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INSIGHTS

ETHIOPIA'S TIGRAY CONFLICT

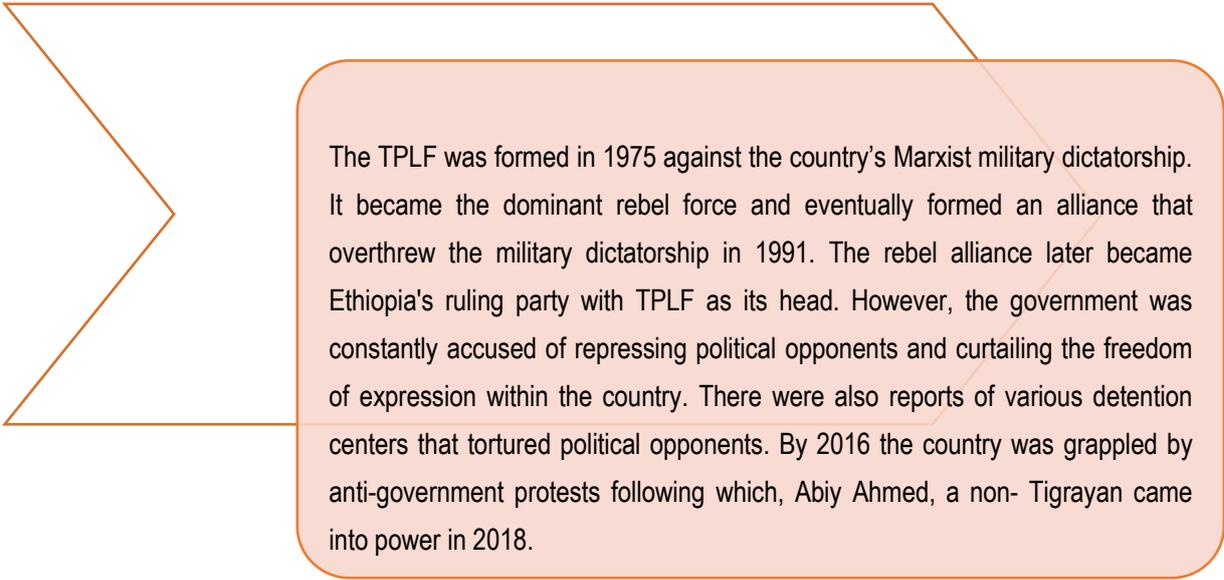
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I. ETHIOPIA'S TIGRAY CONFLICT - INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia, a linchpin to Africa's regional security has been under civil war for over a year. The conflict between the joint military forces under the PM Abiy Ahmed, ethnic militias and Eritrean forces, and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has left many dead, millions displaced, and has pushed many of its regions into famine. Recently, the international community has accused both the warring parties of committing grave war crimes and obstructing humanitarian aid to the region. In Nov 2021, the TPLF forces took control over many strategic towns including the Amhara and Afar regions, forcing the government to declare a state of emergency (Gavin, 2022). Consequently, many countries called back their nationals from Ethiopia, and the government detained thousands of civilians from the Tigrayan ethnic group. In Dec 2021, the government, in a counter-offensive led by the PM himself led the military forces to recapture the towns forcing the rebel forces to retreat to Tigray. There have been many reports of drones having hit refugee camps in Tigray killing dozens of civilians. Factors such as humanitarian crises coupled with gross violation of human rights of the dissenters have plunged an erstwhile politically stable Ethiopia into a quagmire. Ethiopia has operated in close partnership with American and European powers in counterterrorism and anti-piracy initiatives in the region. With terrorist extremism being on the rise in the region and piracy ramping up off the coast of Somalia, Ethiopia's instability becomes a matter of international concern.

II. THE TIGRAY PEOPLES LIBERATION FRONT (TPLF)



The TPLF was formed in 1975 against the country's Marxist military dictatorship. It became the dominant rebel force and eventually formed an alliance that overthrew the military dictatorship in 1991. The rebel alliance later became Ethiopia's ruling party with TPLF as its head. However, the government was constantly accused of repressing political opponents and curtailing the freedom of expression within the country. There were also reports of various detention centers that tortured political opponents. By 2016 the country was grappled by anti-government protests following which, Abiy Ahmed, a non- Tigrayan came into power in 2018.

III. WHAT LED TO THE CONFLICT?

Before Abiy's Prime Ministership, Ethiopia has been under the control of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) which was dominated by the TPLF. The TPLF assumed control over many of the country's key governmental positions and had been accused of conducting various practices of corruption and abuse. Soon after Abiy came into power, he signed a joint declaration with neighbouring Eritrea, formally ending the border conflict between both countries that had been continuing for decades. Following the declaration, protests



sparked across the Tigray region where most of the disputed territories fell. The TPLF was wildly against the move. Many of the TPLF leaders who were in power were also put under trial for committing various activities of corruption and other abuses of power.

In Nov 2019, Abiy dissolved the EPRDF and formed the Nationwide Prosperity Party, which the TPLF refused to join. Abiy's efforts to create a pan- Ethiopian political party bought fears among the regions of the deeply ethnic state who worries that the country's federal system, which allowed significant autonomy to the ethnically defined states like Tigray and Oromo, was under threat. The tensions, however, escalated when in Aug 2020, the government postponed the national election in light of the pandemic. In Sept 2020, TPLF conducted the regional parliamentary elections defying the governmental decision after accusing Abiy of trying to prolong his hold overpower, the government called the election unconstitutional. In Nov 2020, the TPLF forces attacked a federal military base in Tigray in a reportedly pre-emptive strike against the federal force's plan to attack them. Following which the government launched a military offensive against the Tigrayan leadership and it soon developed into a bloody war.



IV. TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Feb 1975	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TPLF was founded
Jun 1991	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A coalition dominated by the TPLF overthrows Colonel Mengistu's military government
Aug 1995	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proclamation of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. • TPLF leader Meles Zenawi becomes PM • TPLF dominates the coalition of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). • Tigrayans dominate all major governmental positions.
Apr 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following a popular uprising, Hailemariam Desalegn resigns, Abiy Ahmed becomes the PM.
Nov 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abiy dissolves EPRDF and forms the nationwide Prosperity Party. The TPLF refuses to join the party. • Many TPLF officials are put to trial for charges of corruption and previous abuses.
Aug 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abiy postpones elections due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TPLF accuses Abiy of trying to extend his hold on power.
Sep 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TPLF went ahead with a regional election, defying an order from PM Abiy. The elections are termed unconstitutional by the government • In response, the PM moved troops from the Somali and Oromia regions toward Tigray.
Oct 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abiy warned of possible military intervention in Tigray
Nov 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethiopian government launches counter airstrikes. • Tigray rejects mediation efforts and Sudan closes its border with Ethiopia • The government sends troops into the northern region of Tigray, accusing the TPLF of attacking government military bases in the area. • Reports of Ethnic killings in the town of Mai Kadra. Both the TPLF and Amhara military men accused each other of attacks. Consequently, thousands of Tigrayans fled to neighbouring regions. • The TPLF launches rocket attacks at Amhara airports and the Eritrean capital Asmara. • Ethiopian federal forces attack the Tigrayan capital, Mekelle, and reportedly gained control over the territory.
Dec 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethiopia and the UN signed a deal in which the UN opens humanitarian access in the government-controlled land to help people displaced as a result of the conflict. • Reports of killings, protests, and attacks including frequent attacks on UN groups continue to emerge despite the government claiming that no civilians were harmed.
Feb 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thousands of civilians flee Western Tigray accusing the forces of rapes, killings, and looting. There were also reports of “ethnic cleansing” being committed. • Eritrean forces were accused of hunting down and attacking hundreds of Tigrayans.
Mar 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abiy confirms that Eritrean troops entered Tigray after months of denial from both nations. • Ethiopia says Eritrean forces are starting to withdraw. Residents later say they did not withdraw and report that Eritrean troops continue to kill civilians.
Jun 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UN says 350,000 Tigrayans are experiencing famine. • Airstrike in Tigray's Togoga town kills 51 including children. • U.N. aid chief accuses Ethiopia of using food as a weapon of war. • Ethiopia, however, denies blocking aid. • Tigrayan forces take control of Mekelle. Ethiopian and Eritrean troops withdraw from most of Tigray except Western Tigray declaring a cease-fire. • The government shutdown all electrical, financial, and telecommunications services in Tigray • The US chief of staff of the Eritrean Defence Forces was accused of conducting human rights abuses in Tigray.
Jul 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tigrayan forces push to attack Amhara and Afar regions and towards the road and railway linking Ethiopia to Djibouti port.
Sep 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.N. accuses Ethiopia of a de facto blockade of aid to Tigray, which the government denies.



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| Oct 2021 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethiopia launches a ground offensive to push Tigrayan forces out of Amhara and Afar. • Abiy is sworn in for another 5 years in office. • Reports say that the government has restarted airstrikes in Mekelle. • Rebels claim control of two key cities in Amhara less than 400 kilometers (250 miles) north of Addis Ababa. • The TPLF announces the formation of a rebel coalition with groups including the Oromo forces. |
| Nov 2021 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethiopia declares a state of emergency across the country. • The UN-Ethiopian report says crimes against humanity could have been committed by both sides. • Countries including the US call for withdrawing their citizens from Ethiopia. • The UN Security Council calls for a ceasefire. • The PM arrives on the battlefield to launch a counter-offensive against the TPLF. • The government puts new restrictions on sharing information about the war. |
| Dec 2021 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The government forces claim to have recaptured certain towns. • UN humanitarian flights and convoys between Addis Ababa and Mekele resume. • Abiy returns to the Capital. • Ethiopian government announces that its military forces would temporarily halt any excursions into Tigray. |
| Jan 2022 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethiopia announced pardons for high-profile political prisoners. • 17 people working at a flour mill, were killed in drone strikes in the town of Mai Tsebri. • The government signalled its willingness to talk to its opponents. |

V. HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

The continuing fights in Tigray have caused one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. At least 400,000 people are facing famine in the north, essential medication is not available, and more than two million people have been forced from their homes. A government-imposed blockade in Tigray has kept humanitarian aid from reaching the area an action which the UN General Secretary has repeatedly condemned. All aid routes into Tigray are blocked except for one road from the Afar region where food convoys have recently been attacked, reportedly by pro-government militias.

The ethnic Amhara militias in Western Tigray have been accused of conducting an ethnic cleansing campaign. The TPLF is also accused of executing hundreds of people. Allegations including sexual violence, torture, lootings, and killings are being raised against both forces. The US has cut off trade privileges for Ethiopia and threatened its leaders with sanctions.





In Nov 2021, the World Food Program announced that 9.4 million people across northern Ethiopia are in desperate need of aid. In a survey that was conducted in Aug 2021, it was reported that more than 20% of displaced children were acutely malnourished and about 79% of pregnant and nursing mothers were in the similar state. These numbers are comparable to the 2011 famine in Somalia, however, despite the reports on a famine-like condition in the region, a famine has not been officially declared with the government refusing to admit any existing hunger or famine conditions.

VI. REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Ethiopia is the second-largest populated country on the African continent. It is also close to the shipping routes of the Red Sea, a hotbed of militant Islamist activity, and a major source of migration to Europe. Until recently, it has been considered as a stable ally by the western powers.

Possible Further Fragmentation Of Ethiopia

- Apart from the obvious destabilizing refugee crisis it warrants, the current conflict in the multi-ethnic nation if intensified, could possibly lead to a disintegration which would wreck the already fragile balance in the region. A similar situation that happened in the early 1990s, where one of its provinces, Eritrea, got independence with full western support, essentially American support, if repeated with the case of Tigray, it could lead to further fragmentation. If that happens, it will be the largest state collapse in modern history. It will lead to mass interethnic and interreligious conflict creating a security vacuum that will make the region vulnerable to exploitation by extremists. This will likely cause an acceleration of illicit trafficking, including of arms and a humanitarian and security crisis in the region.

Impact On Fight Against Islamic Militants

- Ethiopia is the leading contributor of troops fighting against the Islamist militants in Somalia and South Sudan as part of the joint African Union- UN mission, which would be in jeopardy if the security situation worsens within Ethiopia. It would create a dent in the efforts by AU and the UN to mitigate and resolve conflicts in the Horn of Africa. Recently in the Dec 2021 counteroffensive, most of the armed drones used against the rebel forces were imported from Iran and Turkey causing tensions in the latter's relation with Egypt. Apart from this, the Ethiopian government has also struck deals with China and UAE for importing weapons to aid the war.



Regional Security

- Ethiopia is landlocked between six countries among which, the Eritrean forces are already at the forefront of the battle. Three of its neighbours including South Sudan, Somalia and Sudan are also currently experiencing frequent and heightened political and security situations.
- Ethiopia has a history of being the stable provider of security in the region, lending forces to Somalia and South Sudan, and offering important diplomatic support during Sudan's transition. Recently, however, the border dispute between Ethiopia and Sudan has flared up and threatens to escalate, and Sudan itself is facing deep fissions among the military and civilian elements of its transitional government. The dispute further complicates the Nile dam talks and Ethiopian officials have accused Egypt of conspiring with Sudan's military to undermine Ethiopia, by supporting the TPLF. Egypt's interest in the region lies with TPLF aiming to influence the Ethiopian political decision regarding the Renaissance Dam, which it considers a threat to its national security. Somalia is in the middle of a constitutional crisis with the increased differences between President Farmajo and PM Roble. Addis Ababa hosts the African Union headquarters and the country's National Defense Force coordinates and oversees multilateral peace and security operations in the region

VII. THREAT OF SANCTIONS



The United States of America

- The United States, until the war broke out had been the biggest donor to Ethiopia. From 2016 to 2020 US provided the US \$4.2 billion worth of aid as humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia. Ethiopia had been the biggest supporter of the US's global war on terror.
- Following the escalation of conflicts, the relation between Ethiopia with the US is constantly deteriorating. In an effort to initiate peace talks, the US has threatened the imposition of further sanctions against both the Ethiopian government and the TPLF.
- The US has already removed Ethiopia from a list of countries that get duty-free access to the US market through the Africa Growth and Opportunities Act, a move which will be a huge political and economic blow to the government.
- President Biden has also instructed the World Bank and the IMF to withhold lending to Ethiopia, calling for a legal investigation on the "war crimes" committed.





The European Union

- The escalation of conflicts has also deteriorated the relation of Ethiopia with the European Union.
- EU has also taken similar stance of that of the US, by threatening to impose of further sanctions against both the Ethiopian government and the TPLF.

VIII.INTERNATIONAL INTERESTS

- Ethiopia, a long-standing western ally in the Horn of Africa has been seeking the help of Iran, Turkey, and China for importing weapons; soft loans from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and political protection from Russia and China.
- Russia and China have already blocked the UN Security Council on a resolution on the civil war.



China

- China, a major investor in Ethiopia, has so far preferred to keep a low profile, opposing the threats of U.S. sanctions and saying Ethiopia can resolve its issues without foreign interference.
- If the US's support declines, China will undoubtedly fill in the vacuum. Access to the Red Sea is a strategic priority for China and if the situation in Ethiopia blows up into a complex and long-lasting civil war, it would undermine its basic Horn policy, including its maintenance of a military base in Djibouti.
- China has already entered the civil war supporting the Abiy Ahmed regime.
- China is also likely to supply weapons and support the military expenditure of the Ethiopian government.

IX. WORSENING ECONOMIC WOES

The war has taken a negative toll on Ethiopia's economy with a decline of investments due to the fear of rising instability in the region. This adds to the already vulnerable pandemic-induced economy.



The IMF forecasts GDP growth of just under 2% for 2021, down from 6% in 2020, after averaging over 9% during the last ten years.

The country is also suffering an acute foreign currency shortage and inflation. In Aug 2021, the central bank directed banks to suspend lending based on collateral. Federal authorities have reportedly asked banks, other businesses, and the government to contribute to the war expenses.

The conflict has cost the government over \$1 billion, with no intimation of a peaceful end, this is likely to increase. China's Exim Bank is withholding \$339 million in credit over the concern of a possible spill over.

The conflict has deteriorated the operating environment in the Tigray region. The security risks have increased, and the federal government has also cut off internet and phone lines to the region and blocked transport routes. Beyond these immediate impacts, the conflict is also likely to slow or stall wider reforms by the Abiy administration that were aimed at encouraging investment. The government's frequent airstrikes and aid blockades have already damaged Abiy's international image.

The widespread human rights abuses and a humanitarian crisis have further tarnished his government's reputation with its increased inclination to China, the western led investment opportunities in the country will likely remain scarce. The condition will also deter investors and thereby diminish the attractiveness of the government's planned reforms designed to attract foreign capital, including the liberalization of sectors such as telecommunications and finance.

X. INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS

The United States and European Union have been working with the African Union to find a peaceful solution to end the fighting. The US has imposed sanctions on Eritrea for its role in the war and threatened to extend these to Ethiopia and Tigray.

Former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo has acted as a mediator, visiting Mekelle as well as Addis Ababa however, he has had limited success with both parties claiming that it is too late for mediation.

The African Union's (AU) peace initiatives in Ethiopia are being supported by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The AU Commission Chair together with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development's (IGAD) executive secretary, President Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya, have appealed for an immediate cessation of hostilities.

XI. ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION

The UN reports reveal a desperate and deteriorating humanitarian situation in Ethiopia, with hundreds of thousands experiencing famine more than 60 percent of pregnant and lactating women experiencing malnutrition, and rising rates of severe, acute malnutrition in children under five. Toxic rhetoric casting all Ethiopians of Tigrayan descent as enemies is on the rise, as are mass arrests and other forms of persecution. A communication blockade imposed on Tigray makes gaining access to ground-level information hard. Unless all sides in Ethiopia make the necessary concessions to bring about a cessation of hostilities through peaceful negotiations, more war would also threaten the government's authority and State's integrity and stability. Its collapse would have disastrous consequences not just for Ethiopia but also for other Horn of Africa nations which border the country.

Domestically, the civil war has had severe repercussions on Ethiopian politics, economy, and society. The rift between the centralizing tendencies of the current regime and the demands to protect the autonomy of the regional leaders is threatening the complex multi-ethnic country, entangling major regional/international organizations as well as world/regional powers in the crisis. The AU and the UN have appealed for cessation of hostilities while major global powers such as the US, China, or regional powers such as Iran, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey continue to push their strategic interests in the region. Mediation, however, has not seen any point in succeeding with the government declaring the TPLF as a terror group and the TPLF not willing to meet at a middle ground.



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