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**EXPERT COMMENT**

Ethiopia: Fresh clashes renew fears for a return to conflict — Expert comment

ACLED East Africa Senior Analyst Jalale Getachew Birru explains why fighting between the TPLF and government forces raise concerns of renewed armed clashes in northern Ethiopia.

2 February 2026 • 4-minute read



People walk through an intersection in Mekele, the capital of the Tigray region, where the TPLF and local administration are seated, on 2 April 2025. Photo by Ximena Borrazas/AFP via Getty Images.

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What triggered the recent clashes in northern Ethiopia?

The [Tigray People's Liberation Front \(TPLF\)](#)-led [Tigray Defense Forces \(TDF\)](#) have launched an operation to control disputed territories of both western and southern Tigray, triggering a series of clashes with state forces. On 26 January, fighting broke out in the disputed Tselemt area along the Tigray-Amhara border after the TDF crossed the Tekeze River in an attempt to seize control of the area and ended up clashing with the [Ethiopian National Defense Force \(ENDF\)](#). The confrontation continued on 28 and 29 January. Separately, TDF troops took control of the disputed Alamata and Korem areas in southern Tigray on 29 January after the ENDF command post withdrew. On 30 January, the ENDF conducted multiple drone strikes targeting vehicles in the Central Tigray zone, killing at least one person. The local administrations indicated that the vehicles were transporting goods, like cooking oil and bananas.¹ So far, there is no statement from the federal government on this.

TDF troops also clashed with regional rivals, the Tigray Peace Forces (TPF), which are former TDF members seeking to remove the TPLF from the region. Armed clashes between the two groups broke out on 29 January in the Wajirat area in South Eastern Tigray zone and in Megale woreda of the Afar region, east of Tigray. The clashes continued in Afar on 30 January.

This escalation follows months of worsening relations between the federal government and the TPLF. Both sides have accused each other of violating the Pretoria Agreement that ended the two-year war in northern Ethiopia in November 2022.

Why are these clashes significant?

This fighting is the most significant confrontation between the TDF and the ENDF since the end of the northern Ethiopia conflict. Up until these recent clashes, ACLED records only a few minor skirmishes between the two actors since November 2022. In August 2024, however, tensions between the TPLF and the government escalated following the renewal of relations between Eritrea and the TPLF and [a TPLF internal dispute](#) that led to the TPLF-affiliated TDF troops' [occupation of local administrations in Tigray in March 2025](#), which had been established by the federally-appointed interim regional administration.

The current TDF operation appears to be part of a wider territorial push. ACLED has confirmed that the TPLF has decided to take over the disputed areas of Welkait, Tsegede, Humera, and Tselemt by force. The TPLF-aligned [Interim Regional Administration of Tigray](#)'s president, Tadesse Werede, admitted that the TDF crossed the Tekeze River to control Tselemt. He justified the

operation, citing the federal government's failure to address the TPLF's main aim related to the internally displaced ethnic Tigray people (IDPs) and disputed territories.² The TPLF seeks to establish control over the disputed areas and dismantle the current pro-Amhara local administration established during the northern Ethiopia conflict, before overseeing the return of IDPs, and then negotiating their future status. Prior to the current TDF campaign, the federal government's position has been to first facilitate the return of IDPs to these territories and then organize a referendum to determine whether they will fall under the Amhara or Tigray administration.³

The TPLF has so far operated alone. However, some [Fano militias](#) — Amhara ethnic armed groups — and the Eritrea military have aligned with the TPLF in the past year, reversing their previous alignment with the Ethiopian government during the northern Ethiopia conflict and raising concerns of potentially expanding the conflict. While some experts have expressed concerns of a direct conflict between the two countries, a [direct confrontation between Ethiopia and Eritrea remains unlikely](#). Instead, the developments along the Tigray-Amhara border point to the potential for the two sides to support rival rebel groups.

What can we expect next in northern Ethiopia?

It is still unclear whether the TPLF is testing the water or using these armed clashes as a bargaining chip to renegotiate control of the disputed territories in western Tigray. Should they continue with their current operation, the TPLF is expected to continue mobilizing TDF troops from Tigray and neighboring Sudan — commonly referred to as the TDF's Army 70 — to encircle the disputed western Tigray with the objective of seizing it militarily, raising the likelihood of a major confrontation with the ENDF and affiliated local militias.

At the same time, the TPLF's current push risks escalation in the neighboring Amhara region involving its Fano allies, such as the newly formed Amhara Fano National Movement. Such groups may use the opportunity to stretch federal forces and weaken the government's capacity to defend multiple fronts simultaneously.

Footnotes

- 1 [BBC Amharic, "Police say one person was killed in drone attacks in three areas of Tigray region," 31 January 2026 \(Amharic\)](#)
- 2 [BBC Amharic, "Tigray Interim Administration Says Clashes With Federal Forces 'Should Not Have Happened,'" 2 February 2026 \(Amharic\)](#)
- 3 [Facebook, @FDRECommunicationService, 6 November 2023](#)

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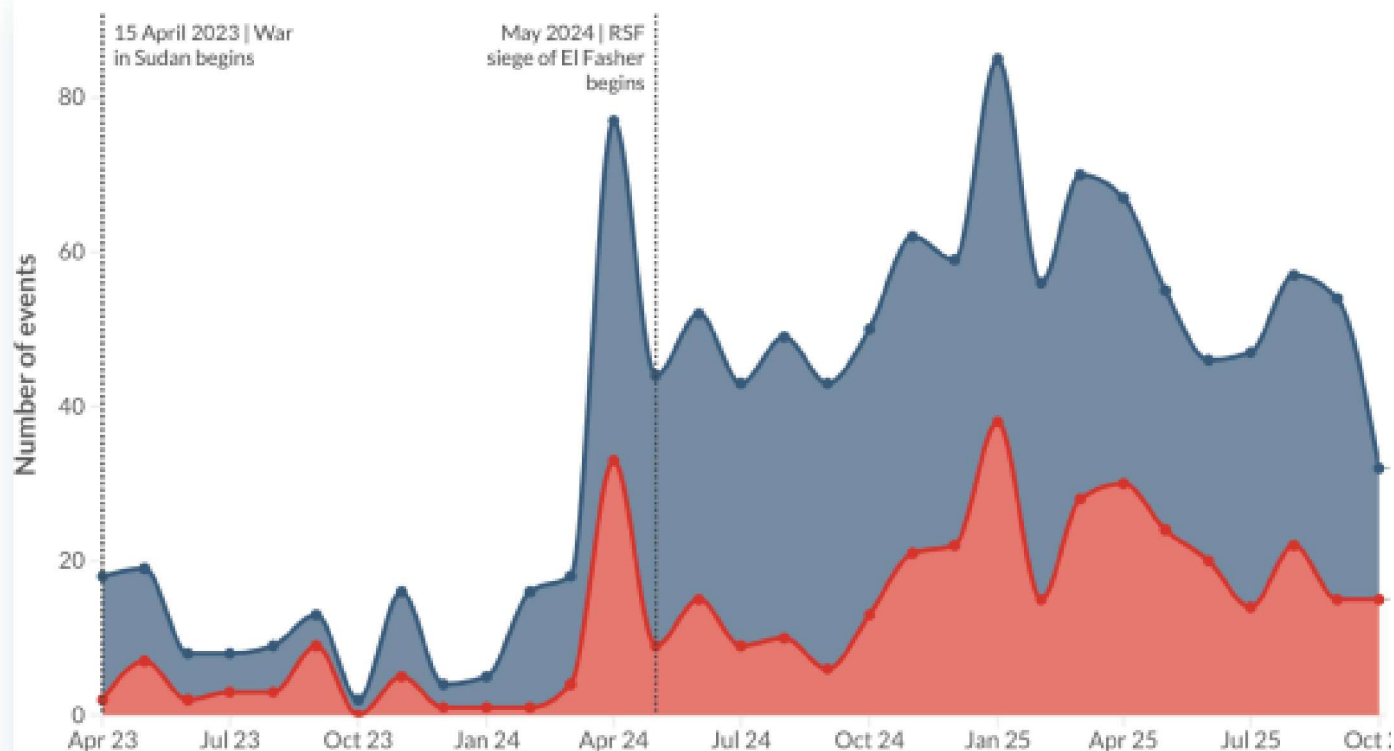
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