Ethiopia’s war on Tigray threatens broader civil war

Jean Shaoul
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One year after Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered the invasion of Tigray province, intensified fighting threatens an all-out civil war amid escalating ethnic conflicts around the country.

The breakup of Africa’s second-most populous country would destabilise the wider Horn of Africa region, including Somalia, the Republic of Sudan, South Sudan, and Eritrea. Ethiopia, the headquarters of the African Union, has long acted as the region’s anchor state on behalf of US imperialism.

Military conflict with the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) has caused untold suffering and devastated the economy. Last week, Abiy declared a state of emergency, giving him powers to impose curfews and censor the media, issued a call to arms for Ethiopia’s citizens and ordered house-to-house searches for and arrests of ethnic Tigrayans and those accused of sympathizing with the TPLF.

He also announced the stepping up of recruitment into both the national and regional armed forces, amid reports of new arms purchases, with Eritrea set to send more troops at Ethiopia’s expense and Iran, Turkey and China bolstering Ethiopia’s arsenal. China is to supply four Chengdu J-20 fighter jets and Wing Loong drones, while Iran and Turkey are supplying attack drones.

Abiy has called the Tigrayan leaders, who were between 1991 and 2018 the leading political force in Ethiopia, “cancer” and “weeds”. This prompted Facebook and Twitter to remove one of Thursday’s posts urging Ethiopians to take up arms and “bury” the approaching rebel forces.

On Sunday, the government organized a pro-military, nationalist demonstration in Meskell Square, in the centre of the capital Addis Ababa, to rally support for the conflict and oppose “foreign interference” from the US and other countries calling for an end to the violence. While the public are generally supportive of the federal government, *Al-Jazeera* reported that many expressed dismay at the war itself.

Days earlier the TPLF announced it had formed an alliance with eight other opposition groups to oust Abiy, through political negotiation or military force if necessary, and install a transitional government. They are threatening to block the crucial road linking landlocked Ethiopia to the Red Sea port of Djibouti and advance on Addis Ababa. Getachew Reda, a TPLF spokesperson, said, “If marching to Addis is what it takes to break the siege [of Tigray], we will.” Tigray has for months been suffering from Abiy’s blockade that has cut off budget transfers and telecommunications, electricity and banking services.

The alliance brings together previously opposed ethnic groups, including the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), a splinter from the Oromo Liberation Front, that is fighting for greater rights for the ethnic Oromos who make up 35 percent of Ethiopia’s 110 million people. The government has declared the OLA a terrorist entity and jailed many suspected supporters.

The alliance, the United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Forces, called on the Biden administration to support their efforts. Berhane Gebre-Christos, a former foreign minister and TPLF spokesperson, told a news conference at the National Press Club in Washington, “We are left with one option—changing the situation; otherwise, we’ll all be massacred,” and called for a resolution to the crisis “before Ethiopia implodes and affects the region.”

Abiy, an Oromian and former military intelligence officer backed by Washington, became prime minister in February 2018 following rising ethnic tensions incited by the elites in a bid to prevent a unified opposition to their free market reforms, including the sale of prize land for commercial, export-based agriculture and flower growing.

Touted as a “reformer” who would bring a “new beginning” to Ethiopia, Abiy disbanded the ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of militia groups and parties dominated by the TPLF. He replaced it with his Prosperity Party (PP) which TPLF refused to join. Abiy retired Tigrayan military and government officials, launched corruption charges against some TPLF members and announced plans for the privatisation of the state-owned economy and liberalisation

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The prime minister launched his murderous "law-and-order" operation against Tigray in November 2020 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. While Tigrayans form just 6 percent of the population, they have long provided much of Ethiopia's national army, seriously depleting Abiy's forces on the ground.

The national elections went ahead last June, although voters in 125 out of the 547 parliamentary seats were unable to vote and two regions, Somali and Harar that voted in September, have yet to announce their results. Meeting few basic standards for a credible vote, Abiy and his Prosperity Party won 401 of the 422 seats contested in June, enabling him to claim a popular mandate for his policies, including greater powers for the federal government.

Contrary to Abiy's expectation of a swift victory last year, the TPLF have retaken most of Tigray, including the capital Mekelle, and moved into the neighbouring Afar and Amhara regions. Fighting alongside allied ethnic Amhara militias opposed to Abiy, the TPLF have reportedly taken two key towns and are some 220 miles from Addis Ababa.

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"—de facto military rule.

With the end of the rainy season, fighting will expand further beyond Tigray, adding to the terrible death toll of 100,000. The federal government's blockade of the region has prevented food and medicine, including United Nations (UN) and international aid, reaching the Tigray where, according to UN estimates, 5.2 million people are in urgent need of help and 400,000 face starvation. The UN says that nearly 2 million Tigrayans have been displaced by the conflict, as well as 450,000 in Afar and Amhara provinces, with 70,000 fleeing to Sudan.

There have been accusations of massacres, sexual violence and horrific human rights abuses on both sides. Last week, a joint UN-Ethiopian report detailed first-hand accounts of numerous human rights violations, some of which Michelle Bachelet, the UN high commissioner for human rights, said "may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity." She added, "the majority of the violations" between November 2020 and June 2021 appeared to have been committed by Ethiopian forces and their Eritrean allies, but following the Tigrayan counter-offensive in June, there were "an increasing number of allegations of human rights abuses by Tigray forces."

Last September, the Biden administration announced it was considering sanctions that could target military commanders, government officials, state institutions and the national carrier, Ethiopian Airlines, prompting Abiy to expel seven senior UN officials. The US government has also suspended security and some economic assistance, said it will not support International Monetary Fund and World Bank funds for Ethiopia and warned that Ethiopian exporters may lose their preferential access to the US market.

The UN Security Council has called for a ceasefire, while the African Union has appointed Nigeria's former President Olusegun Obasanjo as its special envoy to the Horn to try and broker talks.

The US and other western countries have called on Abiy to begin talks with the rebels, advising their citizens to leave the country. On Thursday, Washington sent Jeffrey Feltman, its fixer for the Horn of Africa, to Addis Ababa, to try and persuade Abiy to step back from all-out war. Abiy reportedly rejected this as "external interference."

The fighting in Ethiopia could draw Sudan into the war, under conditions where relations between Addis Ababa and Khartoum are at a low ebb, both over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam that could affect Sudan's water supply and al-Fashaga, the disputed farmlands adjacent to western Tigray which Sudan occupied in December.

Having fallen out of Washington's favour, Abiy hopes that he can profit from the increasing attention being paid to the Horn of Africa. Sited at the crossroads between Africa, the Middle East and the Mediterranean, it has become the focus of great power and regional rivalries, as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, Israel and China, which paid for the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, jockey for position.

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