

Fighting in Ethiopia threatens renewed civil war, destabilising Horn of Africa

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The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) fighters seized control of the airports in Mekelle, Shire, and Axum, cities in Ethiopia's northern regional state of Tigray last Wednesday, claiming it was responding to an offensive by the Ethiopian federal army.

Heavy fighting between the TPLF and Ethiopian forces was reported in the neighbouring regional states of Afar and Amhara, prompting fears that a full-blown civil war has erupted. Hundreds have already been killed, injured or detained.

It threatens another humanitarian catastrophe similar to that of the 2020-22 civil war between Ethiopian federal forces and the TPLF, compounded by the world's worst humanitarian crisis in Sudan, where more than 33.7 million people need aid, up to 14 million are displaced, and famine looms.

Developments in Ethiopia followed the formation of a new rebel alliance, including the Fano militia from Amhara, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and groups from Somali, Afar and Benishangul-Gumuz regions, "The Ethiopian Peoples' Forces Alliance for Survival". This disparate group is united only in its objective of overthrowing Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's federal government in Addis Ababa, which presides over 12 ethnically based regional states.

Insurgencies in Tigray, Amhara and Oromo now threaten the break-up of Ethiopia, which has long served as US imperialism's anchor state in the Horn of Africa.

Ethiopia's rival elites compete for dominance amid economic crisis

What is unfolding in Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous country, is yet another violent contest among rival sections of the Ethiopian ruling elite, fought along ethnic lines. Such contests have been cultivated for decades precisely to prevent the emergence of a unified working-class movement in a country wracked by poverty and social inequality.

Every one of these factions is tethered to one or another imperialist or regional power. They offer no alternative for the working class and poor peasantry, only competing ethnic elites. The TPLF dominated the Ethiopian state from 1991 to 2018 and presided over the same ethnic federal structure, the same impoverishment of the masses, and the same subordination to imperialism.

According to the World Bank, Ethiopia's poverty rate was set to rise to 43 percent by 2025, up from 33 percent in 2016, due to

conflict, climate shocks, and economic decline. Multidimensional poverty affects a massive 72 percent of the country's 130 million population, which is largely rural, despite annual economic growth rates of 10 percent between 2004 and 2018 that largely benefited a small urban elite.

The US-Israeli war on Iran has had a devastating impact, with the blockage of maritime routes, fuel shortages and price spikes of up to 80 percent, collapsing remittances from Gulf workers, fertilizer shortages threatening food production and flower exports upon which Ethiopia depends.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, a former military intelligence officer with close ties to Washington, was lauded for opening up of Ethiopia's economy to transnational corporations and international finance in 2018 that created wealth for a few, while creating severe hardships on the ground. In July 2024, the government agreed to float the Ethiopian Birr to secure a \$3.4 billion IMF loan and an additional \$10 billion World Bank package. The resulting 30 percent devaluation against the US dollar raised the cost of critical imports like medicine, fuel, and fertilizer, passing the financial shock directly onto the working class and rural poor through inflation and reduced public services.

Abiy's 2018 peace deal with Eritrea, for which he received a Nobel Peace Prize in 2019, was little more than a manoeuvre to isolate the TPLF, which had been the dominant force during the war years and viewed the ceding of Badme to Eritrea as a betrayal, asserting the dominance of his own faction.

Ethiopia's unresolved civil war

The escalating fighting in the last week has led to widespread fears of a renewal of the brutal civil war of 2020-2022. It drew in neighbouring Eritrea—on Ethiopia's side—and killed more than half a million people, more than the number who died in the 1984-85 famine, displaced more than a million and led to nearly 30 million needing humanitarian assistance. Millions are still unable to access food, clean water and healthcare.

Under the Pretoria peace deal that ended the fighting, the TPLF promised to disarm, while Addis Ababa agreed an interim administration for Tigray pending negotiations with the group and complete access to Tigray for humanitarian assistance. But neither the TPLF nor Eritrea, which had joined Ethiopia against the TPLF and was not party to the talks, were satisfied with the agreement that left

the loss of Tigrayan territory to Amhara unresolved and displaced Tigrayans in camps and required Eritrean troops to withdraw from Tigray.

The government failed to set up talks over a new regional administration, instead imposing fuel, service and cash restrictions on Tigray, already devastated by the war, prompting the TPLF to accuse the government of attempting genocide.

The Ethiopian government banned the TPFL in June 2025, prior to the 2026 elections, and on-off fighting broke out between the TPFL and federal forces. The TPLF responded by reinstalling its head Debretsion Gebremichael as regional president, reestablishing its prewar legislative council, effectively ousting the interim government, and warned of a return to war.

The threat of a regional conflict

TPLF Vice President Amanuel Assefa said shortly after this latest fighting broke out, “We are in the situation of full-blown war now”.

According to the United Nations, federal forces have used drones against civilians in Tigray, including a strike on a truck ferrying 41 tonnes of food aid bound for the displaced in Sheraro, prompting the TPLF to cut telecoms networks access across northern Ethiopia to prevent government forces utilising the internet to operate drones. TPLF forces have moved into Afar, threatening the road from Addis to the Red Sea port of Djibouti through which almost all land-locked Ethiopia’s international trade, including its fuel imports, passes. Djibouti is located at the southern mouth of the Bab el-Mandeb, directly opposite where the Houthis are trying to assert their control over the Red Sea against Saudi Arabia.

Addis has accused the TPLF and the anti-government alliance of seeking the breakup of Ethiopia and accused Tigray’s neighbours, Eritrea and Sudan, as well as Egypt, of supporting the rebels to weaken Ethiopia.

The fighting erupted just five days after the US Treasury announced on September 18 that the national emergency over Ethiopia, declared in 2021, had expired, ending the sanctions on Eritrea’s military and ruling party. “The national emergency [in Ethiopia] has expired,” the Treasury said, even though the federal army had been carrying out drone wars in Tigray and Amhara for months.

While the lifting of sanctions on Eritrea was apparently aimed at drawing Asmara into an international alliance against Iranian-backed Houthi attacks on the Red Sea, it could lead the TPLF, whose leaders remain under US sanctions, to strengthen its relations with Eritrea and open up a larger proxy war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The Eritrea regime is the product of a 30-year long insurgency against Ethiopia (1961-91), achieving statehood in 1993. It fought another war (1998-2000) over the then disputed border that cost up to 100,000 lives and was only resolved in 2018.

Prime Minister Abiy has for months been threatening to annex part of Eritrea’s coastline to gain access to the Red Sea, lost after Eritrea gained independence in 1993. He has argued that restoring access to the sea — specifically the port of Assab that lies near the strategic Bab el-Mandeb Strait — is vital for Ethiopia’s long-term security and economic development, while Asmara fears Addis Ababa will try to take Assab by force.

Relations with Sudan and Egypt have soured, with Ethiopian

military chief Birhanu Jula accusing both of supporting the new anti-government alliance of armed groups.

Addis Ababa has accused the Sudanese army of hosting thousands of Tigrayan fighters that could attack Ethiopia from Sudan. Many of these fighters allied with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan in the civil war against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by General Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo, which have been fighting for control of Sudan since 2023. The Abiy government, an ally of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) widely seen as the RSF’s main backer, has supplied arms to the RSF. At the same time, the UAE’s regional rival Saudi Arabia is supporting the Sudanese Armed Forces, as are Eritrea and Egypt.

Addis Ababa’s relations with Cairo soured over the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), whose unilateral construction threatened to alter Nile flows upon which both Egypt and Sudan depend, almost leading to war. Egypt, another ally of the Sudanese army, has aggressively pursued Ethiopia’s encirclement over disputes over the Dam and the Nile water basin, forging closer ties with Eritrea and, to a lesser extent, Somalia and Djibouti.

Ethiopia is reportedly planning to withdraw more than 3,000 troops from Somalia to bolster its domestic forces. Its forces are part of an African Union missions aimed at helping Somalia push back against al-Shabaab, an Islamist group which has clawed back much of the territory it lost during the government’s 2022-23 offensive.

Its relations with Somalia deteriorated after Abiy signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Somaliland, the unrecognised breakaway region, in January 2024 in a bid to gain access to the Red Sea. Ethiopia has secured \$3 billion investment by the UAE in a railway from Ethiopia to Berbera port in Somaliland, challenging Djibouti’s monopoly of Ethiopia’s foreign trade. Israel’s recognition of Somaliland in 2025 directly serves Ethiopian access to the Red Sea, creating another point of conflict with its regional rival Türkiye, which has turned Somalia into a de facto protectorate, opening its largest overseas military base in Mogadishu in 2017 and is constructing a space port for long-range ballistic missile testing.

With the Strait of Hormuz already closed, the US Israeli war of aggression against Iran is spreading from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. Simultaneous conflicts in Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia and Yemen pose the risk that these wars will merge into a single, widening imperialist war.



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