



GROWING CIVIL WAR IN ETHIOPIA

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



A new wave of violence has erupted in Ethiopia in the beginning of November, 2020.¹ A number of soldiers and civilians have been killed so far. The dispute lies between the regional forces (Tigray People's Liberation Force (TPLF)) and the national government (Prosperity Party).²

Tensions transformed into a full-fledged civil war on November 4 when Prime Minister of Ethiopia Abiy Ahmed stated that Tigrayans had attacked a national military base and sent his troops to the region of Mekele, an area governed by the TPLF.³ Ethiopian military has heavily bombed the region and destroyed all weaponry.⁴

After two weeks of the conflict, the government claims to have secured a string of townships in the western Tigray region.⁵ Government forces have also taken back control of areas in the south alongside the border of Ethiopia's Amhara region.⁶

¹ Swails, B., & McKenzie, D, "Why are there fears of civil war in Ethiopia?". Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/05/africa/ethiopia-abiy-unrest-explainer-intl/index.html>

² Futune. "War in Ethiopia: Why and How Was It Started? Where Is It Now?", *Borkena Ethiopian News*, November 21, 2020. Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://borkena.com/2020/11/20/ethiopia-war-tigray-region-things-to-know/>

³ Dyer, Gwynne. "New War in Ethiopia: The Abiy Factor", *The Star*. Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://www.the-star.co.ke/opinion/columnists/2020-11-11-new-war-in-ethiopia-the-abiy-factor/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Ethiopian Government Troops Continue Push for Tigray Regional Capital", *TRT World*, November 21, 2020. Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://www.trtworld.com/africa/ethiopian-government-says-it-has-taken-control-of-tigrayan-town-of-adigrat-41668>

⁶ Ibid.

If we go back to the root cause of the conflict, the dispute exists primarily between TPLF and the Ethiopian government.⁷ The TPLF comprises of six per cent of the total population that has ruled the country for twenty seven years but faced defeat in the previous elections held in 2018.⁸ The reason for their defeat was widespread repression and a string of human rights' violations such as torturing government opponents in secret prisons.⁹

However, according to the current government's narrative, several attempts have been made to incorporate the TPLF into the mainstream ruling set up by providing them positions in the national parliament and ministries. But the TPLF never agreed to this inclusion by the Ethiopian government. Its members felt that Prime Minister Abiy wanted to chip away at Ethiopia's multiethnic federation, which it forged in 1991 after overthrowing a Marxist regime that had been present in the country since 1970s.¹⁰

Tensions were further escalated when government announced to delay the elections due to an outbreak of pandemic.¹¹ TPLF rejected the decision and held its own election in September and accused the government of ignoring the constitution by delaying national elections beyond its mandate.¹² The government called this vote illegal, thus the TPLF refused to recognize PM Abiy's authority. In October, the TPLF blocked PM Abiy's appointment of a new head of the Northern Command. Eventually, both sides ended up declaring each other illegitimate. Later on, the withholding of federal funding to this region further inflamed tensions.¹³

The current situation, if this conflict escalates further, will result in destabilization of the entire region (Horn of Africa) through massive displacement and refugee outflow in the neighboring countries.¹⁴ This conflict is already turning into an international one as the TPLF has launched three rocket missiles into Asmara (the capital city of Eritrea) targeting the international airport. Eritrea is

⁷ "Ethiopia's Tigray Region Conflict Raises Fears of Civil War", *Voice of America*. Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://www.voanews.com/africa/ethiopias-tigray-region-conflict-raises-fears-civil-war>

⁸ "War in Ethiopia: Why and How Was It Started? Where Is It Now?", *Borkena Ethiopian News*, November 21, 2020. Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://borkena.com/2020/11/20/ethiopia-war-tigray-region-things-to-know/>

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Zelalem, Zecharias. "Ethiopia's Plan to Delay Its Election for Covid Will Have Unintended Consequences for Democracy." *Quartz Africa*. Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://qz.com/africa/1870457/ethiopias-abiy-election-delay-infuriates-opposition-on-democracy/>

¹² "Tigray Crisis Viewpoint: Why Ethiopia Is Spiralling out of Control." *Yahoo! News*. Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://news.yahoo.com/tigray-crisis-why-ethiopia-spiralling-232607570.html>

¹³ "Ethiopia Postpones Landmark Election to Prevent ." Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20200402-ethiopia-coronavirus-vote-delay-abiy-ahmed>

¹⁴ "Ethiopia's Conflict Spills over Border as Thousands Flee", *The World from PRX*. Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2020-11-10/ethiopias-conflict-spills-over-border-thousands-flee>

being accused by TPLF of fighting alongside the government of Ethiopia. Moreover, around 96,000 Eritrean refugees also live in the Tigray region, sparking fears that they could be displaced again.¹⁵

On the other hand, more than 25,000 people have already fled from Ethiopia. In a worst-case scenario, Ethiopia could now experience “what could be one of the largest refugee exoduses.”¹⁶ No matter who is responsible for the initial provocations or escalation, clearly it’s a threat to international peace and security.¹⁷

The international community has responded to some extent towards the on-going situation. Tibor Nagy, the US Assistant Secretary of State on African Affairs, tweeted on November 15 that Washington strongly condemns the TPLF’s unjustifiable attacks against Eritrea on November 14 and its efforts to internationalize the conflict in Tigray. “We continue to urge immediate action to protect civilians, deescalate tensions, and restore peace,” he wrote.¹⁸

Officials in neighboring countries, including Uganda and Kenya, continue to call for dialogue to resolve the conflict. UN Secretary General António Guterres also spoke with PM Abiy and the chair of the African Union and offered UN support in resolving the conflict. But prospects for a ceasefire have yet to emerge.¹⁹

Conclusively, the situation in Ethiopia is worsening at an alarming pace. There is complete information blackout in the country as the internet is switched off, phone and power lines have been cut and banks are closed. At this stage, it is crucial to end this conflict as soon as possible. United Nations, African Union and other countries such as Sudan, United States, China and countries from EU and the Gulf region can play an important role by arranging a dialogue between conflicting parties and bringing them to the negotiating table. However, the fighting must stop by ending the aggression along with the provisions for redeployment, control of the military’s northern command, and implementing a monitoring mechanism to prevent flare-ups. Legitimacy of PM Abiy’s government should be acknowledged in a transitional capacity until the elections which are

¹⁵ “Ethiopian Rebels Target Eritrea: Here’s What’s Going on”, *Hindustan Times*, November 15, 2020.

Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/ethiopian-rebels-target-eritrea-here-s-what-s-going-on/story-EMm3zuVkpGaOhysua4iIL.html>

¹⁶ “Ethiopia’s Conflict Spills over Border as Thousands Flee”, *The World from PRX*. Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2020-11-10/ethiopias-conflict-spills-over-border-thousands-flee>

¹⁷ “Ethiopia’s Conflict Spills over Border as Thousands Flee”, *The World from PRX*. Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2020-11-10/ethiopias-conflict-spills-over-border-thousands-flee>

¹⁸ Editorial, “The Guardian View on War in Ethiopia: Time Is Short”, *The Guardian*, November 19, 2020. Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/nov/19/the-guardian-view-on-war-in-ethiopia-time-is-short>

¹⁹ James Mbugua, “UN Raises Alert over Humanitarian Crisis, Possible War Crimes in Ethiopia Conflict”, *Jurist*, November 17, 2020. Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://www.jurist.org/news/2020/11/un-raises-alert-over-humanitarian-crisis-in-ethiopia-conflict/>

expected next year. There are very limited chances of conflict resolution, but opportunity for peaceful settlement through negotiations still exists.