

**CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE:  
AVERTING FURTHER HUMANITARIAN DISASTER IN ETHIOPIA**

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*Photo: Ethiopian refugees who fled fighting in Tigray province at the Um Rakuba camp in Sudan's eastern Gedaref province. (Photo by ASHRAF SHAZLY/AFP via Getty Images)*

## INTRODUCTION

In early November, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia sent the national army into the northern region of Tigray in response to a reported attack on an Ethiopian military base by Tigrayan authorities. The outbreak of hostilities marked the culmination of months of mounting tensions and deteriorating relations between Abiy's government and Tigrayan leaders. The ensuing campaign has been waged in the air and on the ground. The fighting has led to a significant deterioration of the humanitarian situation inside Tigray and reports of atrocities. Tens of thousands of Ethiopians fled the violence across the border into Sudan.

Last week, Abiy announced that a "final offensive" was underway to oust the Tigrayan leadership. However, experts are privately warning that a quick military victory is likely to prove elusive and that the country now faces a "[protracted war of attrition](#)." Fighting between the federal troops and Tigrayan forces has moved [towards the more densely populated eastern areas of the region](#). In a worrying sign, the Ethiopian army has reportedly warned the civilian population in the Tigrayan capital of Mekelle that there will be "[no mercy](#)" if they do not "save themselves" and presumably leave the city.

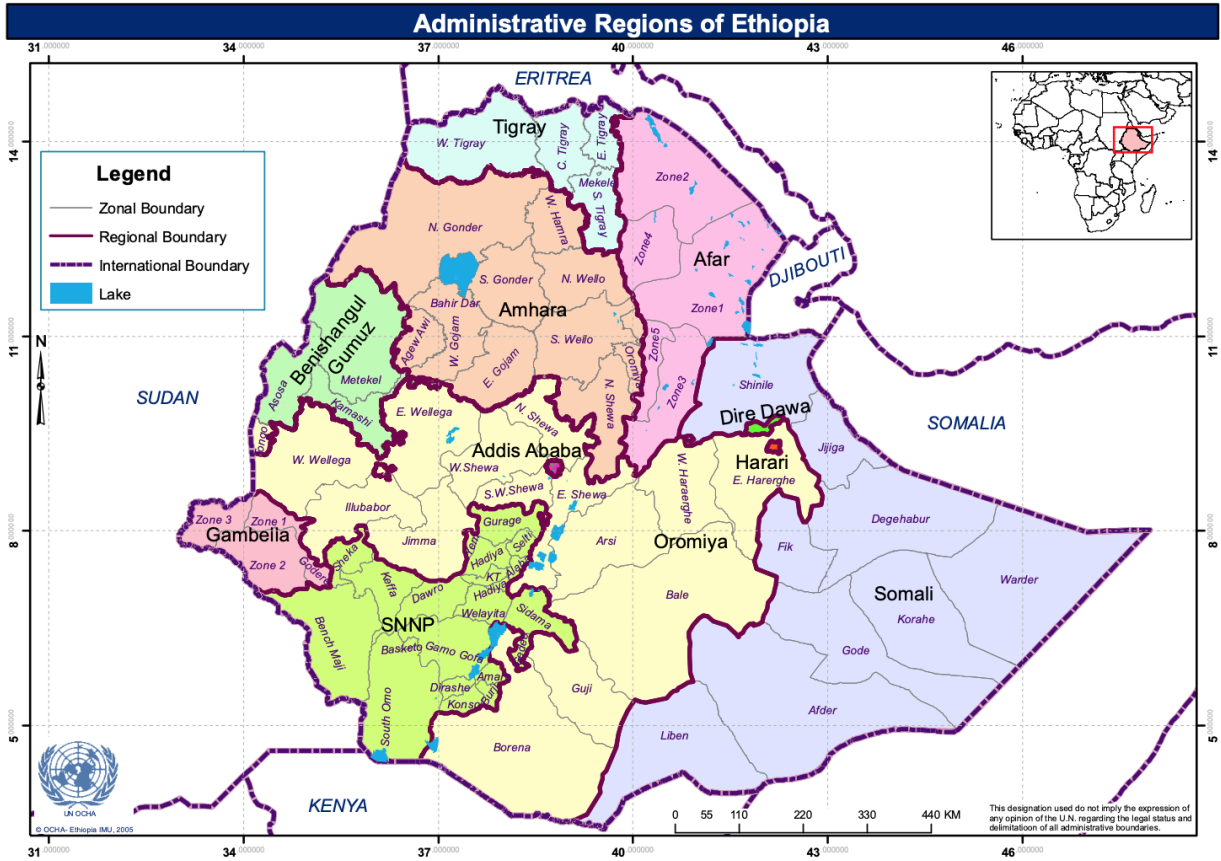
The impact on the civilian population to date is only a preview of what's to come if Ethiopia is allowed to slide deeper into war. The country—home to over 110 million people—is in the midst of a period of political transition and reform. That transition is very much a work in progress and has been marred by conflict between some of its most powerful ethnic and regional groups. The fighting in Tigray could easily cascade into other regions of the country and ignite a wider conflagration with regional implications. It is therefore essential that Ethiopia's international partners work with the parties to help them pull back from the brink and allow the United Nations and others to render assistance to populations in need.

## HUMANITARIAN DIMENSIONS OF THE CRISIS

The conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia is unfolding within an already challenging humanitarian landscape. Ethiopia is home to [19 million people](#) in need of assistance. The Tigray region hosts approximately [96,000 refugees and 100,000 internally displaced people](#). Rates of poverty, malnutrition, and hunger are high in Tigray, which is mostly rural, and women and children are particularly at risk. Before the conflict started, approximately 2 million people in the region were dependent on relief assistance. These challenges were recently exacerbated by a devastating, years-long drought and the worst locust swarm in 25 years, which threatened the already scarce food supply. If the

conflict now impedes farmers from carrying out their autumn harvest, the situation could become even more severe.

The humanitarian situation has deteriorated further as a result of the recent fighting. Communications services, roads, and flight [access](#) to the area have been disrupted or cut off. Humanitarian organizations are having difficulty delivering aid, in part because the government has limited access to banking and other financial activities. In recent days, many NGOs had their bank accounts frozen—some are unable to make any withdrawals while others are able to withdraw just very small amounts on a daily basis. Supplies of food, medicine, and other humanitarian goods in Tigray [will soon be exhausted, putting millions at risk](#). The United Nations reports that relief groups have stockpiles of badly needed goods in warehouses ready to be sent to the region. However, senior aid officials complain that the federal government has imposed a “[de facto economic blockade](#)” on the region, preventing them from distributing this life-saving assistance.



Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), watchdog groups, and witnesses have described [atrocities](#) taking place in Tigray. They report the [mass killing](#) of day laborers,

rape, and the killing of children. Aid groups report that tens of thousands of people have been displaced internally. That number could skyrocket given that Tigray and the neighboring regions of Amhara and Afar are home to upwards of 8 million Ethiopians. These displacements could exacerbate existing tensions between ethnic groups in areas of arrival. Refugees and IDPs in long-standing camps may be forced to flee yet again.

More than [38,000 people](#) have already fled to Sudan in recent weeks, and the UN is planning for as many as [200,000 people](#) to leave in the next two months. Approximately half of the new arrivals are children. The affected population also includes many pregnant women, elderly individuals, and members of other vulnerable groups. Some young men who have fled [say they were unfairly targeted](#) on the assumption that they were affiliated with the Tigrayan authorities or militia. Many tell gruesome stories of being attacked as they tried to flee. Aid workers in the region are also concerned that young women fleeing to Sudan could fall victim to trafficking.

## BACKGROUND

Until 2019, Ethiopia was governed by a four-party coalition known as the [Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front](#) (EPRDF). The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was the main player in this marriage of convenience. The political agreement allowed each ethno-regional bloc a degree of autonomy and a share of the national budget in return for not challenging TPLF rule. Over time, however, growing discontent with the status quo and concerns over corruption fueled a popular backlash against TPLF rule. Inadequate government assistance during the 2015-2016 drought and an aborted federal effort to annex more land for the capital city of Addis Ababa further fueled this resentment.

The situation came to a head in 2018, when calls for change erupted into protest and unrest that ultimately pushed former Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn to resign. Abiy Ahmed—an ethnic Oromo—was chosen to replace him, coming to power on a reform agenda. He moved quickly to release thousands of political prisoners, invited exiled opposition groups back home, and expanded press freedoms. As Zach Vertin of the Brookings Institution observed, Abiy replaced the EPRDF “coalition with a single, nationally oriented ‘Prosperity Party.’ The TPLF... [fought the move, failed, and then opted out](#), leaving the powerful minority outside the national government for the first time in a generation.”

In March 2020, Abiy's government [postponed elections](#) scheduled for August, citing concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic. To facilitate the delay, the federal parliament extended the terms of the federal and regional governments. The TPLF rejected [the](#)

[move as unconstitutional and held its own regional election](#) in Tigray in September. Addis Ababa subsequently ruled Tigray's leadership unlawful. The regional government in Tigray responded by [declaring](#) that it would not recognize Abiy's administration after his original term expired on October 5, 2020.

The political tensions quickly evolved into open conflict. In October 2020, the Tigrayan regional authorities [refused to allow a senior federal army officer to take up his post](#) in the Ethiopian Defense Force (EDF) strategically important Northern Command, based in Tigray. Shortly thereafter, Tigrayan forces reportedly attacked an Ethiopian army base. Prime Minister Abiy then responded in early November by [launching military operations](#) against the authorities in Tigray in a bid to remove their leadership.

## COMMUNAL FLASH POINTS

Even before the current crisis, ethnic and communal tensions ran high in Tigray and other parts of the country. These tensions had already generated significant internal displacement throughout Ethiopia. In addition, the government's decision to transfer troops from some parts of the country to Tigray could leave an opening for new conflicts to emerge. Should the conflict between the EDF and TPLF continue or expand, it could exacerbate tensions in other parts of the country and further imperil millions of already fragile and fundamentally vulnerable people across the country.

**Amhara:** The first area of concern is Amhara, a northern regional state in Ethiopia, which has a [long history of ethnic tension](#) with neighboring Tigray. Amhara's [grievances run deep](#)—including claims Tigray has forcibly annexed valuable sesame and cotton farmlands from Amhara and disproportionately benefited from the construction of the Great Renaissance Dam at Amhara's expense. Amhara militias have supported the federal forces' campaign against Tigray. Even if federal government and the TPLF agree on a cease-fire, the growing tension between Tigray and Amhara could flare into a regional conflict itself. However, despite the fragile operating environment in Amhara, it is the place from where many international and national NGOs are trying to launch their aid operations into Tigray. This, too, is sensitive, as Amhara is home to some of the most vulnerable in the country, and as such operations must be inclusive.

**Oromia:** A prolonged campaign by the Ethiopian army in Tigray may also embolden other opposition groups elsewhere in the country to ramp up confrontation with the federal government. An [armed rebellion](#) is already underway in Oromia, with localized clashes between the Southern Nations and Oromo ethnic communities in Hadiya, Sidama, and Wolayita zones in the southwest and south over the federal government's allocation of national resources. The TPLF has been quick to stoke the flames of this conflict with accusations that the largest ethnicities (Oromo and Amhara) would consume all the

country's resources while the smallest – including Somali, Afar, Tigray, and Southern Nations – are deprived.

**Somali and Oromo Regions:** In the restive border areas of the Somali and Oromo regions, [inter-communal fighting](#) over the division of scarce resources often falls along tribal lines. In particular, in Guji, Borena, Nogob, and East Hararghe zones, communities have [repeatedly clashed](#) in recent years. The federal army or police forces deployed to contain this violence—particularly when local security forces were unable to do so. The fact that the federal government is now occupied in Tigray will only stretch that capacity further.

## REGIONAL DIMENSIONS

Ethiopia is pivotal to the stability of the Horn of Africa. It is an economic and regional leader (home to the African Union), a security partner to the United States and others, and a humanitarian hub for the region. Its unravelling would have a major impact beyond its borders. Indeed, refugees and IDPs inside Ethiopia would be uprooted again. New displacements could burden neighboring states, which already lack the capacity to deal with their own humanitarian and development challenges.

**Sudan:** Aid actors and Sudanese authorities are doing their best to mobilize assistance in response to the tens of thousands of people fleeing Tigray into Sudan. If not properly supported, Sudan could be overwhelmed by the added pressure on top of its own domestic challenges—which include poverty, hyperinflation, political instability, climate-related concerns, and an existing refugee population of around 1 million people. The result could leave displaced Ethiopians from Tigray without proper protection or support in exile. It could also leave eastern Sudan—another vulnerable region which already hosts a protracted Eritrean refugee population—in a very desperate situation. Donors and relief groups will need to move quickly to provide resources and coordination to match the speed and scale of arrivals.

**Somalia:** Recent reports indicate that the federal government in Ethiopia is [redeploying about 4,000 of its troops](#) currently stationed in Somalia to support its offensive in Tigray. The troops being withdrawn do not fall under the command of the African Union peacekeeping force in Somalia, but have been supporting an effort to stabilize the country and bolster the central government's capacity. Their departure raises concerns about a possible security vacuum just as Somalia heads into a tense electoral cycle.

**Eritrea:** Should Eritrea become involved in the situation in Ethiopia, the conflict could spiral into a regional conflagration. Eritrea, which shares a border with Tigray and whose President Isaias Afwerki is close to Abiy, appears close to being drawn into confrontation

with the TPLF. The party dominated Ethiopia's ruling coalition when the country was [at war with Eritrea](#) between 1998 and 2000. Now, Eritrea could easily be drawn back into conflict to support Abiy's efforts to put down the rebellion. If this occurs, the entire region could be destabilized.

## THE WAY FORWARD

There is a narrow window of opportunity to engage with the parties and begin to de-escalate the situation. Failing to do so could lead to a situation in which a number of ethnic militias in different parts of Ethiopia begin to challenge each other and the federal government. It could also trigger cross-border skirmishes with Eritrea, and further internal destabilization inside Somalia and Sudan. The result could be a growing conflict and instability across the Horn of Africa with profound strategic and humanitarian consequences for the region. To avoid this situation, parties to the conflict and international actors should take the following steps:

- **Negotiate a ceasefire:** International attention is now rightly focused on achieving a ceasefire. Ethiopia's foreign partners should spare no effort to persuade both sides to urgently and unconditionally agree to a cessation of hostilities. Key elements of a ceasefire would include an end to the federal government's bombing campaign and to all ground combat, the return to barracks of Tigrayan forces, and the establishment of a [monitoring mechanism to prevent flareups](#). The United States in particular is an important bilateral partner for Ethiopia. Secretary of State Pompeo and the White House should bolster ongoing U.S. diplomatic efforts and underscore to the parties the imperative of achieving a ceasefire.
- **Restore access to the Tigray region and allow unfettered access for aid:** As part of the ceasefire, the federal government should reinstate all modes of communication. Relief agencies must be given immediate access to the region to provide badly needed humanitarian assistance. Markets and banks should be allowed to open. These steps will help jumpstart the local economy and facilitate the autumn harvest to improve the food supply.
- **Launch a major humanitarian aid operation:** Once access is restored, aid agencies will need to ramp up a large-scale aid operation. Relief must include the provision of food, water, non-food items (NFIs). Medical staff will also need to be deployed and healthcare expanded in Tigray and other affected areas. The relief effort should build upon the existing aid infrastructure and programming carried out by humanitarian and development organizations already present in Tigray. Donors need to prepare and make funds available now, and aid groups should improve their coordination and information sharing.

- **Designate a deputy UN Humanitarian Coordinator:** The United Nations should appoint a deputy humanitarian coordinator for Ethiopia. It should also prepare to designate the crisis as a Level III global emergency – a situation requiring the highest level of mobilization across the humanitarian system. A Level III designation would allow the United Nations to fast-track efforts to ramp up a response to the emergency.
- **Ensure that aid actors can fully operate without interference.** The Ethiopian federal government must treat aid actors as neutral parties and remove obstacles to their work. This includes unfreezing NGO bank accounts and allowing full freedom of movement. The Ethiopian government should also provide more and lengthier visas for international aid workers that are extendable in country.
- **Bolster humanitarian and refugee assistance to Sudan:** Sudan needs more donor funding and humanitarian aid to respond to the needs of Ethiopian refugees arriving into the country. The pace with which the situation is developing and remoteness of locations where refugees are arriving are beginning to challenge the capacity of Sudan’s existing aid infrastructure to respond. In particular, UNHCR and its partner organizations in Sudan need a rapid injection of donor funding. International aid actors should maintain open and close working relationships with Sudanese government counterparts, including Sudan’s Commissioner for Refugees.
- **Make accessible land available for the construction of new camps and settlements for newly arriving Ethiopians in Sudan:** The Sudanese government needs to move quickly to identify and make available additional land for arriving Ethiopians. Humanitarian actors must work closely with all stakeholders responding to the influx, including the government and a range of NGOs, to scale up logistics to access new camps and settlements, and obtain desperately needed food, water, and other supplies. The Sudanese government should also consider non-camp options for Ethiopian refugees, including self-settlement models where refugees can access livelihoods opportunities and choose whether to remain in camps or live elsewhere in Sudan.
- **Encourage the early engagement of development actors:** Development actors active in Tigray and Sudan should begin mobilizing to plan and implement early recovery efforts, operating under the assumption that the situation may become protracted. Planning should take into account how to support local host communities, as well. Such considerations should shape decisions about where and how to house displaced Ethiopians, including the design of settlements and camp infrastructure.



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