, will require for different bodies, for an international process, for an international body to be to be involved in this process, another important aspect of this would also be issues of corporate accountability. For for public enterprises such as Ethiopian Airlines and telecom that's played a particular role in withholding, withholding public services from from civilians, and the severe impact that has had on the civilian population. So I think we'll have to look at that as also a medium range, one medium range ask to ensure that moving forward, these public enterprises will not be able to do this in other parts of the country, and this will not be the fate of other civilians and. that we are able to and that we are able to hold our enterprises and our entities accountable, that even in times of conflict, that they have a responsibility to their, to their customers to provide the necessary services, and that and that they will not withhold services based on political circumstances or political situations. Or will at least try to find ways

to address humanitarian situations in the region. And I think another important aspect of this justice and accountability, justice and accountability road will also be memorialization and documentation and reporting. And I think even in a situation where justice and accountability is not possible from the perspective of from justice and accountability is not we're not able to get it from from from what we believe to be the adequate or the proper, the proper mechanisms that we are able to keep, to document these and kind of and have them in place for future generations. And that as a community, we're able to learn from them as well and understand them. And hopefully we're not moving forward just completely misunderstanding the position of our of our situation and our circumstance, and we're kind of able to navigate our history and why certain things are a certain way, you know, as a community, generally, as Ethiopians, or Ethiopians are able, Ethiopians are able to do that.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 26:47

I want to pick up on a couple of things you said there, in terms of, you sort of said that that a good process would involve the international community. And you also just said now that you know, the just as an accountability, in some sense, doesn't feel possible at the moment, but you want to preserve information for for future generations, so the story is told correctly. And so I guess in some sense, you're speaking on behalf of of your community, but in a larger sense, you know, how do you feel victims and survivors feel about the current design of the transitional justice process, and whether they trust it will serve them, trust they will see justice. And what impact do you think that their perceptions of the current process will have on its success?

M Mehret Okubay 27:45

I think I don't believe that there is the current transitional justice process. It it doesn't seem to be very active or very clear at this point how it's how it's moving forward, or what it's going to look like. There have been discussions here and there, but and there's been the publication of the of the green paper, and there has been some discussions about it, but it's not very consistent, so as to tell the trajectory of of what the transitional justice process is going to look like. But what is clearly understood as of right now is that it appears that it's going to be a national, a nationally led process. So a national, national led transitional justice process that's going to be primarily adjudicated by by the current government, which is the government that took part in the conflict, the forces and and the political bodies that were responsible for for how, for how the conflict played out for the humanitarian implications of it and the human rights violations. So I don't feel that this type of transitional justice process will have legitimacy within the Tigrayan community. Unfortunately, I don't feel that there will be a sense of confidence moving forward, and I don't know what level of active participation there will be, also from these, from these groups that feel that they've been disenfranchised by the system. So I don't believe that there will be legitimacy or or I don't believe that victims, victims will be able to identify with with the current process and in its current trajectory. So I'm trying to, so I think we're all trying to understand. And what would be plausible, or what would be possible in terms of trying to define other means for justice and accountability, while also, while also trying to question and try to and try to also comment on and understand the implications of the transitional justice process happening nationally.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 30:25

You were touched on this briefly when you were discussing the telecommunications blockade and the impact it had on information. And this also relates to transitional justice and truth telling. You know, the Human Rights Council established an International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia in December 2021, to investigate and document violations in Tigray and beyond during the war. And that Commission's mandate was allowed to lapse just over a year ago, in October 2023. Since their mandate ended, do you feel there has been a lapse of attention or documentation by other parties of the past, abuses that the Commission wasn't able to have the time to investigate, but also, you know, current ongoing issues in the area?

M Mehret Okubay 31:27

I think ICHREE during the first two years that it was operating the siege was going on in the Tigray region. So there continued to be a telecommunications blackout and internet blackout and information blackout in the Tigray region. And so the first year, the first year and a half of their investigation was conducted, while Tigray continued to be under under a difficult humanitarian situation. And so even under those circumstances, they were able to communicate with refugee communities in Sudan and other parts of East Africa, and they were and they were able to collect a great amount of information, and they were able to bring light to to the degree of the human rights violations in Tigray at the start of the conflict. And there's no question in my mind that had they been able to continue to do their work, and had they been able to continue to investigate the situation in Tigray, that they would have been able to bring more light to the crisis. I feel, I sense from from the situation that that as Tigray opened up more, that there would have been more opportunities for ICHREE to collect data and bring and help us draw a better understanding of the situation. And also, due to the nature of of ICHREE being a UN organization, it also gave it a degree of legitimacy that perhaps, you know, other human rights advocacy groups are not able to do so. So ICHREE's lack of presence is very much, is very much missed and there, and there's a very serious implication as to, there's a very serious implication on the future of justice and accountability in Tigray, because that that institution no longer exists. So I think it's felt very deeply.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 33:52

What are your your recommendations to the international community to help ensure lasting peace for populations in Tigray and across the country, and you know, what steps do you think need to be taken, or pressure that needs to be put on the federal government to make that happen?

M Mehret Okubay 34:11

I think from my experience as a reporter and watching the reporting of other conflicts and seeing the precedent of other conflicts, taking taking place and and looking through and looking through all of those documentations, there is certainly a certain amount of camaraderie that can happen that is very difficult. It's so difficult for, you, know, as someone that experienced conflicts, to to even be able to articulate it, especially when your first language is not English. It's so difficult to explain and express what happened, or explain or tell people

what happened when don't have the vocabulary for it. And and when you see other conflicts, and you see their reportings, and you see those instances, you kind of start to develop that vocabulary for what happened or you understand there's, there's so much for you to learn from, from other people, from other advocacy groups and I realize, that you are, you are sort of empowered together. You grow together. It is a community of people and and we enrich each other because we are able to help each other articulate situations. We're able to open doors for each other. And so I feel that being able to articulate, being able to report on the experiences of Tigray civilians, and the type of impact that government can have on a civilian population, or how atrocities are committed, or or what their implications, what their long lasting implications are. It's, I think as a community, you grow. I think as as humanity, we grow, I think we're more able to to make sense of our of our nature, and we're able to grow or come closer to a more just, to a more just way of living, and and and to improve the the fundamentals of our of our human nature. So I think it's very important for us to understand and to be able to bring justice to any community anywhere, because it is because it is a core, the cornerstone for just generally, a better human human existence, a better humannature. So I do think, from that fundamental point of view, that it's important. I think it's also very important because the violence, the violence in the Horn has is, is is feeding into each other, and it's going to cause a catastrophic humanitarian situation that, that is, that is that is going to have a long, lasting effect on the peace and security situation for decades to come. So I think so I think there's a lot of reason why, why we should, why we should be interested in what's going on in Tigray, I think, and what's going on in Ethiopia, and what's going on in in Eritrea, I think it feeds into understanding the geopolitical situation in these areas, and peace and security and and with it, you know, trade all those things depend on, on, on the peace and security and the human rights situation in these areas. And I think those are the fundamentals that we sort of all have to have to work towards.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 38:24

Those are really important things to work towards. How do you think states and other other governments can better support victims and survivors and to grow from the outside?

M Mehret Okubay 38:38

I think there's still an opportunity for ICHREE to come back to life. I think there is a clause. I think that's that is the probably, that's something that is not on a lot of people's radars, but there is still a possibility for countries and States to to table, for ICHREE to come back to life. And I think that documentation and reporting process is very important and and I think there's also, even if we were not to bring ICHREE back, I think there's a lot of ways that we can support the documentation, the investigation of these processes. And I think we should also think of of reporting and investigation and the memorialization of the situation in Tigray and the atrocities in Tigray should be understood as as supporting the justice and supporting the justice and accountability process that the Ethiopian government has already agreed is necessary and has and has agreed to work towards. Although we might all question that process, I think I think states should look at it from from from the perspective that a genuine justice and accountability process will bring about, sustainable peace in the region. That is the only way to to secure sustainable, long term peace and and as a way of of of resolving, resolving, truly resolving, or truly getting at the cause, the cause of conflict, will require an open justice and accountability process. And so I think from that perspective, there is a lot that states can do to

pressure the Ethiopian government also to take the transitional justice process more seriously, to make it more open, to make it more neutral, but also to find ways, to find avenues, or to be open and willing to allow international bodies to participate in the process, so that all forces are able to be held accountable through the transitional justice process, and it is, in fact, a transitional process, a transitional justice process.

 Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 41:09

Thank you for joining us for this episode of Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention. If you enjoyed this episode, we encourage you to subscribe to the podcast on Apple Podcasts, SoundCloud or Spotify, and would be grateful if you left us a review for more information on the Global Center's work on R2P, mass atrocity prevention and populations at risk of mass atrocities. Visit our website at www.globalR2P.org, and connect with us on Twitter and Facebook at GCR2P.