

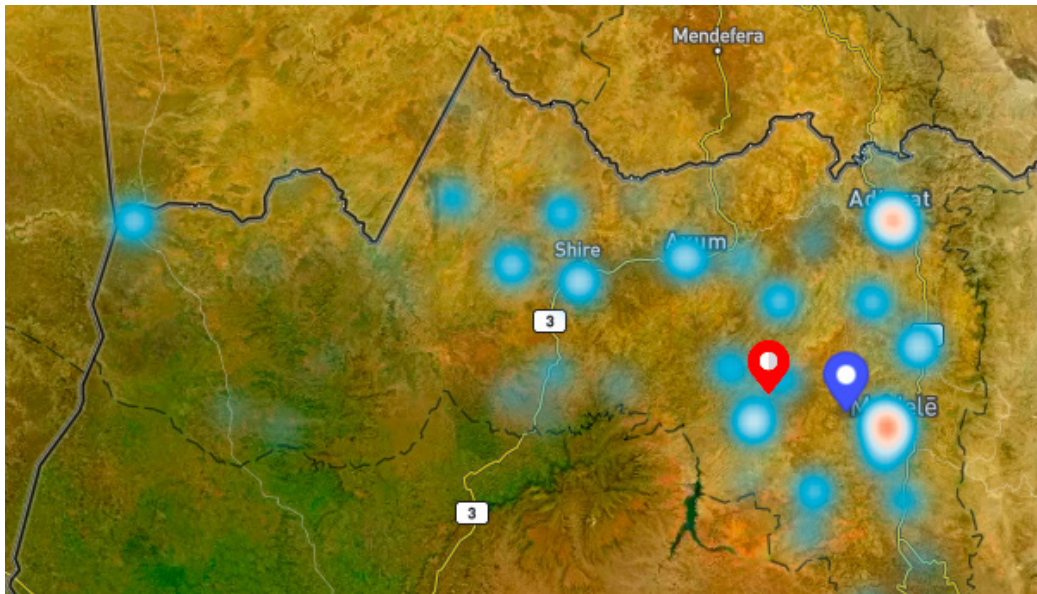
Ethiopia: Vigil Insight Situation Report

29 June 2021

Ceasefire following the fall of Mekelle means that violence will drop over the summer but the murder of three MSF staff shows that access for aid workers will remain difficult and communications limited.

This document provides an analysis of the current situation within Ethiopia and the implications for aid agencies working there. It specifically focuses on Tigray.

Heat map showing the location of violent incidents in the Tigray region from 04 November 2020 to 18 June 2021. Pins indicate the locations of the airstrike on the market in Togoga on 22 June 2021 (blue) and the killing of three MSF aid workers on 24 June 2021 (red).



Note: This map is based on the ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project) data set¹

Incidents include airstrikes; armed clashes (including shelling, artillery and missile attacks); incidents involving remote explosives, land-mines, IED's, or grenades; arrests; attacks on civilians; protests (peaceful, violent, and protests where the security forces intervened with or without excessive force); kidnappings; sexual violence; and looting and property destruction.

SUMMARY

- The opposition TDF (Tigray Defence Force) captured the capital of Mekelle from federal forces on 28 June following a series of earlier advances that began during the 21 June national elections.
- The Ethiopian government released a statement declaring a 'unilateral ceasefire' to start from '28 June, 2021' that will 'stay until the farming season ends'. Ethiopia's main planting season lasts from May to September.
- The results of the elections are yet to be confirmed, but there has been little political violence reported, either pre or post elections.
- Official statements as well as social media posts should be treated with caution, reviewing both the credibility of the content but also what might be omitted from otherwise factual reports.
- The murder of a Spanish MSF staff and her two Ethiopian colleagues West of Mekelle on 24 June challenges the widely held assumption that the presence of foreigners provide a degree of safety.

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MITIGATION FOR AID ORGANISATIONS

Security force activity will remain significant, and the consequent high rate of incidents means the risk to aid organisations is currently rated as **HIGH** throughout the country, with Tigray region being rated as **VERY HIGH**. Aid agencies will need to continue their own assessments of how to adjust their security strategies, but there are options available:

- Those traveling to the field need to understand local complexities and ensure their team is comprised in a manner that signals neutrality and are able to negotiate in tense situations.
- Official statements as well as social media posts should be treated with extreme caution, reviewing both the credibility of the content but also what might be omitted from otherwise factual reports.
- Advise that aid organisations, where possible, track where military positions are located and advise avoidance of all staff accordingly.
- Alternative portable satellite measures (such as Iridium or Thuraya phones) should be considered in the wake of the incident at UNICEF's Tigray offices (see Context below).
- For mitigation on phosphorus munitions see Analysis section below.

CONTEXT

The opposition Tigray Defence Forces (TDF - an amalgamation of the Tigray People's Liberation Front and other militia groups) captured the capital of Mekelle from federal forces on 28 June following a series of earlier advances that began during the 21 June national elections. These gains included several towns on the road between Axum and Adigrat as well as Wukro, Hawzen and Agula on the main road leading north of Mekelle.

The initial federal government response included a 22 June airstrike targeting a market in Togoga town, some 25km from Mekelle in which the US State Department "noted dozens of civilians were killed or injured". The government dismissed the initial gains as "fabrications" and they claimed that the market bombing targeted TDF fighters. The government responded to the fall of Mekelle by offering a unilateral ceasefire on the evening of 28 June, claiming that it was offered to allow farmers to complete the growing season (which ends in late September/early October).

Separately a Spanish MSF worker and her two Ethiopian colleagues were murdered on a road West of Mekele on 24 June. Four days later, on 28 June UNICEF complained that the security forces had dismantled satellite communications equipment at its offices in Tigray (see map on page one).

ANALYSIS

The government's defences likely collapsed through a combination of focus on the elections (and growing violence elsewhere – particularly in the Prime Minister's home region of Oromia) and falling international support for the security measures driven by the escalating humanitarian crisis. Efforts, likely by both sides, to control the flow of information suggest that there has been a significant underreporting of incidents over the months of April, May, and June when compared to November, December, January, February and March.

The MSF killings and the incident at the UNICEF offices challenge the widely held assumption that the presence of foreigners provide a degree of safety. In addition, it is **LIKELY** that the communication difficulties experienced by INGOs in maintaining contact with staff may also affect information flow on key events.

Furthermore, Tigray's Interim Administration Security Council warned on 17 June that vehicles belonging to the UN and related organisations as well as other international and local humanitarian organisations would be searched. Although the government withdrawal from Tigray has changed the environment, the TPLF's history of corruption and human rights abuses combined with similar actions by pro-federal government forces suggests that threats against aid workers and supplies will continue.

More general protests linked to food shortages or government security operations – nationwide - are **LIKELY** also significantly underreported. Both sides have been erecting checkpoints to control access of people – and humanitarian aid – to contested areas.

The level of propaganda and falsified news had increased significantly on both sides even before the fall of Mekelle. The BBC has analysed the Prime Minister's purported statement that he would 'rather die' than hand over power (see [previous report](#)) and concluded that it was faked. Another claim – that he campaigned in the Oromia region in a UN vehicle, has some truth. The vehicle was indeed supplied by the UN but a spokesperson for the UN told the BBC: "It is a common practice in Ethiopia that the UN donates cars to government ministers at federal and regional levels."

Insecurity Insight's review of how aid agencies are portrayed in social media highlights the serious allegations that are at times made against aid operations. (see [Insecurity Insight's report](#)).

In addition, a series of international media reports claimed that "chemical weapons" and heavy artillery were being sent by federal forces into Tigray. In fact, the supposed chemical weapons (CW) appear to be white phosphorus smoke munitions. Describing phosphorus as a CW is emotive and often (deliberately) misleading. It is legal under protocol III when used for its intended purpose - creating smoke screens - but prohibited when used as an incendiary weapon. Phosphorus is thus open to misuse as an incendiary.

If a staff member is injured by a phosphorus munition, first aid necessitates depriving the phosphorus of oxygen, ideally through submersing the wound in water or applying vigorous irrigation of the wound. As a last resort, wet dressing can be used.

PREDICTION

- These are the most significant opposition gains since the latest fighting began in November last year and the fact that the government instituted the ceasefire – under international pressure because of the humanitarian crisis – means that they are unlikely to break it before the end of the growing season. In the meantime, however, the government will likely try to consolidate their military position on the fringes of Tigray – and government forces will almost certainly respond to any violence directed against them.
- These developments mean that it is **UNLIKELY** that Eritrea will withdraw its troops or proxy militias from the Tigray border area – as they have repeatedly claimed to have done or promised to do – so long as it remains under opposition control. Furthermore, growing international pressure is **UNLIKELY** to have much effect on the administration in Asmara because of Eritrean fears that its former ally's renewed control of Tigray will enable the TDF to operate on its border.
- The Eritreans are **UNLIKELY** to mount offensive ground operations except in response to the TDF approaching/crossing the border. They will therefore **LIKELY** stick to the ceasefire, unless they feel threatened, or feel the TDF becoming too strong, either politically or militarily.

- Abiy rode a wave of optimism to become Prime Minister, promising unity and reform after bloody anti-government protests that forced his predecessor to resign. Nonetheless, after initial amnesties, numbers of prisoners are increasing again, as repression of the press is growing and even basic communication by telephone and email are becoming increasingly difficult. This trend is **LIKELY** to continue despite Abiy's ceasefire declaration unless he now engages fully with both the TDF and his political opponents in other regions, particularly Oromia.
- Ballot papers are still being counted in the parliamentary elections but there is little prospect of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed losing given the opposition boycott in Oromia – the most populous region – and the lack of voting in many other areas, including Tigray. Some protests are possible regardless of the outcome, but major civil unrest is **UNLIKELY** whilst there is no realistic prospect of overturning the election result. Therefore, governance will **MOST LIKELY** continue as before despite the TDF gains.
- Propaganda and so-called fake news are **HIGHLY LIKELY** to persist as the conflict shifts from the military to the political because of the ceasefire. However, Abiy's government is **LIKELY** to increase its efforts further as it tries to reimpose its authority in other areas as well as Tigray where it is facing political or armed opposition from September onwards.
- If fighting then shifts to urban areas (or prepared defensive positions) there is a risk that the government may use phosphorus munitions illegally. In open country it can also be used to start bushfires and destroy crops and livestock. Aid workers are **UNLIKELY** to be in such closely defended areas during an assault, though may be affected if in the vicinity of any such munition.
- Field trips and access will remain complex despite the ceasefire given the growing violence against aid workers. Despite the death of the Spanish MSF worker, Ethiopian/Tigrayan staff traveling on their own appear much more vulnerable to arbitrary violence, due to the absence of any potential international witness.
- More widely, the growing insecurity at home is **LIKELY** to make Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's administration even less willing to compromise with Sudan and Egypt in the dispute over the imminent filling of the massive Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile.

You may be interested in

- Ethiopia **Country** page.
- Ethiopia **Data**: Available on the Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX).
- Ethiopia: **Social Media Monitoring**: 25 June 2021.
- Ethiopia **Situation Report**: 16 June 2021.
- Ethiopia: **Sexual Violence** in the Tigray region: 30 March 2021

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¹ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) **database attribution policy**. ACLED general user guide. Accessed on 23 June 2021. ACLED data ranges from 04 November 2020 to 18 June 2021.