



Ethiopia's Tigray War: A Deadly, Dangerous Stalemate

Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°171
Nairobi/Brussels, 2 April 2021

What's new? War rages on in Ethiopia's Tigray region – with civilians bearing the brunt of a brutal conflict marked by atrocities. Under international pressure, Addis Ababa has offered concessions on aid access and pledged that Eritrean troops will withdraw. But prospects of a negotiated settlement appear dim.

Why does it matter? An entrenched Tigrayan resistance combined with Ethiopian and Eritrean authorities' determination to keep Tigray's fugitive leaders from power mean that the conflict could evolve into a protracted war. That would further devastate Tigray and greatly harm Ethiopia, the linchpin state in the Horn of Africa.

What should be done? With a decisive battlefield win for either side a remote prospect, parties should consider a cessation of hostilities that allows for expanded humanitarian aid access. This practical first step would reduce civilian suffering and ideally pave the way for a return to dialogue down the road.

I. Overview

Though Ethiopia's federal government claimed the war in the country's Tigray region was over in November, fighting continues – at great cost to a stricken population trapped in a multi-sided conflict. Tigray's ousted leadership appears to have consolidated its position in rural areas and its resistance commands support from a Tigrayan population that values the region's autonomy. As part of the federal war effort, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed enlisted forces from Eritrea and also from Ethiopia's Amhara region. This move added to Tigrayans' sense of injustice and broadened backing for the rebellion, particularly as Eritrean and Amhara combatants stand accused of atrocities against civilians. While mounting evidence of abuses and international pressure have forced concessions from Addis Ababa, including an announcement that Eritrean forces will withdraw, the war looks set to continue. Led by the U.S., European Union, African Union and UN, external actors should press for a pause in the fighting as an urgent priority so as to allow increased aid delivery – and keep demanding that the parties pursue a negotiated settlement.

All sides in the conflict in Ethiopia's northernmost region appear to be girding for a protracted battle. The Tigrayan leadership, though driven from power in Mekelle, the region's capital, has rallied under the banner of the Tigray Defence Forces, an armed resistance group. It is led by the removed Tigrayan leaders and commanded

by former high-ranking Ethiopian National Defence Force officers. It currently operates primarily from rural areas in central and southern Tigray, while federal troops control the main roads and urban areas. Eritrean soldiers have their heaviest presence in northern Tigray and Amhara forces patrol western Tigray and the far south. All sides are fixated on securing a military victory. None appears capable of achieving one in the near term. The Tigrayan resistance appears to enjoy broad support in the region, while federal authorities and their allies are determined to capture its leaders and put them on trial. The parties' positioning means that the conflict could well last for months, or even years, an outcome that would be even more disastrous for Tigray and the rest of the country.

Urgent measures are needed to stem the tragedy. Direct talks between the parties appear a distant prospect at present, given that Prime Minister Abiy rejects the notion of engaging Tigray leaders he portrays as traitors. For now, the U.S., EU, AU, UN Security Council and other actors should press for more limited but critical gains. Notably, they should demand a cessation of hostilities that at least allows for rapidly expanded aid delivery. To stave off the risk of mass starvation it is critical that ploughing and planting take place as Tigray's rainy season arrives in the next few months. Addis Ababa should also tacitly allow aid groups to negotiate access to Tigray-held areas. Getting Eritrean forces out may not be easy, given Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki's apparent determination to crush the Tigrayan leadership, but Ethiopia's foreign partners should hold Abiy to his pledge that these forces will leave. First steps along these lines could – if all goes well – eventually usher in talks between the federal government and Tigrayan representatives.

II. **An Entrenched Resistance**

The war in Tigray has become a grinding stalemate. Neither side appears poised to achieve a definitive victory, despite the federal government's success in pushing Tigray's leadership out of Mekelle.¹ The presence of Eritrean and Amhara forces fighting alongside federal soldiers has galvanised Tigrayan resistance to the intervention. On 26 March, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced that Eritrean troops would withdraw "effective immediately".² These were welcome words, though it remains to be seen whether the soldiers will in fact depart. Nor is it clear that Eritrean forces can withdraw without giving a boost to the Tigrayan forces Addis Ababa is set on defeating.³ Amid international outcry, authorities have increased

¹ For an account of the conflict's first month, see Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°167, *Finding a Path to Peace in Ethiopia's Tigray Region*, 11 February 2021. On the build-up to the conflict, see Crisis Group Africa Briefings N°160, *Toward an End to Ethiopia's Federal-Tigray Feud*, 14 August 2020; and N°162, *Steering Ethiopia's Tigray Crisis Away from Conflict*, 30 October 2020.

² "Eritrea agrees to withdraw its forces out of Ethiopian border", Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 26 March 2021. The statement said: "The government of Eritrea has agreed to withdraw its forces out of the Ethiopian border. The Ethiopian National Defence Force will take over guarding the border areas effective immediately".

³ Ousted Tigrayan leaders hold this view, as do some senior regional diplomats. "Interview with Getachew Reda on current issues", Tigray Media House, 29 March 2021. Crisis Group telephone interviews, diplomats, March 2021.

media and humanitarian aid access, while promising to probe atrocities. But outside parties' key demand – the withdrawal of Eritrean and Amhara forces – will not be easy to achieve, given that one of the political imperatives that drew both these actors into the conflict, namely the elimination of Tigray's former ruling party as a political force, remains unmet.

After fleeing to rural areas, Tigray's fugitive leaders have dug in. Their campaign commands popular support, meaning that it will most likely endure.⁴ Meanwhile, the federal government has signalled its intent to keep pursuing a military victory.⁵ A drawn-out conflict would lead to even greater suffering for civilians, potentially subjecting those in inaccessible areas to mass starvation. It would also threaten Ethiopia's stability and potentially that of the Horn of Africa, given the country's pivotal position in the region.

The rival combatants' fortunes have waxed and waned over the past few months. In the early weeks of fighting, federal forces and their allies made rapid territorial advances, culminating when they ousted Tigray's government and took control of Mekelle on 28 November, just over three weeks after war broke out. In December, the removed Tigrayan leadership went into survival mode, retreating to far-flung rural areas in the face of a drone-led aerial campaign that killed some leaders and destroyed military hardware commandeered from the federal army.⁶ To avoid detection, they shut down all external telecommunications and went to ground.⁷ Since December, however, their resistance has hardened. The Tigray Defence Forces appear to have established a foothold in rural central Tigray.⁸ Tigrayan media regularly report what they describe as victories by these forces over either the Ethiopian or Eritrean armies.⁹ These claims are hard to verify due to an internet blackout and access restrictions.

Broadly speaking, Tigray's territory is now a battleground for four different forces fighting on two sides. The Tigray Defence Forces are on one side. They hold territory in rural parts of Central Tigray Zone, as well as some areas of Eastern, South-eastern and Southern Tigray Zones.¹⁰ Those forces are pitted against the Ethiopian military, which occupies towns and cities; Amhara regional forces, both regular and irregular,

⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, ordinary Tigrayan citizens, Tigrayan activists, politicians and former officials, January-March 2021.

⁵ For example, on 19 March, the Prime Minister's Office told Tigrayans participating in the rebellion to return home within a week. If fugitive leaders were to turn themselves in, the notice added, they could prevent the "misery of their people". "Final notice from the Government of Ethiopia to all allied with the TPLF outlaws", Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 19 March 2021.

⁶ Crisis Group interviews, eyewitnesses to drone flights over Tigray, November 2020-March 2021. See also, for example, "'They have destroyed Tigray, literally': Mulugeta Gebrehiwot speaks from the mountains of Tigray", World Peace Foundation, 29 January 2021.

⁷ Crisis Group telephone interviews, former senior Tigrayan officials, January and February 2021.

⁸ The Tigrayans have made ever more claims of battlefield victories. Confidential UN reports on file with Crisis Group document an increasing number of confrontations between the Tigray Defence Forces and the Ethiopian and Eritrean militaries in 2021. A speech by a Tigray Defence Forces commander, which appears to have been given in March 2021 as it refers to four months of fighting, offers further corroboration. "The historical speech delivered by general Migbey Haile, commander of Tigray defense forces", Zantana Media, 22 March 2021.

⁹ "News of victory presented by freedom fighter Gebre Gebretsadkan, military spokesperson for Tigray Defence Forces", Dimtsi Weyane International, 15 February 2021.

¹⁰ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Tigrayan activists, representatives of international organisations and NGOs operating in Tigray, January-March 2021.

which patrol most of western Tigray and parts of southern Tigray; and the Eritrean army, which is present mostly in the northern sections of North-western, Central and Eastern Tigray Zones. In early 2021, the Eritreans have also fought further south, according to, among others, the UN.¹¹

Most of the combat over the past few months has occurred in central Tigray, where Tigrayan leaders fled from Mekelle, and increasingly in the two southern zones. For example, battles erupted in Samre district in South-eastern Zone on 14 February, and again in March, as well as further south in several locations (Tigrayan claims of the latter received rare corroboration from non-Tigrayan media on 14 March).¹² From 9 to 12 February, a major clash broke out between Tigrayan and Eritrean forces to the north in the Werie Leke district of Central Tigray Zone.¹³ February fighting between, on one side, Tigrayan forces and, on the other, Ethiopian and Eritrean forces also clustered around Abiy Adiy town, whose roads the UN says are inaccessible due to insecurity. More recently, the Ofla and Endamehoni districts in southern Tigray experienced heavy fighting, with Tigray forces' victory claims over Ethiopian and Eritrean troops contradicted by media that support the federal intervention.¹⁴ Tigrayan forces also staged a deadly attack inside Amhara region on 18 March.¹⁵

International pressure appears to have contributed to a shift in Addis Ababa's public positioning on the presence of Eritrean troops. In the third week of March, U.S. President Joe Biden dispatched Senator Chris Coons to deliver a message to Prime Minister Abiy. A Democrat from Biden's home state of Delaware, Coons is close to the president and sits on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Shortly after the senator's visit, Abiy publicly acknowledged the Eritrean role for the first time.¹⁶ After making a trip of his own to Asmara on 26 March, the Ethiopian premier said Eritrean troops would withdraw.¹⁷

The presence of Eritrean soldiers – and their reported role in atrocities in the course of the war – has inflamed Tigrayan popular sentiment.¹⁸ While getting the Eritreans out is critical, their exit could bring its own complications. It would give some respite to civilians who seem to have borne the brunt of Eritrean forces' violence and may win some political space for the interim administration, which has

¹¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, March 2021.

¹² See, for example, "News of victory and daily news", Dimtsi Weyane International, 16 March 2021; and "At least 80 TPLF militants killed in south Tigray", Wazema Radio, 14 March 2021.

¹³ "News of victory of the month of February and daily news", Dimtsi Weyane International, 15 February 2021.

¹⁴ "Special news: Mr Getachew Assefa has died", Ethiopian Satellite Television, 18 March 2021.

¹⁵ "What took place in Tsagibji, which is under Wag Himra administration?", BBC Amharic, 23 March 2021.

¹⁶ "Biden's closest ally emerges as a shadow secretary of state", *Politico*, 24 March 2021. A growing catalogue of reports on rights abuses over the last few months has helped pile international pressure on Addis to change course. This pressure may account for the somewhat softened positions that authorities have taken lately on aid access and possible UN investigations into atrocities, as well as the Eritrean presence in Tigray. "Investigation into Grave Human Rights Violations in Aksum City", Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 23 March 2021.

¹⁷ "Eritrea agrees to withdraw its forces out of Ethiopian border", Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 26 March 2021.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, regional and Western diplomats, February-March 2021.

demanded that the Eritreans pull out.¹⁹ But it could also relieve pressure on Tigray's forces and allow its emboldened leaders to claim they had forced the withdrawal, thus intensifying the conflict as they next seek to force a federal retreat.²⁰ The Eritreans' continued presence, however, particularly if more atrocities ensue, would also strengthen Tigrayan resolve to fight on.

The incursion of Amhara combatants into Tigray has not helped, either. Amhara regional leaders say they have reclaimed territory that they contend the rebels-turned-rulers from the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) snatched from Amhara hands as they consolidated their power in the early 1990s.²¹ Even though the western areas are relatively quiet at present in terms of fighting, sustained Amhara control – or formal inclusion of the territory in Amhara region – could trigger years of instability as many Tigrayans, including top officials from the federally appointed interim Tigray government, strongly reject Amhara administration.²²

The Tigrayan armed resistance seems to have grown in strength, although it has still at times been under considerable pressure, even surrounded.²³ Its commanders include former Chief of Staff General Tsadkan Gebretensae, who led the Ethiopian military into war with Eritrea from 1998-2000, and another, more recently retired former senior officer, Lieutenant General Tadesse Werede. The Tigrayans appear to have held mostly central rural areas and claim to have been able to stand up to federal and Eritrean forces.²⁴ The war began with Tigray's leaders capturing tanks, missiles and rocket launchers from the federal military, but that equipment was destroyed or discarded in the face of the aerial campaign. Now, Tigrayan forces are more mobile and lightly armed. While it is unclear how many fighters are involved, Tigrayan ranks are said to be swelling due to popular anger at the intervention, in particular at the atrocities allegedly committed against civilians.²⁵

Hundreds of Tigray's fugitive political and military leaders are still at large (including ousted Tigray President and TPLF chair Debretsion Gebremichael), with only around a third of those sought in custody.²⁶ The Ethiopian government did not report having detained or killed any of the wanted leaders in February or March, again sug-

¹⁹ "Tigray regional administration unanimous on the need for Eritrean withdrawal – bureau head", *Addis Standard*, 4 March 2021.

²⁰ A source in regular contact with Tigray's leadership explained the withdrawal announcement by saying: "Abiy has to extricate himself from the mess he is in. Isaias has a narrow window to save his army". Crisis Group telephone interview, March 2021.

²¹ "The people have been liberated: After this they will not return back to slavery" – Agegnehu Teshager, head of Amhara Regional Government", Amhara Mass Media Agency, 18 February 2021.

²² "We don't know the whereabouts of one million people" – interim administration of Tigray", BBC Tigrinya, 3 March 2021.

²³ In his speech, Tigrayan commander Migbey Haile said that Tigray's forces had been encircled several times. "The historical speech delivered by General Migbey Haile, commander of Tigray Defense Forces", op. cit.

²⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Tigrayan activists and former officials with ties to the Tigray leadership, January-March 2021. Confidential UN documents on file with Crisis Group show the Tigray Defence Forces occupying large swathes of Tigray, particularly in central areas.

²⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Tigrayan activists, politicians and former officials with ties to the Tigray leadership, January-March 2021.

²⁶ "AG apprehends 124 suspects in connection with attack against Northern Command", Ethiopian News Agency, 29 January 2021.

gesting that the TPLF leadership has steadied its position. Tigray's commanders claim they routinely capture and kill enemy combatants, and seize trucks, rifles and ammunition to sustain their rebellion.²⁷ From the outset, senior TPLF figures said they do not need an external supply line (though they would like one), because the supportive population will provide food – even amid the shortages – and they can grab more materiel from their foes.²⁸

Federal authorities offer a strikingly different assessment of battlefield dynamics, however. In a 23 March address to parliament, Abiy cast the TPLF as an all-but-defeated force. “What I would like to tell the people of Tigray, the friends of Tigray and the honourable parliament is that the TPLF has now become like grain powder that has been dispersed by the wind. We can't collect it again and make it edible powder”.²⁹

But in addition to the factors noted above that are fuelling the rebellion, there are other considerations suggesting that the war will continue. For one, a sizeable number of Tigrayans oppose the Eritrean and Amhara forces' presence and are outraged at the atrocities both are reported to have committed against civilians.³⁰ The fury runs so deep that even the interim Tigray administration, appointed by the federal government, has expressed it.³¹ Still, that interim administration enjoys little support. Most Tigrayans back the ousted regional leadership.³² Eritrean withdrawal would perhaps ease opposition to the interim administration, but it would be unlikely to dilute anger at the federal overthrow of Tigray's government or at the Amhara irredentism. Even more worryingly for long-term stability in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, many Tigrayans now voice support for secession from the Ethiopian federation.³³ A sustained bid for independence would inflame the Amhara-Tigray territorial dispute and might destabilise Eritrea, causing many years of strife.

With the conflict still in the balance, it remains to be seen whether the federal military will seek to calm the situation somewhat by jettisoning its Eritrean and Amhara allies, thereby risking boosting Tigray's resistance. Even if it wishes to do so, Addis Ababa might find it challenging to move in this direction. Although his government has still not admitted its role, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki has an op-

²⁷ See, for example, “News of victory presented by freedom fighter Gebre Gebretsadkan, military spokesperson for Tigray Defence Forces”, *op. cit.*

²⁸ With the Amhara occupation of western Tigray blocking the route to eastern Sudan, and Ethiopian and Eritrean forces closing all other avenues, the Tigrayan resistance has been cut off from outside support. Crisis Group interviews, former Tigrayan officials with ties to the Tigray leadership, January-March 2021.

²⁹ Office of the Prime Minister – Ethiopia, video, YouTube, 23 March 2021.

³⁰ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Tigrayan figures, November 2020-March 2021. Members of the federally appointed Tigray interim administration have also voiced similar concerns.

³¹ See, for example, comments by interim leader Mulu Nega in “‘You don't belong’: Land dispute drives new exodus in Ethiopia's Tigray”, Reuters, 30 March 2021.

³² Almost all the Tigrayan activists Crisis Group has spoken to since November espouse this view, even those who have opposed the TPLF in the past.

³³ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Tigrayan activists, politicians and former officials with ties to the Tigray leadership, January-March 2021. A European diplomat who visited Tigray said: “Any conversation you have [with Tigrayans] is illuminating. ... There is a common perception this has been planned, that it was collective punishment of Tigray. ... [There is] no sense of a future for Tigray in Ethiopia. People talk about ‘occupation’ and ‘invaders’. ... They feel so abandoned by Ethiopia that there is no perception of anything but secession and independence for Tigray in the future”. Crisis Group telephone interview, March 2021.

portunity to claim areas in northern Ethiopia granted to Asmara by a 2002 UN boundary commission decision that Addis Ababa refused to respect.³⁴ Moreover, the Eritrean leader has a longstanding ambition to cut the TPLF down to size. Isaias views Tigray leaders as ungrateful junior partners who turned Ethiopia's military against his regime in 1998 despite strong Eritrean support for the TPLF's rebellion against Mengistu Haile Mariam's military dictatorship.³⁵ Eritrean troops' looting of Tigray could be seen as payback for the destruction Eritrea suffered in the 1998-2000 war, said a close observer, who dismissed the idea the Eritreans would pull out: "Isaias will not sleep until the TPLF is destroyed".³⁶

Additionally, federal forces' reliance on Eritrean support has grown amid Ethiopia's armed confrontation with Sudan over a disputed borderland. In mid-December, clashes broke out again in the al-Fashaga area along the Ethiopian-Sudanese border after Sudan's military – taking advantage of Ethiopia's distraction by the Tigray conflict – moved to control territory it claims Ethiopians occupied from the mid-1990s. The hostilities, which also have drawn in Eritrean forces, are of particular concern to Amhara leaders, as farmers from that region were evicted by Sudan's incursion.³⁷ The border fight means that, for now, an Eritrean exit from Tigray would further stretch Ethiopia's military, unless Asmara repositions troops to Ethiopia's Sudanese border.

Another factor suggesting the conflict will continue is that the federal government has not fully achieved its key intervention objectives: to disarm the TPLF, prosecute all wanted Tigrayan leaders and re-establish a constitutional government in Tigray.³⁸ With elections in Ethiopia (excluding Tigray) just over two months away, Abiy is likely to worry that he will look weak if he submits to talks with a fugitive Tigrayan leadership that his government has classified as treasonous. Moreover, Abiy faces little domestic pressure to change course. The war in Tigray enjoys broad popular support in much of Ethiopia and, outside Tigray itself, Abiy has successfully cast the TPLF as villains who have been sowing the seeds of civil strife for the past two years.³⁹ Nonetheless, whether Eritrean troops maintain a presence or not, Addis Ababa seems unlikely to dislodge the Tigray Defence Forces from rural areas and convince Tigrayans to curtail their support for the resistance. The sad reality is that the war looks set to grind on, probably for months, if not longer, absent significant action by outside powers to bring it to a close.

³⁴ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°68, *Ethiopia and Eritrea: War or Peace?*, 24 September 2003.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, former Eritrean official, March 2021.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ UN sources have confirmed Eritrea's involvement in the Sudan-Ethiopia clashes. Crisis Group telephone interview, March 2021. For more on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam dispute, see, for example, Crisis Group Statement, "Nile Dam Talks: A Short Window to Embrace Compromise", 17 June 2020.

³⁸ "The Ongoing Law Enforcement Operations in Tigray: Causes and Objectives", press statement, Office of the Prime Minister, 14 November 2020.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Ethiopian and Western diplomats and commentators, February and March 2021.

III. Civilians in the Firing Line

Conditions on the ground are dire. Aid agencies estimated on 5 March that 4.5 million people in the region, or more than two thirds of the population, needed emergency food supplies.⁴⁰ The UN's humanitarian agency said the same number of people "have been without access to electricity, communications and other essential services for more than four months".⁴¹ In March, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network projected that parts of eastern and central Tigray would suffer "emergency outcomes" – just below "famine" conditions – through at least September.⁴² Until February, the federal government was blocking media and aid agency access to Tigray. Although it has now relaxed these restrictions, progress has been slow, with aid workers expanding their operations only incrementally over the last few months.⁴³

Tigray suffers from chronic food shortages. Even before the war, these had been aggravated by the worst desert locust invasion in decades.⁴⁴ Fighting then broke out around harvest time. The shutdown of telecommunications, closure of banks and, seemingly primarily at Eritrean troops' hands, destruction of more than two thirds of health facilities and widespread looting of public and private property – including food stores and oxen for ploughing – has exacerbated the hardship.⁴⁵ Moreover, the conflict has displaced almost one million people inside Tigray, many of them from western Tigray.⁴⁶ The federal government said on 30 March that it is delivering food aid to 4.2 million people in Tigray, a huge increase over the 950,000 who needed assistance before the war, while humanitarian actors say they have delivered adequate food to one million of the 3.5 million people in need who are in accessible areas.⁴⁷

International pressure has contributed to the federal government promising "unfettered" aid access, which should lead to more relief getting into areas under federal control.⁴⁸ Authorities have also eased bureaucratic obstacles to access to the region and there already are more humanitarian workers on the ground.⁴⁹ But the fact that the Tigray Defence Forces hold territory and the presence of Eritrean troops means

⁴⁰ "Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update – Situation Report", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 22 March 2021.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² "Amid High National Needs, Tigray Remains of Greatest Concern with Conflict Driving Emergency Outcomes", Famine Early Warning Systems Network, March 2021.

⁴³ Crisis Group telephone interviews, UN and humanitarian workers with operations in Tigray, January-March 2021.

⁴⁴ "Ethiopia struggles to suppress desert locust infestation", Al Jazeera, 21 October 2020.

⁴⁵ "People left with few healthcare options in Tigray as facilities looted, destroyed", Médecins sans Frontières, 15 March 2021. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission offered partial corroboration of Eritrean responsibility for looting in a 23 March preliminary report, "Investigation into Grave Human Rights Violations in Aksum City".

⁴⁶ Briefing to the UN Security Council by the UN deputy humanitarian coordinator in Ethiopia, 25 March 2021.

⁴⁷ "PM Office issues statement on the Tigray region rule of law operations", Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 3 March 2021; "Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update – Situation Report", op. cit.; "A Week in the Horn", Ethiopian Foreign Ministry, 26 March 2021.

⁴⁸ "UN, Ethiopia, sign deal for aid access to embattled Tigray", Associated Press, 2 December 2020.

⁴⁹ "PM Office issues statement on the Tigray region rule of law operations", op. cit.; "Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update – Situation Report", op. cit.

aid workers will not reach large parts of Tigray unless authorities allow them to negotiate access to Tigrayan-held areas and persuade the Eritreans to consistently allow increased aid flows. Greater humanitarian access to some Eritrean-held areas did start to occur in March.⁵⁰ Yet with no end to the conflict in sight, humanitarian assistance is likely to remain insufficient.⁵¹ There is a genuine threat of mass starvation in the months ahead, especially if the ploughing and planting season is interrupted, with heavy rains starting around June.

All four belligerents stand accused of committing atrocities against civilians. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, a legally autonomous federal institution, has joined Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch in accusing Eritrean forces of mass killings of civilians in the ancient city of Axum in late November.⁵² Human Rights Watch also said the federal military indiscriminately bombed urban areas.⁵³ The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights stated on 4 March that “serious violations of international law, possibly amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity may have been committed by multiple actors in the conflict”.⁵⁴ So far, however, the evidence for such crimes is mainly limited to witness accounts obtained remotely, given that research into the reported atrocities was carried out amid a blanket ban on media and aid agency access. Ethiopian and particularly Eritrean soldiers have reportedly engaged in widespread sexual violence, looting and massacres.⁵⁵

There have also been several reports of serious rights abuses in western Tigray, where federal troops first intervened before Amhara regional forces took control.⁵⁶ They suggest that Amhara factions have forcibly moved Tigrayans en masse from western Tigray, with an intensification of the depopulation in the last month.⁵⁷ Also in western Tigray, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission said Tigrayan militiamen

⁵⁰ “Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update – Situation Report”, op. cit.

⁵¹ The UN deputy humanitarian coordinator in Ethiopia told the UN Security Council on 25 March 2021: “The level of the response has been increasing but if you compare the level of response to the scale and the urgency, we found that it is significantly inadequate”.

⁵² See “Investigation into Grave Human Rights Violations in Aksum City”, op. cit.; “Ethiopia: Eritrean Troops’ Massacre of Hundreds of Axum Civilians May Amount to Crime against Humanity”, Amnesty International, 26 February 2021; and “Ethiopia: Eritrean Forces Massacre Tigray Civilians”, Human Rights Watch, 5 March 2021.

⁵³ “Ethiopia: Unlawful Shelling of Tigray Urban Areas”, Human Rights Watch, 11 February 2021.

⁵⁴ “Ethiopia: Persistent, Credible Reports of Grave Violations in Tigray Underscore Urgent Need for Human Rights Access – Bachelet”, press statement, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 4 March 2021.

⁵⁵ See, for example, “‘We’re here to make you HIV-positive’: Hundreds of women rush to Tigray hospitals as soldiers use rape as weapon of war”, *The Telegraph*, 27 March 2021. While most looting allegations have been directed at Eritrean troops, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission in its report on Axum said Ethiopian soldiers also raided two hospitals there.

⁵⁶ “‘You don’t belong’: Land dispute drives new exodus in Ethiopia’s Tigray”, op. cit.

⁵⁷ A well-placed humanitarian agency source told Crisis Group that some of these actions amounted to “ethnic cleansing”. Crisis Group telephone interview, March 2021. See “Ethiopia’s war leads to ethnic cleansing in Tigray region, U.S. report says”, *The New York Times*, 26 February 2021. See also “Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update – Situation Report”, op. cit. “In Western Tigray, amid reports of grave human rights violations and of forceful relocation of Tigrayan communities on ethnic grounds, partners on the ground indicate that several major towns are now empty of Tigrayan people, with new residents occupying vacated houses”.

backed by local officials killed hundreds of mostly Amhara civilians in Mai Kadra town on 9 November.

Equally worrying are multiple reports of retaliatory attacks on Tigrayan civilians by Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers following armed confrontations with Tigray forces, particularly as such atrocities may well increase as fighting intensifies.⁵⁸ Notable incidents include an early January massacre at Debre Abay to the south west of Shire city, one at Axum in late November and, most recently, the reported murder of civilians by federal soldiers near Wukro town.⁵⁹ Although Abiy has recently pledged that Ethiopian soldiers will be held to account for abuses, days before that his office also said Tigrayans will face “misery” if their leaders do not surrender and those who joined the rebellion do not return home.⁶⁰

IV. Preventing Contagion

If war persists, it would pose a serious threat to Ethiopia's overall stability and potentially to that of the entire Horn of Africa. A concern Crisis Group highlighted at the conflict's outset was that it could exacerbate problems in Ethiopia, such as mounting intercommunal killings in Benishangul-Gumuz region, bordering Sudan in the west, simmering discontent in the country's largest region of Oromia, and national fault lines.⁶¹ Growing hostilities with Sudan complicate the picture further.

For now, the authorities seem to have sufficient control in most areas outside Tigray, but they could lose it. In Oromia, home to a burgeoning insurgency, political discontent is high, though the opposition is relatively fragmented. If fighting intensifies in Tigray – and clashes with Sudan escalate – Addis Ababa's opponents in this region may feel emboldened as the 5 June election approaches. The election could deepen fault lines, particularly given that the main opposition parties in Oromia are boycotting it, citing state repression.⁶² Thus, while Abiy still commands domestic

⁵⁸ Such retaliation appears to have occurred in Axum in Central Tigray Zone in November as well as at Debre Abay in January, Cheli in South-eastern Tigray Zone in February, and near Wukro in Eastern Tigray Zone in March. For example, regarding Axum, Amnesty international said “the Eritrean troops unleashed the worst of the violence on 28-29 November. The onslaught came directly after a small band of pro-TPLF militiamen attacked the soldiers' base”. Also see “MSF Driver Assaulted, Staff Witness Men Dragged off Buses and Killed in Tigray”, Médecins sans Frontières, 24 March 2021; “Ethiopia: Hundreds executed, thousands homeless - the human cost of fighting in Tigray”, Sky News, 17 March 2021.

⁵⁹ “You should have finished off the survivors’: Ethiopian army implicated in brutal war crime video”, *The Telegraph*, 19 February 2021. “MSF Driver Assaulted, Staff Witness Men Dragged off Buses and Killed in Tigray”, op. cit.

⁶⁰ “Final notice from the Government of Ethiopia to all allied with the TPLF outlaws”, op. cit. “Any soldier responsible for crimes in Tigray region will be held accountable: PM Abiy Ahmed”, Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 23 March 2021.

⁶¹ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Steering Ethiopia's Tigray Crisis Away from Conflict*, op. cit.

⁶² “OLF officially out from upcoming election, continues call for release of its jailed leadership, members”, *Addis Standard*, 10 March 2021. “OFC says, again, very difficult to participate in election under current conditions; cautions threat to multinational federalism ‘dangerous move’”, *Addis Standard*, 9 January 2021.

support for the intervention in Tigray, protracted conflict there nonetheless risks sparking unrest elsewhere.

Peace talks seem a long way off. On the battlefield, both sides are swinging for a knockout blow, but neither can realistically hope to land one, regardless of whether or not Eritrea withdraws. The federal government cannot eradicate the armed resistance, which appears to be entrenched in rural areas and command widespread popular support. The Tigray Defence Forces have zero chance of re-establishing control over Tigray given the resources – especially manpower – at Addis Ababa's (and Asmara's) disposal. Moreover, the federal government rejects the idea of negotiating with the ousted Tigray leadership, which it accuses of treason.⁶³ That position, it seems, still has plenty of popular support in Ethiopia outside of Tigray. Meanwhile, many Tigrayans, including senior former officials, consider the TPLF regional government's reinstatement as essential to honouring Tigray's self-determination rights.⁶⁴ It is hard to imagine Addis Ababa acceding to this demand.

Moreover, the path to Eritrean and Amhara withdrawal is strewn with obstacles. In addition to President Isaias, who for reasons noted above, and despite Abiy's announcement that Eritrean forces will withdraw, may balk at doing anything that eases pressure on the TPLF, Amhara's leaders and activists may present a challenge. They believe they acted in justice's interest by reclaiming territory in Tigray they contend the TPLF annexed in the early 1990s.⁶⁵ Even if he wanted to remove the Amhara, Abiy would have to do so by force, which would strain his ties with their leaders, weaken him politically, and so boost Tigray's resistance and Sudan's position. A federal move against the Amhara would widen rifts in Abiy's Prosperity Party, where tensions are already evident between the two largest regional chapters in Amhara and Abiy's home region, Oromia.⁶⁶ Amhara control of western Tigray also creates a buffer zone to prevent the Tigray Defence Forces from resupplying through eastern Sudan. Simmering Khartoum-Addis tensions may tempt Sudan's military to support Tigray's forces if the Amhara leave Tigray.

But despite this bleak picture, there are things outside actors can do. Abiy's declaration that Eritrean troops will exit illustrates how important international pressure is. Foreign leaders should proceed by targeting limited initial goals. They should press for a pause in the fighting to increase aid coverage. Crucially, that would allow more ploughing and planting to occur, with Tigray's rainy season arriving around June. They should push Addis Ababa to tacitly allow aid groups to negotiate access to Tigray-held areas, as occurs with rebel groups in other war zones. They should also keep pressure on Abiy to fulfil his pledge to get Eritrean troops out, investigate abuses and allow unrestricted aid access. The territorial dispute between Tigray and Amhara can only sustainably be resolved via negotiations and legal means, starting with a boundary commission assessment. The African Union and UN Security Council should follow Brussels' and Washington's lead and pressure all parties to pause fighting.

⁶³ "Context for the Current Situation in Ethiopia – The Evolution of Criminality", Office of the Prime Minister, 12 November 2020.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, former federal minister and TPLF politburo member, March 2021.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, leading Amhara activist, March 2021.

⁶⁶ "Amhara & Oromia PP engage in war of words as relative peace returns to violence-hit areas", *Addis Standard*, 24 March 2021.

The AU Bureau of Heads of State and Government is well positioned to urge Abiy to abandon the quest for a total victory on the battlefield.

A cessation of hostilities in Tigray and improved humanitarian conditions just might then pave the way for talks. Abiy will perhaps want to pursue those negotiations after the elections, assuming that his Prosperity Party wins a majority in the federal parliament and the premier is in a stronger position. Talks would focus on finding a sustainable settlement, including the vexatious issue of political representation in Tigray, given the TPLF leadership's broad popular support. As the issues are so thorny, this process should feed into the sort of inclusive National Dialogue that would address Ethiopia's wider destabilising schisms – as Crisis Group and others have long advocated.⁶⁷

V. Conclusion

With Tigray's resistance growing, fuelled by anger at alleged atrocities by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces, and given deep popular attachment to the region's hard-won self-determination rights, the conflict looks set to grind on. A long war would further devastate Tigray, wreck any prospect of a democratic transition led by Abiy and destabilise Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa's fulcrum. It is imperative that outside actors do all in their power to encourage Addis Ababa to facilitate access for humanitarian aid, reassess its calculations regarding the war and seek to stop this stain on Prime Minister Abiy's record from spreading.

Nairobi/Brussels, 2 April 2021

⁶⁷ See Crisis Group Commentary, "War and Repression in Ethiopia Make National Dialogue Ever More Pressing", 29 January 2021.

Appendix A: Map of Tigray with Recent Conflict Hotspots



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

After President & CEO Robert Malley stood down in January 2021 to become the U.S. Iran envoy, two long-serving Crisis Group staff members assumed interim leadership until the recruitment of his replacement. Richard Atwood, Crisis Group's Chief of Policy, is serving as interim President and Comfort Ero, Africa Program Director, as interim Vice President.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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April 2021



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