

Tigray conflict sparks a war of fake tweets and intense propaganda



Displaced people at the Shire campus of Aksum University, which was turned into a temporary shelter for people displaced by conflict, in the town of Shire, Tigray region, Ethiopia on March 14, 2021. BAZ RATNER/Reuters

At first glance, George Bolton was exactly what Ethiopia's state media needed.

His Twitter account, featuring a photo of a distinguished-looking man and the façade of the United Nations headquarters in New York, identified him as a "political analyst and humanitarian" and a former UN diplomat. His tweets faithfully supported the Ethiopian government in the Tigray war, even as evidence of military atrocities mounted.

There was just one problem: George Bolton did not exist. His photo was a

fabrication, borrowed from a newspaper story on fake faces generated by artificial intelligence. The deception was easily proven – yet his tweets were still prominently displayed on the social media accounts of state-run Ethiopian media outlets.

The fake “George Bolton” account was eventually suspended by Twitter. But it was just one example of the intense propaganda wars that swirl around the conflict in Ethiopia’s Tigray region, involving thousands of deceptive posts on Facebook and Twitter every day from all sides in the battle, including state media.

The war has killed thousands of people, forced as many as two million people to flee their homes and destroyed much of the region’s health care system and other basic services. Countless women have been violently attacked and sexually assaulted. But the severe damage and the rising death toll have often been obscured by a fog of falsehoods and duelling propaganda claims.

Many of the fake pro-government Twitter accounts have tried to bolster their credibility by claiming to be those of scholars, diplomats, journalists or other experts. One such profile owner, “John Max,” claimed to be a “conflict analyst” at the European Union. His account, too, was eventually suspended.

Disinformation has been a key element of the government’s communications strategy. When journalists reported in December that Eritrean troops had entered Tigray to support Ethiopia’s military offensive, Ethiopian officials denounced the reports as “fictional” and accused journalists of sympathizing with the Tigrayan rebels. The government finally admitted last week that Eritrean forces were in the region.

The falsehoods have been fuelled by the government’s long-standing ban on media access to Tigray. From the outset of the war last November,

independent media were barred from the region. The ban was only recently lifted.

“When there is little legitimate information on what is really happening on the ground, it is easy for both sides to spread disinformation that supports their narrative,” said Tessa Knight, who studies disinformation in Africa for the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab.

She has documented the social media campaigns of both sides in the Tigray conflict, especially among the Ethiopian diaspora, which often unleashes waves of prewritten copy-and-paste tweets at preset times to increase the chances that a hashtag will be trending and thus influence the public narrative on Tigray.

On a single day in late February, for example, about 90,000 tweets used the #AxumMassacre hashtag to promote an Amnesty International report on mass killings in the town of Axum, while pro-government accounts posted about 12,500 tweets with anti-Amnesty International hashtags in an attempt to discredit the report, Ms. Knight found.

The report, which uncovered horrific details of atrocities by Eritrean soldiers, has become a key focus of disinformation tactics in recent weeks.

One state-run newspaper, the Ethiopian Herald, claimed that the U.S. foreign aid agency USAID had sent a team of investigators to Axum and found no evidence of the massacre. But USAID immediately refuted the report, saying it “neither conducted an investigation nor sent a team to investigate the reported events in Axum.” Facebook flagged the Ethiopian Herald report as “false information.”

In another effort to undermine the Amnesty International report, Ethiopia has tried to use its diplomatic powers in the United States to extradite a man who

had become central to its campaign against the human-rights organization, according to leaked government documents obtained by The Globe and Mail.

The man, Michael Berhe, had played the role of a priest in Axum in a video produced by U.S.-based Tigrayan activists. The video was clearly labelled a dramatic re-enactment of events based on accounts by survivors of the Axum massacre. But the government claimed Mr. Berhe was an “imposter” who had duped Amnesty International. The Ethiopian Foreign Affairs Ministry said he was a “deceptive person” who had been “one of the sources” of the organization’s report.

Researchers at Amnesty International made it clear they had never talked to Mr. Berhe and that he had no involvement in their report. But the leaked documents show the government is still trying to promote the false theory.

In one document, Foreign Affairs Ministry official Yanit Abera Habtemariam recommends that Mr. Berhe be prosecuted for crimes against the state, so he could be deported from the United States to Ethiopia. In another document, Ethiopian diplomat Gebeyehu Ganga asks his country’s embassy in Washington to find out if U.S. authorities will hand him over to Ethiopia. The Globe e-mailed both officials to request comment, but they did not respond.

Mr. Berhe, an interpreter at a hospital in Boston, said he has received a barrage of death threats from pro-government Ethiopians. “They’ve compared my innocent act with war crimes committed by murderers,” he told The Globe in an interview.

“For me, it’s evidence of just how far the government wants to go to silence Tigrayans.”

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