

AFRICA

Peace deal ending Ethiopia's Tigray war yet to dispel fear of more atrocities

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NAIROBI — A three-month-old peace deal in Ethiopia has revived humanitarian aid and restored telephone links and electricity to the northern region of Tigray, but many families there are still fearful because of the continued presence of soldiers from neighboring Eritrea, blamed for a wave of atrocities during the two-year war.

Despite widespread reports of a pullout by the Eritreans, who have supported Ethiopian government forces, residents in three Tigrayan cities said in interviews that they had seen Eritrean soldiers as recently as Tuesday. Others said family members in rural areas had informed them that soldiers there also had not left.

“We are not at peace when we live in fear,” said one resident, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

Over the weekend, an ostentatious convoy of hundreds of vehicles carrying Eritrean soldiers drove north through Tigray, raising hopes among some residents that the soldiers were finally withdrawing. Soldiers blared horns and waved Eritrean flags, according to a video shared with The Washington Post, and taunting messages were inscribed on the sides of the trucks. “We are savage to our enemies,” read one.

It remains unclear whether the Eritrean soldiers were pulling out or just repositioning. The governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea have not issued public statements, and journalists’ access to the region remains severely restricted, making it difficult to determine the status of the Eritreans, who entered the war in its early days to support embattled Ethiopian troops who had been overwhelmed by the seizure of their bases by Tigrayan rebel forces.

Tigrayan forces and Ethiopia’s central government signed a peace deal on Nov. 2 in South Africa, ending a conflict that displaced more than 2 million people, cost hundreds of thousands of lives and threatened the integrity of Africa’s second-most-populous nation. The cessation in fighting has improved the lives of millions, clearing the way for thousands of trucks carrying food and other aid to reach the starving region.

But the deal skirted the thorniest issues and did not involve — or even mention — Eritrea, whose soldiers rapidly gained a reputation for brutality. Tigrayan residents accused them of systematic gang rapes, sexual slavery, industrial-scale looting and frequent mass killings of civilians — allegations supported by independent human rights groups and journalists' investigations.

Eritrean Information Minister Yemane Gebremeskel did not respond to requests for comment on how many Eritrean soldiers were present in Tigray and how long they would remain, or address reports of atrocities. Ethiopia's national security adviser, Redwan Hussein, and the prime minister's spokeswoman, Billene Seyoum, also did not respond to requests for comment.

Tigrayan residents, stung by multiple reports of an Eritrean withdrawal over the past month, provided The Post with photographs and videos taken in their cities over the past two weeks showing Eritrean soldiers in their camouflage uniforms and trademark plastic sandals. The pictures and videos, verified by The Post, show Eritrean soldiers strolling through the town of Axum in northern Tigray. Witnesses also spoke of Eritrean soldiers near Adigrat and in other towns.

On Tuesday, residents in the towns of Axum, Adwa and Sheraro said some Eritrean soldiers were still present.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken tweeted Saturday that he had spoken to Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and that “the ongoing withdrawal of Eritrean troops is a critical step in securing hope and peace.”

Ethiopia desperately needs money to rebuild its economy. It has a \$907 million financing pact with the World Bank but is also seeking debt restructuring and wants its suspension from a preferential U.S. trade deal to be lifted. “To have international funding and financing flow, Eritrea must withdraw,” a diplomat said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

In the Tigray region, doctors at hospitals in three cities said last week that women were still coming in and reporting that they had been raped by Eritrean soldiers. Residents said in interviews that the Eritreans were also routinely looting food, animals and any remaining phones or equipment from the impoverished population.

In Adwa, two residents said Eritrean soldiers rounded up a group of young men from the marketplace in mid-January. They have not been seen since. The residents said relatives were appealing to the Ethiopian military for news. Col. Getnet Adane, an Ethiopian military spokesman, did not respond to a request for comment.

When the conflict first erupted, Eritrea and Ethiopia both spent months denying the presence of Eritrean troops in Tigray. The intervention eventually became obvious, but the number of soldiers sent to Ethiopia has never been disclosed.

In Eritrea, residents reported unprecedented levels of forced military conscription last year. In November, one resident of the capital, Asmara, reported counting more than a dozen homes on five streets that had been sealed by the government. Household evictions have become a common punishment if a family member runs away from mandatory military service or if a family refuses to inform on relatives who had done so.

Still, the peace agreement between the Ethiopian government and Tigrayan rebels has already brought relief to doctors who had watched patients die for lack of basic medicine in the months when aid was blocked, and to the families of combatants and civilians who survived.

The Tigrayan forces handed over an estimated two-thirds of their heavy weapons to the government this month, the diplomat said. In addition to the resumption of humanitarian aid, life has improved as electricity has been restored to the main towns, and two local banks are permitting small cash withdrawals for the first time since November 2020. Phone connections have been restored in the main towns.

Flights between Mekelle in Tigray and the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, have also resumed, although passengers say there have been restrictions over who is allowed to board.

One woman waiting at the airport for two days said she witnessed four families exuberantly reunite, only for the returning member to suddenly collapse as they realized someone was missing or noticed the traditional gauzy Ethiopian white shawl, the netela, was being worn in the mourning fashion. Families traditionally do not like to break news of a death over the phone, preferring to put it off until it can be told in person.

When relatives are farther away, the news can take even longer to filter through. A health professional living abroad said he had spoken to his family on the phone three times since the peace deal.

Each time, he asked to speak to his father, who was a priest and farmer, and was told he was at church. In fact, his father had died in November, after being ill for two weeks, when local hospitals had no medicine to treat him.

Finally, his family managed to contact other Ethiopian expatriates in the city he lived in. Two went to knock on his door. When he opened it and saw their formal attire, he knew his father was dead.

“I just wanted to hold his hands and show my love to him. That’s what hurts my heart,” he said. “I did not put any soil on his coffin.”

Le reported from Washington.