



The International Community Struggles to Address the Ethiopian Conflict

Martin Plaut

The withdrawal of Tigrayan forces into the countryside has parallels with the civil war of 1974–1991. Yet this time, other regional actors are involved.

As the war in Tigray enters its sixth month, there are few signs of it ending. The military and political situation appears as intractable as it was when the conflict commenced on 4 November 2020. As the International Crisis Group [put it](#): ‘Both federal and resistance forces are digging in for a lengthy battle in Ethiopia’s Tigray region?’.

It is worth recalling the history of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), which is leading the current resistance. The TPLF [launched](#) its fight against the Ethiopian government with a raid on a police station and a bank in Axum in July 1975. It spent the next 16 years fighting the government, until it captured Addis Ababa on 28 May 1991. The TPLF is, in a sense, reliving its past, by withdrawing into the countryside and the mountains and [conducting](#) a guerrilla campaign that the government is finding it difficult to respond to. The one major difference between the current conflict and the war in the 1970s and 80s is that today the TPLF is facing not just the armed forces of Ethiopia, but of Eritrea as well. Today’s conflict has a regional dimension.

What Has Caused the Conflict?

Tensions between Tigray and Eritrea can be traced to the liberation movements of the 1970s. Then, the TPLF and Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) had an uneasy alliance, working together to fight the Ethiopian government. This culminated in 1991 with the simultaneous fall of Addis Ababa and Asmara. The EPLF

[provided](#) support to the TPLF in the assault on Addis Ababa and then gave close protection to the TPLF leader, Meles Zenawi. But this alliance hid ideological and tactical disputes. The TPLF came to power, ruling Ethiopia via the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front. By 1998 the relationship had ruptured and Eritrea and Ethiopia [fought](#) a bitter war that ended in 2000, leaving some 100,000 dead. A peace agreement was signed in Algiers, but – much to the fury of Eritrea – Ethiopia [refused](#) to accept the border drawn by the boundary commission established by the treaty. In response, Eritrea’s President Isaias Afwerki collaborated with the Somali Islamists of Al-Shabaab and Ethiopian guerrilla movements in a failed attempt to oust the Tigrayan rulers of Ethiopia. However, in 2018 internal factors finally saw the TPLF lose its grip on power in Addis Ababa, to be [replaced](#) by Abiy Ahmed and the Oromo People’s Democratic Organisation.

Ethiopia’s Abiy and Eritrea’s Isaias realised that they shared an enemy in the Tigrayan military and political leadership. A series of initiatives led to an end to [hostilities](#) in 2018 between Eritrea and Ethiopia, a conflict which had simmered since the 1998–2000 border war. In a series of nine joint meetings between the Eritrean and Ethiopian leaders, they [developed](#) a joint strategy to rid themselves of the Tigrayans. It is instructive that their final visits were held at the military bases of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The TPLF – smarting from its loss of power – attempted to defy the new Ethiopian prime minister. It resisted

attempts to remove heavy weaponry from the Northern Command (headquartered in Mekelle and which it controlled). These weapons guarded northern Ethiopia (and Tigray in particular) from any Eritrean attack. The TPLF [mobilised](#) its citizens to block roads and prevent their removal.

A key question is what the war will do to Ethiopia and the wider Horn of Africa if it drags on, consuming resources and destabilising the region

Abiy cancelled scheduled elections (arguing they could not be held because of the coronavirus pandemic). But his mandate had [expired](#) and the Tigrayans said he had no right to act in this way. They [proceeded](#) with their own elections, despite being instructed by the federal authorities not to. The last straw came when Abiy sent General Jamal Muhammad to take [control](#) of the Northern Command at the end of October, only to have the TPLF put him on a plane back to Addis Ababa.

The federal government and the Tigray regional authority were clearly on a collision course. Exactly what happened on 4 November is not clear, but [fighting](#) broke out at the Northern Command base in Mekelle, which the TPLF took control of. Tigray was under attack from the north, east and south, with reports of drones, possibly supplied by the UAE, being fired from



Food aid distribution in Tigray during the Ethiopian civil war of 1974–1991. Courtesy of Neil Cooper / Alamy Stock Photo

the Eritrean port of Assab in [support](#) of the Ethiopian government's war effort.

The atrocities were predominantly carried out by Eritrean and Ethiopian forces, since Tigrayan forces were on their home territory and unlikely to attack their own people

This is not the 'law-enforcement operation' [described](#) by Abiy. On 6 November, Abiy [said](#) that: 'operations by federal defence forces underway in Northern Ethiopia have clear, limited and achievable objectives'. Six months later this is hardly a plausible assessment. The fighting has evolved into a full-scale war, involving Ethiopian federal forces and Amhara militia, together with the Eritrean army, which have combined to attack the Tigrayan forces. There have also been [reports](#) that Somali troops have joined the Eritrean offensive. Towns such as Adigrat in the north fell to federal forces, which advanced on Tigray's capital, Mekelle. After artillery bombardment of Mekelle, Abiy could rightly claim that his forces were 'fully

in control' of the city. He said that the army's entry into the city marked the 'last phase' of the conflict with the TPLF.

In reality the Tigrayans had pulled their forces out of the cities and had headed to the countryside and the mountains to conduct a guerrilla war – just as they had done prior to 1991. Mekelle had fallen, but the Tigrayan administration had ordered its forces to withdraw before the attack.

The UN – in a secret report – [feared](#) the war would become an extended conflict, characterised by irregular warfare. This is indeed what has transpired. By 4 April 2021 Abiy [admitted](#) that the fighting was far from over. Capturing the cities had not ended the war.

Conflict, Atrocities and Famine

The war has taken a terrible toll on the population. Three Tigrayan opposition parties estimated that by February 2021, 52,000 civilian lives had been lost. They [described](#) the impact of the fighting on their people, including widespread sexual violence, the destruction of health and education infrastructure, and extra-judicial killings.

The atrocities were predominantly carried out by Eritrean and Ethiopian forces, since Tigrayan forces were on their home territory and unlikely to attack

their own people. The most egregious abuses so far include the November killings in the city of Axum, with Eritreans going door to door shooting civilians on sight. Hundreds were [murdered](#), although the exact number has not been possible to ascertain. The findings were broadly supported by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, which [accepted](#) that civilians had been attacked and that Eritrean troops were largely responsible.

The fighting in Tigray broke out as the harvest was coming in. This – together with the disruption [imposed](#) by the conflict – has left many families on the edge of starvation. The region is already seeing deaths from hunger and although aid is reaching some places, perhaps as many as 500,000 are in areas outside of the reach of the agencies.

Diplomacy

As the war erupted, the African Union attempted to intervene to try to end the conflict, which was – after all – taking place just north of its headquarters in Addis Ababa. Towards the end of November the African Union chairman, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, [held](#) talks with Ethiopian President Sahle-Work Zewde. Together they hammered out a mediation plan. This involved the appointment of three

African ‘distinguished statespersons’ who were asked to act as special envoys of the African Union to [mediate](#) between the warring parties.

Eritreans have been reinforcing their positions while ‘re-badging’ their troops as Ethiopian forces

Teferi Melesse Desta – the Ethiopian ambassador to the UK – [said](#) that his country had accepted the appointment of the three envoys to mediate in the crisis. Unfortunately, the [initiative](#) went against the stated policy of Abiy, who said on 11 November that there would be no dialogue ‘until our efforts to ascertain [sic.] the rule of law are achieved’. Clearly furious, Abiy said he would [meet](#) the former African presidents, but had no interest in allowing them to mediate in the conflict. ‘We don’t negotiate with criminals... We bring them to justice, not to the negotiating table’, he declared. Abiy met the three former presidents for pointless [discussions](#) on 27 November. The initiative had failed. The last, best, chance for peace was lost because of Ethiopian government intransigence.

Since then the African Union has had little role in the conflict, with attempts to end the war being taken up by the US and EU. There have been intense efforts to encourage the Eritreans to withdraw from Tigray, so

that the conflict ceases being a regional war. President Joe Biden sent a senator as an emissary to Ethiopia to try to deal with the crisis. Senator Chris Coons said he urged Abiy to declare a ceasefire in the embattled Tigray region, but his appeal was [rejected](#).

The EU and the UK have also [played](#) their part, joining Japan and Canada in calling for the Eritreans to leave. The problem has been discussed at the UN Security Council, where India, China and Russia have prevented attempts to [resolve](#) the issue, on the grounds that it would amount to interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. In an attempt to break the deadlock the Finnish foreign minister, Pekka Haavisto, was asked to travel to the region on behalf of the EU to push for a ceasefire, improved humanitarian aid access, investigations into human rights abuses and, crucially, the withdrawal of Eritrean troops. The Haavisto mission failed to make much headway, with the EU Vice-President Josep Borrell [concluding that](#) little had been achieved: ‘I have to say the situation is not improving. The Eritrean troops are still there, in spite of all the promises of the Ethiopian government to withdraw them. Humanitarian access has not been fulfilled’.

In the meantime, after denying for months that Eritrean troops were involved in the war, Abiy finally reversed his position and asked them to leave. ‘Eritrea has agreed to withdraw its forces out of the Ethiopian border’, Abiy [said](#) at the end of March, the day

after arriving in Eritrea to meet Isaias. Since then there have been [reports](#) that Eritrean troops have begun to withdraw, but this has not been verified. Rather, informal information suggests quite the opposite – that the Eritreans have been reinforcing their positions while ‘re-badging’ their troops as Ethiopian forces.

A key question is what the war will do to Ethiopia and the wider Horn of Africa if it drags on, consuming resources and destabilising the region. There have been [clashes](#) on the border with neighbouring Sudan. Inside Ethiopia there has been [fighting](#) between the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups. And there have been huge [demonstrations](#) against Abiy by the previously supportive Amhara community. With rising tensions inside Ethiopia and across the region, the prospects for Prime Minister Abiy hardly look favourable ahead of June’s [scheduled](#) general election.

Martin Plaut worked for the BBC for 27 years, retiring as Africa editor, World Service News, in 2013. He has written extensively on the continent, publishing books on the Horn of Africa and southern Africa. He is a Senior Research Fellow at King’s College, London.

The views expressed in this Commentary are the author’s, and do not represent those of RUSI or any other institution.