

Ethiopia slides towards civil war as Tigray conflict escalates

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The escalating military conflict in Tigray, home to six million people, in northern Ethiopia is creating a horrific humanitarian crisis that is spilling out across the country's borders. It threatens to spiral out into a broader civil war across the 110 million-strong country and to engulf the Horn of Africa.

Hundreds of people have died since the fighting began earlier this month after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered airstrikes in response to what he claimed was an attack by Tigray's ruling party, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), on a military compound and deployed troops to the province.

The airstrikes' targets included TPLF positions around the Tigrayan capital of Mekelle, with Ethiopian troops seizing the airbase in Humera in a bid to secure the border with Sudan and prevent TPLF forces from escaping. Sudan has responded by deploying its forces to the border, potentially blockading Tigray which already had 600,000 people in need of aid.

Fighting has been reported in several locations, but details are sketchy as the federal government in Addis Ababa has cut the telephone and internet lines, arrested journalists, and prevented people reaching the province.

Abiy's government has declared a six-month state of emergency in the province, while Ethiopia's federal parliament has declared Tigray's regional government illegal and voted to dissolve it. It said that the Tigray leadership had "violated the constitution and endangered the constitutional system" by holding regional elections in September after Abiy postponed this year's promised elections, ostensibly due to the pandemic, as anti-government protests and opposition mounted.

Parliament said a new caretaker administration would hold elections and "implement decisions passed on by the federal government." It declared that the TPLF should be branded a terrorist group after blaming it for a massacre of ethnic Amhara in Oromia on November 2, further

escalating tensions.

Abiy's reformist pretensions essentially mean loosening the country's ties with China and adopting neo-liberal economic policies that open up Ethiopia's largely state-run economy to the transnational corporations and financial institutions to the acclaim of the imperialist powers. He is a former military intelligence officer and minister of defence in the previous TPLF-led government. Abiy hopes that the military assault on Tigray will secure the removal of the TPLF leadership and establish a new leadership subservient to the federal government.

Abiy has rejected calls by the United Nations and the African Union for talks and reiterated his intention to prevail by force. But his aggressive response may backfire and prompt the TPLF and its supporters to dig in. More than half of Ethiopia's army is based in Tigray, a legacy of its war with Eritrea, and its support is not assured, prompting Abiy to sack his army chief, head of intelligence and foreign minister.

The conflict may inspire Ethiopia's other semi-autonomous, ethnically based states, including Abiy's own Oromia where an armed rebellion is already underway, to secede. Politicians of all stripes have whipped up ethnic tensions to prevent a unified struggle by the impoverished masses against the Ethiopian elites. Killings and intimidation are a daily occurrence. Unrest is mounting in the Somali region, with at least 27 people killed in clashes on the border between the Afar and Somali regional states in the last few weeks. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission said gunmen had killed at least 34 people on a passenger bus on Saturday night in the western region of Benishangul-Gumuz that borders Sudan.

Ethiopian officials said that Tigrayan forces had fired rockets towards Amhara state that is adjacent to Tigray, with one rocket hitting the airport in Gondar and another the airport in Bahir Dar, near lake Tana, on Friday. While

the number of casualties is unknown, both airports are used by military and civilian aircraft as the country's road infrastructure is poor.

The TPLF said that the rocket attacks were in response to the air strikes and attacks carried out by Abiy's forces that have included both federal troops and Amhara's regional forces as well as units from Eritrea, on Tigray's northern border. It appears that armed Amhara factions are seeking to regain territory in west Tigray they claim the TPLF annexed when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) set up the federal structure in 1995.

A Tigrayan spokesperson warned of further strikes not only against Ethiopian targets but also Eritrea, sparking fears of the fighting spreading beyond Ethiopia's borders. Debretsion Gebremichael, Tigray Regional President, told Reuters that Eritrea had deployed 16 divisions to Ethiopia, without specifying the number of troops involved. On Sunday, the BBC reported that Tigrayan forces had fired rockets into Eritrea, after claiming Ethiopian soldiers were using an Eritrean airport to attack Tigray.

For nearly two decades, Ethiopia and Eritrea fought a brutal war over disputed borders that spilled over into Somalia, cost the lives of up to 100,000 people and led to massive internal displacement on both sides. It ended in 2018, with Ethiopia agreeing to cede Badme, the disputed territory at the heart of the conflict, to Eritrea, as per a UN ruling, for which Abiy but not his counterpart Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. This was little more than a PR stunt aimed at boosting his credibility as he seeks to link Ethiopia more closely to the imperialist powers.

This was met with fury by the TPLF, which claims Badme as its own. It refused to join Abiy's new Prosperity Party coalition that replaced the EPRDF, a coalition of several militia groups and parties, in which the TPLF had been the dominant partner that governed the country since 1991. The TPLF viewed the peace treaty as "selling out" Tigray and set up regular border posts around Badme, preventing the full implementation of the 2018 peace deal.

This set the TPLF on a collision course with the Abiy government that had sought to marginalise it by dismissing senior Tigrayans from federal institutions, issuing an arrest warrant for a former spy chief and member of the TPLF's leadership body, and blaming the TPLF for hiring proxies to incite violence.

In the last few days, reports have emerged of a civilian massacre, with human rights organisation Amnesty

International saying it had confirmed that "scores, and likely hundreds, of people were stabbed or hacked to death" in the town of Mai-Kadra (May Cadera) near the Sudanese border on November 9. Abiy accused forces loyal to the TPLF of carrying out the killings, a claim the TPLF denied. Tigrayan refugees in Sudan have blamed the massacre on unknown perpetrators from the neighbouring Amhara state.

Michelle Bachelet, the UN human rights chief said, "There is a risk this situation will spiral totally out of control," and warned the massacre, if confirmed, would amount to war crimes if committed by one of the belligerent forces.

The fighting has forced at least 20,000 civilians to cross the border into Sudan, according to the UN, which has warned nine million people could be displaced by the fighting, adding to the already massive 1.8 million people internally displaced within the country.

On November 11, the Sudanese government warned that 200,000 Ethiopians might soon flee Tigray into Sudan, leaving the country unable to cope amid rising discontent with the military's stooge civilian government's inability to address the terrible social and economic conditions. In April last year, the Sudanese military, backed by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, mounted a pre-emptive coup against the long-running regime of President Omar al-Bashir as mass anti-government protests threatened to get out of control.

The TPLF has also accused Abiy of using drones from the United Arab Emirates' military base in Assab, Eritrea, to attack the region.



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