

July 29, 2021

#KeepItOn in Tigray: Ethiopia must lift the blackout from conflict zone

Access to the internet and all telecommunications services must be restored across the Tigray region.

The #KeepItOn Coalition — a global network of human rights organizations that work to end internet shutdowns — is increasingly alarmed by the human rights violations carried out in the region of Tigray during the ongoing conflict, and the increasing use of censorship techniques to conceal them. Since the start of the conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region in November 2020, internet and telecommunication shutdowns, as well as alleged [blocking](#) of specific websites, have been used as a weapon of information control and censorship by involved parties. On June 28, after the capital, Mekele, was taken by Tigrayan troops and the Ethiopian government declared an unilateral ceasefire — a condition of which was the [restoration of essential and communication services](#) — Tigray was once again put under a [complete](#) communication blackout.

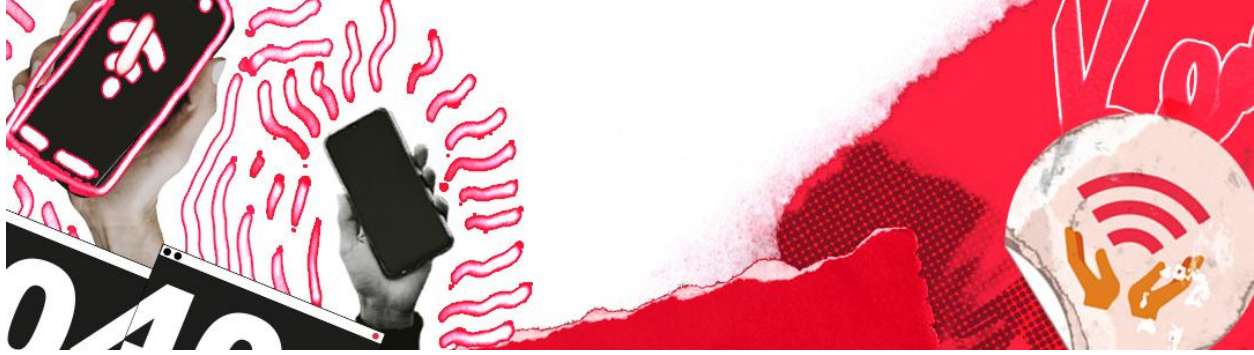
Although connectivity was restored in certain areas in 2020, it is [sporadic and intermittent](#). Broadband and mobile internet remains off, while disconnected phone lines and constant power shortages have rendered satellite internet connections [almost unattainable](#). Ostensibly, Tigray is blacked out, and cut off from the rest of the world, further [aggravating](#) the abuses committed in the region. It is increasingly difficult for journalists, human rights activists, and humanitarian NGOs to [corroborate accounts](#) of human rights violations.

Devastating human rights abuses concealed

Although information emerging from the region has been slow, numerous accusations of troops from Ethiopia and Eritrea, and the Amhara militia, committing heinous crimes against civilians have come out. These reported acts include [mass rape](#) and sexual violence, [mass murder](#), and abuse of refugees.

Ethiopia's history of internet shutdowns and censorship

Since 2016, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia has shut down the internet and social media platforms during important events, protests and conflicts at [least 20 times](#). Data captured through Access Now's Shutdown Optimization Project (STOP) exposed the interference of shutdowns at both local and national levels, including [months-long shutdown](#) of phone and internet services in western



Oromia starting in January 2020 and the [month-long complete internet shutdown](#) following the assassination of artist Haacaaluu Hundeessaa in June 2020. Accusations have also been levelled against the Tigray Defence Force, when in December last year, the state-owned Ethio Telecom [accused the group](#) of sending armed militia to tamper with phone and internet communication infrastructure in Tigray.

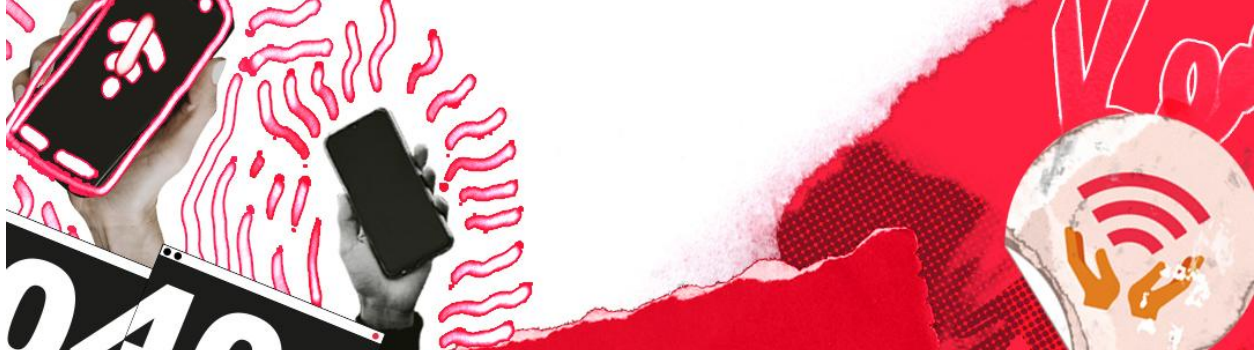
The current disruption of both broadband and mobile internet in the Tigray region follows the government’s pattern of disrupting services during periods of unrest, but is the longest incident since the current government came to power in April 2018. The #KeepItOn coalition has [repeatedly called on authorities](#) in Ethiopia to reconnect people across the nation, and ensure open, secure and free access to the internet and digital communication platforms across the country at all times.

Ethiopia’s legal obligations

Ethiopia's legal obligations are clear. The Government of Ethiopia has ratified regional and international frameworks such as the legally-binding [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), and the [African Charter on Human and People’s Rights](#). Both provide for the protection and promotion of the rights of freedom of opinion and expression, assembly, and access to information — offline and online.

In 2019, the government of Ethiopia [noted a recommendation](#) put forward by the government of Australia during the third cycle Universal Periodic Review to “ensure that civil and political rights, particularly freedom of association and freedom of expression, are upheld, including by ending the practice of Internet shutdowns.”

The African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) Resolution from 2016 [recognizes](#) the “importance of the internet in advancing human and people’s rights in Africa, particularly the right to freedom of information and expression.” The ACHPR/Res. 362 (LIX) 2016 also condemns the “emerging practice of State Parties interrupting or limiting access to telecommunication services such as the internet, social media, and messaging services.” Additionally, [UN experts and high-level officials](#) — including the UN Secretary-General — have [affirmed](#) that “blanket Internet shutdowns and generic blocking and filtering of services are considered by United Nations human rights mechanisms to be in violation of international human rights law”, as they affect people’s access to information, freedom of expression and communication and political participation.



Access to the internet and telecommunications is a lifeline in times of crises

The internet, social media platforms, and other telecommunications play a critical role during peacetime, and through times of social and political unrest, crises, and conflict. They provide spaces for communicating, public debate, seeking public information, reporting and documenting events, and holding governments accountable for their actions. Journalists, human rights defenders, civil society actors, and other relevant stakeholders count on the internet and digital platforms to monitor, document and report on conflicts, and provide emergency support and resources during health and humanitarian crises.

As organizations that believe in the power of the internet as an enabler of human rights, we affirm its restoration will benefit millions of people across Ethiopia, and the world. The ongoing internet and communications blackout in Tigray is endangering lives, serving as a cover for human rights abuses and denying people access to health-related information during the ongoing pandemic, and humanitarian and emergency services.

Recommendations

We once again urge all parties to the Tigray conflict to:

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- 1. Stop shutting down the internet and digital communication services in the Tigray region; and**
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- 2. Immediately facilitate conditions to enable the reinstatement of full internet access in Tigray and all areas currently targeted by internet shutdowns;**
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We also urge the Ethiopian government to:

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- 3. Refrain from arbitrarily shutting down access to the internet, telephone communication, and social media platforms, and publicly commit to assuring the people of Ethiopia that the internet remains open, accessible, inclusive, and secure throughout the conflict and thereafter;**



4. Order the internet service provider, Ethio Telecom, to equally provide all people with high-quality, secure, and unrestricted internet access throughout the conflict and thereafter;

5. Ensure that “additional steps are taken to protect against human rights abuses by business enterprises that are owned or controlled by the state,” such as Ethio Telecom, as stipulated by the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) and the [OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises](#); and

6. Order the internet service provider, Ethio Telecom, to inform internet users of any potential shutdowns, and to take all reasonable steps to fix any identified disruptions likely to impact the quality of service they receive.

Sincerely,

ORGANIZATIONS

Access Now
African Declaration on Internet Rights and
Freedoms Coalition
African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX)
Africa Interactive Media
Africa Open Data and Internet Research
Foundation (AODIRF)
ARTICLE 19 Eastern Africa
Bareedo Platform Somalia
Bloggers of Zambia
Digital Rights Coalition (Malawi)
Digital Woman Uganda
Global Voices
Kijiji Yeetu, Kenya
Miaan Group
Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)
Organization of the Justice Campaign

Paradigm Initiative (PIN)
PEN America
Ranking Digital Rights
Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights
Southeast Asia for Freedom of Expression
Network (SAFENet)
Sassoufit Collective
Ubunteam
Wikimedia Community User Group Uganda
Wikimedia France
Women Of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)
Women ICT Advocacy Group (WIAG)
World Wide Web Foundation
Zaina Foundation
Zambian Bloggers Network

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