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CONFLICT TRENDS ANALYSIS / JANUARY 2025

POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY AND CONTINUING CONFLICT IN BENISHANGUL-GUMUZ

BY GUYU FEREDÉ

This paper offers an analysis of conflict trends in Ethiopia's Benishangul–Gumuz Regional State, focusing on the period since the 2018 national political transition. As well as providing a historical overview, it examines the drivers of contemporary violence, the role of external actors and the remaining obstacles to achieve sustained peace in the region.

SUMMARY

- Central authorities have long marginalized and exploited indigenous people in the area. During the imperial era, Gumuz were enslaved, subjugated and forcefully displaced from Gojjam, Gondar, Shewa and Wollega provinces.
- Slave raiding and the collection of tribute from the Gumuz by Amhara and Agew rulers in Metekel continued until the 1974 revolution.
- The Derg regime that consolidated power following the revolution further complicated the situation for the Gumuz through a large-scale resettlement program, which brought many more settlers from the highlands.
- The post-Derg governing system, ethnic federalism, created Benishangul–Gumuz region and formally protected the rights of indigenous communities. For the first time, the political system granted the Gumuz and others substantial political and economic autonomy. Benishangul–Gumuz, however, has been one of Ethiopia's most conflict-affected regions with its politics featuring a complex set of disputes.
- Since the 2018 national leadership change, tensions between Amhara and Benishangul–Gumuz regions have heightened, in part due to ownership claims over Metekel by Amhara nationalist groups.
- The post-2018 transition has been accompanied by serious violence in the region, partly because of concerns from some indigenous people over a loss of autonomy and political power.
- A deadly ambush in 2018 sparked inter-communal violence in Kamashi between Gumuz and non-Gumuz, mainly Oromos and Amharas, which lasted for more than four years.
- In Metekel, there has been serious violence from April 2019 with the involvement of Amhara Fano militia and the Oromo Liberation Army.
- After three and half years of violence, much of it against civilians, since the second half of 2022 there have been peace and a de-escalation, although security conditions vary across the region.
- Despite this progress, tit-for-tat violence and occasional massacres have continued with a lower intensity, particularly in Metekel, while Kamashi and Assosa have been more stable.

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State (BGRS) was created when the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia's constitution was enacted in 1995. It is situated in western Ethiopia, bordered by Sudan to its west, Amhara region to the north and northeast, Oromia to the east and, according to its regional constitution, Gambella to the south. BGRS is an amalgamation of parts of the former provinces of Gojjam (forming Metekel zone; the rest became part of Amhara) and Wollega (Kamashi zone; the remainder went into Oromia).¹ Administratively, the region is divided into three zones, Metekel, Assosa and Kamashi, and one special *woreda*, Mao Komo. Assosa town is the regional capital.

TERRITORIAL STRUGGLES

Officially, BGRS has five indigenous groups: Benishangul, Gumuz, Boro (formerly known as Shinasha), Mao and Komo.² The regional constitution defines the Gumuz and Boro as indigenous to Metekel. They are early residents of the area, and were later joined by mainly Agew, Amhara and Oromo settlers, mostly from Gojjam and Wollega.³ The Benishangul, Mao and Komo people reside in Assosa zone although some live in Kamashi. The Gumuz also predominantly occupy Kamashi.

In recent decades, BGRS has been one of Ethiopia's most conflict-affected regions. It also has a longer history of violence that has been shaped by the interplay of demographic, economic and political factors. Although they have heightened under it, inter-group tensions pre-date the ethno-federation; for example, the retaliatory massacres of the last few years between Gumuz and Amhara groups have occurred sporadically since the 1970s. Gumuz people were once themselves highlanders in present-day Amhara and Oromia but they were pushed out by more dominant groups into the hot and humid lowlands that they occupy today. During the imperial era, Gumuz were enslaved, subjugated and forcefully displaced from Gojjam, Gondar, Shewa and Wollega.

INTERTWINED DISPUTES

The under-developed, unstable region's politics have featured a complex set of disputes and displacement, reconciliations and agreements since 1991 when the transition to the federation began. Various actors inside and outside BGRS have been involved in insurgencies, political contestations and territorial claims. Amhara and Oromia regions have influenced affairs in Benishangul-Gumuz for more than three decades by meddling in its politics.

Since the 2018 national leadership change, tensions between Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz regions have heightened, in part due to ownership claims over Metekel by Amhara nationalist groups. They regard the zone as Amhara territory that was annexed into Benishangul-Gumuz after the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)-controlled Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power in 1991. During the federal era, various groups from Amhara, Oromia and also from neighbouring Sudan have laid claim to parts of the region. In a continuation of past trends, factions of today's Oromo nationalists, in particular the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), want to take control of Metekel and Kamashi, and some from Amhara want to transfer Metekel into Gojjam.

1 During its 1974–1991 rule, the Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia, known as the Derg, divided the country into 14 administrative provinces.

2 'Revised Constitution of the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State', December 2002.

3 Aweke Amara Kenaw, 'One country–two citizenships: the status of settlers in Benishangul-Gumuz Regional States (BGRS) of Ethiopia', *African Identities*, 20/22 (2022): 257–264, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2020.1813552>.

RESOURCE COMPETITION

Interethnic clashes and ethnonationalist insurgencies are driven primarily by contestation over resources and political control.⁴ In particular, there has been violence between those classified as ‘indigenous’ peoples, notably Gumuz, and those who are more recent settlers, especially Amharas and Oromos. Indigenous people have felt threatened by newcomer communities, who in turn claim persecution at the hands of indigenous insurgents and militia. These types of destabilizing ingroup-outgroup dynamics have increased in recent decades in part because ethnic boundaries became formal administrative borders under the federal system. They have also been exacerbated amid the widespread instability of the 2018 national political transition that included the 2019 dissolution of the EPRDF, the coalition that had forcefully ruled the federation since its inception.

The regional economy is dominated by agricultural production and mineral extraction. In addition to cereal crops, Mao Komo is known for coffee. It also has vast lowlands covered by forest that would be suitable for arable farming if cleared. Assosa, Kamashi and Metekel are resource-rich, including arable land and commodities such as gold, marble and coal. As a result, disputes related to land use and investment are a primary source of conflict, not least because the federal and regional governments have transferred sizeable plots to non-indigenous investors. Such transfers are common as the Gumuz accept paltry compensation to cope with chronic poverty and food insecurity.

INSURGENTS AND THEIR BACKERS

The main insurgencies in the region are those of the Gumuz People’s Democratic Movement (GPDM) and the mostly Sudan-based Benishangul People’s Liberation Movement (BPLM). In addition, there are local Gumuz militia aligned with GPDM that say they are fighting for the rights of their communities. The OLA, an armed offshoot of the Oromo Liberation Front, operates in Kamashi to advance Oromo interests, and Fano militia pursue Amhara claims and grievances, primarily in Metekel. Conflict in the region, according to Ethiopian state media, was stoked by the TPLF after it lost federal power in 2018, and by Sudanese and Egyptian actors.⁵ The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is being constructed on the Blue Nile River at Guba district in Metekel. This is a source of contestation between Ethiopia on one side and Sudan and Egypt on the other, as the downstream states see the hydropower project as threat to their control of a key water supply.⁶

Although common themes run throughout, conflict in the region can be looked at through three historical periods: imperial Ethiopia prior to 1974, military rule then the federal era until the national political transition in 2018—and the current period, the focus of this paper.

IMPERIAL SUBJUGATION (PRE-1974)

Central and local authorities have long marginalized and exploited indigenous people in the area. The impacts of this included that locals did not have adequate access to transport infrastructure and other vital tools for development. Before the 1974 overthrow of Ethiopia’s last emperor, Haile Selassie, conflict in the area was therefore largely due to the subjugation of the Gumuz by mainly Amhara and

4 Tsegaye Birhanu, ‘Conflict Trends Analysis: Benishangul–Gumuz Regional State. May to November 2022’, Ethiopian Peace Research Facility, Rift Valley Institute, 2022.

5 ‘The terrorist TPLF messengers who entered in Benishangul and Gumuz areas were destroyed’, *Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation*, Facebook post, 26 October 2023. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/ebczena/posts/S010654332299736>.

6 Climate Diplomacy, ‘Disputes over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)’. Accessed on 9 January 2025, <https://climate-diplomacy.org/case-studies/disputes-over-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam-gerd>.

Agew rulers, as well as those from Sudan. The resentment of many Gumuz towards ‘light-skinned’ (in Amharic, ቀይ, ‘qay’ meaning ‘red’) people is because their antecedents were taken as slaves by highlanders, particularly those from Gojjam and Wollega, and their resources were exploited. This occurred since Emperor Sertse-Dingle in the 16th century and continued through the reigns of Emperor Susneyos, Emperor Fasiledes and Emperor Yohannes in the 17th century and Emperor Iyasu the Great in the 18th century.⁷

SLAVERY AND ASSIMILATION

Slave raiding and the collection of tribute from the Gumuz by Amhara and Agew rulers in Metekel continued until the 1974 revolution.⁸ Consequently, in the 1960s, Gumuz groups fought against settlers in Mentewuha, Deq and other areas that are part of present-day Amhara.⁹ Alliances could shift, with Agew communities at times supporting Gumuz against Amharas. A typical action by the central government was when it sent troops to disarm the Gumuz and protect Amhara settlers following the Mentewuha fighting.¹⁰

Oromos in Wollega treated the Gumuz similarly harshly, pushing them into today’s Kamashi zone.¹¹ They also made efforts to assimilate local people. For instance, in Metekel they had a strategy to ‘Oromoize’ the Boro and the Gumuz via traditional social conflict resolution mechanisms, known as ‘Luba Basa’ (meaning ‘to set free’) via ‘Harma Hodhaa’ (‘breast-suckling’), which are versions of adoption and assimilation.¹² Despite these efforts, Boro and Gumuz societies survived and sustained their language and culture, which are now notionally protected by the ethnic federal system.

RACIAL HIERARCHY

The longstanding oppression was underpinned by a racial hierarchy: the ‘dark-skinned’ natives, notably the Gumuz, were socially and politically discriminated against by highlanders. This was less the case for their ‘light-skinned’ neighbours, such as the Boro, who had also practiced slavery over Gumuz communities during imperial times. At present, Gumuz often perceive that ‘light-skinned’ peoples pursue economic interests without considering the Gumuz, who largely pursue traditional farming and livelihoods. For example, large-scale land investment by newcomers often disregards the shifting cultivation practiced by the Gumuz.

The historical discrimination and marginalization by highlanders created the grievances that contribute to conflict. For example, an interviewee from Metekel stated that even today ‘light-skinned’ people call

7 Abdussamad H. Ahmad, ‘The Gumuz of the lowlands of Western Gojjam: The frontier in history 1900–1935’, *Africa*, 50/1 (1995): 53–67.

8 Jan Nyssen, ‘The marginalised Gumuz communities in Metekel (Ethiopian western lowlands)’, paper submitted to the HBS Special Issue on the Tigray war (Ethiopia), January 2021. Accessed 9 January 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/347983365_The_marginalised_Gumuz_communities_in_Metekel_Ethiopian_western_lowlands.

9 Ayenew Yeshiwas et al, ‘High-modernist intervention and the prolonged frontier conflict in Metekel, North-West Ethiopia: The case of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam’, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 34/8, (2023): 1501–1531, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2023.2244740>.

10 Yntiso Gebre, ‘Resettlement and the unnoticed losers: Impoverishment disasters among the Gumz in Ethiopia’, *Human Organization*, 62/1 (Spring 2003): 50–61, <https://doi.org/10.17730/humo.62.1.4ava5ykeagpovk10>.

11 Tilahun Negewo, ‘The Impact of Gumuz–Oromo Cross-border conflict on the Rural Society: Along the border of Belojiganfoy [Yie] and Sassiga Woreda’, *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies* 6/9 (September 2018): 380–388.

12 Tsega Endalew, ‘Luba Basa and Harma Hodha: Traditional Mechanisms of Conflict Resolution in Metekkel, Ethiopia’, *Restorative Justice Exchange*, 4 June 2015. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://restorativejustice.org/rj-archive/luba-basa-and-harma-hodha-traditional-mechanisms-of-conflict-resolution-in-metekkel-ethiopia/>.

Gumuz derogatory names meaning ‘dark-skinned’ or ‘black’.¹³ ‘*Shanqila*’ is also still used to describe Gumuz as slaves. In addition, ‘light-skinned’ people in the region often consider that ‘dark-skinned’ peoples live in primitive societies with backward cultures.¹⁴ These racist narratives, coupled with the in-flow of Amharas and Oromos, and subsequent desire of migrants to control resources, contributes to today’s often hostile intergroup relations.¹⁵

RESETTLEMENT AND THE ETHNO-FEDERAL PARADOX (1974–2018)

The Derg regime that consolidated power following the revolution further complicated the situation for the Gumuz through a large-scale resettlement program, which brought many more people from the highlands.¹⁶ This meant flows of Amharas into areas such as Metekel. The primarily Amharas and Oromos who have settled in the region over the last half a century now comprise about 40 per cent of the BGRS population. The settlers lay claim to land that was used by existing inhabitants, who often perceived that the resulting demographic pressure amounted to a new form of cultural, economic and political domination of indigenous people.¹⁷ Many Gumuz feared they will lose out on more land and other resources to newcomers. A consequence of this is that minor disputes could lead to conflict between Gumuz and non-Gumuz residents, as occurred more frequently after the downfall of the Derg in 1991.

ETHNIC FEDERALISM

The subsequent governing system, ethnic federalism, protected and privileged indigenous communities as a response to past systemic injustice and marginalization. For the first time, the political system granted the Gumuz and others substantial political and economic autonomy. However, sporadic inter-ethnic violence continued, mainly in Metekel and Kamashi. This has often involved Amhara and Oromo people claiming land with the support of their respective political elites.

LAND INVESTMENT

Indigenous peoples’ concerns over land were heightened by various government programs to allocate vast tracts to investors since the late 1990s.¹⁸ These investments frequently harm Gumuz livelihoods, as the people are primarily traditional hunters-gatherers and shifting cultivators, activities which also require large amounts of land. For example, one study shows that the federal and regional government ignored local concerns while focusing on attracting investors to the region.¹⁹

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

The issue of large-scale land investment is critical in both Metekel and Kamashi. Large plots in Mijiga woreda (formerly Belo–Jiganfof) in Kamashi have been taken by Oromo investors, for instance. Gumuz

13 Interview with Gumuz elder, Gilgel-Beles town, March 2024.

14 Yeshiwas et al, ‘High-modernist intervention’.

15 Gebre, ‘Resettlement and the unnoticed losers’.

16 Gebre, ‘Resettlement and the unnoticed losers’.

17 Getachew Woldemeskel, ‘The consequences of resettlement in Ethiopia’, *African Affairs* 88/352 (July 1989): 359–374, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.afraf.a098187>.

18 Tsegaye Moreda, ‘Large-scale land acquisitions, state authority and indigenous local communities: insights from Ethiopia’, *Third World Quarterly*, 38/3 (2017): 698–716, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2016.1191941>.

19 Tsegaye Moreda, ‘Postponed local concerns? Implications of Large-Scale Land Acquisitions for Indigenous Local Communities in the Benishangul-Gumuz Region, Ethiopia’, Land Deal Politics Initiative, Working Paper 13, February 2013. Accessed 9 January 2025, https://www.iss.nl/sites/corporate/files/LDPI_WP_13.pdf.

opposition to these deals has involved setting fires to investors' crops.²⁰ Similarly, a key reason for conflict in recent years in Metekel is the transfer of land to investors in Guba and Dangur. Politicians from the Gumuz and other indigenous groups have used inequitable deals as tools to mobilize their community for conflict, often via support for GPDM and its armed wing. This has occurred with marble extraction in Bullen woreda in Metekel, incense and resin collection in Guba, coal mining in Kamashi and agricultural investment in Guba, Dangur and Mijiga.

There have also been inter-regional disputes between, on the one side, Benishangul-Gumuz and, on the other, Amhara and Oromia. Sudanese and Egyptian actors have added fuel to the conflicts, mainly because of their concerns since 2011 about the GERD.²¹ Additionally, Sudan has long been in dispute with Ethiopia over the al-Fashaga border area.

POST-TRANSITION ESCALATION (2018–PRESENT)

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took power in April 2018 following sustained protests in Oromia and Amhara. In December 2019, the National Electoral Board recognized the Prosperity Party (PP), a single national organization, as the successor to the EPRDF, a coalition of four regional ruling parties allied with five other regional ruling parties.²² That change was part of a seismic transition that was accompanied by serious violence. BGRS was one of the hardest hit regions, in part because of concerns from some indigenous people that the PP system would mean a loss of their autonomy and political power. In general, many want to maintain ethnic federalism and fear that PP ultimately plans to re-introduce a unitary system that would disenfranchise minorities.

TROUBLED TRANSITION

Supported by federalist powers, mainly the TPLF and OLA, the Gumuz therefore fought against the PP authorities and non-Gumuz peoples that had historically oppressed them. All regional opposition parties including GPDM and BPLM, which was mostly based in Blue Nile State of Sudan, and their armed wings, allegedly allied with TPLF and OLA against the common enemy, PP.²³ As its relations with Abiy Ahmed and his government sharply deteriorated following the EPRDF's dissolution, TPLF reportedly used the opportunity to try and weaken the central government by supporting the BPLM.²⁴ In terms of goals, both GPDM and BPLM were set on limiting other groups' access to resources.²⁵ In addition, the OLA pursues Oromo territorial ambitions that can be traced back to the 16th century Oromo expansion.

Conflict started in Assosa in June 2018 between the Benishangul and other 'light-skinned' peoples and spread into Metekel and Kamashi in April 2019. Violence between Gumuz and Amhara groups then intensified in Metekel and Kamashi until the second half of 2022. This resulted in property damage,

20 Author's personal experience.

21 Tom Gardner, 'All Is Not Quiet on Ethiopia's Western Front', *Foreign Policy*, 6 January 2021. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/06/ethiopia-benishangul-gumuz-violence-gerd-western-front/>.

22 'The First Congress of Prosperity Party and Public Expectations', *Ethiopian News Agency*. Accessed 10 January 2025, https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/en_34154.

23 Elias Tegegn, 'Benishangul parties trade accusations of destabilizing the region', *The Reporter*, 22 January 2022. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/12637/>.

24 Rift Valley Institute, XCEPT, 'Resistance in the peripheries: Civil war and fragile peace in Sudan & Ethiopia's borderlands', 2021. Accessed 9 January 2025, https://www.xcept-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/RVI.2023.03.23-Resistance-in-the-Peripheries-compressed_1.pdf.

25 Moreda, 'Postponed local concerns?'

civilian deaths and half a million internally displaced people (IDPs).²⁶

KAMASHI CONFLICT

Violence in Kamashi was triggered by the ambush and killing of four top Gumuz regional officials on 26 September 2018 at Maqqa Billa in Gimbi woreda in West Wollega zone by presumed OLA fighters.²⁷ The officials were travelling to discuss with Oromia counterparts about security problems in the border areas between Kamashi and Oromia. The killing sparked inter-communal violence in Kamashi between Gumuz and non-Gumuz, mainly Oromos and Amharas, which has lasted for more than four years. Many Gumuz see not only Amharas and Oromos but all non-Gumuz residents as a threat due to the historical oppression they suffered at their hands. Local Gumuz militia, GPDM fighters and Oromo and Amhara community militias and government forces were the main conflict actors.

GPDM has also clashed with regional paramilitaries and the federal military, as has the OLA, in border areas of BGRS and Oromia. As a result, Kamashi was largely cut off until the 2022 signing of peace accord between the authorities and GPDM because OLA controlled the road that runs through it and connects East and West Wollega zones with Assosa. Both GPDM and BPLM deployed their fighters to protect the people from the OLA at border areas of Kamashi and Assosa. Insecurity has made it very difficult to travel from Assosa to Kamashi and Assosa to the Wollega zones.

METEKEL VIOLENCE

In Metekel, there was serious violence in and after April 2019 with the involvement of Amhara Fano militia and the OLA. Amhara territorial claims on the area were led by a committee campaigning for the 'restoration' of Metekel. After tit-for-tat violence between Gumuz and non-Gumuz for about a year, a mob killed a Gumuz man in Chagni town in Amhara after several Amharas had been killed in Metekel.²⁸ In revenge, Gumuz militia killed a number of Amharas and Agews in Guba and Dangur, as well as Boros and Oromos in Bullen and Dibate. The violence continued with the massacre of over 300 Gumuz residents of Jawi woreda in Amhara by Fano and Amhara Special Forces, a paramilitary unit, in late April 2019. Many more were displaced into nearby towns and into Amhara.

In November 2020, at least 34 people were killed at Qido village in Dibate in an attack by Gumuz militia on a bus travelling from Wombera in Metekel to Chagni.²⁹ More than 200 people, most of them women and children from the Amhara, Agew, Boro and Oromo groups were killed at Bekuji village in Bullen woreda in December 2020 by Gumuz militia, and the next month at least 110 Amhara and Agew were killed in Daleti *kebele* of Dibate, allegedly by OLA and Gumuz militia.³⁰

26 UNHCR, 'East Wollega Zone (Oromia) and Kamashi Zone (Benishangul-Gumuz) 16-19 July 2019', 27 August 2019. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/east-wollega-zone-oromia-and-kamashi-zone-benishangul-gumuz-16-19-july-2019>.

27 Ethiopia Peace Observatory, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, 'Political violence in Benishangul/Gumuz region, 1 April 2018-1 April 2024'. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://epo.acleddata.com/benishangul-gumuz/>.

28 Tsegaye Birhanu, 'The spiraling situation in Ethiopia's Benishangul-Gumuz region', *Ethiopia Insight*, 18 June 2021. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/06/18/the-spiraling-situation-in-ethiopias-benishangul-gumuz-region/>.

29 Reuters, 'Gunmen in western Ethiopia kill at least 34 people in bus attack, rights body says', 15 November 2020. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/gunmen-in-western-ethiopia-kill-at-least-34-people-in-bus-attack-rights-body-say-idUSKBN27VoDL/>.

30 Birhanu, 'The spiraling situation' and 'Metekel, Ethiopia: death toll from the latest attack well over one hundred', *Borkena*, 13 January 2021. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://borkena.com/2021/01/13/metekel-ethiopia-death-toll-from-the-latest-attack-well-over-one-hundred>.

STATE OF EMERGENCY

After the massacre of Amhara civilians in Metekel, Abere Adamu, commander of the Amhara Special Forces, requested the federal government's permission for Amhara region to address the violence.³¹ This, however, intensified tension between the two regional states as BGRS officials saw the request as the latest act of intimidation. The federal government declared a State of Emergency in Benishangul-Gumuz on 23 January 2021 but violence still escalated in the first half of 2022.³² For example, in March 2022 at least 20 civilians were killed in an ambush on a bus travelling from Gilgel-Beles town to Guba.³³ Almost all of Metekel was under the control of Gumuz militia and the OLA, with the latter controlling most of Dibate and some of Bullen. Gumuz militia clashed with security forces and killed the Gumuz chief administrator of Mandura woreda on 11 October 2022.³⁴ However, the peace deal signed by the GPDM and the regional government on 19 October 2022 seemed to calm the conflict in the following months.³⁵

Similarly, Kamashi was controlled by Gumuz militia, including woreda centres such as Sedal, where they nominated new senior administrators for a brief period. Gumuz militia were relatively successful in controlling territory in Kamashi because most woredas were inaccessible due to road blocks by the OLA near the regional border. Assosa was relatively peaceful and under government control throughout the period of intensified violence.

CONFLICT TIMELINE 2018–2022

LOCATION	DATE	ACTORS	EVENT
Assosa town	Jun 2018	Benishangul	Mobs rioted and demanded departure of non-indigenous people
Maqqa Billa, West Wollega	Sep 2018	OLA	Ambush killed 4 Gumuz Kamashi officials
Jawi woreda, Amhara	Apr 2019	Fano, Amhara Special Forces	Killed 300 Gumuz
Chagni town, Amhara	Apr 2019	Amhara, Agew	Retaliatory killing of a Gumuz man
Daleti kebele, Dibate	Jan 2020	OLA, Gumuz militia	Killed more than 100 Amhara and Agew
Qido village, Dibate	Nov 2020	Gumuz militia	Gunmen killed 34 passengers on bus travelling to Amhara
Bakuji village, Bullen	Dec 2020	Gumuz militia	Killed 207 non-Gumuz
Benishangul-Gumuz	Nov 2021	Federal government	State of Emergency declared
Mandura	Mar 2022	Gumuz militia	Killed at least 20 passengers in bus traveling to Amhara
Assosa town	Oct 2022	GPDM, BGRS government	Peace deal signed after humanitarian situation worsened for Gumuz
Khartoum, Sudan	Dec 2022	BPLM, BGRS government	Peace deal signed

- 31 Siyanne Mekonnen, 'Amhara region police says it's requesting federal gov't to intervene or be given the task to solve security crisis in neighboring Benishangul region', *Addis Standard*, 8 December 2020. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-amhara-region-police-says-its-requesting-federal-govt-to-intervene-or-be-given-the-task-to-solve-security-crisis-in-neighboring-benishangul-region>.
- 32 Ethiopia Peace Observatory, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, 'Political violence in Metekel, 1 April 2018–1 April 2023'. Accessed 9 January 2025 <https://epo.acleddata.com/metekel-conflict/>.
- 33 'At least 20 people killed in latest attack by armed men in Benishangul Gumuz state; UN says growing insecurity worsening humanitarian conditions', *Addis Standard*, 5 March 2022. Accessed 10 January 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-at-least-20-people-killed-in-latest-attack-by-armed-men-in-benishagul-gumuz-state-un-says-growing-insecurity-worsening-humanitarian-conditions/>.
- 34 Ethiopia Peace Observatory, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, 'EPO Weekly: 8–14 October, 2022'. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://epo.acleddata.com/2022/10/18/epo-weekly-8-14-october-2022/>.
- 35 'Benishangul Gumuz regional govt, rebel group sign peace agreement', *Addis Standard*, 19 October 2022. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-benishangul-gumuz-regional-govt-rebel-group-sign-peace-agreement/>.

DE-ESCALATION AND RELATIVE PEACE

After three and half years of violence against civilians, since the second half of 2022 there has generally been a de-escalation, although security conditions have varied from zone to zone.³⁶ This has been the outcome of peace processes including community discussions, reconciliation efforts and power-sharing accords between the regional government and the GPDM and BPLM in October and December 2022, respectively.³⁷ As part of those deals, the regional government brought in GPDM and BPLM members at all levels of government. For example, the GPDM chairperson Giragn Gudeta was assigned as the coordinator of regional office for public mobilization for the GERD and the BPLM leader Abduselam Shengel took a position at the job and skills bureau. Fighters from the two groups were organized into cooperatives to start businesses with government support, or they joined the regional security forces. There were also government pledges to create job opportunities, provide loans and transfer urban and rural land to ex-combatants.

MILITANTS SURRENDER

GPDM fighters have surrendered in large numbers since the second half of 2022. In August 2022, 246 peacefully surrendered to the Metekel Zone Command Post.³⁸ Another 90 Gumuz militants moving along the border areas of Dangur and Guba joined their community along with their firearms in May 2023 in Gilge-Beles town. In the same month, 73 GPDM fighters active in Kota kebele in Dangur peacefully returned to Gilgel-Beles. Gumuz militants who had been at times based in Sudan surrendered to the regional government partly due to the ongoing Sudanese civil war which started on 15 April 2023.³⁹

PRIMARY FACTORS

In contrast to the government narrative that it restored order through military means, two primary factors explain the relative peace. First, non-Gumuz residents have fled from most Gumuz areas, even to the extent that non-Gumuz travellers along the main transport routes in Metekel and Kamashi often do not visit Gumuz villages. Second, Gumuz communities have been weakened due to a lack of humanitarian assistances over the four years of conflict. Whereas non-Gumuz sought refuge in urban areas in the region and in Amhara and Oromia, most Gumuz fled into the forest. As a result, many children, women and old people have died, often of hunger-related disease.⁴⁰ The lack of aid has forced many of them to come out of the forests and surrender to the government.

PEACE INITIATIVE

Institutions such as the Ministry of Peace, Inter-Religious Council and Elders' Council have been involved in seeking solutions to the problems in Metekel. For example, there was the Adwa for Sustainable Peace and Strong Nation Building initiative launched by the Ministry of Peace that ended

³⁶ Birhanu, 'Conflict Trends Analysis'.

³⁷ 'Benishangul Gumuz region signs peace agreement with second rebel group, deal signed in Sudan', *Addis Standard*, 12 December 2022. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-benishangul-gumuz-region-signs-peace-agreement-with-second-rebel-group-deal-signed-in-sudan/>, and 'Benishangul Gumuz regional govt', *Addis Standard*.

³⁸ Ethiopia Peace Observatory, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, 'EPO Weekly: 6–12 August 2022'. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://epo.acleddata.com/2022/08/17/epo-weekly-6-12-august-2022/>.

³⁹ International Rescue Committee, 'Sudan Crisis Report: One Year of Conflict', 12 April 2024'. Accessed 9 January 2025, https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/PA2404_Sudan%201-year%20Report_Final.pdf.

⁴⁰ OCHA, 'Ethiopia: Benishangul Gumuz Region (BGR) Access Snapshot (January–October 2021)', 31 October 2021. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-benishangul-gumuz-region-bgr-access-snapshot-january-october-2021>.

in February 2024.⁴¹ It aimed to capitalize on common values to enhance constructive engagement among regional states and ethnic groups with an emphasis on youth. This initiative was not supported, however, by senior BGRS officials such as Wolteji Begalo, then head of the peace and security office, due to budgetary constraints.⁴²

CIVIL SOCIETY EFFORTS

In addition, civil society organizations have tried to reduce conflict across the region, often by facilitating community dialogues. While these have contributed to the recent relative peace, they have at times been hampered by the controlling involvement of government bodies. The Ethiopian Institute of Peace oversaw a 2020–2021 project to strengthen the capacity of members of local peace committees in the region through training on conflict prevention, early warning mechanisms and peaceful transformation. Although limited to Tsore refugee camp and its surrounding areas in Assosa zone, Good Neighbors Ethiopia undertook peace-building activities including livelihood programs and efforts to improve social cohesion.⁴³ The #defyhatenow project is another initiative started in 2019 and aimed at combating hate speech that was propagated through social media.⁴⁴ Hate speech via social media against the Gumuz has, however, continued. Positive Action for Development's impact on helping IDPs seems to have been minimal.⁴⁵ There is also an ongoing Berghof Foundation effort to strengthen local peace efforts.⁴⁶

CONTINUED RESISTANCE

Despite the progress, tit-for-tat violence and occasional massacres have continued with a lower intensity, particularly in Metekel, while Kamashi has been more stable, except the border areas with East and West Wollega zones where the OLA remain in control, as they do in Mao Komo. Civilian deaths and displacement continued along the fragile border that extends from Yaso through Anger Meti, Anger Waja, Mijiga, Fafate, Tenkara and Senne in Kamashi, Bambasi and Keshmanso in Assosa, Kondala in West Wollega, to Tongo in Mao Komo.

PARTIAL DISARMAMENT

Additionally, not all Gumuz insurgents and their supporters among the community have disarmed and joined the government. Some remain in the forests of Metekel and Kamashi, claiming they have yet to fully liberate Gumuz territory. According to local people, they attack and kill officials and non-Gumuz civilians in farms, villages and buses, and steal property including livestock and government vehicles, mainly in Metekel. In January 2024, about 100 Gumuz militants left their camp in Gilgel-Beles town

41 Enkutatash Addis, 'Adwa' for sustainable peace and state-building movement has been completed,' Ministry of Peace. Accessed 9 January 2025, https://www.mop.gov.et/web/ministry-of-peace/home/-/asset_publisher/jxiU3d6mDMLV/content/id/71317.

42 Nardos Yoseph, 'Ministry under fire: where is the Peace?', The Reporter, 3 February 2024. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/38504/>.

43 Good Neighbors, 'Good Neighbors' Nexus Approach to Building Social Cohesion in Ethiopia', June 2024. Accessed 9 January 2025, https://www.goodneighbors.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GNs-Nexus-Approach-to-Building-Social-Cohesion-in-Ethiopia_Online.pdf.

44 #DEFYHATENOW, ETHIOPIA, 'Hate Speech Mitigation Intervention in Benishangul-Gumuz, 2019–2020'. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://defyhatenow.org/ethiopia/benishangul-gumuz-project/>.

45 Positive Action for Development. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://padethiopia.org/>.

46 Berghof Foundation, 'Capacity development for local peace structures in the Benishangul-Gumuz Region in Ethiopia', Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://berghof-foundation.org/work/projects/supporting-local-peace-structures-in-ethiopia>.

and went into the forests with their weapons. This was mainly due to government delays in delivering on power-sharing and job-creation promises in the peace deal, and Gumuz continued fear of OLA and Fano. This trend continued in 2024.

OLA AND FANO ACTIVITY

The OLA are still targeting non-Oromo residents of Metekel. Oromo insurgents attack civilians, often Boro, and clash with government forces, mainly in Dibate and Bullen. The OLA frequently target officials, for example killing the chairperson of Tuski Gambella kebele of Dibate in 2023. Fano started to kill policemen in Metekel in the second half of 2023. One of the victims was Gumuz, leading to the revenge killing of an Amhara man in Mandura. This heightened Gumuz-Amhara tension throughout the first half of 2024.

SECURE ASSOSA

After the 2018 attack by Benishangul in Assosa zone, mainly in Assosa town, the security problem has been less acute than in other zones, though the borderlands of Assosa and Mao Komo with West Wollega are volatile due to the spillover from conflict in Oromia. In Aburamo woreda of Assosa, BPLM and government forces clashed on 15 January 2023, killing a BPLM member and injuring many from both sides.⁴⁷ As this was a month after their peace deal, there was a fear it would unravel the accord, but instead the situation gradually calmed.

BPLM ARRESTS

Other measures taken by the regional government in Assosa have exacerbated tensions. Authorities continued to detain opposition parties' members, mainly towards the end of 2023. For example, 6 leaders and 18 members of BPLM accused of inciting violence were imprisoned in September 2023.⁴⁸ This continued the same month, arresting more Boro Democratic Party members and transferring the chairperson from Gilgel-Beles to Assosa. Meanwhile, in October 2023 non-Oromo residents of Assosa town protested against the Oromo Ireecha celebration by removing a flag. All of this increased tension and civilian deaths and displacements continued along the fragile borders with Oromia.

CONFLICT DYNAMICS

A variety of external and internal actors have been involved in the violence, deploying a range of tactics.

EXTERNAL PLAYERS

The involvement of the OLA, Fano, TPLF and Sudanese and Egyptian actors have complicated the conflict.⁴⁹ In order to try and weaken the federal government, the TPLF provided training and logistics for Gumuz militia in Metekel's Guba forests and in Sudan. In border areas of Kamashi and Assosa, and in parts of Metekel, OLA activity either distracted the government, providing space for GPDM to operate, or activity supported the Gumuz insurgents. BPLM fighters were based in Sudan with some

47 Ethiopia Peace Observatory, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, 'EPO Weekly: 14–20 January 2023,' 24 January 2023. Accessed 10 January 2025, <https://epo.acleddata.com/2023/01/24/epo-weekly-14-20-january-2023/>.

48 'Members of Benishangul People's Liberation Movement locked behind bars', Borkena, 8 September 2023. Accessed 10 January 2025, <https://borkena.com/2023/09/08/ethiopian-members-of-benishangul-peoples-liberation-movement-locked-behind-bars/>.

49 Rift Valley Institute, XCEPT, 'Resistance in the peripheries'.

support provided by Sudanese military intelligence.⁵⁰ Egypt is alleged to have supported GPDM in a number of ways, including by hosting militia leaders since 2018.

ASSERTIVE AMHARA AND AGEW

Tension has continued even after the peace agreements, in part due to the emergence of strong new Amhara and Agew actors including the Metekel restoration committee, *Gobez Aleqa*, the Fano, and Agew–Awi activists and politicians. Although the Amhara and Agew–Awi actors are in conflict with each other—the latter wants to carve a new Agew–Awi region out of parts of Amhara and BGRS—all forces have an interest in having Metekel under their administrative control, and so present a major threat to indigenous people.⁵¹

The restoration committee has a well-organized network mainly in Metekel to work towards the goal of restoring Metekel to Gojjam.⁵² *Gobez Aleqa*, a wing of the Fano, aims to control Metekel's fertile areas. At present, this force, supported by the restoration committee and Fano, is distributing Bejimiz forest area to Amhara farmers who are clearing and cultivating crops without government permission. This park area was the base of the Amhara insurgents who killed Gumuz and some Shinasha civilians in Dangur. According to indigenous Metekel residents, *Gobez Aleqa* is a well-armed force that now controls a large area bordering Sudan including Bejimiz National Park. Gumuz elders have asked the government to prevent the acts of all the Amhara groups if it wants GPDM and associated Gumuz militia to disarm. Meanwhile, Fano is increasing its presence in Pawe, Mandura and Dangur, pushing from neighbouring Jawi in Amhara. Fano is primarily interested in controlling the political leadership in Metekel.

Agew people live in Mandura and Dangur but are not officially classified as indigenous. At times during the federal era, Agew activists have questioned their non-indigenous status in Metekel and sought to transfer Metekel into Agew–Awi zone of Amhara. Their claim on Metekel mainly relates to the Belaya Agew communities who live there plus migrants in Mandura who came from Agew–Awi. Agew–Awi politicians and activists have petitioned the House of Federation to establish an Agew–Awi Regional State.

GUMUZ MILITIA-GOVERNMENT ALLIANCE

As a means to protect people from the OLA and other groups, in 2024 some Gumuz groups temporarily allied with the government and started to push back against the OLA in Dibate and the Galessa area. There were also economic reasons for this, as Gumuz ex-combatants had taken government jobs and others had started businesses organized under cooperatives. For example, Gumuz militia and government forces faced an OLA attack in Dibate in April 2024 when they were set to start gold mining. The ex-combatants organized into a gold mining cooperative were given a site in Galessa where the OLA is active and making money from gold. In this location, the OLA orders local Oromos to extract gold for a day for the OLA and the remaining days of a week for themselves. When the ex-combatants went to start extraction, the OLA conducted its deadly ambush. Similar measures were taken by the BPLM in Assosa zone and Mao Komo, allying with government force to repel OLA attacks at border areas.

50 Rift Valley Institute, XCEPT, 'Resistance in the peripheries'.

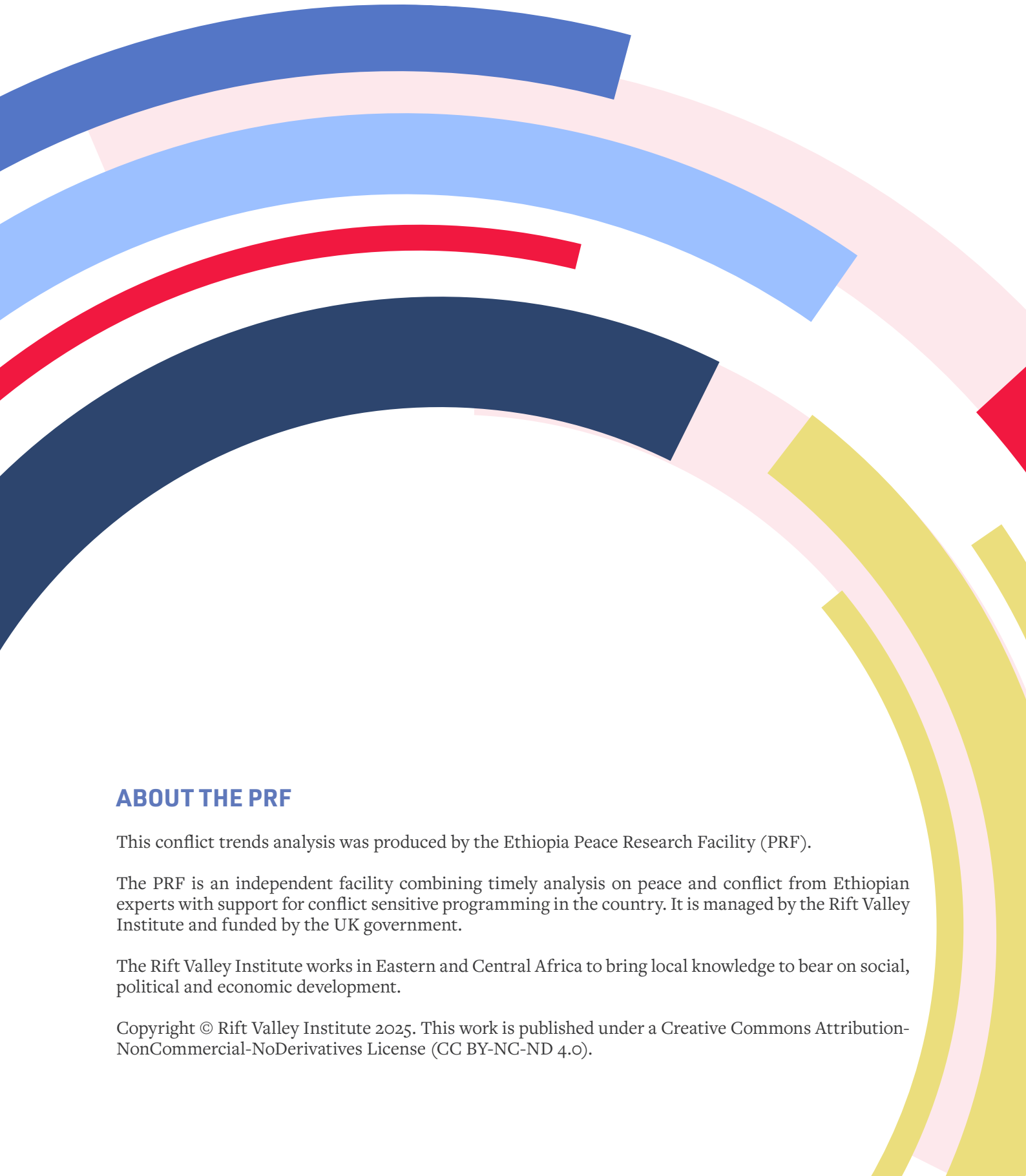
51 Birhanu, 'Conflict Trends Analysis'.

52 Tsegaye Birhanu, 'The murky politics behind the Metekel massacres', *Ethiopia Insight*, 29 December, 2020. Accessed 10 January 2025, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/12/29/the-murky-politics-behind-the-metekel-massacres/>.

INFRASTRUCTURE AS A WEAPON

The road that connects Assosa with Addis Ababa through Wollega and Shewa has been cut by OLA since the 2018 violence, forcing non-Oromos to use air transport. Moreover, Kamashi is connected with Assosa through Wollega and there is only a dry-weather road through Oda Bildiglu.⁵³ Although cutting electricity and internet has been frequently done by Amhara groups, forces from Oromia started to do the same since June 2024.

53 OCHA, Ethiopia: Benishangul Gumuz Region (BGR) Access Snapshot (January–October 2021). Accessed 10 January 2025, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-benishangul-gumuz-region-bgr-access-snapshot-january-october-2021>.



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