

Ethiopian military seizes control of regional capital after offensive against Tigray province

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29 November 2020

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced Sunday that government forces were “fully in control” of Mekelle, the regional capital of Ethiopia’s northern province of Tigray.

He claimed the military had entered the city in the “last phase” of the conflict with the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). Military operations in the Tigray region had ceased, he said, although federal forces would “continue their task of apprehending TPLF criminals and bring them to the court of law.”

The neighbouring province of Amhara has sent its uniformed “special forces” to support the military and maintain security, while civil servants have also arrived from Amhara to take over the running of some of Tigray’s western towns and cities. Both moves will fuel ethnic tensions.

The army’s takeover of Mekelle follows the offensive that began after the expiry of Abiy’s ultimatum for dissident local leaders to surrender expired Wednesday evening.

Abiy had called on the leadership of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), the local ruling party, to surrender to prevent the assault on the city. He threatened Mekelle’s 500,000 citizens, saying “We call on the people of Mekelle and its environs to disarm, stay at home and stay away from military targets [and] to do their part in reducing damages to be sustained because of a handful of criminal elements.” He urged them to support the federal government against the TPLF “in bringing this treasonous group to justice.”

Military officials had earlier warned there would be “no mercy” if residents of Mekelle did not distance themselves from the TPLF and leave while they still could. Such action targeting civilians is a breach of international law, prompting Human Rights Watch’s Laetitia Bader to warn “Treating a whole city as a military target would not only [be] unlawful, it could also

be considered a form of collective punishment.”

TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael defied Abiy’s ultimatum, declaring that his people were “ready to die” defending their homeland and their right to self-determination and that “Their brutality can only add [to] our resolve to fight these invaders to the last.”

Abiy launched the military offensive in Tigray, home to around six million people, on November 4, claiming that the TPLF had started it by overrunning army bases and slaughtering non Tigrayan officers and its purpose was to restore “enforce constitutional order and the rule of law.”

Parliament declared Tigray’s regional government illegal and voted to dissolve it. The Tigray leadership was accused of having “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. The Tigrayan elections came in the wake of bitter disputes between the federal government and the TPLF that says it has been marginalised since Abiy became prime minister in February 2018.

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.

Abiy is determined to secure the removal of the TPLF leadership and establish a new leadership subservient to the federal government as part of his broader plan to centralise its authority at the expense of the devolved regions, amid mounting ethnic tensions that threaten to tear Ethiopia apart.

There were reports of fighting between Tigrayan and federal forces in several towns in the province. While it is believed that there have been heavy casualties on both sides, there is little reliable information about what is

happening because the federal government in Addis Ababa has cut the telephone and internet lines to Tigray, arrested journalists, deported the Crisis Group's Ethiopia Senior Analyst William Davison on November 21, and prevented people reaching the province.

As well as military clashes, hostilities have spread to civilians, with ethnic violence between Tigrayans and Amhara, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. According to an investigation by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, a Tigrayan youth group with the complicity of local security forces had killed at least 600 civilians from the Amhara and Wolkait ethnic groups in Mai Kadra two weeks ago. Tigrayan leaders have denied this. Tigrayan refugees have reported atrocities by Amhara militia fighting alongside federal forces.

Hundreds, possibly thousands, have died in the conflict so far, with up to a million people displaced as civilians fled the fighting. Around 43,000 from western Tigray around the towns of Humera and Kansa have fled to neighbouring Sudan. The Kassala region is one of Sudan's most impoverished regions that is struggling to cope with the influx of refugees and is in urgent need of assistance. Ethiopian troops and paramilitaries are reportedly now preventing Tigrayans reaching or crossing the border.

According to the UN, shortages have become "very critical" in Tigray region, with cash and fuel needed to run diesel-powered generators running out. A report published last week said that food for nearly 100,000 Eritrean refugees living in neighbouring Tigray would run out in a week and more than 600,000 people who rely on monthly food rations have not received them this month. Ethiopia has some 1.7 million refugees and internally displaced people living in camps.

The worst locust swarm to hit Ethiopia in 25 years is compounding the crisis. Last year locusts destroyed 350,000 tonnes of cereals and three million acres of pasture, resulting in a million people across the country needing emergency food assistance. This year's damage is expected to be worse, given the recent heavy rains.

According to a United Nations (UN) internal document seen by Reuters, the conflict in Tigray brought efforts to combat the locust swarms to a halt as Tigrayans were being mobilised for war. According to a recent report by the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), about 600,000 Tigrayans are dependent on food assistance, while another million people receive other forms of support, all of which are now disrupted, as banks are closed and roads are blocked.

Abiy has refused all calls from the UN, the European Union, the African Union and international agencies to negotiate with the TPLF, claiming that the military operation was a "law enforcement operation" aiming to remove "traitorous" rebel leaders and restoring central authority in accordance with Ethiopia's devolved constitutional system. He insisted, "A fundamental element of the international legal order is the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states... We respectfully urge the international community to refrain from any unwelcome and unlawful acts of interference."

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who holds the chair of the African Union, sent three high-level envoys for Ethiopia, but the federal government in Addis Ababa refused to allow them to meet the TPLF leadership.

The UN's efforts to arrange mediation appears to have been stymied by Washington, which has long viewed Ethiopia as a key ally and proxy in the Horn of Africa.

The desperate situation confronting Ethiopia is bound up with the escalating crisis of world capitalism and the resultant great power rivalry that led over the last decades to the fragmentation and disintegration of a region that includes Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia and Djibouti. The Horn is an arena of intense great power and regional rivalry for control of oil reserves and mineral resources in neighbouring countries, and the sea route through the narrow Bab al-Mandeb straits through which much of Europe's oil passes—with the US and Europe engaged in a ferocious struggle with China.

The Trump administration played a key role in bringing Abiy to power in 2018 as part of its efforts to loosen the country's dependence on Chinese investment initiated under the TPLF-dominated government, open up the state-owned economy to global corporations and banks and counter the spread of China's influence across the continent.

Tibor Nagy, the US assistant secretary for African affairs, expressed his backing for Abiy saying "This is not two sovereign states fighting. This is a faction of the government running a region that has decided to undertake hostilities against the central government."



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