



Ethiopia's Civil War: Cutting a Deal to Stop the Bloodshed

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What's new? Ethiopia's devastating civil war has worsened and broadened. Since June, the Tigray region's forces have turned the tables on the federal military and its allies. Although their offensive has galvanised resistance, especially in the neighbouring Amhara region, Tigray forces have recently made new gains, increasing the pressure on Addis Ababa.

Why does it matter? Continued fighting will further destabilise Ethiopia and could draw in Sudan if Tigray forces seek to reclaim western Tigray from Amhara control. Combined with an insurgency in the Oromia region and economic challenges, the situation could trigger a collapse in federal authority that would roil the Horn of Africa.

What should be done? International partners should back former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, the new African Union envoy to the Horn, in seeking a choreographed de-escalation of the conflict and demilitarisation of the flashpoint area of western Tigray. Tigray leaders should freeze their offensive as Addis Ababa unblocks aid and services to the region.

I. Overview

The war in northern Ethiopia grinds on and is likely to worsen. On the back foot since hostilities erupted in November 2020, the Tigray region's forces recovered, compelling federal and allied Eritrean troops to retreat in June. The Tigray forces then advanced into the adjacent regions of Amhara and, temporarily, Afar, causing mass displacement. They remain set on reclaiming Tigray's west from Amhara control. Meanwhile, Addis Ababa has renewed restrictions on aid headed into Tigray, deepening famine conditions there, and has also been buying arms, recruiting tens of thousands of fighters and, most recently, launching a new campaign to reverse Tigray's gains. The conflict could draw in other parties, too. It may embroil Sudan if Tigray's encircled forces seek an external supply line. Insurgents in Oromia region have allied with Tigray. While the parties are not yet ready to talk, when they are, African Union (AU) regional envoy Olusegun Obasanjo will be best positioned to broker a choreographed de-escalation leading to a ceasefire that can help stabilise an increasingly fragile Ethiopia. Donors, neighbours and others should back his efforts.

There is no end to Ethiopia's instability in sight. Tigray forces are fighting to reopen aid channels to the region, which Addis Ababa has largely blocked, remove security

threats and recapture territory that they have lost in the conflict and not yet reclaimed. The Tigray offensive has uprooted at least 450,000 people in Afar and Amhara. But resistance from local militias and regular forces has thus far stymied some of the Tigray leaders' plans, including their bid to take back western Tigray, which is administered by Amhara's government backed by Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers. Moreover, opposition to the Tigray advances has also helped the federal government enlist fresh forces, setting the stage for its own military push in October, although that appears to have sputtered, allowing the Tigray forces to gain more ground in eastern Amhara as they counter-attacked.

Despite probably tens of thousands of fatalities, both sides remain committed to war. The Tigray leadership, emboldened by their military resurgence, and unwilling to accept either the federal blockade of Tigray or occupation of western Tigray by their historical northern rivals, the Amhara, are geared up to keep fighting. For its part, Addis Ababa has procured more military hardware from abroad to better arm and equip its new recruits as they try to regain the upper hand in the conflict. Those efforts seem to be suffering setbacks, however, as Tigray forces advance through eastern Amhara in mid-October, occupying strategic locations and, at the time of publication, threatening to take Dessie and Kombolcha cities.

More combat promises disastrous near-term consequences, increasing instability and exacerbating the humanitarian emergency in the north. Similarly, due to the presence of Eritrea's military, Tigray's fighters are unlikely to quickly drive the Amhara and allied forces out of western Tigray, raising the risk of further atrocities there and continuing destructive warfare, with recently armed civilians joining the fray. Meanwhile, an August alliance between the Tigray forces and anti-government insurgents in the central region of Oromia has ratcheted up the likelihood of all-out civil war. That is something that the Ethiopian state, already buckling under an economic crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, would struggle to withstand. In addition, if the Tigray forces start receiving supplies from neighbouring Sudan, tensions would heighten between Addis Ababa and Khartoum, possibly triggering an inter-state war. Once the bulwark of security in the Horn, Ethiopia would then become a source of crisis presenting a major threat to the region's stability.

Given the mass suffering and economic woes inflicted on Ethiopia's population, as well as the growing risk of regional conflagration, a cessation of hostilities and negotiations are more essential than ever. In pressing the parties to move down that path, the U.S., the European Union (EU) and Ethiopia's neighbours should throw their collective weight behind the diplomatic initiative led by former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, the new AU envoy to the Horn. With fighting having ramped up in October, now is not an opportune moment for Obasanjo to make major progress on his new brief. Still, as federal leaders oversee a rapidly deteriorating situation and Tigray faces a famine, it is possible to imagine a time when all parties will see an incentive to take conciliatory steps in order to steer away from ever more disastrous outcomes. Through pressure (including, where appropriate, targeted sanctions) and suasion, outside actors should urge them to adopt this approach.

Obasanjo and others should encourage the parties to embrace a choreographed de-escalation along the following lines: first, both sides should publicly state their desire for a negotiated settlement, with each saying it would be willing to recognise the other's legitimacy. He should then press for a trade-off that involves Tigray's forces

freezing their advance in Amhara in exchange for Addis Ababa's full cooperation in expediting humanitarian assistance to the north. It is imperative that the federal government immediately cease blocking that assistance, as millions of Tigrayans are perched on the edge of starvation. But Obasanjo and other international partners can use negotiations to insist that Addis Ababa lift any remaining controls and broaden access, as well as restore services such as electricity, banking and telecommunications. These steps would be accompanied by an Amhara departure from western Tigray, in return for similar Tigray moves in Amhara, and the withdrawal of Addis Ababa's Eritrean allies from the area, which the federal government and outside actors should demand in unison.

Addressing the situation in western Tigray will pose a particular challenge: any negotiations over how to resolve the conflict there will be particularly fraught due to a longstanding territorial dispute between Amhara and Tigray and the bitterness among both Amhara and Tigrayans at having suffered atrocities at the other's hands. The Amhara occupation is unacceptable to Tigray's leaders, who say they will not stop fighting until they regain the area. The Amhara administration, meanwhile, is not about to simply vacate territory that many of its officials and supporters believe was illegally and violently annexed by Tigray's ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), in the aftermath of Ethiopia's civil war in the 1980s. Still, if the parties can find a way out of the impasse, they could then pursue long-term solutions, including agreeing to jointly administer the area, ensuring minority rights protections or creating an autonomous district.

Should the parties reach the point where they are ready to make peace in western Tigray, and they are looking for a way to secure and demilitarise the area, an international presence may be the best solution. A multilateral peacekeeping contingent, whether UN or AU or a mixture, cannot be a tool to force a settlement: it would only be viable with full support from Addis Ababa, and right now the federal government, and the other conflict parties, for that matter, all seem unlikely to give the go-ahead. Still, that could change. As the fighting continues and war fatigue sets in, the federal government could find itself seeking ways to create space for the negotiations needed to produce a sustainable resolution to the ugly Amhara-Tigray dispute. If the parties are seeking a way out, an international mission could provide the necessary monitoring or security guarantees. With that in mind, the UN, AU and other actors should give early thought to how an international mission might be stood up and sustained.

In the meantime, outside actors should work with the AU envoy in pressing leaders on all sides of the conflict in the direction of de-escalation, ceasefire and dialogue with the goal of defusing a dangerous situation that increasingly threatens the stability of not just Ethiopia but also the region beyond.

II. A Widening War

A. Tigray Conflict Spills Over and Grinds On

Ethiopia's civil war, pitting Tigray forces against a coalition of federal troops, allied paramilitaries, militias and the Eritrean army, has widened dramatically in recent months, pushing up the death count and driving hundreds of thousands more civilians

toward starvation.¹ Since mid-2021, the Tigray forces, overwhelmed at first when the conflict erupted the previous November, have rebounded, scoring major victories over their opponents on the battlefield and capturing thousands of federal troops.² The resistance in Tigray was able to recruit en masse and win support among Tigrayans in large part due to widespread revulsion at the intervening forces' reported atrocities against civilians.³ In stepping up its military campaign, mainly by moving into Amhara region, the Tigray leadership has been trying to achieve a number of goals.

First, it has tried to pressure Addis Ababa to end restrictions on aid reaching the region.⁴ Efforts thus far have been largely unsuccessful: violence is still impeding delivery of humanitarian supplies, while the federal authorities and their allies on the ground maintain a de facto blockade that a senior UN official says is an effort to "starve the population either into subjugation or out of existence".⁵ Roads into Tigray from Amhara are no longer open, partly because the conflict parties (each blames the other) have destroyed bridges over the Tekezze river, which separates central and western Tigray.⁶ Taking a circuitous route through the Afar region is therefore the sole option for convoys bearing aid overland to Tigray. Interference from federal and Afar authorities and militias has reduced what arrives in Tigray to a trickle.⁷ "There are lots of issues with humanitarian supplies. People are dying. We can't help it – it is

¹ The Tigray forces' leaders say they take orders from Tigray's regional government, classified as unlawful by Addis Ababa. "Press release of main leaders of Tigrayan army", MTV Habesha, 27 September 2021. The Tigray government central command for military operations consists of five TPLF executive committee members (Debretsion Gebremichael, also acting regional president; Getachew Reda; Alem Gebrewahid; Fetlework Gebregziabher; and Getachew Assefa, former national intelligence chief) and two field commanders (Tsadkan Gebretensae, a former Ethiopian military chief of staff; and Tadesse Werede, who headed the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei). Crisis Group telephone interview, TPLF official, 30 September 2021.

² Civil war broke out in November 2020 when the federal government intervened to replace the TPLF regional executive. For Crisis Group's coverage of the build-up to and beginning of war, see, for example, Crisis Group Africa Briefings N°160, *Toward an End to Ethiopia's Federal-Tigray Feud*, 14 August 2020; N°162, *Steering Ethiopia's Tigray Crisis Away from Conflict*, 30 October 2020; and N°167, *Finding a Path to Peace in Ethiopia's Tigray Region*, 11 February 2021.

³ "The fighters are there because of the atrocities. They are fighting for a cause". Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Tigray official, 16 September 2021. See also "Fear and hostility simmer as Ethiopia's military keeps hold on Tigray", *The New York Times*, 19 March 2021.

⁴ See, for example, "Unless We Become Victorious, We Will Cease to Exist as People!" – The Message of Alem Gebrewahid, Member of Central Command of Tigray and Chairman of Office of TPLF, Delivered to the People of Tigray on the Occasion of the New Year of 2014", TPLF, 13 September 2021.

⁵ Mark Lowcock, "How to Destroy a Country: Does Ethiopia Have a Future?", Center for Global Development, 6 October 2021. Lowcock was head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) until July 2021.

⁶ Three bridges over the Tekezze were wrecked shortly after the federal withdrawal from Tigray. While no proof has emerged as to the responsible party, the Amhara forces appear to have the clearest motivation. The bridges were destroyed as the Tigray forces advanced and as Amhara's government looked to protect the territory in western Tigray it had taken over during the war. Many Amhara officials and activists say the river was the historical western border of Tigray.

⁷ "Ethiopia – Tigray Region Humanitarian Update Situation Report, 2 September 2021", OCHA, 2 September 2021.

because of blockages, because of the siege. We have very serious problems”, says a top Tigray official.⁸

Secondly, the Tigray leadership aims to recover all the territory it lost in the war's first phase, including, eventually, the disputed lands of western Tigray, a fertile sesame-growing area that borders Sudan and is now under Amhara control. In June, Tigray forces expelled Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers from central parts of Tigray, taking back most of the region as the administration installed by Addis Ababa the preceding December withdrew.⁹ They then reasserted their authority over a southern section of Tigray, known as Raya, which Amhara forces had also seized in the war's first weeks. They have stopped short, however, of advancing into western Tigray, where significant numbers of heavily armed Eritrean and federal troops back up Amhara paramilitaries and militias.

Tigray forces instead drove south into the neighbouring Amhara and Afar regions as they pursued a war of attrition against Addis Ababa and its allies. In mid-July, they advanced across the Tekezze near Mai Tsebri and into the Amhara region's North Gondar Zone.¹⁰ They also moved, briefly, into Chifra, a town on the Afar-Amhara border around 50km south east of Weldiya town, claiming that they could cut off the Addis Ababa-Djibouti trade route at Mille nearby.¹¹ In early August, Tigray forces seized Lalibela, a UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage Site known for its monolithic churches, thereby grabbing international headlines.¹² Then, on 12 August, they occupied Weldiya, a major Amhara transport and commercial hub on the main road to Addis Ababa. They still control the town. Now, after holding off a federal offensive and hitting back hard, they occupy other strategic locations, such as Chifra and, at the time of publication, are poised to threaten two other cities to Weldiya's south on the Addis Ababa road, Dessie and Kombolcha, and also Mille on the Addis Ababa-Djibouti road.¹³

In September, the Tigray advance had slowed and, in some cases, was reversed. Federal and regional authorities tapped into hostility to the TPLF, the banned ruling party of the Tigray region and the former leading member of a coalition that ruled

⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Tigray official, 16 September 2021. A source in Mekelle, Tigray's regional capital, said city residents are running out of cash, adding that Tigray had been lacking electricity for the preceding ten days. Crisis Group telephone interview, 20 September 2021.

⁹ The federal operation in Tigray crumbled after ambushes by Tigray forces and other attacks drew national military units into the Tigray forces' stronghold. See Crisis Group Statement, "As Ethiopian Troops Exit Tigray, Time to Focus on Relief", 9 July 2021; William Davison, "The Dangerous Expansion of Ethiopia's Tigray War", Crisis Group Commentary, 30 July 2021; and "Behind the Front Lines in Ethiopia's Tigray", The Horn (podcast), 30 July 2021.

¹⁰ "Ethiopia – Tigray Region Humanitarian Update Situation Report, 9 July 2021", OCHA, 9 July 2021.

¹¹ See "Statement by Command Post of Tigray Army", Tigray Media House, 31 July 2021. A source close to Tigray's commanders said they decided not to block the Djibouti road to prevent the country from unravelling and to give the government time to change course. Crisis Group telephone interview, former senior federal official, 4 August 2021. See also "Ethiopia's Tigray forces enter neighbouring Afar region, Afar says", Reuters, 19 July 2021.

¹² "Lalibela: Ethiopia's Tigray rebels take Unesco world heritage town", BBC, 5 August 2021.

¹³ "Deadly' air strikes hit capital of Ethiopia's Tigray", Agence France Presse, 18 October 2021. The Tigray forces' leader said victory is inevitable after recent battlefield successes. "Statement of freedom fighter Tadesse Werede, chief commander of Tigray army regarding the fighting that took place from 7 October 2021 onwards", Tigray TV, 16 October 2021.

Ethiopia from 1991 to 2019 with frequent repression, spurring locals to organise into militias to beat back Tigray forces.¹⁴ One former Ethiopian diplomat said the Tigray forces “are facing stiff resistance, massive mobilisation. They will not be facing the military, they will be facing the people”.¹⁵ In August and September, the Tigray forces met resistance to the south of Weldiya near Hayk town, north of Gondar around Debarq and Debat towns, and to the west of Weldiya along the route that leads to Debre Tabor town. In addition, they pulled out of almost all the Afar region in September after running into federal troops and Afar fighters around Chifra and in low-lying areas in northern Afar.¹⁶ Tigray’s leaders claimed to have merely paused to regroup and absorb new recruits after capturing materiel and territory.¹⁷

The Tigray forces’ incursions and the resulting counter-offensives have made the chances of dialogue slim at present. Instead, amid mobilisation on both sides, Tigray’s leaders look set to ramp up the pressure on the federal and Amhara governments as Addis Ababa and allied parties seek to push Tigray forces back. The political atmosphere in the country remains poisonous, meanwhile, as evidenced by the belligerent and at times hateful rhetoric, particularly from the federal side.¹⁸ Abiy’s office had said negotiations with the TPLF, which federal authorities designated as a terrorist organisation on 6 May, would be possible only after a new parliament reappointed the prime minister. But he did not actually commit to talks, even then, and indeed seems to be in no rush. Abiy was sworn in on 4 October, and there has been no indication since the ceremony that negotiations are on the agenda, while his forces instead went on an unsuccessful offensive in Wollo in Amhara region a week later.¹⁹

¹⁴ “Ethiopia civil war: Thousands of troops assemble on highway to front line in bloody conflict”, Sky News, 5 October 2021.

¹⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, 13 September 2021.

¹⁶ Tweet by Kontie Moussa, @AfarParty, leader of Afar People’s Party, 11:30pm, 7 September 2021. A leading Afar opposition politician, however, says Tigray’s forces have been pushed out of the region. Tigray commanders confirm the withdrawal but say it is for tactical reasons. “Statement of the Military Command of Tigray Army”, Tigrai Media House, 9 September 2021.

¹⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, individual close to top Tigray forces commander, 28 September 2021.

¹⁸ U.S. Agency for International Development head Samantha Power condemned Abiy for using “dehumanising” language when he referred to TPLF leaders as “weeds” and “cancer”. “US warns Ethiopia of ‘dehumanizing rhetoric’ on Tigray”, Associated Press, 4 August 2021. The State Department also spoke out when Abiy’s adviser Daniel Kibret used similar rhetoric in September. “US blasts ‘dangerous’ rhetoric by ally of Ethiopia PM”, AFP, 20 September 2021. In an example of harsh words from the Tigray side, top official Getachew Reda said: “They killed us enough. They massacred us enough. We will even the balance. ... We will secure an era when the Amhara elites will never again be able to subdue Tigray either through music [and] battle cry or in the name of church sermons. That much I can assure you”. “Interview with Getachew Reda”, Tigrai Media House, 27 May 2021.

¹⁹ “Addis says TPLF fate lies with yet to be formed govt later in the year”, *The East African*, 11 September 2021. Direct talks with the TPLF are unlikely to occur unless the federal parliament lifts the organisation’s terrorist designation. Abiy has told some Western diplomats he is willing to enter talks with the TPLF, while indicating to others that his government will not negotiate with a terrorist organisation. Crisis Group interviews and telephone interviews, September 2021. There was no sign in Abiy’s inauguration speech of a shift in approach toward the Tigray conflict. “Ethiopia’s Abiy sworn in for new term, strikes defiant tone”, AFP, 4 October 2021.

B. *Risks of Escalation*

Despite the growing turmoil, all parties for now remain committed to war. While there are indications that some in Addis Ababa believe a rethink is necessary, there have also been strong signals that federal authorities are doubling down on the military strategy, including the illegal blockade.²⁰ Federal arms purchases and the mobilisation of tens of thousands of new soldiers and militiamen preceded an offensive that began on 11 October, after the rainy season tapered off the month before.²¹ The Tigray forces are, notwithstanding challenges in September, looking to retake control of western Tigray.²² Should Tigray forces control the Gondar area, they could push west to the Sudan border town of Metemma and also north as part of an operation to reclaim the contested territory.²³

As the conflict expands, the costs are set to climb. The mid-2021 fighting has already displaced at least 450,000 people in Afar and Amhara, in addition to the nearly two million who were driven from their homes in Tigray.²⁴ According to some reports, Tigray forces have also looted aid warehouses, shelled residential areas and killed civilians in neighbouring regions.²⁵ If they continue to confront recently formed popular militias operating among civilians, “there could be massive casualties, so they have to be very careful”, says a former Ethiopian diplomat.²⁶ On 18 October, Ethiopia’s ministry of foreign affairs commented on recent fighting by suggesting that Tigray forces had killed only civilians as they advanced into areas south of Weldiya and

²⁰ See, for example, Kebour Ghenna, “How did Ethiopia so badly miscalculate its war with Tigray?”, Borkena, 17 September 2021. Kebour stood for parliament in the 2021 elections for the opposition Ezema party, whose leaders have backed the war. For the opposing viewpoint, see Yodahe Zemichael, “Ethiopia’s conflict: Will negotiations with the TPLF work?”, *Defence Post*, 21 September 2021. Yodahe is an adviser to the prime minister. On the blockade strategy, see “TPLF Opens Fresh Attacks on Civilians: Office”, statement, Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 18 October 2021.

²¹ “Is Ethiopia flying Iranian-made armed drones?”, Bellingcat, 17 August 2021. Abiy signed a “military financial cooperation agreement” with the Turkish government on 18 August. “Ethiopia, Turkey sign water, military financial cooperation agreement”, Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 18 August 2021. An Ethiopian security official said both Iran and Turkey had delivered military hardware to Ethiopia. Crisis Group telephone interview, August 2021. A European official said Ethiopia had purchased drones from Azerbaijan. Crisis Group interview, 24 September 2021.

²² Amhara leaders and activists say the TPLF annexed the historically Amhara area in the 1990s, forcibly displacing thousands of Amhara. Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°156, *Bridging the Divide in Ethiopia’s North*, 12 June 2020.

²³ Between Gondar and Metemma lies the stronghold of ethnic Qimant separatists. The Qimant are a likely ally of Tigray forces, as they are regularly involved in violent confrontations with Amhara forces. Satellite imagery analysis shows serious destruction of Qimant settlements since May, peaking in August. “Visual evidence of widespread damage to Qimant communities in West Gondar”, Vigil Monitor, 28 September 2021. A senior Tigray official said the Tigray forces were already operating in the area. Crisis Group telephone interview, 1 October 2021. For background on Amhara-Qimant tensions, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Bridging the Divide in Ethiopia’s North*, op. cit.

²⁴ “Ethiopia – Tigray region humanitarian update, 2 September 2021”, op. cit.

²⁵ See, for example, “At scene of Ethiopia’s new killings, some fight, some flee”, Associated Press, 10 September 2021. Also “‘They are out for revenge’: Evidence of war crimes as rebels roar out of Ethiopia’s Tigray region”, *The Telegraph*, 17 August 2021.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, 13 September 2021.

that continued constraints on aid to Tigray would be the result.²⁷ On the same day, Ethiopia's air force bombed targets in Tigray's capital Mekelle, killing three, with more aerial attacks following on 20 October.²⁸

A battle for western Tigray, flat terrain that exposes fighters, could also exacerbate the risks for civilians, who have already suffered in the area.²⁹ Moreover, it could draw Sudan into the war if Tigray forces move to open up a supply route for aid and arms through the east of that country. Addis Ababa would view any Sudanese assistance to Tigray's leaders – including the facilitation of aid – as a hostile act, pushing the two countries toward open conflict. Relations between Addis Ababa and Khartoum are already at a low ebb, mainly due to disputes over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam that Ethiopia is constructing on the Blue Nile, affecting downstream Sudan's water supply, and al-Fashaga, the disputed farmlands adjacent to western Tigray, which Sudan occupied in December.³⁰ If Sudan steps in on the Tigray forces' side, Abiy might well think that Khartoum supports Tigray leaders in seeking to remove him. For his part, Eritrea's President Isaias Afwerki might fear that better armed and supplied Tigray forces could eventually muster attacks on the Eritrean military, leaving him exposed.

Should Tigray's autonomy struggle become a full-blown war of independence, new risks will emerge, and de-escalation will become still more difficult. As one senior observer put it: "Definitely [the western Tigray issue] is going to spark a regional war if it is mismanaged".³¹

C. *The Connection to Oromia's Conflict – and Beyond*

Meanwhile, conflict is also escalating to the south in Oromia, Prime Minister Abiy's home region and the country's most populous, where tensions are running high between the authorities and Oromo nationalists, who allege that the premier has

²⁷ "TPLF Opens Fresh Attacks on Civilians: Office", op. cit. The ministry of foreign affairs argued: "It is absurd to expect unrestricted flow of humanitarian aid to the Tigray region while the TPLF is actively attacking neighbouring areas and provoking the people to obstruct the process".

²⁸ "Deadly' air strikes hit capital of Ethiopia's Tigray", op. cit. See also "Second air strike this week hits capital of Ethiopia's Tigray – TV", Reuters, 20 October 2021.

²⁹ U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken accused Amhara forces of "ethnic cleansing" in western Tigray, pursuant to numerous accounts of Amhara militias killing Tigrayan civilians, and vice versa, in Mai Kadra in early November. "AFP: Blinken condemns 'ethnic cleansing' in Ethiopia's Tigray", video, YouTube, 11 March 2021. More recently, media reports and satellite imagery analysis have indicated that Amhara forces are holding thousands of Tigrayans in Humera town in prison camps. Crisis Group telephone interview, satellite imagery analyst, 30 September 2021. "Men are marched out of prison camps. Then corpses float down the river", CNN, 10 September 2021.

³⁰ As concerns the dam, Sudan considers that without an agreement on its filling and operating rules, it may at different times increase flooding and also cause water shortages if its operators do not synchronise releases from the reservoir with Sudanese projects. As concerns al-Fashaga, Sudan moved to occupy disputed territory adjacent to Tigray in December 2020, a month after the federal intervention. Sudan's Sovereign Council head Abdel Fattah al-Burhan claims that Abiy gave Sudan the green light for the move in return for Khartoum's agreement to close the border to Tigray forces. A former Ethiopian diplomat concurs. Crisis Group telephone interview, 13 September 2021. See also Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°173, *Containing the Volatile Sudan-Ethiopia Border Dispute*, 24 June 2021.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, former senior federal official, 7 September 2021.

undermined their struggle for greater autonomy and democracy even though it was mainly protesters in Oromia who catapulted him to power. As Tigray's leaders do, they also suspect Abiy has plans to reform Ethiopia's ethnic federalist constitution, thereby threatening the region's autonomy.

At the centre of these tensions is the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), which is operating an insurgency that appears to be gaining momentum after Oromo opposition parties boycotted the mid-June elections. The OLA is a splinter from the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), a popular yet fragmented party that advocates for Oromia's self-determination. Abiy's government sees the OLA as posing a significant threat, in part because it has the potential to choke trade to and from the capital and is already controlling swathes of rural central and western Oromia, including near Addis Ababa.³² The federal parliament classified it as a terrorist organisation in May.³³ Partly in response, the OLA and Tigray forces allied – striking a military cooperation agreement – in August, with the stated goal of trying to replace Abiy's cabinet with a transitional administration.³⁴

One major factor contributing to the growing violence is that the political situation in Oromia is increasingly fraught.³⁵ Prior to the pandemic, parliamentary and regional elections in Oromia set for 2020 were expected to be competitive between the allied OLF and Oromo Federalist Conference (OFC), on one hand, and Abiy's Prosperity Party, on the other. Then came the 29 June 2020 murder of popular Oromo singer Hachalu Hundessa and a ten-month election delay, which upended the country's politics.³⁶ Although authorities blamed OLF elements, many Oromo opposition supporters believe he was assassinated for criticising the government. His killing triggered deadly unrest in Oromia and Addis Ababa, including attacks by Oromo mobs on Amhara civilians.³⁷ Amid the chaos, federal authorities detained Oromo activists, including the popular OFC politician Jawar Mohammed, putting him and others on trial on terrorism charges.³⁸ Both the OLF and OFC protested the crackdowns by

³² The OLA says it is "advancing" into various areas in West and North Shewa zones. Crisis Group telephone interview, 12 October 2021.

³³ The OLA's opponents cast it as a secessionist group, but it says it stands for autonomy for Oromia within a multinational federation. On 27 April, the OLA detailed a negotiation platform, including conciliatory items such as tabling for discussion how to better protect local minorities and what to do about powerful regional paramilitaries. On 6 May, however, it declared "total war" on the government after Abiy's cabinet announced the intent to designate the OLA as a terrorist group.

³⁴ "Ethiopia armed group says it has alliance with Tigray forces", Associated Press, 11 August 2021. Discussing the OLA's historical opposition to the TPLF, its leader, commonly known by his nom de guerre Jaal Marroo, told Crisis Group that the military cooperation agreement was a choice "between worse and worst. The worst is the Prosperity Party now in office making Ethiopia a living hell". Crisis Group telephone interview, 21 August 2021.

³⁵ Oromo nationalist forces gained a significant boost after Jawar Mohammed, a driving force of the protest movement that catalysed Abiy's rise to power in 2018, joined the OFC in December 2019, the same month the Prosperity Party was created. Within days, the OFC allied with the OLF, forming a potent bloc. For background on the federalism debate, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°283, *Keeping Ethiopia's Transition on the Rails*, 16 December 2019.

³⁶ See Crisis Group Statement, "Defusing Ethiopia's Latest Perilous Crisis", 3 July 2020.

³⁷ For an account of the violence, see "Chaos in the Rift – A microcosm of Ethiopia's brutal polarization", *Ethiopia Insight*, 5 January 2021.

³⁸ See "Ethiopian prosecutors charge Jawar with training terror group in Egypt", *Ethiopia Insight*, 25 September 2020.

boycotting the rescheduled elections, which took place on 21 June 2021, citing widespread arrests and closures of party offices.³⁹

In the wake of the boycott, which handed Abiy's Prosperity Party a thumping victory in Oromia when polls were for the most part held, the OLA insurgency intensified.⁴⁰ Starting on 15 August, for example, the group blocked the main southerly route to Kenya, from Bule Hora in Oromia's West Guji Zone to the Kenyan border town Moyale, and also clashed around the same date with regional and federal security forces in West Shewa Zone adjacent to Addis Ababa.⁴¹

As the violence has escalated, historically rooted tensions between Ethiopia's two largest communities, the Oromo and Amhara, have continued to flare. In late August, locals and officials said OLA fighters killed more than 100 Amhara civilians in East Wollega Zone.⁴² The insurgents said all those killed in fighting were government-affiliated militiamen from Amhara.⁴³ The turmoil relates to a broader political dispute that involves Oromo nationalists classing Amhara settlers as their main oppressor during an imperial era that ended in 1974. Amhara activists argue that innocent civilians are persecuted by Oromo nationalists and other ethno-nationalists as a result.

If the fault line between Amhara and Oromo widens further, it could set in train other destabilising effects. First, these tensions could deepen rifts within the Oromo and Amhara chapters of the country's ruling Prosperity Party.⁴⁴ Secondly, the violence could spill over into another region, Benishangul-Gumuz, which borders Sudan and where armed factions are also operating, imperilling security around the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.⁴⁵ There, militias from the Gumuz ethnic group have mobilised over the last year, creating disruptions that led to delayed elections in most

³⁹ See William Davison, "Ethiopia Votes, But Balloting Will Not Ease the Country's Deep Crisis", Crisis Group Commentary, 17 June 2021.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, OLA representative, 13 September 2021. Balloting did not take place in some parts of western Oromia due to the insurgency there.

⁴¹ For reports of more such incidents, see the updates at the OLA Communiqué website.

⁴² The East Wollega attack was the latest instance of intercommunal and government-insurgent violence in Oromia since conflict broke out between the OLA and the authorities three years ago. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, a legally independent federal organ, said OLA-tied fighters killed about 150 civilians in Kिरamu village after security forces left the area. The Commission said the attacks were ethnically motivated, adding that Amharas killed 60 Oromos in retaliation. "East Wollega: Security forces in the region need to be strengthened to ensure the security of civilians", press release, Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 26 August 2021.

⁴³ "Regarding the Situation in East Walaga", OLA-OLF High Command, 26 August 2021.

⁴⁴ Following violence in eastern Amhara, protesters in that region accused the OLA of massacring Amhara civilians, the Oromia chapter of the Prosperity Party of orchestrating the killings and Abiy of abetting or disregarding them. One Amhara-Oromo flashpoint is an Oromo administrative enclave in eastern Amhara. The killing of an imam there in mid-March kicked off a cycle of attacks that killed hundreds and displaced tens of thousands, triggering Amhara protests about what protesters refer to as an "Amhara genocide". "Oromia PP accuses Amhara region forces of fomenting violence in Oromia Zone, says OLA rebels not present as PM Abiy pleads for calm," Addis Standard, 23 March 2021.

⁴⁵ "The murky politics behind the Metekel massacres", *Ethiopia Insight*, 29 December 2020. The OLA could yet play a role in ramping up regional tensions. The insurgent group, whose stronghold is in western Oromia, may already have external supply routes into Sudan. That could exacerbate frictions between Addis Ababa and Khartoum. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Containing the Volatile Sudan-Ethiopia Border Dispute*, op. cit.

of the region.⁴⁶ The militias, operating largely in Metekel Zone, have killed ethnic Amhara, Shinasha and Oromo people, whom they perceive as settlers, and conducted deadly ambushes on convoys servicing the dam. In April, they also briefly took over one district in Kamashi Zone.⁴⁷

III. Mass Suffering

The situation in northern Ethiopia is dire and set to get worse. Millions of Tigrayans are suffering food shortages, with estimates suggesting hundreds are dying daily of hunger-related causes.⁴⁸ Since 28 June, when federal troops and administrators left most of Tigray, around 1,000 aid trucks – bearing only about 14 per cent of the needed aid – have arrived in the region.⁴⁹ Aid agencies say government impediments, as well as security incidents, notably the 18 July and 19 August militia attacks on aid convoys in Afar, explain most of the shortfall.⁵⁰ A compounding factor is Addis Ababa has cut Tigray off from budget transfers and telecommunications, electricity and banking services, thereby making the population suffer for the federal dispute with Tigray's leaders. Researchers estimate that, due to the war, only up to a quarter of Tigray's land will produce "reasonable outputs", while the UN says Tigray's crop yields in 2021 may be as low as 13 per cent of normal, raising famine concerns.⁵¹ On 1 October,

⁴⁶ The Gumuz are among the groups that historically were subject to slave raids by more powerful Ethiopian ethnicities. Some of them reside in Sudan, whence they are believed to be supporting the rebels. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Containing the Volatile Sudan-Ethiopia Border Dispute*, op. cit. Some local observers say the conflict is partly driven by Gumuz concerns about Amhara encroachment as well as fears that Amhara nationalists will press claims that Metekel is rightfully part of Amhara. See for example, "EIEP podcast: Marginalization and persecution in Ethiopia's Benishangul-Gumuz", *Ethiopia Insight*, 12 September 2021.

⁴⁷ "Armed group takes control of county in western Ethiopia – Rights commission", Reuters, 22 April 2021. The latest rebel attack on a road leading to Guba district, site of the dam, on 3 September reportedly killed four federal police officers and one national soldier.

⁴⁸ A UN official said a September survey of 15,000 pregnant and lactating women showed 79 per cent of them suffering from acute malnutrition. Crisis Group telephone interview, 1 October 2021. Academic researchers at Ghent University in Belgium estimate that at least 425 people per day die of hunger-related causes in Tigray. Crisis Group telephone interview, 4 October 2021.

⁴⁹ "Ethiopia – Northern Ethiopia Humanitarian Update", OCHA, 30 September and 14 October 2021. The federal authorities have not allowed any fuel trucks to enter Tigray since July.

⁵⁰ See "Statement by Acting Humanitarian Coordinator for Ethiopia Grant Leaity on the operational constraints and de facto humanitarian blockade of Tigray," OCHA, 2 September 2021. On 2 September, OCHA said the UN cancelled travel from Semera to Abala after Afar Special Police blocked a UN travel assessment mission and harassed staff on 24 August. "Ethiopia – Tigray region humanitarian update, 2 September 2021", op. cit. More recently, the World Food Programme said a shortage of truck drivers is hampering deliveries, as vehicles have not returned from Tigray. Authorities in Mekelle say the drivers, most of whom are ethnic Tigrayans, fear harassment on the return journey. Federal officials have suggested that the TPLF seized the trucks. "Ethiopia's Tigray crisis: Why are hundreds of aid trucks stranded?", BBC, 28 September 2021.

⁵¹ "August 2021 status of cropping in the wider surroundings of Mekelle (Tigray, Ethiopia)", Mekelle University and Ghent University, September 2021. "Ethiopia – Tigray region humanitarian update, 2 September 2021", op. cit.

Addis Ababa expelled seven top UN officials for assisting the TPLF, making it harder for humanitarian actors to do their jobs.⁵²

The management of aid flows has become a key factor in the conflict. After Addis Ababa installed an interim administration in Mekelle in December 2020, humanitarian aid into the region gradually started flowing again, but fighting made deliveries to the hinterland difficult and dangerous. Notably, Eritrean and Ethiopian military checkpoints blocked routes into areas where Tigray forces were concentrated. Eritrean troops allegedly also looted medical clinics, food stores and agricultural tools, as well as killing oxen and other livestock.⁵³ With the TPLF now back in Mekelle, federal authorities are once again restricting aid flows, prompting the U.S. delegation to the UN Security Council to say the Ethiopian government's obstruction of humanitarian supplies and vital services may amount to war crimes.⁵⁴ Addis Ababa has at times blamed the Tigray forces' offensive for disrupting aid, and it claims to be unable to deliver telecommunications and power services to the region due to Tigray fighters' attacks on utility company staff.⁵⁵

The humanitarian and economic crisis related to the conflict could have devastating effects nationwide. Although most suffering is inside Tigray, the war's spread has created its own emergency in parts of Amhara and Afar. Afar authorities said more than 140,000 people were displaced by the end of August, and Amhara's government said at least 233,000 people have fled to Dessie and Kombolcha in South Wollo Zone, an area where Tigray forces have recently been focused.⁵⁶ The war is hurting all Ethiopians by further weakening a pandemic-stricken economy marked by an annual inflation rate of 34 per cent in September and a hard currency shortage that limits imports.⁵⁷ With the government facing aid cuts, and struggling with debt repayments, there is little sign of relief on the horizon.⁵⁸ In February, the International Monetary Fund said it expected Ethiopia's economic growth to be only 2 per cent in the fiscal year that ended 7 June, due to the pandemic's effects. Previously, it estimated that

⁵² "Ethiopia accuses expelled UN staff of helping TPLF, asks UN to 'expeditiously replace' them", *Addis Standard*, 1 October 2021.

⁵³ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°171, *Ethiopia's Tigray War: A Deadly, Dangerous Stalemate*, 2 April 2021.

⁵⁴ "Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on Ethiopia and the Situation in Tigray", United States Mission to the United Nations, 26 August 2021.

⁵⁵ "Ethiopia: What do we know about aid going into Tigray?", BBC, 15 August 2021. The federal government's reluctance to provide services may well reflect the fact that it considers the TPLF a terrorist organisation and the regional government it runs unlawful. See also "TPLF Opens Fresh Attacks on Civilians: Office", op. cit.

⁵⁶ "Ethiopia – Northern Ethiopia Humanitarian Update", OCHA, 16 September 2021. More than 1.7 million people in both regions reportedly now require aid due to the conflict

⁵⁷ "Country and Regional Level Consumer Price Index", Central Statistical Agency, October 2021.

⁵⁸ In addition to Washington's punitive action, the European Union suspended budget support to the Ethiopian government in November due to restrictions on humanitarian access. S&P Global downgraded Ethiopia's credit rating on 24 September, reportedly citing "heightened political instability and delays to debt restructuring". "S&P pushes Ethiopia's ratings into junk territory on delayed debt restructuring", Reuters, 24 September 2021.

the rate would rebound to 8.7 per cent for the 2021-2022 budget year, but now says there is too much uncertainty to make a forecast.⁵⁹

Moreover, conflict dynamics could make things still worse. The country's economic predicament could grow more serious if the OLA's insurgent activities increase, pulling Oromia deeper into crisis, and greatly so if the Tigray forces succeed in blocking the main trade route to Djibouti.⁶⁰ More broadly, further war means that conditions will continue to deteriorate, with Addis Ababa unable to impose its authority in several regions that have become restive at the same time. If the Abiy government's control were to keep dwindling, the end result could even be a disastrous fragmentation of the Horn of Africa's most populous state, especially given that opposition plans for a transitional administration seem unformed at best and that some other political actors are implacably hostile to the notion of a TPLF-OLA-led interim administration.⁶¹ One former senior Ethiopian official – who is not a former TPLF member – believes the federal leadership must reconsider: “If they do not go for talks, the country will collapse – no ifs, no buts”.⁶²

IV. Path to Talks

Ethiopia urgently needs a respite from the conflict that could very well pull it apart, even if the parties are not yet ready to think about talks and de-escalation. Through a combination of pressure, diplomacy and forward planning, outside actors should work together to move the parties toward the path of peace.

A. Pressure Increases

Pressure on the conflict parties to find a resolution to the situation in Ethiopia's north is growing, and it is coming from a range of domestic and international sources. In September, 24 Ethiopian civil society organisations called for a cessation of hostilities and talks to address all the country's crises.⁶³ Ethiopia's worried neighbours have been increasingly vocal about the need for negotiations and are likely to keep lending momentum to the idea of peace talks. Sudan's Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, who is also chair of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the East African regional body, offered on 4 August to mediate the conflict, as he had done before; as with his previous offers, Addis Ababa rebuffed him, partly due to poor Ethiopia-Sudan

⁵⁹ “IMF Reaches a Staff-Level Agreement for the First and Second Reviews of the Extended Credit Facility and Extended Fund Facility for Ethiopia”, International Monetary Fund, 23 February 2021; “World Economic Outlook, October 2021”, International Monetary Fund, October 2021.

⁶⁰ “Ethiopia conflict – Tigray forces claim march to Addis Ababa ‘now possible’”, AllAfrica, 20 September 2021.

⁶¹ There is no opposition plan for a transitional government, despite the new Tigray-OLA ties. Many in the Oromo opposition suspect the TPLF of planning to become the predominant federal actor, as it was from 1991 to 2018. Crisis Group interviews, Oromo opposition activists, September 2021. Tigray's leaders hope to build alliances with, among others, ethnic Agew and Qimant forces in Amhara, as well as local Afar leaders, but these efforts are nascent. Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior Tigray officials, September 2021.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, former senior federal official, 7 September 2021.

⁶³ “Ethiopia: Local CSOs call for peace as country marks new year”, The Elephant, 13 September 2021.

relations.⁶⁴ President Salva Kiir of South Sudan has also proposed trying to broker a peace agreement, receiving no formal response from Addis Ababa.⁶⁵

Other African leaders have also started pressing for dialogue. In New York on 26 August, Kenya, speaking on behalf of the “A3+1” (ie, the three African states on the UN Security Council plus St. Vincent and the Grenadines), urged a negotiated settlement and, among other suggestions, said Ethiopia’s federal parliament should remove terrorist designations from the country’s armed movements to pave the way for talks.⁶⁶ While the AU has so far been muted, the chair of the AU Commission, Moussa Mahamat Faki, named former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo as his Horn of Africa envoy. Expectations are that Obasanjo will focus on trying to end Ethiopia’s civil war.⁶⁷ When Abiy visited Kampala and Kigali in late August, both President Yoweri Museveni and President Paul Kagame are said to have told him to seek a negotiated settlement. Other African heads of state delivered similar messages at Abiy’s inauguration in early October.⁶⁸

The U.S. government, which has its own regional envoy, has been vocal about the crisis and even taken punitive measures, although with limited success so far. As well as urging talks, the U.S. has enacted sanctions, notably a 23 August asset freeze on Eritrea’s military’s leader.⁶⁹ Due to alleged human rights abuses, the U.S., Ethiopia’s top bilateral donor, has also suspended security and some economic assistance to the government. Though it will exempt humanitarian programs from the suspension, much of the \$500 million it gives annually for education, health and other projects may not be renewed.⁷⁰ Potentially more significantly, the U.S. says it will not support International Monetary Fund and World Bank funds for Ethiopia and warns also that Ethiopian exporters may lose preferential access to the U.S. market due to the government’s alleged rights abuses.⁷¹ Ethiopian officials and pro-government ac-

⁶⁴ “Sudan still pushing to mediate Tigray conflict: PM Hamdok”, *The East African*, 18 August 2021. On the frayed bilateral ties, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Containing the Volatile Sudan-Ethiopia Border Dispute*, op. cit.

⁶⁵ “Igad asks President Salva Kiir to mediate Ethiopia war with TPLF”, *The East African*, 7 September 2021.

⁶⁶ “Statement by Ambassador Martin Kimani, Permanent Representative of Kenya on Behalf of the A3+1 (Kenya, Niger, St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Tunisia)”, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Kenya to the United Nations, 26 August 2021.

⁶⁷ “The Chairperson of the AU Commission Appoints Former President H.E. Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria as High Representative for the Horn of Africa”, press release, African Union, 26 August 2021. The naming of Obasanjo as “Horn of Africa” rather than “Ethiopia” envoy may well dilute the focus of the initiative, according to a regional legal expert with mediation experience. Crisis Group telephone interview, 14 September 2021.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, former senior federal official, 7 September 2021. For example, at the inauguration, Kenya’s President Uhuru Kenyatta said: “I remind you today that the people of Ethiopia have given you a mandate to lead, a mandate to bring peace, a mandate to build stability, a mandate to bring all the people of Ethiopia together”. “President Kenyatta Attends Ethiopian PM Abiy’s Inauguration in Addis Ababa”, Presidency of Kenya, 4 October 2021.

⁶⁹ “Sanctioning Eritrean Military Leader in Connection with Human Rights Abuse in Ethiopia”, U.S. Department of State, 23 August 2021. Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. official, 9 September 2021.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. official, 8 October 2021.

⁷¹ The Congressional Research Service said: “The United States is withholding support for new multi-lateral development bank lending that does not address basic human needs and has asked partners to do the same”. Ibid. Broad restrictions on assistance to Eritrea were already in place, it noted. Crisis

tivists have reacted by accusing the U.S. and other outside actors – as well as the Western media, rights groups, UN agencies and humanitarian organisations – of supporting a TPLF return to federal power.⁷²

Piling pressure on the Ethiopian and Eritrean parties to end the war, the Biden administration on 17 September issued an executive order setting up a new sanctions regime targeted at what it described as individuals and entities “responsible for or complicit in”, among other things, “actions or policies that threaten the peace, security, or stability of Ethiopia, or that have the purpose or effect of expanding or extending the crisis in northern Ethiopia or obstructing a ceasefire or a peace process”.⁷³

Among the sanctions that would flow from this regime are travel bans as well as asset freezes and other constraints on economic activity tied to the U.S. Conversely, the White House also said if there is progress toward negotiations it will help increase economic assistance and consider providing debt relief to Ethiopia.⁷⁴ Abiy responded to the sanctions threat with an open letter in which he accused the U.S. of applying “unwarranted pressure characterised by double standards”.⁷⁵ Given that federal officials are defiant, and the leadership set on achieving military gains, these measures are not going to elicit an immediate switch in policy. But combined with diplomatic urging from former President Obasanjo amid a deteriorating overall economic and security situation, they may at least boost efforts to convince the Abiy government to change course.

B. *A Narrow Pathway Out*

With Addis Ababa looking to ramp up its military campaign and the Tigray leadership adamant it will not stop fighting until it removes threats to Tigray, overcomes the “siege” and clears all “enemy forces” from the region, the immediate prospects for peace are dim.⁷⁶ Still, they could brighten over time through a combination of internal and external pressure coupled with – more importantly – war fatigue and a deteriorating situation for all belligerents. In particular, a peacemaking opportunity is most likely to arise if neither side makes decisive gains, with Tigray leaders needing to change tack to alleviate a famine and Abiy fearing that his authority could dissipate.

Outside actors like the U.S. and EU, as well as Ethiopia’s neighbours, should help prepare the ground for this moment by throwing their full weight behind AU Envoy Obasanjo as he marshals support from African leaders and presses all the Ethiopian warring parties toward choreographed de-escalation and negotiations. Empowering a credible regional figure to lead international mediation efforts will be key to their success when the moment comes, and it will have the added benefit of promoting

Group telephone interview, U.S. official, 9 September 2021. “US set to tighten sanctions on Ethiopia and warring parties”, *Financial Times*, 17 September 2021.

⁷² U.S. officials dismiss the suggestion that the U.S. supports a TPLF return to federal dominance. Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. official, 9 September 2021.

⁷³ “Executive Order on Imposing Sanctions on Certain Persons with Respect to the Humanitarian and Human Rights Crisis in Ethiopia”, White House, 17 September 2021.

⁷⁴ “FACT SHEET: Biden-Harris Administration Actions in Response to Ongoing Crisis in Northern Ethiopia”, White House, 17 September 2021.

⁷⁵ “An Open Letter to President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.”, Office of the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, 17 September 2021.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Tigray official, 16 September 2021.

coordination among external actors. As for the goals he lays out, Obasanjo should encourage the parties in the following direction.

As a first step to reset the tone and encourage concessions, all sides should announce that they seek a peaceful solution and are willing to recognise one another's legitimacy.⁷⁷ While the federal government should immediately remove its egregious restrictions on humanitarian assistance into Tigray, Obasanjo and others could use the moment to press it to lift any remaining controls, broaden access for donors and restore essential services to the region – such as banking, electricity and telecommunications – that have been cut off.⁷⁸ For their part of the trade-off, Tigray leaders could freeze their military positions. Tigray forces might then follow up by withdrawing from Amhara, and Amhara forces by departing western Tigray. Ethiopian parties and international allies would also have to insist that Eritrea bring its troops home from western Tigray, a request that President Isaias is likely to resist.

The long history of grievance between Amhara and Tigray, rubbed raw by the current war's events, is a major obstacle to untangling the knot of western Tigray and will present a special challenge for Obasanjo. Crisis Group and others, including the U.S. government, have called for the withdrawal of Amhara forces, whose occupation even the federally appointed Tigray interim administrators opposed.⁷⁹ But all sides are dug in. The Amhara say western Tigray is historically Amhara land that the TPLF violently seized as it consolidated power in the 1990s. They are disinclined to relinquish control of the land, especially now that Tigray forces occupy Amhara territory, where locals report them committing atrocities.⁸⁰ Meanwhile, Tigray leaders are dead set on reclaiming the west. They say the Amhara takeover in the wake of the November 2020 federal intervention was an unconstitutional annexation that led to mass expulsion of Tigrayans – a charge that echoes the historical Amhara complaint.

Over the long term, there are ways that the parties could deal with the western Tigray issue other than perpetual warfare, such as via joint administration, agreements to ensure minority rights protection or creation of an autonomous area. Initial talks could aim toward eliciting Tigray and Amhara region pledges to engage in peaceful

⁷⁷ A senior Tigray official told Crisis Group: "There must be a sign that the federal government wants to come to the negotiating table. Once they have demonstrated their intent, we will come on board". Crisis Group telephone interview, 16 September 2021.

⁷⁸ Comments from Tigray's leadership suggest that federal action on unlocking aid and services is required as a first step toward a cessation of hostilities. "Interview with Getachew Reda", The Tigray Intercept, 12 September 2021. For his part, Abiy told top international officials that the federal government would switch on banking services in Tigray only weeks after Tigray forces have ended hostilities and pulled back to their home region. Crisis Group telephone interview, international organisation official, 4 August 2021.

⁷⁹ "Tigray: It has been announced that the Tigray Interim Administration has taken a stance for Eritrean troops to withdraw", BBC Amharic, 4 March 2021.

⁸⁰ Several sources have reported the allegations. On Kobo town in Amhara's north, for example, see "Then the killing started": Witnesses accuse Tigray fighters", Associated Press, 29 September 2021. The Amhara claim is built on the fact that the area was part of the pre-federal state province of Gondar, which mostly came under the Amhara region when federal administrative boundaries were drawn according to ethno-linguistic settlement patterns in the 1990s. Additionally, Amhara activists say the TPLF violently removed Amhara people from the area in the 1980s and 1990s. The TPLF position is that the area became part of Tigray under the 1995 constitution as Tigrinya speakers were found to predominate. Crisis Group Briefing, *Bridging the Divide in Ethiopia's North*, op. cit.

consultations to address competing claims and grievances.⁸¹ But to have a chance of reaching a lasting settlement, the parties must first stabilise the area, which would as a first step likely involve reaching a consensus on interim security arrangements for the disputed land. Because they are at war with the central authorities, Tigray's leaders would be unlikely to accept federal forces as a solution, even on a temporary basis. Nor is Amhara likely to yield control of the territory to an actor it gravely mistrusts.

One solution, unlikely though it may currently seem, may be an international presence endorsed by all the parties. For political, practical and other reasons, this solution could be effective only if it is introduced at a point when Addis Ababa and the other parties are looking for a solution for how to secure western Tigray, and actively support the idea of bringing in international peacekeepers.⁸² The motivation for the parties to take this step would be that such a force could reassure both Amhara and Tigray authorities that neither side will try to control territory while grievances relating to western Tigray are being resolved. It would therefore give them the sense of security they need to demilitarise. Peacekeepers would also soothe all sides' worries about renewed conflict flaring while negotiators are seeking solutions to Ethiopia's political crisis and outlining Tigray's precarious future relations with the Ethiopian state.⁸³

For the present, there are numerous obstacles in the way of the peacekeeping idea, not least that Ethiopia's government would vehemently oppose any such suggestion, labelling it as a violation of sovereignty, and that Tigray's leaders believe they have every right to forcibly end Amhara control of western Tigray. But given the possibility that all sides may at some point see sense in looking for peaceful remedies, the AU, UN and their member states should at least begin considering what would be required to stand up and sustain such a mission.

Coaxing the parties toward and then down a de-escalatory path will be no easy task for Obasanjo, and he will need ample support, starting with a capable team. To this end, the AU Commission and AU member states should provide him with the resources and authority to bring on board the experts he needs, including from the UN system, if he requests them.⁸⁴

While ending the bloodshed in the north must be the priority for all, Ethiopians will also need to come together in a national dialogue – at the appropriate time – to chart the country's path toward a more harmonious future. The government already plans such a dialogue and Obasanjo should use his broad writ to support this home-grown process where appropriate. To boost its chances of success, the planned discus-

⁸¹ Future policies to ease tensions could include much stronger minority rights protection for Amhara in western Tigray, such as the right to be educated in the Amharic language at public schools. Other options include joint Tigray and Amhara administration or the creation of an autonomous administration for people who identify as ethnic Welkait. Resource sharing, especially of sesame exports, could also be part of the solution. Some of these ideas are discussed in Crisis Group Briefing, *Bridging the Divide in Ethiopia's North*, op. cit.

⁸² Because of the possibility of "apocalyptic" violence, a group of anonymous Ethiopians has also called for peacekeepers in western Tigray. "Reflection by concerned Ethiopians to Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Amhara state and Tigray state", World Peace Foundation, 22 July 2021.

⁸³ Tigray's leaders have said a referendum on Tigray's independence is necessary. Crisis Group interview, senior Tigray official, 1 October 2021.

⁸⁴ A Western diplomat expressed concern that the Commission was constraining Obasanjo by providing him merely with a "note taker and suitcase carrier" when he needs a full team of Ethiopia, cease-fire and mediation experts. Crisis Group telephone interview, 1 October 2021.

sions should include some of Tigray's dissident leaders, jailed top Oromo and other opposition figures, and representatives of other armed groups, including from Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz regions.⁸⁵

V. Conclusion

Unless all sides in Ethiopia make the necessary concessions to bring about a cessation of hostilities, followed by talks, many thousands more people will die amid conflict and famine. More war would also threaten the federal government's authority and possibly even the Ethiopian state's integrity and stability. Its collapse would have disastrous consequences not just for many of Ethiopia's 110 million people but also for other Horn of Africa nations, all of which border the country. Some federal allegations against the Tigray leaders may well be valid, including that their attitude and actions have helped destabilise the country. But leaders in Addis Ababa are also responsible for the present situation and the Tigray forces have shown that they are formidable and cannot be completely defeated. The leaders who brought about this catastrophe may not be able to erase that part of their legacy, but by taking conciliatory steps they could begin to build a new and better one – as peacemakers and architects of a more stable future for Ethiopia.

Nairobi/Brussels, 26 October 2021

⁸⁵ As Abiy reiterated at his inauguration, there are plans for a government-sanctioned national dialogue, but no indication that discussions will involve armed group representatives or members of designated terrorist organisations, which would exclude the TPLF and others whose participation would be required in order for the dialogue to succeed. Brook Abdu, "National dialogue to launch in October", *The Reporter*, 11 September 2021. Seleshi Tessema and Addis Getachew, "Ethiopian leader promises inclusive national dialogue", Anadolu Agency, 4 October 2021. For more background, see "War and Repression in Ethiopia Make National Dialogue Ever More Pressing", Crisis Group Commentary, 29 January 2021.

Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

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