

# Ethiopia: War in Tigray

## Background and state of play

### SUMMARY

Little has changed since the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) agreed on 2 November 2022 to cease hostilities and return to constitutional order. The 2-year civil war has killed thousands of people and seriously aggravated the country's already disastrous humanitarian situation. The conflict erupted in November 2020, after the Ethiopian army attacked Tigrayan troops, who had taken control of military headquarters in Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region, in northern Ethiopia. The troubles are however deep-rooted in a power struggle between Ethiopian communities, within an ethnic-based federal system.

The TPLF was the main force in the coalition that ruled Ethiopia for three decades. Anti-government protests and the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as prime minister in 2018 put an end to this domination and the TPLF refused to be part of the new ruling party created by Abiy while it was side-lined in the new administration. Abiy's cabinet ended a territorial dispute with Eritrea – which has long-standing border feuds with neighbouring Tigray. Abiy also undertook political reforms, considered by the TPLF as an attempt against Ethiopia's ethnic federalism. Tensions escalated to a civil war after the Tigrayan authorities organised a regional election in September 2020, despite the central government's decision to postpone all elections owing to the pandemic.

Army forces and armed groups from Eritrea and Ethiopian provinces neighbouring Tigray joined the conflict. Fighters on all sides deliberately hindered humanitarian access and committed atrocities against civilians, including children. The EU has suspended most of its budget support to Ethiopia, a country long considered a cornerstone for EU relations with the Horn of Africa. The European Parliament has been following events closely, and has previously sent delegations to the region. During the conflict, several European Parliament resolutions condemned the human rights abuses and non-respect of international humanitarian law by all parties.



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# The conflict

## Background

After [Abiy Ahmed](#) was appointed Ethiopia's prime minister in April 2018, he pledged to undertake a [series of reforms](#) marking a significant path to democracy, such as reviewing the country's anti-terrorist and civil society laws.

A single ruling party, the [Prosperity Party](#) (PP), was created to replace the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the coalition of the four main ethnically based parties, governing since 1991. The [creation of the PP](#) has been perceived as a move by Abiy away from Ethiopia's [ethnic federalism](#) (see box below). Three of the four EPRDF parties merged into the PP, as did regional parties that had not been involved in previous national governments. However, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which had long been the [leading party](#) in the EPRDF, decided not to [merge](#) into the PP.

Abiy appointed a [gender-balanced cabinet](#) and [side-lined TPLF](#) in the appointment of new top security officers. The new government [freed thousands of political prisoners](#) and granted an amnesty to rebel armed groups, including the [Oromo Liberation Front](#) and [Patriotic Ginbot 7](#).

Abiy also signed an [agreement with Eritrea](#) putting an end to a two-decade boundary dispute. This involved ceding [Badme](#) and its surrounding area – which Tigrayan rulers consider part of [their territory](#) – to Eritrea. This move won Abiy Ahmed the [2019 Nobel Peace Prize](#).

The TPLF joined the EPRDF to overthrow dictator Mengistu in 1991 and was the leading force in the coalition until the protests that overthrew the government in 2017. The [1994 Constitution](#) turned Ethiopia into a federal republic, where regional states based on ethnicity<sup>1</sup> are given a right to self-determination. Ethnic federalism gives each region's majority community most of the powers in the regional institutions. It has often resulted in [discrimination against](#) minority communities, leading to frequent [violent conflicts](#) in several regions, such as in [Oromia](#) currently.

The president is head of state, but the prime minister retains most of the executive power. At federal level, there is a lower chamber, the House of Peoples' Representatives, and an upper chamber, the House of the Federation. Each regional state has a president, a state council, and its own justice system. While national defence is entrusted to the federal government, regional states can establish their own police forces; stretching this endowment, several regions – including Tigray – have formed highly equipped 'special forces.' These forces have notably been involved in violent attacks in the Somali and Amhara regions. In Tigray, Afar and Amhara regional forces have supported the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) against Tigrayan forces.

Main sources: [International IDEA](#), 2009; [African Arguments](#), 2019; [Britannica](#), 2022; [IPI Global Observatory](#), 2021.

## Outbreak

In 2020, Ethiopia's federal parliament approved the government's decision to [postpone all elections](#) planned for August until the end of the pandemic, and extended the prime minister's mandate.<sup>2</sup> Considering the federal decision to be illegitimate, the Tigrayan regional government held a [regional election](#) in September 2020. The TPLF won most of the seats in the regional parliament, a result considered [null and void](#) by the House of the Federation. In retaliation, the federal government [cut budgetary allocations](#) to Tigray.

On [3 November 2020](#), Abiy Ahmed ordered a military offensive against Tigrayan forces, who had taken command of the military headquarters in Mekelle, Tigray's regional capital. The federal government declared a state of emergency in the region, appointed an [interim administration of Tigray](#), and restricted access to [electricity](#), [banking services](#) and [communication means](#) in the region.

## Spillover

Despite [declarations](#) by federal representatives that the situation was [under control](#) at the end of November 2020, the conflict [escalated](#) into a civil war, with dire humanitarian consequences. Government airstrikes involving [Turkish](#) and Iranian [drones](#) reportedly killed dozens of civilians.

Troops from neighbouring Ethiopian regions took sides with either [federal or Tigrayan fighters](#). Amhara troops notably seized disputed western Tigray, where they allegedly committed [grave abuses](#) against Tigrayans. Eritrea, which has [long-standing disputes](#) with neighbouring Tigray, also [sent troops](#) against the Tigrayan forces; they are accused of [massacring civilians](#). Under [international pressure](#), Ethiopia eventually acknowledged the presence of Eritrean forces in support of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), and called on the Eritrean government to [withdraw](#) its troops in May 2021. However, a large-scale [Eritrean offensive](#) was reported in September 2022. By October 2022, Ethiopian federal forces working with Eritrean and other allies had taken control of [major towns](#) in Tigray.

The Tigray conflict has also [heightened tensions](#) between Sudan and Eritrea, already at odds over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and [border disputes](#). Ethiopia and Sudan each accuse the other of [supporting rebel forces](#) in their country. Ethiopia has notably accused Sudan of supporting a Tigrayan attempt to damage the GERD. The [influx of refugees](#) from Tigray has placed additional pressure on Sudan's military rulers, while at the same time earning them [more support](#) from the international community.

Figure 1 – Northern Ethiopia



Source: EPRS, 2022 made with [Datawrapper.de](#) – data source: OpenStreetMap.

## Humanitarian and human rights situation

Across Ethiopia, [20 million people](#) are in need of assistance due to conflict, locust invasion, drought or floods. While the conflict has made it impossible to assess the situation in the field precisely, [most observers](#) estimate that it has resulted in severe [deterioration](#) of the already fragile situation in Tigray and northern Ethiopia.

The death toll could be [over half a million](#). Nearly 3 million people have been [displaced](#) either internally or into neighbouring countries (more than 60 000 into [Sudan](#) between November 2020 and March 2022).

The majority of Tigray's population are farmers, whose [activity stopped](#) because they were killed, had to flee, were prevented from harvesting and planting, or deprived of their material and livestock. As a result, nearly half of the 5.7 million Tigrayans are in a severe food crisis.<sup>3</sup> Children are particularly affected by the consequences of the war: one in three children under five in Tigray is suffering from [acute malnutrition](#), more than one million are [missing their education](#), and over 9 000 [children without parents or caregivers](#) have been recorded in the region.

Attacks have damaged [critical infrastructure](#), including [hospitals](#) and schools. The fighting hit and even targeted numerous [civilians](#). [Eritrean refugees](#) in Tigray (about 100 000 before the conflict) were attacked by armed groups from all sides and some of their camps were destroyed.

[Relief assistance](#) in Tigray has been [extremely difficult](#) and frequently interrupted, owing to insecurity, a lack of fuel and insufficient funding. [Reportedly](#), Ethiopian officials turned back aid convoys and Ethiopian and Eritrean<sup>4</sup> soldiers blocked or stole food aid. Aid began reaching the region again during a [humanitarian truce](#) between March and [August](#) 2022. During the conflict, numerous incidents impacted the security of aid workers, and at least [two dozen](#) of them were killed.

The [UN Secretary-General](#), the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), in a [joint report](#) with the [Ethiopian Human Rights Commission](#) (EHRC) and several non-governmental organisations<sup>5</sup> have accused the conflicting parties of grave human rights and humanitarian law violations. These include extra-judicial detention and killings, forced displacement, gender-based and [sexual violence](#), and other atrocities.

*Based on the information collected and assessed by it, the [joint OHCHR-EHRC investigation team] finds reasonable grounds to believe that there have been widespread violations of international human rights, humanitarian and refugee law by all parties to the conflict in Tigray. [A list of violations and their perpetrators follows.]*

*Some of these violations may, depending on their circumstances, amount to international crimes, in particular, war crimes and, to the extent widespread or systematic, crimes against humanity. The seriousness of these allegations call for independent investigations and appropriate prosecution of those responsible.<sup>6</sup>*

### Tigray's population

In 2021, Tigray's population was estimated at 5.7 million (5 % of Ethiopia's population).

Tigray's inhabitants are mostly Tigrayan (96.6 %), Amhara (1.6 %) and Irob (0.7 %).

Most of them (92.2 %) are Orthodox Christians. Orthodox Christians are also a majority in the rest of Ethiopia, but only with 41.9 % of the population.

50.7 % are female, 49.3 % are male.

50 % are under 18.

Before the conflict, Tigray was already host to 100 581 internally displaced people (October 2020) mainly from Amhara and Oromia, and 95 929 refugees and asylum seekers (4 November 2020) mostly from Eritrea.

Source: [ACAPS](#), 2021.

The UN Human Rights Council established an ad-hoc [International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia](#) in December 2021. Its initial findings, issued in September 2022, came to similar conclusions. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR)<sup>7</sup> also set up a [Commission of Inquiry on Tigray](#) in May 2021, but had not published conclusions as of the end of November 2022.

## Peace talks

### The Pretoria and Nairobi deals

The TPLF and the Ethiopian government entered [peace talks](#) on 25 October 2022 in Pretoria (South Africa). The African Union's (AU) High Representative for the Horn of Africa, [Olusegun Obasanjo](#), mediated the talks, with observers from the East African Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the United Nations (UN) and the United States.

The Ethiopian government and the TPLF [signed](#) a peace agreement on 2 November 2022, complemented by implementing modalities [agreed](#) on 12 November 2022 in Nairobi (Kenya).

#### Key points of the peace agreement

The [peace agreement](#) and the [implementing modalities](#) include:

##### **Permanent cessation of hostilities**

Disengagement of forces or armed groups under federal and TPLF control

Cessation of hostile propaganda

##### **Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR)**

The 'Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia has only one defense force'.

A DDR programme will be set up for Tigrayan combatants, 'consider[ing] the Tigray's region law and order needs'.

The peace agreement envisaged the 'overall disarmament of TPLF Combatants' within 30 days of its signing. However, the implementing modalities state the 'disarmament of [TPLF] heavy weapons will be done concurrently with withdrawal of foreign [i.e. Eritrean] and non-ENDF [i.e. other regions' paramilitary] forces'.

##### **Protection of civilians and humanitarian access**

##### **Restoration of the constitutional order**

'ENDF and other relevant Federal Institutions' will re-enter Mekelle.

'The TPLF shall respect the authority of ... all bodies and organs of the Federal Government [which had declared regional elections in Tigray null and void]'.

##### **Transitional measures**

An interim inclusive regional administration will be appointed.

A [transitional justice](#) policy framework to ensure [accountability](#), redress and reconciliation will be set up.

An [AU-led group](#) with representatives from the conflicting parties and from IGAD will monitor implementation of the agreement.

## Way forward

Implementation of the agreement is [challenging](#), since it makes no clear mention of the steps forward, such as the deadline for lifting the energy and communications blockade, the composition and duration of the interim administration, or how the security of Tigray's population should be ensured after the disarmament of Tigrayan forces.

It took two weeks for [humanitarian aid](#) to reach the region after the peace deal was signed. However, basic services still need to be restored to [improve humanitarian access](#) and the population's living conditions. While the government has [reconnected](#) Mekelle with the national power grid, it has set [no timeline](#) for full restoration of the internet, phone lines and electricity.

It is unclear whether the '[inclusive interim regional administration](#)' will bring together federal and TPLF representatives, who will be the appointing authorities, or when new elections will be held.

Talks on [Tigrayan forces' DDR](#) began on 1 December 2022, however they are challenged by the fact that Eritrean troops have not yet withdrawn from Tigray and have reportedly continued committing [abuses and killing](#) since the peace deal was signed.<sup>8</sup>

## European Union reaction

In December 2020, the EU High Representative/Commission Vice-President (HR/VP) Josep Borrell expressed his [great concern](#) about ethnic violence, human rights violations, and the humanitarian situation in Tigray. The EU [suspended](#) the disbursement of €88 million of budget support in December 2020. Jutta Urpilainen, EU Commissioner for international partnerships, indicated that further payments will be [carefully examined](#), so that basic services could be supplied to [vulnerable populations](#) – to combat food insecurity or gender-based violence for example. The [2021-2027 programming](#) is on hold due to the conflict.

EU humanitarian funding for Ethiopia reached [€58.25 million](#) in the first 6 months of 2022,<sup>10</sup> targeting in particular refugees in Ethiopia and people – especially children – affected by food insecurity and malnutrition, and by the drought in the south. When possible, [humanitarian air bridges](#) landed in Tigray's regional capital to deliver relief to people affected by the conflict. Since the beginning of the conflict, the EU has also strengthened its [support to Sudan](#), a country to which dozens of thousands Tigrayans have fled.

In February 2021, the Finnish foreign minister Pekka Haavisto met representatives from the African Union, Ethiopia's and Sudan's authorities and civil society on behalf of the HR/VP. Tensions between Ethiopia and the EU escalated after he [told reporters](#) that there 'were varying accounts on the issues of humanitarian access and human rights violations, even within the federal government' and described this as 'some kind of denial of the magnitude of the problems in the country'. Although Pekka Haavisto's visit did not include the conflict zone, several aid agencies and non-governmental organisations [confirmed](#) the difficult humanitarian access on the ground, human rights violations and dissemination of false information. The EU [was unable to reach an agreement](#) with Ethiopia on the deployment of an electoral observation mission for the June 2021 parliamentary elections.

The 20 June 2022 meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Council made it clear that 'although there is some progress in Ethiopia [after a humanitarian truce was agreed between the belligerents in March 2022], this is not enough for a full normalisation of relations'. The EU again called for 'further humanitarian access, restoring basic services in Tigray and lifting restrictions on fuel and fertilisers'. In August 2022, on his blog, Josep Borrell denounced the weaponisation of 'access to food, medicine, electricity, telecom services, access to bank accounts', despite 'the [peace rhetoric](#) of the conflict parties'. On 17 October 2022, the Council again called for 'an [immediate halt](#) to the joint

### EU-Ethiopia relations

The EU's partnership with Ethiopia is based on a joint [strategic engagement](#) agreement (2016), providing for annual ministerial meetings and for high-level dialogues in six sectors: regional peace and security; countering terrorism and violent radicalisation; migration, social and economic development; investment and trade; governance and human rights; climate change and environmental cooperation.

The European<sup>9</sup> [joint cooperation strategy with Ethiopia 2017-2020](#) laid down development cooperation priorities (job creation; natural resource management; and governance) and cross cutting issues (nutrition; migration; and gender). The EU [strengthened its support](#) to Ethiopia after the 2018 peace agreement with Eritrea, thus reinforcing Ethiopia's role as a key African partner for the EU.

offensives launched by Ethiopian National Defence Forces in collaboration with Eritrean Defence Forces, and a full withdrawal of Eritrean troops from the sovereign territory of Ethiopia'. It also demanded that the Tigray Forces 'refrain from any further military operations'.

After the announcement of the peace deal, Josep Borrell reaffirmed the EU's 'readiness to [support peace efforts](#) moving forward' and called for a quick resumption of humanitarian access, and for justice to be done for the atrocities committed.

The resumption of EU-Ethiopia relations in the framework of the new [EU strategy in the Horn of Africa](#) – adopted in March 2021 but prepared before the outbreak of the Tigray conflict – will depend on progress with implementation of the peace deal. The partnership between Ethiopia and the EU is also challenged by the former's perception of '[the selective vilification](#)' of Ethiopia's government by the latter.<sup>11</sup>

## European Parliament position

As early as 5 November 2020, the Co-Presidents of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly called the parties in conflict 'to engage in a sincere, peaceful and [inclusive dialogue](#)'.

The European Parliament [debated](#) and adopted a first [resolution](#) on the armed conflict in Tigray on 26 November 2020. Expressing its concern for the breaches in humanitarian and human rights, it called for immediate and unrestricted humanitarian access, and for the freedoms of expression and press freedom to be upheld, including by the restoration of communication means in Tigray. It also called for a ceasefire and for political divergences to be addressed by constitutional means.

Parliament's resolution of 7 October 2021 on the [humanitarian situation in Tigray](#) expressed deep concern about the acute food insecurity triggered by the conflict and aggravated by the difficult humanitarian access, and condemned the looting of humanitarian aid. Parliament called on the parties in conflict to act immediately to ease humanitarian access in Tigray and in the neighbouring regions of Amhara and Afar, and not to block the provision of critical medicine, fuel and food supplies. Parliament strongly condemned the targeting of civilians, including aid workers and medical staff and facilities, sexual violence and the recruitment of child soldiers by all parties in conflict. It urged the Ethiopian government to combat impunity and to sign and ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

In October 2022, a new resolution focused in particular on [the situation of children](#) in the region. It condemned sexual violence against children and adults and expressed its deep concern about reports of ethnic-based killing and mutilation of children and on their recruitment as child soldiers. It called again for full humanitarian access, and the re-establishment of basic services, including schools. It also expressed Parliament's support for diplomatic efforts, for a return to constitutional order, and for the setting up a ceasefire monitoring mechanism.

This latest resolution was informed by meetings and visits on 20-22 September 2022 by a delegation of Members of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET) to Ethiopia and Sudan, and a joint delegation of Members of the Committees on Development (DEVE) and on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) to Ethiopia. The [AFET delegation Members](#) met the President of Ethiopia, representatives of the Ethiopian government, and Members of Parliament, as well as the UN Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa and civil society representatives. They 'called on all actors for a permanent ceasefire and peace talks under the auspices of the African Union'. The [DEVE and FEMM delegation Members](#) met the President of Ethiopia, members of the Ethiopian government, AU representatives and UN representatives in Ethiopia. They expressed their condemnation of sexual and gender-based violence 'perpetrated on a staggering scale since armed conflict erupted'.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In 2022, there are 11 regional states Afar; Amhara; Benishangul Gumuz; Gambela Peoples; Harari People; Oromia; Sidama; Somali; Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples; Southwest Ethiopia Peoples; and Tigray. In addition, two multi-ethnic cities have a special status: Adis Ababa and Dire Dawa. (main source: [CIA World Factbook](#), accessed 28.11.2022).
- <sup>2</sup> Elections eventually took place in June 2021 (they were delayed until September in some areas and did not take place in Tigray): the [PP won](#) 410 out of 436 seats in the federal parliament, which [confirmed Abiy](#) as prime minister.
- <sup>3</sup> [Tigray Emergency Food Security Assessment](#), World Food Programme, August 2022. Before the conflict, there were already 430 000 people facing a high level of food insecurity ([IPC](#), October-December 2020).
- <sup>4</sup> [UN official accuses Eritrean forces of deliberately starving Tigray](#), Reuters, 15 June 2021
- <sup>5</sup> Including [Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), and the [International Crisis Group](#).
- <sup>6</sup> [Report](#) of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC)/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Joint Investigation into Alleged Violations of International Human Rights, Humanitarian and Refugee Law Committed by all Parties to the Conflict in the Tigray Region of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, November 2021.
- <sup>7</sup> On the ACHPR, see: I. Zamfir, [African Union instruments to protect human rights and democracy](#), European Parliament, EPRS, November 2022.
- <sup>8</sup> The [implementing modalities](#) (agreed on 12 November 2022) links the disarmament of TPLF heavy with withdrawal of foreign and non-ENDF forces. However, these forces are not formally bound by the agreement.
- <sup>9</sup> This strategy involves the European Commission, the European Investment Bank, 15 EU Member States, and Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.
- <sup>10</sup> €85.5 million in 2021, €63.2 million in 2020.
- <sup>11</sup> This perception is also evoked in a [leaked mission report](#) by the EU special representative in the Horn of Africa.

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[eprs@ep.europa.eu](mailto:eprs@ep.europa.eu) (contact)

[www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu](http://www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu) (intranet)

[www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank) (internet)

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