



Statement

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A Call to Action: Averting Atrocities in Ethiopia's Tigray War

A joint Ethiopian-Eritrean offensive has made significant gains in Tigray, marking yet another turn in Ethiopia's brutal conflict. The risk of large-scale attacks on civilians is high. African and world leaders should take urgent action to prevent an even worse humanitarian catastrophe.

A seven-week Ethiopian federal and Eritrean offensive in Ethiopia's northernmost region of Tigray risks degenerating into a still bloodier phase, with federal and Eritrean forces targeting civilians. Hostilities pitting the federal government and its allies against Tigray's forces resumed on 24 August, shattering a five-month humanitarian truce that failed to develop into formal talks. After weeks of stalemate, Tigray's defences began giving way to superior firepower in mid-October. Federal troops are pushing into Tigray on several fronts alongside Eritrean soldiers and forces from Amhara region, which borders Tigray. Civilians are trapped in the line of fire. With Ethiopian authorities having, in effect, rebuffed calls from the African Union (AU), UN and others to halt the offensive, regional and Western powers need to do more to ward off further disaster. They should warn Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki of punitive consequences should their troops target civilians as they move deeper into Tigray. They should also make more concerted efforts to press the belligerents to stop fighting and come to the negotiating table.

Origins of the War

The war in Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous country, has exacted a terrible human toll. According to most estimates, it is among

the world's deadliest conflicts. Although reliable information is hard to come by, humanitarian and diplomatic sources tell Crisis Group that the battles since 24 August may have involved more than half a million combatants and killed tens of thousands of people.

The conflict began in late 2020, when, after a two-year power struggle, a constitutional dispute between Tigray regional and federal leaders turned to war. Tigray's elite, represented by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), had dominated Ethiopia's politics and security apparatus for more than two decades, setting the stage for a standoff when Abiy rose to power in 2018. Tensions spiked when Tigray defied central authority by holding regional elections in September 2020, and erupted into outright conflict when Tigrayan forces attacked the federal military command in the region.

After the war broke out, federal troops, Eritrean soldiers and Amhara regional forces first pushed into Tigray and took its capital, Mekelle, prompting the TPLF administration to flee to the mountains. There, Tigray's leaders regrouped. Their subsequent guerrilla campaign thwarted federal plans and, months later, they succeeded in recapturing Mekelle and re-installing the TPLF government. Under a renewed federal blockade, Tigray's troops launched an offensive the following month, capturing territory in several directions in Amhara

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(rights groups found they committed atrocities) and pushing south toward Addis Ababa in an attempt to dislodge Abiy from power. That offensive failed, as the federal government, armed with new drones and backed by strong popular mobilisation, beat back Tigray’s forces, which retreated to their home region in December 2021. After almost four months without a major confrontation, the two sides agreed to a humanitarian truce in late March. Many hoped that the truce might bring a lifting of the blockade and an opening for peace talks.

A Return to Blows

The recent return to blows came after prospects for peace faded with the primary points of friction between the two sides unresolved. The U.S. facilitated two meetings between federal and Tigray representatives, but by August, the process had floundered. Although aid flows increased to Tigray, Addis Ababa dragged its feet on commitments to ease other aspects of its blockade. Tigray’s leaders, meanwhile, refused to negotiate while under siege. They demanded the return of Western Tigray, violently controlled by Amhara (which also lays claim to the area) and Eritrean forces since the war’s first months. They also objected to the AU’s peace envoy, former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, perceiving him as too close to Addis Ababa. For its part, Mekelle pressed for the former Kenyan president, Uhuru Kenyatta, to play a leading mediating role and also for greater U.S. involvement; federal leaders are wary of both ideas. International frustration has run high, with diplomats accusing Addis Ababa of lacking the will to give peace a chance and Tigray’s leaders of overplaying their hand by threatening to go back to war.

Toward the end of August, the fighting resumed, starting in northern Amhara region and then spreading. It is unclear which side ended the truce. The U.S. has blamed Tigray’s

forces, whereas some European diplomats claim that Tigray’s operation may have preempted an attack by federal and Eritrean troops who had massed in Eritrea and around Tigray’s southern borders. Once the fighting was under way, the federal-Eritrean campaign increasingly focused on capturing Shire, a city in northern Tigray, which fell on 17 October. Federal and allied Amhara regional troops have also made gains in southern Tigray. Eritrean and Ethiopian troops have carried out air and artillery strikes on Mekelle and Shire, as well as other urban zones, especially near the Eritrean border, and seem intent on capturing the regional capital.

The federal-Eritrean push appears to aim at dealing a decisive blow to Tigray’s forces, which are on the back foot. Eritrea, which has backed Ethiopia’s government since the conflict began in late November 2020, now has considerable military might in Tigray. In mid-September, Asmara launched a major mobilisation drive to bolster its ranks. The campaign is gaining ground. Tigray’s leaders have indicated that their troops, who may number around 200,000 and had time to regroup during the truce, are now struggling to withstand the onslaught. Ammunition is running low, fuel is in short supply and federal drones are frequently in the skies – all of which constrains Tigrayan mobility. A source close to Tigray’s government told Crisis Group that civilians fleeing combat zones are following Tigray’s forces, exposing them to Eritrean and Ethiopian gunfire when the front lines suddenly shift.

Risk Factors

There is a serious risk of accelerating atrocities as the current phase of the conflict unfolds, with Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers targeting Tigray’s civilian population as they recapture locations vacated by Tigray forces and hostilities continue. With both Abiy and Isaias eyeing

their recent battlefield gains as another opportunity to deal a fatal blow to the TPLF, several risk factors are evident.

First, Asmara may well have ruthless designs with respect to Tigray, and it is nearly imperious to outside pressure. Eritrea's long-time ruler, President Isaias, appears intent on crushing Tigray's leadership (his mortal foes in decades past, especially since a 1998-2000 border war) and his forces have already engaged in widespread atrocities in the present war's first phase, including a massacre of scores of people in Aksum confirmed by Ethiopia's government. Isaias views Tigray's forces as an existential threat. He aims to ensure that Tigray will never again be a political, economic or military rival to Eritrea, which formally gained its independence from Ethiopia in 1993. Moreover, trying to deter Isaias is a thankless task. Few leaders have shown more blatant disregard for human rights or indifference to world opinion.

Secondly, the war has seen a surge in dehumanising hate speech by government officials and TPLF opponents, which is all the more potent against the backdrop of federal actions to collectively punish the Tigrayan people. An Abiy adviser, Daniel Kibret, notorious for his divisive rhetoric, said in September 2021 the TPLF "should be erased and disappeared from the historical record", while the mayor of Dire Dawa city stated two months later that Tigrayans are "not created as humans". An EU envoy said in June 2021 Ethiopian leaders expressed intent to "wipe out the Tigrayans for 100 years", an allegation Addis Ababa strongly refuted. Pro-government journalists and activists have since called for Tigrayans to be killed and for the entire Tigrayan population to be interned. On 20 October, a journalist wrote that the forces involved in the offensive should not be held responsible for killing civilians because the TPLF is to blame as it has called for mass mobilisation of the population. Such sentiments further heighten fears that Tigrayan civilians

could be targeted, especially as many of them back Tigray's forces.

Thirdly, Abiy may not be able to control his forces, even if so inclined. Addis Ababa is relying heavily on fairly new recruits for the current offensive. Their relative lack of training could lead to even graver atrocities than his more experienced forces have already committed in the region. A UN document seen by Crisis Group recorded multiple civilian deaths from airstrikes over the last two months. It also said Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers executed 46 civilians in Shimblina village in Northwest Tigray between 6 and 12 September. The document states that since 24 August almost half a million have been displaced by fighting in that area as well as south west of Shire near the Amhara-Tigray border. All this is occurring at the onset of the main harvest season in a devastated region that is heavily dependent on agriculture. Sources close to Tigray's authorities claim that many more atrocities have occurred during the offensive, though no one has presented evidence of such additional crimes.

Fourthly, the federal, Amhara and Eritrean blockade of Tigray shows no sign of abating. UN experts believe that the federal government's siege strategy – repeatedly restricting the region's access to humanitarian relief while cutting off trade, transport, banking services, electricity and telecommunications – amounts to the crime of using starvation as a method of warfare. Nothing suggests that Addis Ababa and Asmara will soon scale back these tactics. Indeed, despite Addis Ababa's assertions that it will now deliver aid and protect civilians, Isaias and Abiy may try to manoeuvre Tigray's forces behind a tightened siege, luring the population to federally held areas so they can isolate Tigray's forces and curry favour with civilians by delivering food to them. (Conversely, a UN official told Crisis Group that Eritrean commanders plan to force civilians into Tigray forces' strongholds so that food stocks run low

in Tigray-controlled areas, thus weakening the Tigray forces and making them appear responsible for hordes of starving people.)

Finally, absent a course correction, a conflict that has been rife with atrocities will almost surely persist – whether Tigray’s leaders manage to repulse the present offensive or not. Despite their battlefield disadvantage, they have vowed to continue fighting even in the face of continuing setbacks. It certainly seems plausible that, over the long term, sustained efforts to quash Tigray’s resistance will only boost the cause of hardliners in the region, including those pushing for an independent Tigray nation-state, and so make negotiations even harder to pursue. Even if the federal government achieves its goals in its present campaign and settles into a long-term military occupation of Tigray, the region’s fighters are likely to keep resisting via an insurgency as they did earlier in the war.

International actors must respond with an urgency and seriousness matching the gravity of the situation. Thus far, the world’s response to the war in Tigray has been lacklustre, despite the enormous death toll and the potential for worsening regional destabilisation. Difficult as it may be to influence leaders in Addis Ababa and Asmara, it is incumbent upon regional actors and those farther afield to throw themselves more fully into the effort.

As a first step, continental and regional statesmen with Abiy’s ear, and anyone able to speak to Isaias, should impress upon them the imperative of halting the bloodshed. Leaders such as Kenya’s William Ruto, Ghana’s Nana Akufo-Addo, Uganda’s Yoweri Museveni, Senegal’s Macky Sall, South Africa’s Cyril Ramaphosa and Angola’s João Lourenço should urge Abiy to go to the negotiating table and consider a truce while he has the upper hand militarily, rather than battle an insurgency that could be long and bloody. With support and encouragement from the U.S. and other

Western powers, the leaders of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia should press their allies in Asmara and Addis Ababa to restrain their forces and commit to peace talks. All external actors should keep insisting in unison that Asmara withdraw its troops from Tigray.

Secondly, international actors farther afield should weigh in more directly to decry the disastrous humanitarian situation and Abiy and Isaias’ unwillingness to call off their offensive. U.S. President Joe Biden should attempt to speak with these leaders to stress that Ethiopian and Eritrean officials will face clear consequences should the forces under their command systematically attack civilians. He could, for instance, say he will impose further targeted sanctions on any actor, including Ethiopian and Eritrean government and military leaders, responsible for atrocities against civilians, as promised in a September 2021 executive order. The EU and its member states should consider threatening similar measures.

Thirdly, multilateral institutions need to make their voices heard. After its 21 October meeting on the crisis, the UN Security Council should issue a statement reflecting the perilous circumstances, as has been underscored by UN Secretary-General António Guterres. In parallel, African leaders should insist that the AU Commission and its envoy Obasanjo make sincere, expedited and comprehensive efforts to prepare for negotiations after their recent inadequate efforts were exposed by one of the co-mediators, Kenyatta. The AU and partners are now trying to organise federal-Tigray talks scheduled for 24 October in South Africa. While these plans are welcome, fast-moving events on the battlefield may render them moot. In the meantime, AU Commission chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat has the ability to bring the issue onto the agenda of the AU Peace and Security Council, the integral piece of an African collective security architecture designed in part to prevent atrocities.

Fourthly, in order to increase international awareness of the bloodshed, the U.S. and other governments should disclose information they hold about the scale of the recent fighting and the number of fatalities. Given the renewed threat to civilians, the State Department could also release the atrocities determination report on crimes committed during the conflict that it completed in 2021. The U.S. and other Western countries that have trained satellites on the Tigray war should make clear to combatants that they are willing to publicise any evidence of atrocities they discover.

Fifthly, as Crisis Group has outlined previously, the U.S., the EU, EU member states and others should collectively make clear to Ethiopia's federal government that they will resume non-humanitarian assistance (which was suspended in most cases when the war broke out) only once it comes to the negotiating table in good faith and ends its blockade of Tigray. They should stress that their representatives at the World Bank and International Monetary Fund will block further funding for Ethiopia in the meantime, while explaining that such support – and debt relief – is at the ready should the situation sufficiently improve in Tigray and Abiy's government participate in substantive talks. They should also make clear that delivering humanitarian aid only to federally controlled areas in Tigray, as the central government appears to be planning, is an unacceptable violation of international humanitarian law.

As for Tigray's leaders, they should also stick to their commitment to attend the AU talks and agree to a truce. Following Tigray forces' failed attempt to topple Abiy in 2021 and their recent battlefield setbacks, Mekelle should pledge to focus on civilian protection inside Tigray

when humanitarian deliveries resume rather than embarking on further offensives or raids outside Tigray, which have included atrocities against civilians in Afar and Amhara regions. While Mekelle has expended much of its political capital on winning over Western powers, Crisis Group understands that it has alienated many African officials in the process. Tigray's leaders should devote more of their efforts to convincing fellow continental leaders to back peace efforts, including through bolstering AU mediation efforts.

The awful war in northern Ethiopia looks set to worsen still further. Vigorous international action is needed now to stop atrocities as front lines shift and federal and Eritrean troops move into new territory. Peace will come only through the difficult concessions of a negotiated settlement, but the more atrocities mount, the more distant those negotiations are likely to become. The immediate priority must be to deter mass killing. Thus far, the belligerents, and particularly President Isaias, have often proven insulated from outside influence. But, given the stakes, that cannot be an excuse for inaction. African and international actors need to move with far greater cohesion, urgency and focus to arrest the violence unfolding in Ethiopia's Tigray region.