



Stakes Of The Ethiopia-Tigray Peace Agreement

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The two year long war that began in November 2020 in Ethiopia's Tigrayan region may have killed as many as 600,000 civilians, says African Union envoy Olusegun Obasanjo. It also displaced one million civilians who are now in desperate need of

humanitarian aid. Thanks to mediation efforts from the United States (U.S.) and the African Union (AU), peace was restored on November 2022 after a few failed ceasefires. The peace deal has the potential to provide a long-sustainable peace for Ethiopia provided that there is commitment from both sides to effectively implement the agreements and work on their differences.

The conflict escalated from a political dispute between the government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

The TPLF is a former ruling political party that ruled Ethiopia from 1991 to 2019. It ruled Ethiopia as a federal system in which different ethnic groups control the affairs of 10 regions. Although Ethiopia became more prosperous under the coalition there were protests demanding human rights and more democracy. The demonstrations eventually intensified leading to a government reshuffle that saw Abiy Ahmed appointed to prime minister.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed liberalized politics, set up a new party – the Prosperity Party (a merger of three former EPRDF member parties) and removed key Tigrayan government leaders accused of corruption and repression. In response, the TPLF leaders said they were being unfairly targeted in corruption prosecution, blamed for the country's poor economy, thus, they withdrew from merging into the new party. But things worsened when the TPLF held its own regional elections in Tigray 2020, in defiance of the federal government's decision to postpone elections due to COVID-19. And on 3 November 2020, Tigray forces and allied local militia attacked Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF). In retaliation, the Ethiopian government launched an offensive in Tigray on 4 November, marking the start of the war.

The road to a peace deal

Five days into the conflict, on the 9th of November, the TPFL leader, Gebremicheal, sought peace negotiations by requesting intervention from the AU to stop the war. Abiy rejected the proposed peace talks despite calls from the AU and the U.S. for a peace deal. Abiy accused TPLF of preparing for war since 2018 (organizing and drafting militias) and for rebelling against the federal government by having an "illegal election." And promised Ethiopia would solve the issue itself. Nonetheless, the international community including the AU, the U.S., and Kenya held meetings and summits to discuss how a peace deal could be achieved between the Ethiopian federal government and the TPLF.

In July 2021, after losing ground to the Tigray Defense Force including the Tigrayan capital, Mekelle, the Ethiopian federal government announced a unilateral ceasefire but still held the Tigray region under a "starvation siege." TPLF responded with seven pre-conditions for a ceasefire which included the withdrawal of the Ethiopian Defence Force and Amhara militias in the Tigrayan region, humanitarian access, and restoral of basic services. This move helped to deescalate tension and opened opportunities for mediation for peace talks – the TPLF on December 2021 announced it will withdraw from Amhara and Afar (but only completed later in April 2022) with the hope of creating, "a decisive opening for peace." And the ENDF stated that it would not advance any deeper into the Tigray region, and on January 2022 released several opposition prisoners saying they desired to have a dialogue with the Tigrayan leadership. But fighting continued.

On March 2022, two weeks after a reported secret meeting between Ethiopia's field marshal, Birhanu Jula and Tigray's lieutenant general, Tsadkan Gebretensae in Seychelles by the U.S. officials, the Ethiopian government announced an indefinite humanitarian truce to allow humanitarian aid in Tigray. This truce opened possibilities for a ceasefire period that, unfortunately, only lasted five months due to disagreement in peace negotiations.

First, the TPLF wanted their pre-conditions met before peace talks could begin especially the restoration of essential services in Tigray. The Ethiopian government dismissed the demand, saying that it was a separate issue from the ceasefire talks, and would require a more stable environment for it to come into effect. Moreover, the conflicting parties could not agree on a mediator. Abiy refused mediation from Sudan stating that Sudan is not a "credible party" to mediate, and favoured the AU's Horn of Africa envoy Olusegun Obasanjo, the Tigrayan leadership, on the other hand, preferred Kenya's former President, Uhuru Kenyatta to lead mediation efforts. This was, mainly due to TPLF's perception was that Obasanjo was too friendly with the Ethiopian government, and therefore claimed that Kenyatta would be more neutral. This disagreement resulted in a failed ceasefire.

The U.S. organized another meeting to negotiate peace talks on September 2022, this time the TPLF agreed to have the AU as a mediator in the peace talk, whom they strictly opposed before. On 2 November, after 10 days of discussions, Ethiopia and the TPLF signed a peace agreement in Pretoria, South Africa. An agreement that brings a permanent cessation of hostilities. Due to commitment from both sides, peace prevails six months later it was signed.

The Peace agreement

On paper, the agreement promises long sustainable peace provided that both parties commit themselves to implementing the agreed articles. The agreement addresses the root causes of the conflict and establishes a mechanism to ensure the effective implantation of the pact.

One of the key pillars of the agreement that promotes a long lasting-sustainable peace is Article 6, it outlines the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process in which the TPLF agreed to disarm off all heavy and light weapons. This process will help establish a permanent cessation of hostilities and ensure that the ENDF is the only legal defense force in Ethiopia.

Articles 7 and 9 also play an important role in promoting sustainable peace, it stipulates measures to address the root causes of the conflict. The sections focus on building confidence between TPLF and FDRE. Abiy's government agreed to facilitate the representation of the Tigray region in the federal institutions, including the House of Federation, and the House of Peoples' Representatives, and to lift the terrorist designation of the TPLF, making them a legal party in Ethiopia. This signals a "genuine belief in the peace accord," says Temitope Olodo, Africa Security Forum's president.

This is essential to the TPLF as their presence in the federal government and ministerial cabinet weakened since Abiy Ahmed took power as prime minister. The parties also agreed on resolving their issues of contested areas which would be their political differences that caused the war. In return, the TPLF agreed to refrain

from conscription, training, deployment, mobilization or preparation for conflict, and to respect the constitutional mandate of the FDRE and halt any attempt of bringing an unconstitutional change of government.

To ensure the effective implementation of this agreement, both parties agreed to establish a Joint Committee comprising representatives from each party, representatives from Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and chaired by the African Union through the High-Level Panel. The committee will monitor, verify, and ensure compliance with the agreement with the guidance of experts from the AU high-level panel. This mechanism plays an important role in maintaining permanent cessation of hostilities, it provides a platform for both parties to voice any potential grievance and be mediated by the AU high-level panel before it escalates to war.

Overall, the peace agreement has the potential to provide Ethiopia with long-sustainable peace. The peace agreement addresses key issues (disputes in political reforms) that started the conflict and established a mechanism to ensure effective implementation of the accord. However, the success of this accord depends on both conflicting parties' commitment to the pact.

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