

Brutal conflict in Tigray threatens breakup of Ethiopia

Jean Shaoul**12 April 2021**

Bloody conflict in Tigray, one of Ethiopia's semi-autonomous, ethnically defined provinces in the north of the country, is fuelling support for secession from Ethiopia's federal state.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed launched what he called a "law-and-order" operation against the regional government of Tigray, run by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), last November, in response to what he claimed was an "attack" by Tigray's ruling party on an army compound.

It followed moves by the federal government to bypass the regional government after Tigray rejected Abiy's decision to postpone elections due to the pandemic and went ahead with its own elections in September.

While Abiy declared at the end of November that he had defeated the TPLF, fighting has continued, with forces from Ethiopia's Amhara region in the west—which have effectively annexed parts of Tigray to Amhara—and the Eritrean army in the east fighting alongside federal forces against the TPLF. With more than half of Ethiopia's army based in Tigray, a legacy of the 20-year-long war with Eritrea, Abiy could not rely on the military's support, to the extent that he sacked his army chief, head of intelligence and foreign minister days after the fighting began.

Aid workers and diplomats believe that thousands have died in the conflict. Villages have been shelled. More than two thirds of Tigray's health facilities have been destroyed and there has been widespread looting of public and private property—including food stores and oxen for ploughing.

More than one million people have been displaced, with around 60,000 fleeing to Sudan. More than two thirds of Tigrayans, 4.5 million people, have been without electricity, communications and other essential services for more than four months and are in need of emergency food supplies. For three months, the federal government blocked all access to Tigray and imposed a news blackout of the conflict, shutting down telephone lines and the Internet.

Tigrayans fleeing the conflict, as well as aid agencies, have testified to massacres, the most terrible atrocities and sexual violence. Dominik Stillhart, operations manager at

the International Committee of the Red Cross, said, "The violence against the civilian population, especially sexual violence... seems to be a feature of the conflict."

Michelle Bachelet, the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner, warned of "blanket denials and finger-pointing" as evidence mounts of atrocities committed by all sides, including the Ethiopian National Defence Force, the Eritrean army, the TPLF and its supporters, as well as fighters from Amhara province.

The US, European Union (EU) and United Nations have condemned Eritrea's presence in Tigray, with Brussels imposing sanctions. The incoming US Biden administration put pressure on the United Arab Emirates to halt its military operations in Yemen, leading to the decommissioning of its drone base in Assab that had been supporting Ethiopian forces against the TPLF. It has called for the withdrawal of Amhara forces from western Tigray, which Amhara lays claim to, a demand Abiy has rejected, dependent as he is on Amhara support both to regain control of Tigray and win the elections set for June.

After months of denying ongoing military operations in Tigray, reports of ethnic atrocities committed against civilians and the involvement of Eritrea's military in the conflict, Abiy has finally conceded that Eritrean forces did cross into Tigray, claiming that "they feared an attack from the TPLF." Members of Ethiopia's interim government in Tigray have admitted that Eritrea controls a 100 kilometre strip of Ethiopian territory along the border, although Abiy said Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki had agreed to withdraw his forces from the region "as soon as Ethiopia's army could control the trenches along the border."

To evade responsibility for potential crimes against humanity, he sought to blame Eritrean forces for "atrocities... committed in Tigray region," thereby antagonizing his ally Afwerki. Should Eritrea withdraw its troops from Tigray, Abiy would be unable to regain control of the region, as thousands of young Tigrayans are reportedly taking up arms.

The Tigrayan conflict has been brewing for some time. The TPLF, a nationalist movement founded in 1974, played

a key role in defeating the Moscow-aligned government of Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991. It became the dominant party in the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of several militia groups and parties, under the leadership of Meles Zenawi, a Tigrayan, that imposed an authoritarian regime on Africa’s second most populous country of 112 million people.

As resentment grew against Tigrayan political and economic dominance—Tigrayans constitute just six percent of the population—politicians whipped up ethnic tensions in opposition to a unified struggle by the impoverished masses against the Ethiopian elites seeking to open the country to foreign investment. While Ethiopia saw more than a decade of rising growth rates, some of the highest in Africa that turned the country into the economic powerhouse of the region, little of this trickled down to the impoverished masses.

There were huge protests starting in 2014, precipitated by a central government land grab of historic Oromo lands that were handed over to overseas companies—often from the Gulf and China, for infrastructure and export-orientated agribusiness. Ethnic protests in Oromia and Amhara, who constitute about 35 percent and 27 percent of the population, saw thousands killed and tens of thousands arrested.

The ensuing political crisis forced the resignation in February 2018 of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, who took office after Meles’ death in 2012. He was succeeded by Abiy Ahmed, a former military intelligence officer and an Oromo with close links to Washington. He was welcomed at home and abroad as a “reformer,” receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for ending the 20-year-long war with Eritrea one year later. In November 2019, he disbanded the EPRDF, replacing it with the Prosperity Party (PP), which TPLF refused to join.

Abiy released tens of thousands of political prisoners, ended the internet blackout imposed by the previous government, lifted a ban on several political parties, some of which had been designated “terrorist” groups, paving the way for their leaders to return to Ethiopia. He introduced a raft of measures aimed at reducing the TPLF’s dominance, including retiring their military and government officials, instigating corruption charges against some members and announcing plans for the privatisation of swathes of the state-owned economy and liberalisation of the banks.

But Abiy’s promised new dawn was short lived. The military, enraged by the changes, mounted an abortive coup in 2019. Despite Abiy’s promise to end ethnic discrimination, ethnic violence increased, with 1.7 million internally displaced people living in camps. Viewed as collectively responsible for the crimes of the previous regime, some 100,000 Tigrayans were driven from their

homes and were living in camps even before the conflict erupted last year. Land sales continued, under conditions where 80 percent of Ethiopians are dependent on the land for their subsistence and at least 25 percent of the population ekes out an existence on less than \$2 a day.

Tigray is only one of the festering ethnic conflicts in a country that is a mosaic of ethnicities and languages. The *Financial Times* recently cited Abiy admitting that Ethiopia’s federal army was fighting a guerrilla war on at least eight separate fronts as unrest grows across Ethiopia.

Abiy also faces an increasingly fraught border dispute with neighbouring Sudan, which in December moved its forces into the long-contested border region of al-Fashaqa, the fertile agricultural triangle farmed by Ethiopians since the mid-1990s, that Khartoum claims as its own, prompting Addis Ababa to redeploy troops to the border. The hostilities forced Ethiopia’s Amhara farmers to flee the region.

Abiy is also facing Egyptian and Sudanese opposition to Ethiopia’s Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and its plans to fill what is Africa’s largest reservoir on its own schedule that its neighbours fear could jeopardise their water supply in the event of a drought. The Blue Nile, whose source lies in Ethiopia, provides more than 80 percent of the Nile’s waters. With Ethiopia refusing to negotiate the timetable, there are fears that Egypt and/or Sudan may support the armed insurgencies in Benishangul-Gumuz and Oromia regions.

Under such conditions, the TPLF and other insurgent groups would seize the opportunity to resist the federal government in Addis Ababa, precipitating a wider civil war that threatens not just the survival of Abiy’s government but the stability of the entire region.



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