



### A social media disinformation campaign targeting the WFP and other aid organisations in Ethiopia is shrinking the humanitarian space to respond to food insecurity.

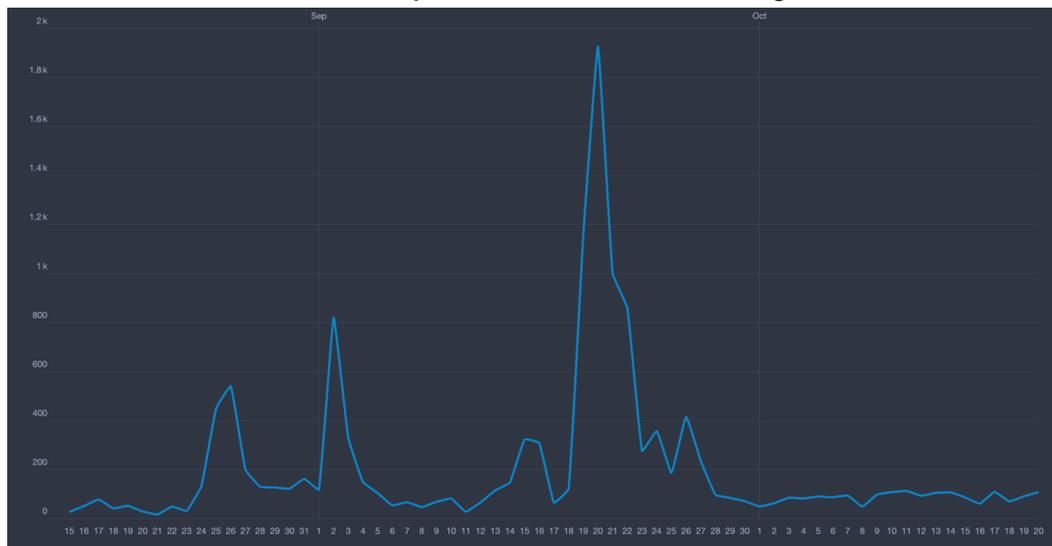
On 24 August 2022 members of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) **forcibly broke** into a World Food Programme (WFP) warehouse in Mekelle city, Tigray region, and looted 12 full fuel tankers loaded with 570,000 litres of fuel intended for WFP operations, putting **millions at risk of starvation** as a result. This incident was exploited in a social media disinformation campaign that suggested that the WFP had deliberately aided the TPLF with food and arms supplies.

This bulletin discusses some of the social media statements and images created to spread disinformation about aid agencies. The false information shared via social media is a contributing factor to the shrinking of the humanitarian space in Ethiopia. The disinformation campaign undermined trust in the neutrality, impartiality and independence of the aid sector.

The bulletin outlines the allegations made against the WFP and cites other examples of false accusations against other donors and international organisations, including the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

These allegations often peaked in response to conflict-related reports.

Figure I: Number of Facebook and Twitter posts related to the WFP, 15 August – 20 October 2022



Posts” refers to the aggregation of Facebook and Twitter social media posts originating from an IP address registered in Ethiopia that referenced “WFP” or “World Food Programme”. Any mainstream newspaper article published via the newspaper’s Facebook or Twitter account is also counted as a social media post. The bumps in the volume of posts related to the WFP are correlated to the following events: i) the hijacking of the fuel trucks on 24 August; ii) the start of the Ethiopian and Eritrean offensive against the Tigrayan rebels; and iii) the publishing of the Report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia on 19 September. **Source: Insecurity Insight**

## Disinformation targeting the WFP: allegations of collusion with the TPLF

In recent months the highly publicised incident involving the violent looting of a dozen WFP fuel tanks in Mekelle city by Tigrayan armed forces has been widely instrumentalised to accuse the UN of colluding with the TPLF, the Tigrayan paramilitary group that the Ethiopian government had [classified as a terrorist organisation](#) in May 2021. An analysis of thousands of Facebook and Twitter posts mentioning the WFP in Ethiopia from August 2022 shows evidence of a sophisticated and deliberate disinformation campaign aimed at the organisation.

One example is that of a Twitter post retweeted more than four hundred times of a propaganda-style image ostensibly showing a handshake between a TPLF and WFP representative. In direct reference to the Mekelle incident, underneath the handshake is written “WFP The Logistics Department of TPLF” (see Image I). The author falsely argues in the tweet that the WFP’s failure to investigate the incident “leads only to one conclusion. The WFP was complicit.”

However, the WFP’s executive director, David Beasley, had strongly condemned the incident in a [tweet](#) published on 25 August 2022.

In another example, a Twitter post that has been retweeted nearly a thousand times takes aim at the US government and alleges that the WFP has delivered arms to the TPLF on its behalf: “The US did every thing to help [the] TPLF & to dismantle Ethiopia: ... Provide ammunitions [sic] to [the] TPLF in name of aid via [the] WFP.”

Other images circulated on Twitter also indicated the sophisticated methods employed by this campaign – which, it is worth noting, is conducted in English and not an Ethiopian language, possibly suggesting that the targeted audience is an international one.

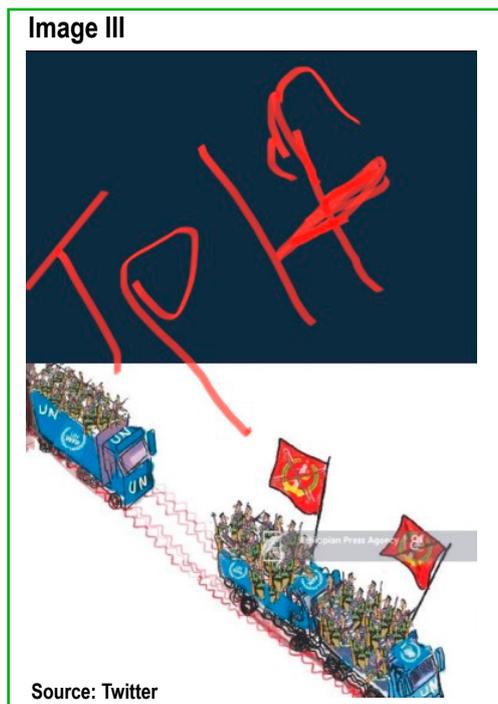
One such image consists of a manipulated version of the WFP’s logo that makes the abbreviation WFP mean “Weapons Funneling Program” (see Image II). The symbolic wheat stalks and corn cob in the normal WFP logo are replaced with weapons, including a grenade, an axe, a dagger, a machine gun and a military two-way radio. Hanging from the laurel wreath are the flags of the United States and European Union (EU), implying that the WFP is their agent and that they are behind the supply of weapons to the TPLF.

Image I



Image II





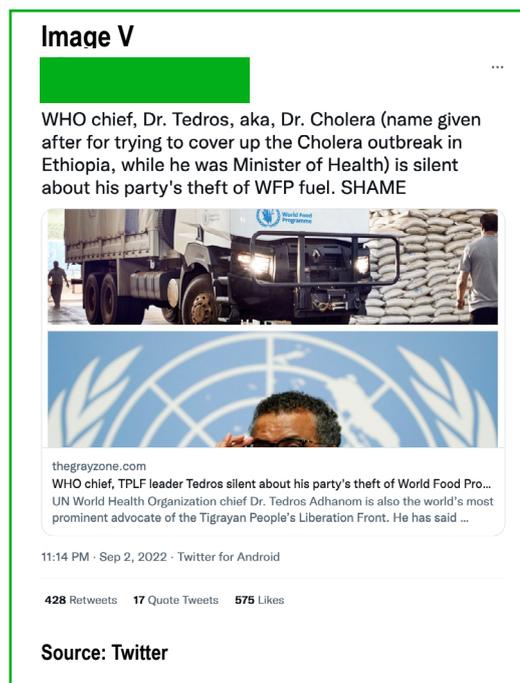
In another telling image, TPLF soldiers are seen aboard WFP trucks, presumably on their way to the fighting (see Image III).

The disinformation did not only target the WFP, and was extended to other UN organisations and their donors. The WHO and USAID were also regularly targeted. One social media user, for example, argued the following: “WFP and USAID are the main sponsors of TPLF. They should be held accountable for all Tigray, Amara, and Afar damages. Neocolonialism at its highest through these western organizations must end.” In another example, a tweet accusing the WFP of providing support for the TPFL included an image also accusing USAID of supplying food to the Tigrayan armed forces (see image IV).

The incident in which TPLF fighters broke into the WFP warehouse in particular has been used to attack other aid organisations and accuse them of partiality.

An example is that of a tweet targeting the director-general of the WHO, a native of Tigray, who has also been the target of a systematic campaign on Twitter in Ethiopia alleging that he is supporting and abetting the Tigrayans following his public interventions on the developing humanitarian crisis in the region.

The tweet, which has been shared more than four hundred times and attracted nearly 600 likes, accuses the WHO director-general of remaining “silent about his party’s theft of WFP fuel” (see image V).



## Official Ethiopian government positions

On 27 October 2022, in the days preceding the ceasefire deal between the Ethiopian government and Tigrayan rebels, an Ethiopian government spokesperson referred to the WFP Mekelle incident and **promised** that “the government will oversee the distribution of aid in all parts of the country, including Tigray”. **According** to the Ethiopian Press Agency, an official state news distribution agency, this measure will be undertaken to prevent “aid grain and medicine that meant [sic] to the needy [from being] stolen by any terrorist group”.

Some social media users welcomed the announced measure, with one commentator writing the following: “Right decision by Ethiopian gov’t, USAID and other in’t organizations arm & provide logistics to TPLF rebels.” Once again, it is noteworthy that the response is in English, not a local language.

On 29 October 2022 a government spokesperson **alleged** that their supposed support for the TPLF and other groups has resulted in “an outburst of widespread and irreversible hatred of the US & EU”.<sup>1</sup>

Some state-run media outlets have also published articles that accuse aid agencies of undermining Ethiopia by propagating the TPLF’s views. The UN and other international organisations are accused of conducting “**a coordinated media war on Ethiopia**” in an article published by the state-run Ethiopian Press Agency on 1 November 2022:

International human rights organizations were also at the forefront to confuse misinforming and tarnish the image of the ENDF [Ethiopian National Defence Forces] and the government. Look! They are supporting a terrorist organization that has massacred thousands of its troops and officers who were fighting in the rank and file of the terrorist army. ... Even the UN agencies continued to conduct a coordinated media war on Ethiopia and have escalated their propaganda led by the Secretary-General who lamented that “everything is out of control in Ethiopia” hoping for total devastation of the country. For a couple of days, apart from the propaganda war on the country by the WHO Director Tedros Adhanom major UN systems were fabricating news that the entire country is hit by drought, cholera, Malaria and an unprecedented lack of medicaments in the entire country.

## Profile analysis

An analysis of a sample of Twitter profiles found to be spreading disinformation in Ethiopia about the WFP indicates that the people engaged in this activity tend to be online activists who post extremely regularly on topics related to the civil war from a pro-government perspective. There are no strong indications that the profiles are fake.

A minority of the profiles can be described as being those of online “influencers”, with two profiles having gained a large number of followers.

Finally, the social media users in the sample are predominantly male of Ethiopian nationality. The fact that many of these tweets are in English suggests they are aimed at an international, not local audience.

## Conclusions

- Negotiated access to provide aid to affected populations in areas controlled by non-state armed actors is often misrepresented as aid agency support for these non-state actors.
- Security incidents are often misrepresented on social media as examples of an association between aid agencies and a conflict party. Non-fatal incidents in particular are often used to spread disinformation by claiming an association between an aid agency and an armed or political actor. (See [Helicopter Crash](#) and [ambush on a vehicle in the DRC](#))
- Disinformation about aid programmes very often targets food and health programmes.

## Recommendations

- Monitor the way in which aid programmes are represented on social media and design strategies to counter mis- and disinformation about aid agency objectives.
- Be aware that non-fatal security incidents may pose a particular risk for misrepresentation on social media, and design appropriate communication strategies in response.
- Be aware that the humanitarian imperative to provide food and medical aid without discrimination is very easily turned into social media disinformation that accuses aid programmes of favouring a particular social group.

## Further resources

- DRC Social Media Monitoring: [WFP Helicopter Crash](#) (Nov 2022) and [CENI and the Red Cross](#) (Jul 2022)
- Violence Against or Obstruction of Health Care: 2021 SHCC Ethiopia [Factsheet](#)
- Aid in Danger Bi-Monthly [News Briefs](#): Available since October 2014

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Insecurity Insight. 2022. Ethiopia: Disinformation Campaign Targeting Aid Agencies: Conflict and Hunger: Social Media Monitoring, November 2022. Switzerland: Insecurity Insight. [bit.ly/ETHDisinfoSMMNov2022](https://bit.ly/ETHDisinfoSMMNov2022)

<sup>1</sup>The full [quote](#) reads as follows: "The US & EU continue forcing TPLF and other ethnic extremist entities upon Ethiopia. As a result, our people started an outburst of widespread and irreversible hatred of the @US & @EU. We are losing our faith in the Western media, the US and EU's role models and moral forces."