

RESURGENT CLASHES IN ETHIOPIA

Africa's Newest Protracted Conflict in the Making

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INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmad Ali the Nobel Peace Prize for the pivotal role he played in concluding the unresolved Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict. Abiy's Ethiopia was internationally recognized as a beacon of democracy in a conflict-ridden Africa and commended for its efforts towards liberalization¹. However, the Ethiopia of today stands in stark contrast of these past visualizations of the country. In November 2020, the country was faced with the start of Africa's newest conflict. Armed violence between the Ethiopian military and Tigray militia threatens to destabilize not only the Ethiopian state but also the stability of the East African Region due to shared boundaries with volatile states, trans-boundary ethnic groups (such as ethnic Somalis), and internal ethnic divides.

Resurgent clashes after a supposed government victory in Tigray are indicative of the fact that the Tigray conflict is likely to be a protracted one. These clashes and other factors, such as the nature of violence, commission of atrocity crimes and the impact of famine on human security, will be explored. The Ethiopian case can provide an example of how traditional and non-conventional security threats can collectively destabilize a state and contribute to insecurity. The implications of this in terms of region security will also be considered. While in some cases insurgencies fail to mount comprehensive and successful campaigns against a state's security forces, the Tigray war serves as an example of the opposite. It is the group's success in this second round of clashes against the government, the snowballing humanitarian crisis, and the regional implications of the conflict that makes Ethiopia a poignant case to study.

This is followed by tracing the reasons behind Putin's choice of escalating tensions and the probable diplomatic gains he may have been eyeing. The options for the US, its allies and other Pacific stakeholders like European Union (France and Germany) will also be analyzed.

BACKGROUND

Home to a federal government that has distributed power along ethnic lines, a strong sense of ethnic identity has directed Ethiopian politics at the regional and national levels. The frail

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¹ Schneidman, Witney. 2019. "Ethiopia: Africa's next powerhouse?". March 26. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2019/03/26/ethiopia-africas-next-powerhouse/>

nature of this set-up was made visible during November 2021. Following the cancellation of regional election in Tigray, Ethiopia owing to COVID-19 restriction, the regional administration proceeded to hold election as an act of defiance. Staged against a central government they believe is working to undermine them, militants in Tigray have since launched a full-fledged war against the Abiy Ahmad's administration. The root of this hatred lies in long standing ethnic tensions, marginalization from federal politics, and the policies of Abiy Ahmad in particular. As Ethiopia, which was once a beacon for democracy in conflict ridden Africa, descends into a protracted conflict itself, old scars re-emerge and the fragility of ethnic federalism becomes clear.

The current system of ethnic federalism was created in 1991 after the overthrow of the military junta. While the Tigrayan groups, who played a key role in the overthrow of junta, continued to hold considerable power in successive Ethiopian regimes, this seemingly changed with the advent of politician Abiy Ahmad in 2018. Abiy rise to power came within the context of domestic concerns over the maintenance of human rights and democratization². Since 1991, Ethiopia was governed by a coalition government that held Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) at its helm. With Abiy's election as Prime Minister, the new administration dissolved the longstanding coalition and created a new political party (the Prosperity Party) which the TPLF refused to join. The Abiy government is also noted to have prosecuted several Tigray officials on corruption charges. In addition to the regional elections in Tigray, tensions also escalated when Tigrayan forces allegedly raided an army base to steal weapons. This served as the final spark of the conflict.

Since November 2020, both parties (the coalition of Eritrean and Amhara forces under Abiy and the Tigray Defense Force) have been engaging in armed conflict. Following the alleged raid, Abiy declared a "law enforcement" operation through the means of a military campaign. Violence in the following week continued, meanwhile regional and international actors tried unsuccessfully to mediate. Ethiopia's shared borders with conflict prone Eritrea and Sudan also added to heightening violence and cross border tensions. By December 2021, the government forces had all but subdued the Tigrayan forces weeks into the military assault; however, the recent resurgence of violence served as a dangerous indicator that the Ethiopian conflict would be a protracted one. The conflict has since become the source extensive forced migration and displacement, sparked a man-made famine, and has been the source for a wave of atrocity crimes.

THE VARIOUS DIMENSTIONS OF RESURGENT CONFLICT

Current Standing of the Conflict

Following what was presented as a decisive victory by the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) in November 2020, the offensive capabilities of the Tigray Defense Force (TDF) were

² BBC. 2021. "Ethiopia's Tigray War: The short, medium and long story". 29 June. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54964378>

compromised and pushed back into rural Tigray. As the international community took the take-over as an opportunity address the vital humanitarian needs of conflict affected peoples and push for a diplomatic resolution of the conflict. However, Crisis Group³ reported that after being ousted from Mekele, the leadership of the TPLF “consolidated its position in rural areas” and capitalized on the wide support it holds from local Tigrayans. Failure to account for this and for prematurely declaring victory has costed the ENDF. In June 2021, the TDF led an offensive into the city of Mekele, removed the resident ENDF forces, and took back control of the region’s capital. Received with wide fanfare, it is now clear that the TDF has reemerged stronger and more popular.

The Tigray Defense Force, the armed wing of the TPFL, initially gained strength by acquisitioning military tanks, missiles, etc. and filling up its ranks with Tigrayans. After its retreat into the region’s rural areas, the group had lost much of its military equipment due to heavy aerial attacks from the ENDF. However, Crisis Group⁴ also notes that TDF has been able to recover from this for the better by gaining a “more mobile and lightly armed” that has also been swelling in numbers as disgruntled Tigrayans are joining the TDF in large numbers. While details on how the resistance force was able to build itself back up after initially losing Mekele are unclear, it is clear the force has emerged stronger than before given that it has since been able to recover not only Mekele but is also seeking to reclaim other areas.

The TPFL and the Tigray Defense Force are seemingly bent on securing a full victory. They have since denied joining in with the government’s declaration of unilateral ceasefire in Mekele. A spokesperson for the TDF has instead iterated the group’s intension to “degrade enemy fighting capabilities”, referring to pushing back not only the ENDF, but also the Eritrean forces that have been assisting Ethiopian force⁵. Some reports state that out of the ENDF’s twenty divisions, “seven have been completely destroyed, three are in a shambles”⁶. While other authorities on the subject say it is too soon to estimate, these numbers nonetheless give a rough idea of the kind of damages that the ENDF may be facing. Additionally, the TDF itself also claims to have “neutralized” tens of thousands of government soldiers. However, it is unclear as to what is meant by “neutralize” as it may refer to killing of enemy soldier, their capture, disarmament, etc.

³ International Crisis Group. 2021. “Ethiopia’s Tigray War: A Deadly, Dangerous Stalemate” April 2. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/b171-ethiopia-tigray-war-deadly-dangerous-stalemate>

⁴ International Crisis Group. 2021. “Ethiopia’s Tigray War: A Deadly, Dangerous Stalemate” April 2. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/b171-ethiopia-tigray-war-deadly-dangerous-stalemate>

⁵ Al Jazeera. 2021. “Tigray rebels vow to drive out ‘enemies’ after retaking Mekele”. June 29. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/29/tigray-rebels-vow-to-drive-out-enemies-despite-ceasefire>

⁶ Nunis, Vivienne. 2021. “Ethiopia's Tigray crisis: Rebel resurgence raises questions for Abiy Ahmed”. July 3. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57693784>

The military victory of the TDF is particularly concerning because it could have on national stability. After re-capturing Mekele, the TDF seems to be willing to extend the fight beyond Ethiopia's Tigray Region and into the Amhara region. This would mean that destabilization of Ethiopia is a possibility due to which containing the conflict will be increasingly difficult to achieve. In line with this, according to experts another key consequence of this rapid rise in power and influence is that negotiating with the TDF may become harder for international actors⁷. Compared to November 2020, the TDF and the TPLF holds much greater leverage. Given their control over major cities like Mekele and their intension to expand their reach, not only within Tigray but also beyond, the group holds much more leverage now than before. However, their cooperation will be crucial to not only provide access to humanitarian organizations, but also to ensure that there is popular support for their work.

Regional Impact

The regional architecture around Ethiopia has had sever implications for the conflict within Ethiopia and its cross-border spread. As mentioned previously, the neighboring countries of Eritrea and Sudan have become intertwined with the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia. While Eritrea was a key actor in the conflict from the Ethiopian side, new violence has been raging along the Ethiopia-Sudan border. These two developments are deeply concerning for several reasons which will be explored in this section. Regionalization of conflict could add to conflict in Sudan and pull otherwise relatively conflict free Eritrea into conflict as well.

The Ethiopia-Eritrea link has been a crucial one during the ongoing Tigray conflict. Prime Minister Abiy had been accused of involving Eritrean forces within the ENDF, a fact that was confirmed by U.S. reports in December of 2020 and finally by Eritrean authorities in April 2021^{8 9}. Eritrea's involvement in the conflict has been controversial from the very beginning, not only because it risks regionalizing the conflict, but also because the TPLF has long been hostile towards Eritrea and the Eritrean forces have been known to be committing atrocities within Tigray. Abiy Ahmed is noted to have revealed in a parliamentary address that Eritrean forces had "fed, clothed and armed retreating Ethiopian soldiers" during the initial stages of

⁷ Al Jazeera. 2021. "Tigray rebels vow to drive out 'enemies' after retaking Mekele". June 29. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/29/tigray-rebels-vow-to-drive-out-enemies-despite-ceasefire>

⁸ Al Jazeera. 2021. "Eritrea confirms its troops are fighting in Ethiopia's Tigray". April 17. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/17/eritrea-confirms-its-troops-are-fighting-ethiopias-tigray>

⁹ Stewart, Phil. 2020. "Exclusive: U.S. says reports of Eritrean troops in Ethiopia's Tigray are 'credible'". December 11. <https://www.reuters.com/article/ethiopia-conflict-eritrea-usa-idINKBN28L07J>

fighting¹⁰. In April 2021, Eritrean authorities also admitted that they had physical troop presence in Tigray¹¹.

Despite an Ethiopian order for all Eritrean forces to withdraw from Ethiopian territories, the extent to which this is happening in practice is doubtful. While one new report notes that Eritrean troops have left from the towns of Shire, Axum, and Adwa, the United States has also expressed doubts about whether Eritrean troops are withdrawing altogether¹². Another report instead suggested that Eritrean forces have settled along the border areas between Ethiopia and Eritrea¹³. A spokesperson of the TPLF stated that the group will push for a pursuit of Eritrean forces across the border if needed, a fact that is reinforced by local reports that Tigray soldiers have been travelling west towards the Ethiopia-Eritrea border to fight¹⁴.

Another sensitive border is the one shared with Sudan. In addition to a tumultuous economic and political climate, Sudan has a disputed border with Ethiopia and now hosts Ethiopian nearly 70,319 refugees that fled to the country to seek respite from their own conflict¹⁵. This makes tense cross-border dynamics between Ethiopia and Sudan recently sensitive to escalation. Sudanese soldiers manning the border took advantage of lax Ethiopian security presence and captured Ethiopian controlled areas of the disputed territory. Crisis Group notes that Eritrean involvement in counter-offensives along the Sudanese border also means the given the recent withdrawal of Eritrean troops, the ENDF will be spread even thinner¹⁶. With no signs of these tensions relaxing, it is possible that the current occasional skirmishes along the border could escalate to more violent conflicts. However, internal political pressure seems to have caused both governments to dig into their heels further^{17 18}.

¹⁰ BBC. 2020. "Tigray crisis: Eritrea's role in Ethiopian conflict". December 28. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55295650>

¹¹ Al Jazeera. 2021. "Eritrea confirms its troops are fighting in Ethiopia's Tigray". April 17. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/17/eritrea-confirms-its-troops-are-fighting-ethiopia-tigray>

¹² The Associated Press. 2021. "Eritrean forces withdraw from key towns in Ethiopia's Tigray 1 day after declaration of ceasefire". June 29. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/ethiopia-tigray-ceasefire-1.6084930>

¹³ Stars and Stripes. 2021. "Ethiopia hints at Tigray military move; ceasefire in doubt". June 30. <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/africa/2021-06-30/ethiopia-forces-tigray-military-cease-fire-2007834.html>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ United Nations Population Fund. 2021. "UNFPA Sudan Response to the Ethiopian Refugees Situation". May 25. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/unfpa-sudan-response-ethiopian-refugees-situation-report-7-25-may-2021#:~:text=As%20of%2025%20May%202021,%2C%20Gedaref%2C%20and%20Blue%20Nile.>

¹⁶ International Crisis Group. 2021. "Ethiopia's Tigray War: A Deadly, Dangerous Stalemate". April 2. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/b171-ethiopia-tigray-war-deadly-dangerous-stalemate>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Woldemichael, Shewit. 2021. "Ethiopia-Sudan border tensions must be de-escalated". May 10. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/ethiopia-sudan-border-tensions-must-be-de-escalated>

The Pressing Humanitarian Crisis

Almost as soon as ENDF's military campaign into Tigray began, concerns about maintenance of the essential human rights of Tigrayans was also brought up. What started as deep concern over the Ethiopian government's unwillingness to grant IGOs and international NGOs access to conflict affected areas has now turning into a fully-fledged mission to control a burgeoning humanitarian crisis. The involvement of Eritrean soldiers, a man-made famine, wartime gender-based violence (GBV), massacres, cutting off individuals from internet and communication networks, and the destruction of critical infrastructure are just some of the many occurrences that have severely impacted the humanitarian situation in Ethiopia. With the changing contours of conflict in Ethiopia, the ability of international actors to monitor the country's rights situation and administer assistance will likely get harder.

Currently, the scope of humanitarian challenges in Ethiopia is quite wide. The issues that will be discussed here are the impending threat of a famine, gender-based violence, and internal displacement. While exact numbers are hard to come by, MSF¹⁹ estimates that hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced due to the crisis while another source states that as many as 1,900,000 have been internally displaced²⁰. Many have clustered around schools and universities, in semi-permanent, make-shift shelters. While international organizations have been building and maintaining camps, a Ghent University²¹ report found that 27% of IDP are still living without shelter and 6% are living in self-constructed shelters. In these camps provision of essential services such as medical care, food, water, clothing, etc., become much harder as camp management is not formalized and organized.

Another rapidly emerging concern has been the risk of a man-made famine. The United Nations has warned of a possible famine, highlighting concerning cases of starvation. This is supported by projections of the Famine Early Warning System Network that has classified many parts of Tigray as falling between Phase 3 (crisis) and Phase 4 (emergency)²². It also highlighted that the worst affected areas in Tigray are likely already in Phase 5 (famine)²³. This indicates that if sufficient measures are not taken to alleviate the humanitarian crisis, the likelihood of a man-made famine occurring will increase from Phase 4 to Phase 5 (famine) in areas where this has not yet happened are high. To address this, international actors and local partners have been supplying food aid as consistently as possible to affected populations. Since May 1, 2.3 million out of 5.2 million people have received food aid²⁴.

¹⁹ Medecins Sans Frontieres. 2021. "Tigray's cities fill with displaced people fleeing insecurity and in need of aid". March 29. <https://www.msf.org/ethiopia-tigray%E2%80%99s-cities-fill-displaced-people-need-aid>

²⁰ Annys, Sofie, Bempt, Tim Vanden, Negash, Emmet, Nyssen, Jan. 2021. Tigray: Atlas of the humanitarian situation. Ghent University. July 8.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Famine Early Warning Systems Network. 2021. "Ethiopia". May. <https://fews.net/east-africa/ethiopia>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. 2021. "ETHIOPIA – TIGRAY REGION HUMANITARIAN UPDATE". June 17.

Gaining access to vulnerable areas has arguably been the most crucial issues humanitarian organizations are faced with. Much of the early reports detailing the impact of the conflict came from refugees who had fled outside the country's border and into Sudan. Crisis groups states that it was only after considerable international pressure that Ethiopia "promised 'unfettered' aid access" to Tigray and authorities eased bureaucratic restrictions²⁵. Given this, humanitarian access has been "significantly improving" over the past few months²⁶. Another key factor that has been affecting the provision of aid is the response of armed groups present on ground. In some cases, security personnel have been blocking aid vehicles from reaching affected population. In another case, bridges crucial for the passage of aid vehicles were destroyed by armed groups that locals identified as being Amhara, and government authorities claimed were from the TDF²⁷.

Reports of human rights violations at the hands of Eritrean and Ethiopian forces have also been broadly brought forward. On 28th-29th November 2020, Eritrean forces were involved in the massacre of several hundred in the city of Axum. Amnesty International²⁸ notes that extra-judicial killings, the massacre in Axum, widespread looting and more, could amount to a grave violation of International Humanitarian Law. Ethiopian security forces have also been involved in gender-based violence, including rape and assault of women, according to Amnesty²⁹. All these pose as major obstacles to administrating aid and may be violations of international humanitarian law as they violate human rights and prevent individuals from accessing urgent humanitarian needs. Given this reality, NGOs have petitioned the United Nations Human Rights Council to issue a resolution on the Conflict that highlights the grave human rights violations that have taken place through the hands of all the combatant parties³⁰.

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation%20Report%20-%20Ethiopia%20-%20Tigray%20Region%20Humanitarian%20Update%20-%202017%20Jun%202021.pdf>

²⁵ International Crisis Group. 2021. "Ethiopia's Tigray War: A Deadly, Dangerous Stalemate". April 2. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/b171-ethiopia-tigray-war-deadly-dangerous-stalemate>

²⁶ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. 2021. "ETHIOPIA – TIGRAY REGION HUMANITARIAN UPDATE". July 9.

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation%20Report%20-%20Ethiopia%20-%20Tigray%20Region%20Humanitarian%20Update%20-%202019%20Jul%202021.pdf>

²⁷ Fick, Maggie, Houeld, Katherine, Paravicini, Giulia. 2021. "Analysis: Ethiopia govt withdrawal from Tigray capital opens new chapter in war". July 2. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopia-govt-withdrawal-tigray-capital-opens-new-chapter-war-2021-07-02/>

²⁸ Amnesty International. 2021. "Ethiopia: Eritrean troops' massacre of hundreds of Axum civilians may amount to crime against humanity". February 26. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/02/ethiopia-eritrean-troops-massacre-of-hundreds-of-axum-civilians-may-amount-to-crime-against-humanity/>

²⁹ Amnesty International. 2020. "Beyond Law Enforcement". <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/AFR2523582020ENGLISH.PDF>

³⁰ Human Rights Watch. 2021. "NGOs Call for UN Human Rights Council Resolution on Tigray". June 11. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/11/ngos-call-un-human-rights-council-resolution-tigray>

CONCLUSION

Resurgence of ethnic tensions in Ethiopia presents a complex and, most likely, protracted conflict scenario. Much like many other modern conflicts, Ethiopia's conflict is slowly emerging as a civil conflict where the insurgent forces, the TPFL and the TDF, is going against its government to gain greater autonomy or sovereignty. What sets the TPLF and the TDF apart, however, is that the TPLF and the TDF present a strong and organized force that has been able to not only re-emerge quickly after a set-back, but it has also managed to deal a significant blow to the government. The Ethiopian government's loss of Eritrea as a support structure has also contributed to giving Tigrayans a greater chance at victory.

While active conflict itself serves as a potent destabilizing force, the scope of the humanitarian crisis and the everyday difficulties it creates for individuals could also become fodder for groups who wish to recruit vulnerable individuals into armed groups. For instance, a promise of food and a stable income by an armed group during a famine will likely be appealing to individuals who are struggling to supply for their families. Similarly, gender-based violence adds to the broader phenomenon human insecurity during conflict and in some contexts even motivates women to engage in combat to escape it (for instance in the Sri Lankan case some women noted widespread insecurity and sexual violence as reasons why they joined the LTTE). This is precisely why humanitarian and peacebuilding programs not only contribute to alleviating the immediate needs of individuals or long-term development, but they are also a crucial step in helping stabilize a conflict environment.

It is yet to be seen how successful the TPLF will be in fulfilling its nationalist ambitions. While international pressure has forced Ethiopia to abandon its Eritrean backing, it is doubtful that regional and international actors will allow for a protracted conflict within Ethiopia. This is particularly true given that ethnic tensions have also been rising between other ethnic groups of Ethiopia, such as emerging cases of Amhara-Oromo violence. While these have not escalated to full conflict, they nonetheless show a prominent trend of ethnic divisions and violence in the country. The African Union and United Nations are already spreading their limited resources to a range of other protracted conflicts in Africa and beyond. Additionally, the risk of stating inter-state conflict also looms large. Thus, incentives to prevent further escalation are extensive. Whether these efforts will be successful will depend on the ability of regional and international organizations to bring the various parties on board and the consistent provision of resources to help the humanitarian effort.