

THE MORAL DILEMMA OF INTERNMENT: THE CASE OF TPLF SLEEPER CELLS

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INTRODUCTION

This paper briefly examines internment as a confinement of a group of individuals belonging to the belligerent parties for military reasons to avoid threats of sabotage during the eminence of war¹. It doesn't have to be foreign nationals. It can be applied to own profiled nationals belonging to a section of the society posing a potential threat (Malkin, 2004). The study concentrates on internment for the period between 1940 to date in the United Kingdom and the United States and draws lessons from them for Ethiopia. It checks if the experience of the two countries can be safely applied to Ethiopia, to avoid Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) sympathizing saboteurs from harming other citizens and even panic attacks on themselves by the alarmed community.

Emperor Haile Selassie I wrote:

"In all civilized world if one state wants to wage war against another, it announces its intention of doing so. After such an announcement has been made, the diplomatic representatives of the two sides return to their home countries. If their citizens so desire, they may also leave." (Selassie, 1976)

This protocol exists between modern countries. For example, Japanese residents of the United States of America did not get that chance in advance to leave, as Japan launched a pre-empted strike at Pearl Harbour.

The same thing happened in Ethiopia when Italy launched a surprise attack on Ethiopia in 1935, however, Ethiopia didn't act against Italians living in

¹ **[1] The International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC, 2014) defines Internment as deprivation of liberty - detention - is a common and lawful occurrence in armed conflict that is governed by many provisions of international humanitarian law (IHL). Like other bodies of law, IHL prohibits arbitrary detention.**

the country. To this day, it has been a longstanding tradition that strangers should not be harmed, but looked after, no matter what. Ethiopians were naïve and God-fearing people. As a result, Ethiopia paid dearly.

The justification of confinement of people for security reasons during the war has been debated. Advocates of internment during war justify the action under the primary protection of the safety of citizens and possible passing of information to the enemy or even attacks from sympathetic individuals to the invading force. However, the opponents of the idea argue that it violates human rights. Categorizing people according to their race, colour, faith, or origin is discrimination. Is it?

Malkin (2004) strongly suggests that a balance must be drawn between civil liberties and national security.

INTERNMENT IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

The archive of World War II memories gathered by the BBC states, "Internment of civilian nationals belonging to opposing sides was carried out, in varying degrees, by all belligerent powers in World War II." (BBC, 2014)

The BBC sounded like: "The UK was not the only one interning citizens of alien origin."

BBC Fact File estimates that "at the outbreak of war [against Nazi Germany] there were around 80,000 potential enemy aliens in Britain who, it was feared, could be spies, or willing to assist Britain's enemies in the event of an invasion."

The UK gave a legal veil to its actions in dealing with the issue. It brought all German and Austrian citizens over the age of 16 before special tribunals dividing them into three groups.

A. High-security risks - numbering just under 600, who were immediately interned,

B. Doubtful cases - numbering around 6,500, who were supervised and subjected to restrictions,

C. No security risks - numbering around 64,000, who were left at liberty. More than 55,000 of category 'C' were recognized as refugees from Nazi oppression. The vast majority of these were Jewish.

However, Group B was rounded up in 1940 after the failure of the Norwegian campaign, noticing the insurgence of spies and the people's agitation against these aliens. This group included Germans and Austrians. The Italians were also included in this group when Italy became a potential threat aligning with the Nazis. These people were seen as the security risk of the nation. Later, even Group C was also affected due to tabloid press scaremongering articles about foreigners. This led to a public call to do something about the aliens in their midst. That could have been where things gone wrong had the British Government did not have interned the potential threats.

The government decided to round up all male enemy aliens, regardless of classification, between 16 and 60 years of age and all women in category B, sometimes with their children (Pistol, 2020).

Category 'A' interned in camps erected across the UK, the largest settlement of which was on the Isle of Man. Category 'B' and some in Category 'C' were held in camps in major cities throughout the country.

Pistol estimates Up to 30,000 Germans, Austrians, and Italians were arrested during May and June 1940 and sent to temporary holding camps (Pistol, 2018)



Another internment was brought about in the UK in August 1971 due to IRA and Loyalists' tit-for-tat disturbances. It is called "Operation Demetrius". It involved the arrest of more than 340 people from Catholic and nationalist backgrounds who were kept in safe places away from the population (Moriarty, 2019). Some might argue that Britain did not consider internment of the Irish as an option to round up some of the Irish who was held in confinement because they were a threat to the peace, security, and safety of Britain. However, Moriarty (ibid) still considers them internees because they were not formally charged for any crime, but confined for fear of the safety of citizens. That action by the UK Government qualifies the steps taken as an intern.

INTERNMENT IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The United States was a neutral country during the Second World War up until 07 December 1941. However, on one Sunday morning before 08:00 a.m., everything was changed. Imperial Japan launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbour (PRUITT, 2018). This is outside the protocol of conducting war in the civilized world, as Emperor Haile Selassie mentioned. The actions of Imperial Japan subjected American nationals of Japanese origin and Japanese living in the United States to be caught in between. It was a pre-emptive surprise attack where the USA did not expect anything like that would happen. With that, the USA was dragged into The Second World War that ended up with the hydrogen bombardment of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

If we draw a parallel, the pre-emptive attack of the Japanese air fleet was like the recent Tigray People's Liberation Front's (TPLF) "lightning attack" on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF). The justification given by both actions is the same: the latter would launch an attack sooner or later anyway. That was cowardice.

It took the USA authorities some time to wake up from the shock and think straight to decide what steps it should take next. Retaliation was imminent. Japan awoke a sleeping giant. However, you don't just go to war driven by emotions. So, the US took stock of residents that belong to Japanese heritage. By the time Pearl Harbour was attacked, 127,000 Japanese was

living in the United States. The Government of President Franklin Roosevelt was instructed by Executive Order 9066 to send 120,000 men, women, and children of Japanese origin to a concentration camp (Roosevelt, 2018). Two-thirds of them were US citizens. They stayed there until the war was over.



There were huge arguments about the legal implication of that action at the time by the US Government, but the safety of the country outweighed the risk of being accused of racism. Setting them free before the war was over was considered a national threat since they could sympathize with Japan. The USA Government cited **national security** as justification for this policy although it violated many of the most essential constitutional rights of Japanese Americans.

THE ETHIOPIAN EXPERIENCE

The Ethiopian situation was totally different. Internment was rarely considered during the war, perhaps because of cost and the logistics it involved. For example, In May 1998 war broke out between Ethiopia and

Eritrea over a piece of land called Badme. As Eritrea was part of Ethiopia up until 27 April 1993, a great number of Eritreans had been living throughout the country. The moment the war broke out, the TPLF authorities considered those Eritreans as “national risks,” making the case the first in Ethiopian History. The Eritreans were not interned. However, the then Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi decided to expel them from the country. When challenged, he shrugged his shoulders and said, “if we do not like the colour of their eyes, they had to leave”. As a result, 75,000 Eritreans were rounded up, evicted from Ethiopia to Eritrea (Solomon, 2018). The Prime Minister could have put more convincing arguments than that, referring to security risks.

On the other hand, the regime of The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which was dominated by the TPLF, for example, used frequent internment as a means of removing young people is considered a threat to its power. After months of detention, which it calls the training period, it used to release dressing them up with a T-shirt that read “Never again” (አይደገምም), which meant “I would never protest against the government again”. The following picture depicts Amhara internees in 2016 after TPLF sent its soldiers to burn down the Gondar marketplace².



² [2] <https://borkena.com/2016/09/16/ethiopia-gonder-fire-entire-market-with-420-stores-reduced-to-ashes/>

That was a brutal crackdown by the TPLF. Such brutality, however, didn't save it from being ousted from power by a popular uprising. Right now, intending to come back to power, the same group of terrorists has plunged the country into a conflict that is threatening the whole region of East Africa.

Because TPLF's and its supporters sabotage the war, it wages in Ethiopia, internment is currently brewing in the country. On the night of 03 November 2020, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) Special Forces, militia, and Tigrayan ethnic officers launched a surprise attack on the ENDF barracks in Tigray. The attack resulted in 36,000 members of the ENDF being unaccounted for (Mekonnen, 2021)

On 04 November 2020, the Federal Government sent law enforcement troops to Tigray to apprehend those who were behind the massacre. It succeeded in capturing some of the ring leaders of the attack, some were killed, some remain at large.

In June 2021, the Government of Ethiopia declared a Unilateral Humanitarian Ceasefire and withdrew its troops from the Tigray region to give peace a chance. The leadership of the TPLF that was on the run returned to Mekelle, the regional capital, and called back its disbursed army. One would expect them to use the opportunity for peaceful activities. However, the belligerent TPLF leadership decided to fight outside its territory to replace the Federal Government. It immediately launched an attack on Afar and Amhara regions with the intention come back to power. So far, hundreds of thousands are killed and around 850,000 people are displaced from the two regions.

In its 27 years of brutal rule of Ethiopia, the TPLF had armed the majority of Tigrayans to support the regime and defend themselves in case of any resistance of the non-Tigrayan citizens. Leave alone Tigrayans, even loyal "opposition" party members and those non Tigrayans who worked for the TPLF were armed, as the recent court case revealed (Fasil, 2020). Literally, the TPLF supporting Tigrayans behaved as if they owned the entire country, and the rest of the citizens were marginalised to second class.

As of 31 October 2021, the TPLF waged a bitter battle to capture two strategic and industrial cities of Dessie and Kombolcha in Wello³. In the city of Dessie alone, there were more than 30,000 people of Tigrayan origin living peacefully until the attack on the city started. The ENDF and the Amhara Special Force defended the city for more than a week keeping the invaders at bay. However, the ethnic Tigrayans citizens of Dessie came out of their residences and attacked the soldiers from behind, which changed the game of the war. As a result, the TPLF forces entered the two cities and are now stripping the city of its belongings. The following KPR Radio conversation between journalists Jemal Countess and Ann Garrison reveals how the TPLF sleepers in Dessie were instrumental in enabling the TPLF to overrun Dessie.



Similar behaviours were observed in 1991 when the joint army of the TPLF and Eritrean People’s Liberation Front were fighting to overthrow the military regime of Col. Mengistu Hailemariam. However, in those days, the sleeper cells were not armed like these days. Nobody touched the Tigrayans or Eritreans at that time and yet they were instrumental in supporting the rebels both financially and provision of information.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/01/tigrayan-forces-claim-control-of-two-cities-on-road-to-ethiopias-capital>

WHAT SHALL BE DONE?

Tigrayans are living in large numbers throughout the country. Now, the Government of Ethiopia is facing a dilemma. Most of them are armed as indicated above. Shouldn't the Government of Ethiopia deal with the threat posed by these sleeper cells, given the lessons learned from Dessie and Kombolcha? Holding them somewhere in camps throughout the country may be a violation of their constitutional rights. Leaving them at large is, however, allowing them to hit from behind as they did in the city of Dessie and Kombolcha. Just as the United Kingdom does not want the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to take over Westminster, the Ethiopian government does not either wish the separatist brutal TPLF to overrun the capital city, Addis Ababa. Everywhere the TPLF went, they killed people and farm animals, raped women, and children looted everything they came across, no matter how big or small the value of the war spoils could be. Amnesty International says: "They defy morality or any iota of humanity." (Callamard, November 9, 2021).

The Ethiopian government needs to take lessons from the United Kingdom, the USA, and other countries on how they dealt with the German and Japanese or even the IRA potential threats. No country has any moral upper ground to accuse the Government of Ethiopia of taking the same action to protect their own citizens. Taking the right decision is paramount to safeguard the safety and security of the citizens. Internment is a temporary measure to protect the Defence Force from being backstabbed yet again. It might also be found necessary to protect the Tigrayans themselves from an angry mob. If TPLF supporters are isolated, the internment of the sleeper cells is second to none solution.

In conclusion, here is the advice suggested by Malkin (Ibid). It is important, especially in times of war, that governments should consider nationality, ethnicity, and religious affiliation in their homeland security policies and engage in what she calls "threat profiling." These steps may entail bothersome or offensive measures, but she argues, they are preferable to "being incinerated at your office desk by a flaming hijacked plane". Desperate times call for desperate measures.

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