The International Community Struggles to Address the Ethiopian Conflict

Martin Plaut

The withdrawal of Tigrayan forces into the countryside has parallels with the civil war of 1974–1991. Yet this time, other regional actors are involved.

As the war in Tigray enters its sixth month, there are few signs of it ending. The military and political situation appears as intractable as it was when the conflict commenced on 4 November 2020. As the International Crisis Group put it: ‘Both federal and resistance forces are digging in for a lengthy battle in Ethiopia’s Tigray region.’

It is worth recalling the history of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), which is leading the current resistance. The TPLF launched its fight against the Ethiopian government with a raid on a police station and a bank in Axum in July 1975. It spent the next 16 years fighting the government, until it captured Addis Ababa on 28 May 1991. The TPLF is, in a sense, reliving its past, by withdrawing into the countryside and the mountains and conducting a guerrilla campaign that the government is finding it difficult to respond to. The one major difference between the current conflict and the war in the 1970s and 80s is that today the TPLF is facing not just the armed forces of Ethiopia, but of Eritrea as well. Today’s conflict has a regional dimension.

What Has Caused the Conflict?

Tensions between Tigray and Eritrea can be traced to the liberation movements of the 1970s. Then, the TPLF and Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) had an uneasy alliance, working together to fight the Ethiopian government. This culminated in 1991 with the simultaneous fall of Addis Ababa and Asmara. The EPLF provided support to the TPLF in the assault on Addis Ababa and then gave close protection to the TPLF leader, Meles Zenawi. But this alliance hid ideological and tactical disputes. The TPLF came to power, ruling Ethiopia via the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front. By 1998 the relationship had ruptured and Eritrea and Ethiopia fought a bitter war that ended in 2000, leaving some 100,000 dead. A peace agreement was signed in Algiers, but – much to the fury of Eritrea – Ethiopia refused to accept the border drawn by the boundary commission established by the treaty. In response, Eritrea’s President Isaias Afwerki collaborated with the Somali Islamists of Al-Shabaab and Ethiopian guerrilla movements in a failed attempt to oust the Tigrayan rulers of Ethiopia. However, in 2018 internal factors finally saw the TPLF lose its grip on power in Addis Ababa, to be replaced by Abiy Ahmed and the Oromo People’s Democratic Organisation.

Ethiopia’s Abiy and Eritrea’s Isaias realised that they shared an enemy in the Tigrayan military and political leadership. A series of initiatives led to an end to hostilities in 2018 between Eritrea and Ethiopia, a conflict which had simmered since the 1998–2000 border war. In a series of nine joint meetings between the Eritrean and Ethiopian leaders, they developed a joint strategy to rid themselves of the Tigrayans. It is instructive that their final visits were held at the military bases of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The TPLF – smarting from its loss of power – attempted to defy the new Ethiopian prime minister. It resisted attempts to remove heavy weaponry from the Northern Command (headquartered in Mekelle and which it controlled). These weapons guarded northern Ethiopia (and Tigray in particular) from any Eritrean attack. The TPLF mobilised its citizens to block roads and prevent their removal.

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Abiy cancelled scheduled elections (arguing they could not be held because of the coronavirus pandemic). But his mandate had expired and the Tigrayans said he had no right to act in this way. They proceeded with their own elections, despite being instructed by the federal authorities not to. The last straw came when Abiy sent General Jamil Muhammad to take control of the Northern Command at the end of October, only to have the TPLF put him on a plane back to Addis Ababa.

The federal government and the Tigray regional authority were clearly on a collision course. Exactly what happened on 4 November is not clear, but fighting broke out at the Northern Command base in Mekelle, which the TPLF took control of. Tigray was under attack from the north, east and south, with reports of drones, possibly supplied by the UAE, being fired from...
the Eritrean port of Assab in support of the Ethiopian government’s war effort.

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This is not the ‘law-enforcement operation’ described by Abiy. On 6 November, Abiy said that: ‘operations by federal defence forces underway in Northern Ethiopia have clear, limited and achievable objectives’. Six months later this is hardly a plausible assessment. The fighting has evolved into a full-scale war, involving Ethiopian federal forces and Amhara militia, together with the Eritrean army, which have combined to attack the Tigrayan forces. There have also been reports that Somali troops have joined the Eritrean offensive. Towns such as Adigrat in the north fell to federal forces, which advanced on Tigray’s capital, Mekelle. After artillery bombardment of Mekelle, Abiy could rightly claim that his forces were ‘fully in control’ of the city. He said that the army’s entry into the city marked the ‘last phase’ of the conflict with the TPLF.

In reality the Tigrayans had pulled their forces out of the cities and had headed to the countryside and the mountains to conduct a guerrilla war – just as they had done prior to 1991. Mekelle had fallen, but the Tigrayan administration had ordered its forces to withdraw before the attack.

The UN – in a secret report – feared the war would become an extended conflict, characterised by irregular warfare. This is indeed what has transpired. By 4 April 2021 Abiy admitted that the fighting was far from over. Capturing the cities had not ended the war.

**Conflict, Atrocities and Famine**

The war has taken a terrible toll on the population. Three Tigrayan opposition parties estimated that by February 2021, 52,000 civilian lives had been lost. They described the impact of the fighting on their people, including widespread sexual violence, the destruction of health and education infrastructure, and extra-judicial killings.

The atrocities were predominantly carried out by Eritrean and Ethiopian forces, since Tigrayan forces were on their home territory and unlikely to attack their own people. The most egregious abuses so far include the November killings in the city of Axum, with Eritreans going door to door shooting civilians on sight. Hundreds were murdered, although the exact number has not been possible to ascertain. The findings were broadly supported by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, which accepted that civilians had been attacked and that Eritrean troops were largely responsible.

The fighting in Tigray broke out as the harvest was coming in. This – together with the disruption imposed by the conflict – has left many families on the edge of starvation. The region is already seeing deaths from hunger and although aid is reaching some places, perhaps as many as 500,000 are in areas outside of the reach of the agencies.

**Diplomacy**

As the war erupted, the African Union attempted to intervene to try to end the conflict, which was – after all – taking place just north of its headquarters in Addis Ababa. Towards the end of November the African Union chairman, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, held talks with Ethiopian President Sahle-Work Zewde. Together they hammered out a mediation plan. This involved the appointment of three
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African ‘distinguished statespersons’ who were asked to act as special envoys of the African Union to mediate between the warring parties.

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Teferi Melesse Desta – the Ethiopian ambassador to the UK – said that his country had accepted the appointment of the three envoys to mediate in the crisis. Unfortunately, the initiative went against the stated policy of Abiy, who said on 11 November that there would be no dialogue ‘until our efforts to ascertain [sic] the rule of law are achieved’. Clearly furious, Abiy said he would meet the former African presidents, but had no interest in allowing them to mediate in the conflict. ‘We don’t negotiate with criminals... We bring them to justice, not to the negotiating table’, he declared. 

The EU and the UK have also played their part, joining Japan and Canada in calling for the Eritreans to leave. The problem has been discussed at the UN Security Council, where India, China and Russia have prevented attempts to resolve the issue, on the grounds that it would amount to interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. In an attempt to break the deadlock the Finnish foreign minister, Pekka Haavisto, was asked to travel to the region on behalf of the EU to push for a ceasefire, improved humanitarian aid access, investigations into human rights abuses and, crucially, the withdrawal of Eritrean troops. The Haavisto mission failed to make much headway, with the EU Vice-President Josep Borrell concluding that little had been achieved: ‘I have to say the situation is not improving. The Eritrean troops are still there, in spite of all the promises of the Ethiopian government to withdraw them. Humanitarian access has not been fulfilled’.

In the meantime, after denying for months that Eritrean troops were involved in the war, Abiy finally reversed his position and asked them to leave. ‘Eritrea has agreed to withdraw its forces out of the Ethiopian border’, Abiy said at the end of March, the day after arriving in Eritrea to meet Isaias. Since then there have been reports that Eritrean troops have begun to withdraw, but this has not been verified. Rather, informal information suggests quite the opposite – that the Eritreans have been reinforcing their positions while ‘re-badging’ their troops as Ethiopian forces.

A key question is what the war will do to Ethiopia and the wider Horn of Africa if it drags on, consuming resources and destabilising the region. There have been clashes on the border with neighbouring Sudan. Inside Ethiopia there has been fighting between the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups. And there have been huge demonstrations against Abiy by the previously supportive Amhara community.

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