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Health system collapse in Tigray: patients and health workers at risk of starvation

Geneva, Switzerland; 2 June 2022 — Nurses and other healthcare workers in Tigray, Ethiopia, are continuing to care for their patients in the most dire and stressful conditions. After 18 months of fighting between the federal government and rebel forces, the health system in Tigray has completely collapsed with shortages of drugs, equipment and personnel. Health workers are also suffering from lack of food and pay.

Mr. Teshager Worku Kassie of the Ethiopian Nurses Association (ENA) has told ICN that, at the beginning of the war, the ENA engaged in humanitarian aid and support activities of people, including nurses, in the Tigray region via Jhpiego and USAID.

He added: “Sadly, soon after the beginning of the war, every connection to the region was completely blocked. We don't have any correspondence with our chapters and desks at Tigray right now! Although we don't have a formal communication, informally we have heard that the nurses, like other civil servants, are under severe economic crisis, with no salaries and other incomes, but are serving the people and military for free. We cannot imagine how they are servicing without salaries for more than a year. “

Dr Pamela Cipriano, ICN President said:

“Yesterday, we heard that lack of medicines and fuel had caused the largest hospital in Tigray, Ayder Referral Hospital, to suspend its regular operations. Health workers had not been paid for over a year and are struggling to care for their families. Millions are facing starvation. The situation is catastrophic!

‘Nurses and other health workers in Tigray are facing the extreme limit of what they can do to care for their patients, and are risking their own health. With hospitals closing, more patients will die and nurses and other health workers are losing their livelihoods. In our latest [International Nurses Day report](#), ICN has called for the protection and safety of nurses, and investment in their well-being. If we do not care for the carers, we cannot care for the patients.”

On 24 March, the Ethiopian government declared a humanitarian truce with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and ceased restrictions on aid to the Tigray region, where 5.2 million people need humanitarian assistance.ⁱ Despite this, reports show that the situation in Tigray is dire with health facilities damaged and thousands of patients going untreated.

In May, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General of the World Health Organization, who is from the Tigray region, said of the situation in Tigray, “Current supplies of food are too little to sustain life. The health system has collapsed. People are starving to death — and it is intentional”.ⁱⁱ

ICN is continuing to monitor the situation in Ethiopia and will remain in close contact with the Ethiopian Nurses Association to explore all options to provide support to nurses in the region.

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Note to Editors

The **International Council of Nurses** (ICN) is a federation of more than 130 national nurses associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality care for all and sound health policies globally.

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ⁱ The Guardian (30 May 2022). "More than 4,000 arrested in Amhara as Ethiopia cracks down on militia" Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/30/more-than-4000-arrested-in-amhara-as-ethiopia-cracks-down-on-militia>

ⁱⁱ Jerving Sara (10 May 2022). "Despite truce, Tigray aid 'too little to sustain life' says WHO chief. Available at: <https://www.devex.com/news/despite-truce-tigray-aid-too-little-to-sustain-life-says-who-chief-103226>