

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	508
Land:	Etiopien
Kilde:	International Crisis Group
Titel:	Avoiding the Abyss as War Resumes in Northern Ethiopia
Udgivet:	7. september 2022
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	16. september 2022

Avoiding the Abyss as War Resumes in Northern Ethiopia

Renewed fighting between a federal-Amhara-Eritrea coalition and Tigray's forces has shattered a tenuous months-long truce. The reversal heralds a return to one of the world's deadliest conflicts. International envoys should keep pressing the Ethiopian parties to renew the truce and begin formal direct negotiations.

War rages – again – in northern Ethiopia. The resumption of conflict on 24 August between the federal military, forces from the Amhara region, which borders Tigray, and Eritrean troops, on one side, and Tigray forces, on the other, marks the breach of a roughly nine-month truce that had largely halted some of the world's deadliest fighting. The return to blows is a setback for a struggling peace process and strenuous efforts to get food to millions of besieged Tigrayans. Although it is unclear exactly why combat restarted or whether either side planned a sustained campaign, both immediately escalated, with a Tigrayan offensive to the south into Amhara and a joint Ethiopian-Eritrean incursion into Tigray from the north. Sustained full-blown hostilities would mean prolongation of a likely unwinnable war, creating more mass suffering. Instead, the Ethiopian parties must renew the truce and overcome the obstacles that have impeded the beginning of formal talks. Concerted high-level pressure by donors, many of whom have been distracted by the Ukraine crisis, will likely be vital to any breakthrough.

A Return to Arms

Fighting in Ethiopia's nearly two-year civil war – a brutal conflict that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, displaced millions and generated credible reports of atrocities on all sides – resumed in northern Amhara on 24 August. Efforts to commence formal talks have failed to end the siege and humanitarian crisis in Tigray, and tensions have been rising over the course of the summer. As when the war broke out in November 2020, each side blamed the other for starting the hostilities, and it is not clear who shot first. As in 2020, federal troops had been massing near Tigray's southern border for weeks. In recent months, Tigray's leaders have also bolstered their own forces through rearming, recruitment and training.

The late August clashes in northern Amhara – just south of a part of Tigray that Amhara groups claim as their own – were preceded by smaller incidents. Federal

forces shelled Tigray positions at Dedebit in north-western Tigray on 15 August. That was the first serious violation of a truce dating back, in effect, to December 2021 but formalised in March. Then, on 24 August, the day fighting to the south began, the federal military said it had shot down a plane the previous evening coming from Sudanese airspace to deliver weapons to Tigray. No independent source has verified that the plane was indeed carrying arms, but Tigray has previously received other air deliveries of unspecified cargo that Addis Ababa believes to have been lethal aid.

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Whether or not either side fully intended it, the fighting quickly spread, taking the country back to full-blown confrontation. Tigray's fighters seem to have had the better of the first exchanges in the south, taking the northern Amhara town of Kobo on 27 August; Tigrayan media showed footage of prisoners of war arriving in Alamata town in southern Tigray. For its part, the federal air force bombed Tigray's capital Mekelle on 26 August, and again overnight on 30-31 August, [reportedly](#) causing deaths by hitting a kindergarten and civilian areas near the main hospital.

As new fronts opened, each side painted the other as the aggressor. On 1 September, Tigray authorities said the Ethiopian and Eritrean armies had launched major offensives from Eritrea to the north. On Twitter, Eritrea's ambassador to Kenya and Tanzania [implicitly confirmed](#) Asmara's renewed involvement. Federal authorities, a day earlier, accused Tigray forces of staging an "[invasion](#)" of areas to the west of Kobo and also close to the disputed Sudanese border in Western Tigray. The latter clashes [reportedly involved](#) Tigrayan former UN peacekeepers who were stranded in Sudan during the war when they refused to return to Ethiopia. A top Tigray official told Crisis Group that these forces were defending their position near the Sudanese border, and that federal and Amhara units had tried to penetrate Tigray in the south.

War, Truce and War Again

Ethiopia's civil war began in November 2020, when a [constitutional dispute](#) between Tigray and federal leaders escalated into conflict amid a prolonged power struggle. Momentum has repeatedly flipped sides. At first, the federal government (backed by Eritrea's military and Amhara forces) pushed into Tigray, took Mekelle and compelled the region's ruling Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) administration to flee to mountainous areas. Tigray forces subsequently regrouped to launch a guerrilla campaign that thwarted

federal plans and, months later, recaptured Mekelle and reinstalled the TPLF government. In July 2021, partly in response to a renewed federal blockade, Tigray's troops mounted an offensive, pushing in several directions in Amhara (amid [accusations](#) of atrocities), as well as south toward Addis Ababa in an attempt to dislodge Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government. Then, in turn, the federal government, armed with new drones and backed by strong popular mobilisation, beat back Tigray's forces, which retreated to their home region in December.

The subsequent lull in fighting evolved into a fragile, informal truce, with both sides making conciliatory gestures. In December, Addis Ababa ordered the release of key opposition prisoners and put forward a plan for national dialogue to address Ethiopia's long-festered political challenges. In late March, the parties [formalised a humanitarian truce, after which critical aid deliveries into Tigray began picking up](#). In the precarious new status quo, federal troops stayed largely outside Tigray, while Tigrayan forces left the Amhara holding onto Western Tigray (which the Amhara call Welkait) – [where rights group say](#) Amhara groups have committed atrocities and displaced 700,000, mostly Tigrayan residents, since the war began. Eritrean soldiers continued to occupy parts of Western Tigray (in the north) and north-eastern Tigray.

Even following the truce, the humanitarian situation in Tigray remained dire. Despite the increase in food aid, Addis Ababa and its allies continued to block commercial traffic into the region, while tightly restricting the fuel supply and failing to restore Tigray's electricity, telecommunications and banking services, all of which the federal government had severed in the conflict's early phase and cut again after leaving Mekelle in June 2021.

Efforts to get peace talks off the ground also foundered. Both sides took steps and offered commitments to engage in formal negotiations, but the latter never commenced amid squabbling between the two sides over mediators and preconditions. While the federal government and many outside actors backed an African Union-led process, the Tigray authorities expressed scepticism that this body, which is headquartered in Addis Ababa, could act as a fair arbiter, and rejected a lead role for its envoy, former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo. Tigray authorities have said they prefer Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta as mediator, but he is leaving power, having served his final term. It is unclear if Kenyatta could still play such a role after his anointed successor, Raila Odinga, lost to Deputy President William Ruto, who has a bitter relationship with Kenyatta, in Kenya's 9 August election. Further complicating matters, the federal government demanded talks without preconditions, while Tigray authorities made negotiations contingent on both unfettered humanitarian operations and a

full restoration of services, as well as the return of Western Tigray (a hotly contested area that the Amhara, who currently control it, claim the TPLF violently annexed in the early 1990s).

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International efforts to steer the parties toward peace have been uneven. Distracted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Western capitals reduced their high-level focus exactly as the truce in Ethiopia was beginning to take hold. The diplomacy that persists is often disjointed. For instance, the U.S., which has now dispatched its third regional envoy since creating the post in April 2021, facilitated a secret meeting between senior officials from both sides in June in Djibouti (there was a similar one earlier in Seychelles), where the federal government pledged to restore services to Tigray. But there was little follow-up to that meeting, with Tigray accusing Addis Ababa of breaking its pledge and Washington of failing to act as guarantor. When the AU's Obasanjo subsequently tried to go to Mekelle days after a joint UN, U.S. and EU visit, and with still no progress made toward service restoration, Tigray's leaders took it as another sign Abiy was reneging on the Djibouti pledges and rejected his request to visit. Obasanjo's [call](#) for Eritrea to also attend prospective talks caught many other actors by surprise and cemented Mekelle's view that he should not lead mediation efforts.

For Tigrayans, the conflict's further escalation would bring major risks. Any form of renewed war is in fact likely to worsen the blockade of Tigray and the humanitarian crisis, with all aid operations to Tigray suspended since hostilities kicked off. In a [23 August letter to international partners](#), which reiterated demands for federal authorities to restore services and return Western Tigray to Mekelle's control, Tigray's president concluded by warning again that the region would fight to end the blockade if necessary. But the reality is that, while Tigray may well be able to demonstrate its military prowess, it looks unlikely to achieve its ends in the short term. Its forces would face a major challenge in seeking to break through the combined force of federal, Amhara and Eritrean troops to open and then maintain a corridor to neighbouring Sudan. Nor is there much reason to think that another push south, aimed at overthrowing Abiy, is likelier to succeed than last time. Rather, renewed fighting could well embolden hardliners in Addis Ababa and Asmara, as well as among Amhara's political leaders who want to double down on the siege strategy that has so devastated Tigray.

Abiy, too, would likely lose out from an escalation. He still has no viable military and political strategy for bending Mekelle to his will. His administration has already proven unable to hold and govern Tigray in the face of a resolute and popular insurgency, which his own brutal tactics served to inflame. A rebooted full-blown war is likely to increase his government's international isolation at a time when the Ethiopian economy desperately needs foreign aid, while bogging Addis Ababa down in a costly, deadly and unwinnable conflict with a foe that has had time to regroup and is fighting for its survival. Clashes near the Ethiopia-Sudan border in an area contested by those two states as well as by Amhara and Tigray raise the stakes further. Should these skirmishes persist, Sudanese troops could become involved, possibly in a de facto alliance with Tigray forces. That development would increase the likelihood of a disastrous, wider confrontation, pitting Sudan against Ethiopia – they are already at loggerheads over disputed border areas and Ethiopia's new megadam on the Blue Nile river – and maybe Eritrea as well.

If any actor expects to gain from more violence, it is probably Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, whose forces fought alongside federal and Amhara troops against Tigray during the war's first phases, re-entered the fray recently and, as noted above, continue to occupy parts of the region's west and north east. Isaias considers the TPLF a historical and existential foe. He thus opposes any rapprochement between the TPLF and Addis Ababa that would mean rehabilitating the Tigray party (he almost certainly welcomed Ethiopian federal authorities classifying the TPLF as a terrorist organisation in May 2021). He may well struggle to take on Tigray on his own, however, meaning that he is unlikely to be able to pursue war if Abiy wants to return to the truce.

Renewing the Truce

It is essential that the African and international envoys who have been engaged diplomatically continue to demand that the main antagonists rein in their forces, prevent further escalation and agree on a new truce – while beginning to set the stage for formal talks. The window for averting a return to a sustained full-blown war appears to be short. Until a [2 August visit](#) to Mekelle by the EU, U.S. and UN special envoys – which has now been followed by an early September visit to Addis Ababa, under way as this statement goes to press, by the U.S. and UN emissaries, plus Obasanjo – outside actors working for a peaceful resolution had been watching too passively, as a volatile standoff drifted back toward conflict and the peace process stalled. A higher-level, more intense degree of engagement is required.

The main external actors, including the AU, U.S., EU and UN, as well as Kenya, should move immediately and in concert. The recent joint trips by envoys to Mekelle and Addis Ababa are a welcome start and should be paired with higher-level engagement from all, such as telephone calls from senior officials. They should make clear to Abiy's government that major non-humanitarian assistance, including World Bank projects and any new International Monetary Fund financing, may be in jeopardy should the federal government fail to stop its offensives and continue the de facto blockade of Tigray. The war puts donors seeking to ease Ethiopia's economic difficulty in a bind. Yet, while they should keep scaling up humanitarian relief, they should take direct budget support off the table for now lest they wind up bankrolling a revived federal war effort. Further, donors risk undermining a key incentive for Abiy to make peace should they continue to ramp up major development assistance even as war resumes.

External players, including the AU, should also insist with as much unity as possible that Eritrea withdraw its troops from Tigray (and that Abiy press for this result) and that the federal government honour its representatives' private pledges at the U.S.-facilitated June meeting in Djibouti with Tigray officials to restore banking, telecommunications and electricity services to the beleaguered region.

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Outside actors should lean on Tigray as well. They should keep demanding that its leaders desist from steps that would further escalate the fighting and agree to a truce. Mekelle should agree to hold the necessary discussions with the federal authorities on the logistical and security aspects of restoring services to Tigray, such as how to manage payments and provide security for installation and maintenance technicians. Diplomats also need to mediate a dispute between Tigray's government and the World Food Programme after the former grabbed twelve WFP tankers on 25 August, saying the UN agency refused to return in kind fuel it was owed. Tigray's seizure of the WFP fuel trucks creates a further constraint on already woefully insufficient humanitarian operations that have left at least half of Tigray's approximately seven million people in need of support. Unless the incident is remedied, federal authorities are likely to use it as a reason to restrict, or completely close off, the region's fuel supply, arguing that Tigray's authorities redirect humanitarian assistance to their military operation.

If the parties can be persuaded to de-escalate and restore the truce, the next step is clearing still substantial hurdles to formal talks. At the end of August, a senior Tigray commander insisted to Crisis Group that the federal government must at

least publicly commit to completely lifting the blockade and restoring services before any form of discussions can occur. For its part, Addis Ababa's latest position on the issue was that those things would happen only alongside discussions over a permanent ceasefire. An Ethiopian diplomat told Crisis Group on 31 August that it was not practical to restore services with the TPLF still armed and prepared for war.

Much as African and international players should continue to insist that Ethiopia restore services, Tigray's leaders should also weigh whether their demands for the government to fulfil what they cast as its legal obligations in advance of talks are well advised, particularly if they help prolong an intolerable, immiserating status quo. There are alternatives that could allow Mekelle to maintain a position of principle while making practical progress toward peace. For example, Tigray's representatives could attend formal talks but limit their discussions to the logistical and security issues of reconnecting Tigray to trade, aid and services, leaving formal talks on other issues until the government has lifted the siege. In such a scenario, the formality of the process and extra international scrutiny could help increase external pressure on the federal government to honour its pledge to restore services and end its punishment of Tigray's civilian population, even if international actors' pleas to this effect have long gone unheeded.

Another hugely difficult issue that will likely need to be finessed until talks get off the ground is the status of Western Tigray. The area has been administered by Tigray throughout the current federal era that began in the early 1990s, but is also claimed by the Amhara, which seized it when the present conflict began, citing their longstanding stance that the TPLF forcibly took it, displacing the native population when the Tigrayan party rose to power in the 1990s. The 2020 Amhara takeover involved the violent expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Tigrayans and widely reported atrocities by Amhara forces and militia against civilians. Tigray's leaders face substantial pressure from Tigrayans not to make concessions that legitimise these new facts on the ground and have refused to negotiate over the area's constitutional status. Reclaiming the area would also allow the besieged region a corridor to resupply itself through Sudan.

Finding common ground with respect to Western Tigray will be no small task, as the sides remain far apart. Amhara outright rejects Tigray's demand that it withdraw and return the territory to its pre-war status, and Addis Ababa has thus far declined to force the issue. Abiy may well have assessed that favouring Tigray in this instance would be too costly for him in Amhara, which has been a core pillar of his political and wartime coalition. In recent months, in order to assert control, the federal and Amhara governments have [arrested](#) thousands of members of Amhara's nationalist militia, known as Fano, causing opposition to

Abiy to grow in Ethiopia's second-largest region. Abiy can ill afford to lose more Amhara support given the host of other problems his government is facing, including the growing rebellion in Ethiopia's most populous region, Oromia, which is nominally Abiy's base. Furthermore, the prospect of Tigray gaining the capacity to resupply itself from Sudan via Western Tigray is unacceptable both to Abiy and Isaias.

The federal government could publicly acknowledge that Amhara's violent takeover [of Western Tigray] was unconstitutional.

Rather than let the intractable Western Tigray issue continue to be an obstacle to de-escalation and peace talks, the parties should get around the table and discuss disagreements there. To help matters along, the federal government could publicly acknowledge that Amhara's violent takeover was unconstitutional, and call for Amhara and Eritrean forces to leave the area so recently displaced residents can return. These steps could open the door to Tigray representatives attending the talks, although it would also require Mekelle to implicitly accept the need for a political process on Western Tigray and, during that process, federal control of the area if and when the other forces leave. Tigrayan and federal commitments to a future political process to assess the various claims might help ease Amhara concerns. Long-term solutions that might emerge from those discussions include Amhara and Tigray agreeing to jointly administer the area, ensuring minority rights protections or creating an autonomous district accountable directly to the federal government.

Last is the question of mediation. To ease Tigrayan concerns about AU mediation, the AU could create a panel of senior African officials to lead the process, which in addition to Obasanjo could include representatives from the Kenyan, South African and/or Algerian governments. Should talks progress to permanent ceasefire arrangements, Western partners, particularly the U.S. and EU, would likely need to act as guarantors of any agreement. The UN would probably be best positioned to monitor it, though reaching agreement to such an arrangement in Addis Ababa and New York will not be easy. In any event, more coordinated efforts from all the major outside actors will be necessary to hold the parties to their commitments and to get talks under way. Such a boosted approach will also be required in the future to deal with sticky Western Tigray discussions, as well as all aspects of re-establishing relations between the federal and Tigray governments, including Mekelle's demand for a self-determination referendum and the future status of Tigray's forces.

To alter the current trajectory, high-level visits to Addis and Mekelle by the U.S. and other international officials may be useful; ideally, these would be

coordinated for maximum effect (as indeed happened with the joint visit to Mekelle by the U.S., EU and UN special envoys in early August, even though that proved insufficient to curb the renewed fighting). To further raise awareness of the gravity of the situation, African leaders might convene a meeting on Ethiopia's crisis at the forthcoming UN General Assembly. While focused international attention is vital to prevent more carnage, the onus for preventing more senseless death and suffering in Ethiopia rests on Ethiopian leaders on both sides of the conflict, as well as Eritrea's government. If the parties do not find a way to address their differences around the negotiating table, then the brutal war will continue, with Ethiopia's people paying the price of their failure.