

Prevention and Protection

Working Group

PPWG Assessment – Ethiopia Conflict

Prepared for the United States Atrocity Early Warning Task Force

Conflict Background

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali's ascendance to power in April 2018 as Chairman of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), effectively ended the dominance of the Tigray Liberation Front (TPLF) that had led the coalition of four political parties for 30 years. TPLF had ruled with impunity, jailed thousands of opponents, detained and tortured human rights activists, bloggers, and journalists. PM Abiy initiated key reforms including release of thousands of prisoners, repeal of repressive laws, and ended the war with Eritrea for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He promised to hold free and fair elections open to all political parties. While these actions were unprecedented, reforms stalled and ethnic violence spread, and in many cases, the Ethiopian and Eritrean security forces were implicated.

Having lost power in the governing party, TPLF showed its dissatisfaction by accusing the PM of straying from democratic centralism. In 2019, the TPLF refused to join Abiy in forming the new Prosperity Party that replaced the EPRDF. Concerned about the spreading of the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) and the Ministry of Health recommended the postponement of the general election that was scheduled to be held in 2020. Both chambers of the Ethiopian parliament agreed to postpone the election to June 5, 2021, but later moved the date back to June 21st. TPLF and OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) rejected the postponement, accusing PM Abiy of usurping power and declaring his government illegitimate.

In defiance of the ruling of the Federal Parliament, TPLF held its own election in Tigray and claimed its party had won a high percentage of the vote even though the Ethiopian constitution specifically empowers NEBE to hold and oversee elections in the country. TPLF went further by declaring that it would no longer recognize the authority of the federal government after September 30, 2020. The NEBE rejected the elections held in Tigray. For his part, PM Abiy tried but failed to reconcile his government's differences with TPLF.

It is also important to note that throughout 2020, ethnic and religious violence increased throughout Ethiopia. TPLF created an anti-Ethiopian government alliance with other extremist groups. Since then, the country has seen increased terrorist activities which have taken many innocent lives including infants, children, and pregnant women. Women have become prey to rape as a weapon of war.

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What triggered the armed conflict in Tigray was the attack by TPLF on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) – initially denied by TPLF – and the retaliatory attack by the ENDF. The conflict has resulted in thousands of civilian deaths, mass starvation, and approximately 1.8 million internally displaced people. The conflict is spreading to neighboring regions of Amhara and Afar. Eritrean government forces have assisted ENDF resulting in the TPLF retaliating by firing missiles. There have also been UN reports claiming that Somalian troops have been involved in the fight in support of ENDF.

In May 2021, PM Abiy designated the TPLF and OLF as terrorist groups. A month later, Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, was recaptured by TPLF. After this defeat, and because of the upcoming elections, the Ethiopian government declared a unilateral ceasefire, but atrocities continued. On July 12, 2021, NEBE announced that Prime Minister Abiy had won by a landslide, but the election raised international concerns about fairness and accessibility, as political leadership in Tigray boycotted elections. Also, due to violence and insecurity, as well as the impact of the pandemic, people in Tigray were not able to participate.

The African Union sent a delegation to meet PM Abiy with an offer to negotiate peace. Abiy met with the delegation and explained that he considered the conflict an internal matter for his government to resolve and that TPLF is a criminal network.

The unstable condition in Ethiopia is further complicated by the dispute over the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan. Egypt and Sudan are concerned that the continued filling of the GERD will cut off their share of water supply to the Nile. On July 9, 2021, the UN Security Council met regarding this issue and concluded that the African Union was in the best position to mediate the dispute as the UN does not decide on water-related issues. However, the fear of an Egyptian military attack on Ethiopia is real, and the consequences are dire for the Horn of Africa. The dam is a very popular issue in Ethiopia and has given PM Abiy significant support from the people.

In response to the atrocities in the Tigray region, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken issued a [resolution](#) on May 23rd announcing visa restrictions on current and former Ethiopian and Eritrean government officials, members of the security forces, and some other “individuals responsible for, or complicit in, undermining resolution of the crisis in Tigray.” The visa restrictions include Amharan forces and members of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF).

Moreover, Ethiopia was one of the countries highlighted by the 2021 congressionally mandated Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act report. A released statement by Alice Wairimu Nderitu, the United Nations Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide, expressed concern over the escalated humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia. Nderitu urged the African Union to mediate an end to the atrocities.

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Humanitarian Crisis/Unfolding Atrocities

Humanitarian Situation and COVID-19 Impact

- Throughout Ethiopia, COVID-19 cases are surging. In Tigray, the pandemic is exacerbated by the conflict, deterioration of the healthcare sector, and the destruction of medical facilities. According to USAID, approximately 5.2 million people out of a total population of around 6 million in Tigray need humanitarian assistance. Like other African countries, less than 2% of Ethiopian population has received COVID-19 vaccines.
- The number of internally displaced persons ([IDPs](#)) is approximately two million, more than 1.7 million of which are within Tigray. By the end of 2021, USAID estimated that nearly [24 million](#) Ethiopians will likely require humanitarian assistance.
- According to the latest UNICEF report, [100,000 children](#) in Tigray are at risk of death from malnutrition. These numbers continue to grow as children experience food insecurity.
- There are confirmed reports of Tigrayans dying from starvation. More than 350,000 people live in famine conditions. More civilians are at risk of famine due to the conflict's effect on the agriculture sector. The [Famine Early Warning Systems Network](#) declared that the vast majority of Tigrayans would face catastrophic levels of food insecurity.

Gender-Based Violence and Ethnic Killings

- Amnesty International warned about extreme sexual and gender-based violence in their 2021 report. Women and girls are targets of horrifying sexual abuses from multiple parties involved in the conflict, specifically Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers. Doctors who treat women and girls survivors, reported an increase of rape and mutilation as a weapon of war.
- There are continued reports of massacres of civilians in the region. [Amnesty International](#) claims to have uncovered many mass graves of massacred civilians. Ethiopian security forces have been implicated in multiple attacks as well as failure to protect civilians in fighting zones.
- Ethnic killings have been reported on an unprecedented scale in many parts of the country as well as thousands detained. Thousands of civilians have been reportedly killed in [Mai kadra](#) in the Tigray region. Fragmentation is increasing and ethnic violence is spreading throughout the country.

Central Government v. Actions of the Political Opposition

- Reports of some humanitarian agencies being denied access to the region to provide necessary humanitarian services are surfacing in the news. According to the Guardian, the Ethiopian government has denied access to humanitarian agencies like Doctors Without Borders and the Norwegian Refugee Council alleging that these organizations are spreading misinformation about the government.
- Important roads and bridges have been cut by the Ethiopian government and the TPLF, thus hampering aid delivery.
- Communication and telephone lines were cut off by the TPLF and the Ethiopian government.

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- Aid workers and journalists struggle to be protected as they have been targeted by the government and opposition forces.

Potential War/Destabilization in the Horn of Africa

- The dispute between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan regarding the filling of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) reservoir could result in a war that will further destabilize the Horn of Africa.
- Tensions between Sudan and Ethiopia are escalating with Ethiopia accusing Sudan of occupying Ethiopian territory. This has caused the Sudanese ambassador to be recalled, blocking Sudan's efforts to mediate a ceasefire.
- The involvement of Somalian and Eritrean troops fighting alongside the Ethiopian National Defense Forces has worsened the crisis. Also, there are reports of some gulf nations involvement in the conflict.
- The African Union's efforts to end the crisis of the Tigray region have been rejected by the Ethiopian government.

Recommendations for the State Department

- Call on the Ethiopian government to prioritize immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of Eritrean and Somali forces from Ethiopian territory and the return of Amharan militia to their barracks.
- Call on the Ethiopian government to control its security forces and immediately stop the use of extrajudicial executions, mass arrests, arbitrary detentions, forced eviction, and destruction of property during its law enforcement operations.
- Call on the Ethiopian government to restore all means of communications and allow humanitarian agencies to provide assistance to the people, and journalists to report the situation on the ground.
- Call on the Ethiopian government, Eritrea, TPLF, and other warring groups to respect international humanitarian law and protect civilians from harm.
- Call on all parties to engage in an inclusive national dialogue, to mitigate ethnic and territorial conflict throughout Ethiopia.
- Urge the Ethiopian government to allow independent investigations of alleged atrocities and hold perpetrators accountable.
- Call on all warring parties to cease using rape as a weapon of war, and to protect women and girls caught in the conflict.
- Call on the TPLF to put down their weapons and negotiate with the government to protect the rights of the Tigrayan people and return to resolving the conflict peacefully.
- Impose specific and targeted financial sanctions on individuals perpetuating the conflict.

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- USG and regional countries should remain neutral on all issues, including the Nile River Dam regional dispute. The US should help Egypt and Sudan resolve the dispute with Ethiopia through dialogue.

Recommendations For USAID

- Provide humanitarian aid to alleviate the impact of COVID-19 by providing testing kits, vaccines and re-establishing healthcare centers destroyed and looted.
- Increase the funding for humanitarian assistance to accommodate the millions of Tigrayans who are at risk of famine and expedite emergency relief supplies.
- Provide appropriate assistance and safe houses for victims and survivors of gender-based violence who are mostly young girls and women.
- Invest in programs to bring Ethiopian women to the negotiations table.
- Direct humanitarian aid to the thousands of displaced refugees in Sudan and the Tigray region.
- Invite faith-based and religious leaders to a national dialogue to stop ethnic rivalry and hate speech. (Most faith-based organizations have close relationships with communities around Ethiopia.)
- Build Ethiopian government capacity to help it ensure that all federal projects reach all regions and ethnic groups.
- Invest in training of community peacebuilding so advocates in Ethiopia can prepare for national dialogue and reconciliation.
- Fund Ethiopian Human Rights Commission as they investigate atrocities and support their efforts in holding perpetrators accountable.
- Support Ethiopia in carrying out inclusive national dialogue.

Recommendation For Congress

- Appropriate funding for humanitarian assistance for refugees in Sudan and IDP's in Ethiopia. People urgently need shelter, food, water, sanitation, and hygiene, as well as health and protection.
- Appropriate funding designated to improve human rights in Ethiopia.
- Clarify the messaging of US and Western powers about the endgame of the punitive measures and avoid it resulting in the creation of an authoritarian regime.
- Call on the Ethiopian government to prioritize immediate humanitarian ceasefire and the withdrawal of Eritrean and Somali forces from Ethiopian territory and return to the barracks of the Amharan militia.
- Urge the UN Secretary-General and the President of the UN Security Council to visit Ethiopia to review the humanitarian situation in Tigray.
- Urge the Biden Administration to call regional and neighboring countries who contributed to the violence to cease doing so and to begin promoting peace and reconciliation.

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- Urge the ICC to open an independent investigation to identify perpetrators of atrocity crimes (prioritize criminal prosecutions of individuals responsible for human rights abuses, mass killings, and rape as a weapon of war)
- Support the UN in holding member countries that are exacerbating violence in Ethiopia accountable and ask them to refrain from taking sides in Ethiopia.