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Ethiopian, Eritrean troops clash with Tigrayan forces in the north

Reuters

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Summary

- Ethiopian, Eritrean forces attack, says Tigray military
- Tigrayan forces intensify attacks, says Ethiopia govt
- Tigrayans arrested after ceasefire broken, lawyer says

NAIROBI, Sept 1 (Reuters) - Allied Ethiopian and Eritrean government troops attacked Tigrayan forces on Thursday inside the northern Ethiopian region of Tigray, a Tigrayan military spokesperson said, as the latest flare-up in the conflict entered its second week.

The Ethiopian government blamed the rebellious forces of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) for the renewed violence, saying they had intensified their attacks.

The conflict in northern Ethiopia, pitting federal forces and their Eritrean allies against the TPLF, which runs Tigray's regional government, broke out in November 2020. Fighting resumed on Aug. 24, breaking a ceasefire in place since March.

"The enemy, having already relocated a massive force to Eritrea, has now begun a joint campaign with the foreign invading force of Eritrea," the Tigrayan military command said in a statement.

It said the northern town of Adybayo had been attacked from four directions, while fighting was also ongoing on Tigray's southern front. TPLF spokesman Getachew Reda spoke on Twitter of "a massive four-pronged offensive" around Adybayo.

The Ethiopian government said intensifying Tigrayan attacks were killing and displacing civilians and destroying property. It also accused the TPLF of diverting food aid meant for hungry Tigrayans.

The government statement did not directly address the TPLF's allegation of a joint attack by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops in northwestern Tigray.

Ethiopian military spokesperson Colonel Getnet Adane, the prime minister's spokesperson Billene Seyoum and Eritrean Information Minister Yemane Gebremeskel did not respond to requests for comment.

Eritrea's ambassador to Kenya, Beyene Russom, tweeted that Tigrayan forces were making a mistake and added "Victory to the Eritrean Defense Forces and the people of Eritrea is inevitable!"

ARRESTS RESUME

A Tigrayan lawyer in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa said he had received reports of dozens of arrests of ethnic Tigrayans, including clergy, since fighting resumed last week.

Hailu Kebede, a senior Tigrayan opposition figure based in Addis, went missing on Aug. 29 after leaving home to see a mechanic, a family member said. Relatives had checked police stations but could not locate him, and an unknown person had answered his phone saying he was not available. Spokesmen for Addis Ababa police and the federal police did not respond to requests for comment on the alleged arrests or on Hailu's disappearance.

During previous pivotal moments in the conflict, thousands of Tigrayan civilians have been rounded up and detained with little food or medical care. Dozens died. The Ethiopian government said they were suspected of supporting the TPLF. Most of them were later released without charge.

The conflict in Africa's second most populous country has killed thousands, displaced millions and pushed parts of Tigray into famine. Almost all of Tigray's 5.5 million people need food aid, but the latest round of violence has halted all humanitarian convoys.

The war is rooted in old grievances between ethnic groups, built up over decades of turmoil, violent changes of regime, territorial disputes between regions and long periods of authoritarian rule, most recently by a coalition dominated by the TPLF from 1991 to 2018.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has accused the TPLF of seeking to reassert Tigrayan dominance over Ethiopia, while the TPLF accuses him of over-centralising power and oppressing Tigrayans. Each side rejects the other's narrative.

ERITREA'S ROLE

Verifying claims and counter-claims about events on the ground in Tigray is difficult as reporters are not allowed into the region, which has had few communication links with the outside world since government troops pulled out in mid-2021.

A humanitarian worker in the Tigrayan town of Shire told Reuters that witnesses had reported heavy artillery shelling from Eritrea into Tigray around the town of Shiraro on Wednesday and in the early hours of Thursday.

A militia leader allied to the Ethiopian government, based in Gondar in the Amhara region south of Tigray, cited contacts on the front line as saying there had been "heavy shelling from our side" aimed at Tigrayan trenches around Shiraro.

Eritrea fought a war against Ethiopia, then run by the TPLF, in 1998-2000 and has remained an enemy of the TPLF. It sent troops into Tigray to support the Ethiopian military immediately after fighting broke out in November 2020.

The Eritrean government declared a ceasefire in March, but in May, Eritrean forces fired at least 23 shells at Shiraro, killing a 14-year-old girl and wounding 18 people, a U.N. bulletin said. Eritrea did not respond to requests for comment at the time.

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