



After Agreement in Ethiopia's Tigray Region, What Stands in the Way of Lasting Peace?

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A peace deal between Tigrayan forces and the Ethiopian government signed in November 2022 raised hopes that the war in northern Ethiopia—one of the world's deadliest conflicts in recent years—was finally drawing to a close. Since the war erupted in November 2020, it has claimed at least 600,000 lives according to some estimates, and has left Tigray in ruins, with many Tigrayans struggling to obtain basic needs and medical care. Yet, despite the peace agreement and some tepid movement toward implementation, the situation remains tense, and there is much that stands in the way of lasting peace in the region.

Conflict Draws in Armed Actors

When Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister in 2018, hopes were high that he would reform the country's politics and move it toward more democratic governance. Acclaim for the young politician grew when he traveled to Eritrea and put an end to the “no war, no peace” tensions between Ethiopia

and Eritrea.

In 2019, Abiy announced the creation of the Prosperity Party (PP) to replace the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which had governed the country for nearly three decades. While most of the constituent parties in the EPRDF agreed to join the new political entity, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)—the lead faction of the EPRDF—refused to do so, describing the new party as “illegal and reactionary.”

Tensions worsened between the TPLF and the federal government during the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of public health concerns, the Ethiopian government delayed elections scheduled for August 2020, which the TPLF condemned. Tigray held regional elections in September 2020. In October 2020, the Ethiopian federal government dramatically cut funding to the Tigray region, which one Tigrayan official described as “tantamount to a declaration of war.” In November 2020, mistrust and frustration boiled over into violence when the TPLF launched an attack on Ethiopia's Northern Command.

While the conflict initially involved only the TPLF and the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), it quickly drew in other national and international actors. Eritrean forces reportedly joined the conflict as early as December 2020, though the Ethiopian government obfuscated and denied their involvement. The Ethiopian federal government also rapidly mobilized regional defense forces, most notably the Amhara regional special forces, which the youth militia *Fano* fought alongside.

The TPLF also brokered alliances, bringing together a variety of Tigrayans to form the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF). The Ethiopian government claims that members of the *Samri*, a youth militia, fought alongside the rebels, though Tigrayan officials dispute this. In summer 2021, Tigray rebel forces announced a partnership with the Oromo Liberation Army, a splinter faction of the long-running Oromo Liberation Front, with whom the TPLF has a fraught history.

The conflict has been characterized not only by the multitude of armed actors, but also by possible war crimes and devastating impacts on civilians' lives. The Ethiopian government implemented a telecommunications, electricity, and banking blackout that lasted for roughly two years, effectively cutting Tigrayans off from the rest of the world. Furthermore, the Ethiopian government has persistently blocked the distribution of aid; in December 2022, an estimated 5.5 million people in Northern Ethiopia were facing “severe acute food insecurity.” Doctors without Borders reported that civilian healthcare infrastructure in Tigray was deliberately targeted by armed actors. Of the 106 facilities visited by the team, nearly 90 percent were “no longer functioning or fully functioning.”

The details surrounding the conduct of war remain murky—the telecommunications blackout, expulsion of journalists, and online misinformation campaigns all make it difficult to obtain and verify information. The Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia's report, released in September 2022, “concluded that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the Federal Government of Ethiopia and its allies have committed crimes against humanity in Tigray region, indicating that some are ongoing” and that there were “reasonable grounds to believe that Tigrayan forces have also committed war crimes and human rights abuses, including large-scale killings of Amhara civilians, rape and sexual violence, and widespread looting and destruction of civilian property.” Furthermore, some analysts have identified issues with reporting on the Ethiopian conflict in one of the major conflict datasets.

Incomplete Peace Agreement Challenged by Fractured Environment

Beyond establishing a cessation of hostilities between the TPLF and Ethiopian forces, the November 2022 peace agreement also includes measures intended to reintroduce normality into the Tigray region, along with some measures to ensure compliance with the deal. “Foreign troops”—which implies but doesn’t explicitly name Eritrea’s forces, alongside non-ENDF forces—are to withdraw from Tigray, and the Tigrayan forces disarm. The federal authority is also granted access to Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region.

The agreement outlines other guarantees, including the protection of civilians’ human rights; the resumption of public services in the region; the unobstructed flow of humanitarian supplies to Tigray; and a provision affirming that the two parties will facilitate the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees to the region. It also underscores the need for accountability for wartime violations. Both parties agreed to the monitoring of the peace deal through a Joint Committee consisting of representatives from both sides, the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), and the African Union (AU).

While a valuable first step toward peace, the agreement exhibits shortcomings. Perhaps the most glaring of these is the absence of many of the conflict’s belligerents; the agreement did specify that “the ENDF shall safeguard the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security of the country from foreign incursion and ensure that there will be no provocation or incursion from either side of the border,” and that “the Parties commit to and declare an immediate and Permanent Cessation of Hostilities, and undertake to disengage forces or armed groups under their control,” but did not name the specific forces to be addressed. It is unclear whether Eritrean and Amhara forces will be bound by the agreement.

In recent weeks, a number of reports have suggested that Eritrean forces have been seen leaving Tigray. If this is the case, it is a heartening development; however, some reports suggest that these Eritrean troops may be redeploying to other locations. If Eritrean forces remain in the region, it could undermine efforts to broker peace, and would have implications for the safety of Tigrayan civilians. In December 2022, there were still reports of Eritrean soldiers engaging in looting and violence against civilians, and any continued presence is an ongoing threat.

Concerns over Amhara’s armed groups are further complicated by fractures in the allyship between Amhara’s various forces and the Ethiopian federal government. While Amhara forces fought alongside the ENDF throughout the war, the priorities of Amhara’s militias have not always aligned with regional or national governments. In an attempt to exercise control over increasingly independent Amhara groups, the Ethiopian government carried out mass arrests of militia members and a military leader (among others) in May 2022, exposing fluid alliances but also possibly stoking more mistrust and straining relations.

Though reports of Amhara forces leaving some cities in Tigray are a heartening sign that they are willing to abide by the agreement, these forces have remained in Western Tigray, and a humanitarian in the region noted that there were still “significant numbers” of Amhara forces present even in places they are withdrawing from. Taken together, this presents an acute risk of conflict resurgence in Tigray.

Growing animosities could disincentivize Amhara's groups from taking the peace deal seriously, while whispers of Amharan defection might put the TPLF back on the defensive. Tenuous alliances could significantly shift fault lines and undermine the potential for sustainable peace in the region.

There are also signs of possible divisions within the TPLF. Reports say that Debretsion Gebremicael did not receive enough votes from the central committee during the most recent election to continue as leader of the group—a result of differing visions for the organization's future and some aspects of the peace agreement. If a leadership change is afoot in the TPLF, the new vanguard may not be particularly keen on implementing the agreement. Furthermore, there are reportedly divides related to the formation of an interim administration, with Tigrayan opposition parties concerned about exclusion from the body. There are also some reports of alienation from Ethiopia in general among Tigrayans. As one survivor stated, "I am only Tigrayan now, not Ethiopian—if we were Ethiopian, the government wouldn't let us be raped by soldiers." Such sentiments, particularly in the absence of accountability for wartime atrocities, can undermine efforts to implement the peace agreement.

While the peace agreement indicates plans for the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of TPLF combatants and the retention of a single Ethiopian defense force, presumably with the intention to disarm the various Amhara forces that fought alongside the Ethiopian government during the war, the provision is notably vague on specifics. TPLF rebels were reported to have begun disarming in mid-January, but that was over two months after the agreement was signed and over a month after disarmament was set to be completed. The TPLF recently stated that about 65 percent of their army had withdrawn from the frontlines, and, while avoiding details, added that some forces remained on the ground "due to the problems they [anti-peace forces] are creating." The continued presence of TPLF forces on the frontlines is emblematic of unsettled concerns and potential mistrust that may ultimately lend itself to a recirculation of arms. Partial adherence to DDR protocols—perhaps indicative of limitations in one or both parties' political capacity and will—might chip away at confidence in the peace agreement.

Furthermore, the agreement does not suggest a way forward on the issue of control over contested territory between Amhara and Tigray. After TPLF forces took control of the area in July 2021, reports surfaced of atrocities committed by the group against Amhara civilians. Throughout the course of the war, Tigrayans in this disputed area faced ethnic cleansing campaigns by Amhara security forces and their allies. Additionally, as of early January, tens of thousands of refugees remained in Sudan, either unable or unwilling to return home. According to the peace agreement, it is the responsibility of the Ethiopian government to assist in the "return and reintegration" of both IDPs and refugees, so long as it is safe to do so, but there is little information on the status of reincorporation. The peace deal mandates that the Ethiopian government implement a "transitional justice policy" for accountability of atrocities committed during the war that is in line with Ethiopia's constitution and the AU Transitional Justice Policy Framework. This is to be developed in consultation with stakeholders and civil society groups. However, details—such as what the timeline is and who (precisely) will be given a seat at the decision-making table—remain unclear. And for some, Ethiopia's resistance to a United Nations (UN) investigation in 2021 calls into question its commitment to criminal accountability.

The implementation of the agreement also exhibits a variety of shortcomings that could scuttle prospects for peace. For example, while the agreement provides for the restoration of public services in Tigray and the passage of aid, as of January 2023, much of Tigray remains disconnected and humanitarian aid that does enter the region continues to fall short of needs, with some areas

remaining inaccessible to aid workers. In August of 2022, the World Food Programme (WFP) estimated that nearly half of Tigray's population was facing severe hunger; the UN stated that over half of this population had received aid, though the current flow of aid was still insufficient.

Furthermore, tensions are rising in Oromia. The Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups are each alleging killings committed by the other, while deadly attacks have been reported in recent weeks. The peace agreement has offered hope for the Tigray region, but the persistence of instability in Oromia underscores the myriad challenges Ethiopia faces on the road to peace. Recently, Abiy has increased military operations against the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), which was not a party to the agreement despite at least a nominal, one-time partnership with the Tigrayan forces.

Despite unresolved issues in Tigray, Abiy's attention has diverted to, among other things, fighting in Oromia, border disputes with Sudan, and severe drought, while the international community, wary of decisive action during the war, may be eager to turn their focus elsewhere. On February 3, Abiy met with Tigrayan leaders to discuss the implementation of the peace agreement thus far, but there has been little reporting on what was discussed or agreed to at the meeting. An end to this conflict is not guaranteed, and divisions within Tigray have been reified by atrocities committed by both sides. Addressing gaps, creating accountability, and reaching resolution necessitate that pressure be placed on domestic, regional, and international parties. Building trust requires calls for accountability and investment in reconciliation processes to be answered in a way that is grounded in context.

Thus, while a peace agreement between Tigrayan forces and the Ethiopian government is a heartening step toward resolving the conflict in Northern Ethiopia, it has a long way to go to being a holistic blueprint for durable peace.

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