Ethiopia wracked by internal war and inter-state conflict as famine rages in Tigray

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4 July 2021

On June 28, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced a unilateral ceasefire in Tigray. This was a stark reversal of his declaration late November that he had defeated the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in a three week-long military campaign.

He has pulled his federal forces out of Mekelle, the capital of Tigray province, one of Ethiopia's semi-autonomous, ethnically defined provinces in the north of the country, as well as other towns in the region, ahead of advancing Tigrayan fighters. It follows the ousting of his forces from Mekelle by TPLF fighters.

Abiy said his army units were ambushed and "massacred" while passing through villages, but he denied claims that his military had been defeated as "a lie." Nevertheless, he added, conditions had become unbearable for his troops. He claimed that his government had voluntarily withdrawn its forces in a unilateral cease-fire for humanitarian reasons, to allow crops to be planted.

Getachew Reda, a TPLF executive member, contradicted him saying that Ethiopian forces had capitulated as Tigrayan forces captured military assets, killed several hundred men and took thousands of prisoners of war. On Friday, to reinforce his point and humiliate Abiy, thousands of Ethiopian prisoners of war were paraded through Mekelle amid cheering crowds as they were taken to a nearby prison.

Reda accused the Ethiopian troops of robbing banks, looting food aid and cutting off electricity and telecommunications as they retreated.

Abiy's loss of Mekelle marks a turning point in a war that has plunged Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous country of 112 million people, into chaos, amid escalating ethnic conflicts around the country. It threatens to destabilize the wider Horn of Africa region, in which Ethiopia has long acted as the anchor state on behalf of US imperialism.

Such a defeat for one of Africa's most powerful armies is a major blow to Abiy's authority. Washington's man staked everything on what he declared would be a brief, decisive campaign to bring the restive Tigray region under control. His eight-month long military campaign has been a catastrophe as the conflict became increasingly bitter and fierce, widening to encompass drone support from the United Arab Emirates from its base in Djibouti, neighbouring Eritrean forces in the east and Amhara provincial forces in the west fighting alongside Ethiopian federal troops.

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 and sacked his army chief, head of intelligence and foreign minister days after the fighting began and drew down Ethiopia's peacekeeping forces in Somalia.

There have been numerous reports of wanton damage to buildings, property, and farms, with Tigrayans subject to massacres and sexual violence at the hands of the Eritrean and Amhara militias and left to starve. This served to bolster support for the TPLF, intensify secessionist demands in Tigray and drive thousands of young Tigrayans to take up arms. The majority of Tigrayans have been without electricity, communications and other essential services for the last week and are in desperate need of emergency food supplies.

While Abiy had for months denied that Eritrea had sent its soldiers to support his army in Tigray, he finally admitted this in March when he sought to place responsibility for atrocities on Eritrean forces. Eritrean troops have remained in Tigray, despite Abiy's claim that Eritrea had agreed to withdraw them.

On Friday, Ramesh Rajasingham, the UN's acting humanitarian aid chief, told a Security Council meeting that the situation in Tigray had deteriorated dramatically and the region was experiencing "the worst famine situation we have seen in decades." More than 90 percent

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of Tigray's last crop harvest and 80 percent of its livestock have been looted or destroyed and planting for the next harvest has been seriously reduced by the fighting.

More than 400,000 face famine, although the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) says the number facing starvation is closer to 900,000. Another 5.2 million are at "emergency" or "crisis" levels.

The UN says that nearly two million of Tigray's six million people have been displaced, with 70,000 fleeing to neighbouring Sudan. International aid agencies say their work in Tigray has been impeded because the Ethiopian federal government had cut electricity, internet and phone lines to the region, and have warned of a pending humanitarian catastrophe.

With several key bridges destroyed, little aid is entering the region, while troops along Tigray's western border with the Amhara region had prevented food trucks from entering the province. Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the US ambassador to the UN, said that according to reports she had heard, getting aid into Tigray is now "more difficult" than it was a week ago, which is "not an indication of a humanitarian cease-fire, but of a siege."

Fighting has continued between Tigrayan and Eritrean forces in north-western Tigray, close to the towns of Badme and Shiraro, which both Tigray and Eritrea claim as their own, with Tigrayan leaders threatening to invade the Amhara region of Ethiopia.

Abiy, a former military intelligence officer and an Oromo, took office in February 2018 as ethnic tensions mounted across the country, incited by the elites in a bid to prevent a unified opposition to their economic programme that had benefited the wealthy at the expense of the great mass of the population.

Touted as a "reformer" and given the Nobel Peace Prize for ending the 20-year-long war with Eritrea one year later, Abiy disbanded the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of several militia groups and parties dominated by the TPLF. He replaced the EPRDF with his Prosperity Party (PP) which TPLF refused to join. Abiy retired Tigrayan military and government officials, launched corruption charges against some of their members and announced plans for the wholesale privatisation of the state-owned economy and liberalisation of the banks.

Abiy launched his murderous "law-and-order" operation against the TPLF-run regional government of Tigray last November in response to what he claimed was an attack on an army compound. That move followed the federal government's efforts to bypass the TPLF after it rejected Abiy's decision to postpone the 2020 elections due to the pandemic and went ahead with its own elections in September.

The military conflict in Tigray takes place amid ethnic strife and inter-communal violence across many parts of the country, with large swathes of Benishangul-Gumuz, Afar, Somali, Oromia, Amhara and the Southern Region under "Command Posts," —in effect military rule. This meant that around 18 percent of the country, 102 out of the 547 parliamentary seats, were unable to vote in last month's twice-postponed parliamentary elections. In two regions, Somali and Harar, polling had to be postponed until September.

The elections met few of the most basic standards for a credible vote and the results have yet to be announced. It was expected that Abiy and his Prosperity Party would win at the federal level and in most regions, enabling him to claim a popular mandate for his policies, including greater centralisation of authority in Addis Ababa, the capital.

The violent ethnic conflicts have prompted fears that Ethiopia will withdraw its more than 5,000 troops from the United Nation's peacekeeping mission in Abyei—the highly contested region along the Sudan-South Sudan border at the heart of the tensions between the two countries—creating a security vacuum that could spark renewed fighting.

Abiy, who has lost his shine in Washington, is coming under increasing pressure over Ethiopia's filling of its massive hydropower dam on the Nile, known as the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which both Egypt and Sudan oppose, without a binding agreement on how the water can be shared. The two downstream countries that rely on the Nile for much of their fresh water oppose any unilateral damming that may affect the river's flow. The UN's Security Council is set to discuss the issue this week.

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