

PPWG Assessment – Ethiopia

Prepared for the United States Atrocity Early Warning Task Force

The conflict in Ethiopia has been brewing for a while. When Prime Minister Abiy came into power, the rule of the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government came to an end, which did not sit well with the TPLF leaders. Prior to Abiy's election, TPLF ruled with impunity, cracking down on protests, detaining and torturing human rights defenders, bloggers and journalists and jailed thousands of opponents. When Abiy became the prime minister, he initiated key reforms including releasing thousands of prisoners, reformed and repealed repressive laws and mended fences with Eritrea, which gave him the Nobel Peace Prize.¹ He promised to have free and fair elections and allowed multipartyism.² While these actions were unprecedented, other reforms stalled, and ethnic violence continued to spread in many cases implicating the Ethiopian security forces.

In 2018, TPLF started showing signs of dissatisfaction and claimed that Abiy was discriminating against them. In 2019, the TPLF refused to join Abiy in forming the new Prosperity Party after Abiy had dissolved the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which for decades had been dominated by the TPLF. In August 2020, under the advice of constitutional lawyers, Prime Minister Abiy postponed the general elections citing safety issues because of the Covid 19 pandemic. Consequently, the TPLF accused Abiy of power consolidation and usurping their regional powers enshrined in the constitution. Tigray held its own elections and the TPLF declared that it would no longer recognize the authority of the federal government. Throughout 2020, violence towards ethnic minorities increased.

Abiy has failed to deliver key reforms. Other root causes of failure include historical ethnic tensions and violence³ and decades of impunity and repressive military rule dating back to the removal of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. (Some also suggest years of repression under the Emperor's reign). The country has seen an increase in violent protests and arbitrary arrests. When a famous musician, Hechalu Hundessa, was murdered in June 2020, protests broke out throughout the country. Protests turned violent and there are reports of ethnic violence. In response, Abiy used extreme police force to stop the violence. The police arrested thousands, killed and maimed others.⁴ The government also arrested well known leaders Bekele Gerba,

¹ <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2019/abiy/facts/>

² <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2019/press-release/>

³ <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/09/19/ethiopias-democratic-transition-is-in-peril>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/aug/03/how-a-musicians-death-unleashed-violence-and-death-in-ethiopia>

Jawar Muhammed and Exkinder Nega, resorting to tactics of the EPRDF years and raising concerns over Abiy's commitment to democratic rule.

Prime Minister Abiy's decision to postpone the general elections, citing safety concerns and the Covid-19 pandemic was based on guidance from health experts and constitutional lawyers. However, the TPLF rejected it and asserted that Abiy was no longer the legitimate leader, his rule had elapsed, and he was trying to usurp power without an election. The federal government affirmed that the power of the Prime Minister was extended through a constitutional process whereby the country's house of federation was involved. The TPLF held its elections and elected its regional president. Abiy responded with anger and saw this as an assault on his leadership. The government stated that this is against the constitution of the country. The election was also conducted in the absence of the electoral board. Local efforts to reconcile the government and the TPLF failed.

Three weeks ago, the Federal government launched a military attack against the Tigray forces, stating that it was an act of self-defense following the TPLF's attack on the Central government's military post in the North. The TPLF initially denied attacking the military forces but subsequently confirmed it had conducted the attack.⁵ Hostilities ensued between EDF and TPLF and has engulfed Ethiopia's Northern region, leaving hundreds of dead civilians, thousands internally displaced, and over forty thousand refugees who fled to Sudan.⁶ The situation in Ethiopia is a major concern for peace, humanitarian and rights organizations.⁷ The UN warns of a humanitarian catastrophe and urges both parties to allow unimpeded humanitarian aid agencies to go into the Tigrayan region and provide medical and food services.⁸ They are also asking for safe corridors for those wanting to flee to Sudan, where thousands of Ethiopian refugees are flocking every day. All communications in the Northern region have been cut, making it impossible to know what is going on. Both warring parties continue to accuse each other of attacking civilians. Amnesty International reported an incident where a massacre has occurred.⁹

The war between the Ethiopian Defense Forces (EDF) and TPLF has spread to Eritrea, where TPLF fired missiles. The TPLF claim that the Eritrean government is fighting along the EDF, and therefore, they have a right to self-defense. This assertion seems to have been confirmed by

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54805088>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict/ethiopias-pm-seeks-to-regain-control-over-restive-tigray-region-idUSKBN27N09O>

⁷ <https://www.usip.org/press/2020/11/statement-ethiopia-senior-study-group-peace-and-security-red-sea-arena>

⁸ <https://www.dw.com/en/ethiopia-un-hopes-for-swift-humanitarian-access-to-tigray/a-55765127>

⁹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/ethiopia-investigation-reveals-evidence-that-scores-of-civilians-were-killed-in-massacre-in-tigray-state/>

the Prime Minister who noted that the Eritrean government had provided supplies to soldiers in the Northern Command who had fled to Eritrea following the TPLF attack on November 4. Last week, Abiy gave TPLF 72 hours to surrender, but the TPLF vowed to fight on. Over the weekend, the deadline for surrender ended, and the EDF attacked Mikelle, the Capital of Tigray.¹⁰ However, it is hard to ascertain any reports because of the blocked communication in the region. Several news outlets are reporting that Ethiopian police are searching for the leaders of TPLF. Mikelle is now under the control of EDF.¹¹ The TPLF leadership is still at large.

The Africa Union offered a peace negotiation delegation of three, but Abiy rebuffed it. He has promised to sweep the region. Abiy says his government does not negotiate with criminals. They view this as law enforcement. The TPLF has also indicated they will fight on.¹²

Atrocities Risk Factors/Unfolding Atrocity Crimes

- Hundreds of civilians are reported killed in the Tigray region in Mai kandra, Tigray.
- Over 40,000 have fled to Sudan and are causing a refugee crisis for UNHCR and the host country.
- There is an untold number of internally displaced in Tigray. Ethnic tensions in Ethiopia have worsened dramatically and people are reporting violence or perceived fear of those who live in areas where they are the minorities.
- Hate speech has increased by all groups
- There are reports of large youth organized mobs with the capacity to cause violence
- Ethnocentric political elites are also taking part in fueling violence towards different groups.
- There are reports of planned ethnic cleansing. Some view the EDF attack on the Tigray region as ethnic cleansing.¹³
- There are reports of massacres of civilians taking place in the region perpetrated by both warring teams. Amnesty International claims that they have uncovered a large number of civilians massacred.¹⁴
- Recently, the UN said that there could be crimes against humanity in the town of Mai-Kadra.¹⁵

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55083098>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/28/world/africa/ethiopia-tigray-Mekelle-assault.html>

¹² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-21/african-union-to-send-envoys-to-mediate-ethiopian-conflict>

¹³ <https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-sudan-africa-ethiopia-kenya-205738f7adfea3178e5f2150e6dff14e>

¹⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/ethiopia-investigation-reveals-evidence-that-scores-of-civilians-were-killed-in-massacre-in-tigray-state/>

¹⁵ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/11/1077592>

- There is a growing mistrust of the security forces who in some instances have been implicated in attacks and in others of failing to protect.
- Thousands of refugees are flocking into Sudan and are narrating horrifying stories of killings by both parties.
- Humanitarian agencies have not been able to access the region to provide necessary humanitarian services. Thousands of people in this region lack food, medicines and other basic supplies¹⁶
- There communication block by the government has made it difficult for journalists and advocates to gain access and report facts or distil misinformation.
- Thousands of civilians, including 96 000 Eritrean refugees in camps in the area, are displaced or in real danger. They have no more food and basic essentials.¹⁷
- Experts warn that the fighting could lead to a long-protracted war and could lead to the fragmentation of Ethiopia.
- Experts warn that the war could extend to other countries and potentially destabilize the entire region.
- Lack of protection of journalists and freedom of expression.

Recommendations

- **For the State Department**
 - The USG must be neutral to have a successful intervention (including in the Nile River Dam regional dispute). It is counterproductive for the U.S. to state that the government has the right to attack TPLF yet at the same time ask TPLF to come to the negotiating table.
 - The US should call on the TPLF to put down their weapons and negotiate with the government to protect the rights of Tigrayan people in Ethiopia.
 - Civilian safety must come first. Ensure that both parties protect civilians and respect the rights of all Ethiopians.
 - Call on Ethiopian government and TPLF to respect international humanitarian law and protect civilians from harm. The UN and Ethiopia reached an [agreement](#) to provide humanitarian access in Tigray. The State Department should support this effort.
 - The State Department should call on the Central government to restore all communications and allow reporters and humanitarian agencies to report what is happening.
 - The State Department should call for a military de-escalation of conflict and release of political prisoners and journalists.

¹⁶ <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-no-5-24-november-2020>

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55147858>

- The State department should call for all perpetrators of human rights violations to be held accountable.
- State Department should call on Ethiopian government to engage in inclusive national dialogue, to mitigate ethnic and territorial conflict throughout Ethiopia.
- The State Department should call on Ethiopian government to contain its security forces and immediately stop the use of extrajudicial executions, mass arrests, arbitrary detentions, forced eviction, and destruction of property during the law enforcement operations in East and West Guji zones.
- The US should urge the Ethiopian government to allow independent investigations on reported executions, ethnic cleansing, crime against humanity, atrocities and massacres.
- Support the Africa Union to host a peacebuilding and conflict resolution summit for all countries in the horn of Africa and the Middle East countries. Increasingly, Middle East countries are participating or implicated in ongoing conflicts in the region.
- Call on countries in the Middle East to remain neutral and support stability and national reconciliation in Ethiopia.
- Encourage the government of Ethiopia to conduct a review of their antiterrorism law of 2019.
- **For USAID**
 - Direct humanitarian aid to the thousands of displaced refugees in Sudan and in the Tigray region.
 - Support Ethiopia with technical and political climate in implementing safe and fair national elections.
 - Invest in training of youth on nonviolent approaches to conflict resolution.
 - Invest in programs to bring Ethiopian women to the negotiations table.
 - Invest in faith-based or religious leaders in national dialogue to stop ethnic rivalry and hate speech. (Most of the faith-based organizations have close relationships with communities around Ethiopia.)
 - Support the Ethiopian government in ensuring that all federal projects reach all regions and ethnic groups.
 - Invest in training of community peacebuilding advocates as Ethiopia prepares for national dialogues to prevent hate speech, ethnic cleansing, and rise in terrorism.
 - All political actors in the entire country need to undergo training on resolving conflict without violence.
 - Fund Ethiopian Human Rights Commission as they investigate and carry out inclusive dialogues in Ethiopia.
- **For Congress**
 - Congress should lift the freeze on providing humanitarian aid to Ethiopia.
 - Contribute funding for humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia refugees in Sudan and civilians trapped in the Tigray region.
 - Appropriate funding designated to improve human rights in Ethiopia.

- Release a resolution calling the Ethiopian government and all regional groups accountable for the violation of human rights. The resolution should urge the Federal government to return to a human rights and legal framework that regulate human rights in Ethiopia.