



African Union, United Nations, and the Crisis in Ethiopia

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Ethiopia's military offensive in Tigray achieved the central government's primary goal of regaining control over state territory. However, the Ethiopian authorities has not proposed a viable political solution, which heralds a long-lasting guerrilla conflict. Their rejection of African Union (AU) mediation means there is a need for greater international effort—including by Europe—at stabilisation.

Background of the Conflict. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) were the main force fighting the communist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam. After he was overthrown in 1991, the TPLF controlled the country, nominally through a coalition of parties representing the Oromo, Amhara, and southern peoples. The group created one of the most repressive systems in Africa, and the Tigrayans (about 6% of Ethiopia's population) took key positions in the central administration, power structures, and the economy. They lost them after 2018 [when the reformist Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took power](#). The TPLF then withdrew to its home province of Tigray where it retained full power. It ignored arrest warrants and nominations for civilian and military positions from the capital. After pan-Ethiopian elections, originally set for August, were delayed due to the pandemic, the TPLF declared that the mandate of the prime minister had expired. In September, the TPLF organised elections—which had been banned—for provincial authorities, in which it obtained 98% of the votes. Contact with the central authorities was completely severed and the Ethiopian government ceased to recognise and finance Tigray structures.

In its dispute with the central government, the TPLF presents itself as a defender of the Ethiopian version of the federal system—[ethnic federalism](#). It gives ethnically defined provinces autonomy, for example, their own armed forces and political parties. However, it also fuels centrifugal tendencies and weakens the sense of ties with the state. Ahmed has tried to increase the central government's say in the provinces. In place of the

dysfunctional coalition of ethnic groups, he created a new pan-Ethiopian Prosperity Party, which the TPLF opposes.

The Course of the Fighting. In early November, the TPLF attacked Ethiopian military bases in Tigray, killing and abducting soldiers and seizing military equipment. In response, the Ethiopian authorities announced an offensive against the TPLF, cutting the province off from the internet and keeping journalists out. As a result, there were no reliable reports from the ground. Although the Ethiopian military had better weapons, including drones obtained from the United Arab Emirates, the Tigrayans had the advantage in numbers and field experience. The central government engaged regional forces from Amhara Province, adjacent to Tigray, to support the offensive. The ethnic dimension of the conflict was highlighted by the Mai-Kadra massacre on 9 November when militias affiliated with the TPLF murdered around 600 seasonal workers, mainly from the Amharic minority. There were also reports of ethnically motivated attacks by pro-government Amharic forces against Tigrayans. An offensive against the region's capital, Mekelle, announced by the government, risked widespread civilian casualties and destruction. Ultimately, the TPLF forces evacuated the city and federal troops declared victory on 28 November. Despite declarations that the central authorities would restore order, begin reconstruction, and readmit refugees, European diplomats report a breakdown in security in the province and widespread robbery. TPLF leaders in turn announced a guerrilla fight.

In the course of the fighting, Tigray forces bombarded the capital of neighbouring Eritrea with missiles several times, wanting to draw it into the war to legitimise the TPLF's

actions and give it a chance for a favourable political solution. However, these actions were not successful. Eritrea's involvement—officially denied—remained discreet, and the TPLF did not gain allies elsewhere in the country or abroad. The conflict indirectly affected Somalia as Ethiopia withdrew its forces supporting the AU mission (financed by the EU) in this country. This boosted armed groups in Somalia. Ethiopian authorities have removed Tigray officials from AU structures. They also accused—without evidence—the head of the WHO, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (a Tigrayan), of organising support for the TPLF.

The conflict has sparked a humanitarian crisis. The federal authorities blocked bank accounts in Tigray, which deprived some of its inhabitants of their livelihood. Even before the conflict, 600,000 people in the province benefited from various forms of international aid, which has now ceased. Although the UN obtained approval to include Tigray in humanitarian programmes, the ongoing fighting is holding them back. About a million people have been internally displaced and more than 50,000 have fled to neighbouring Sudan. France, Germany, and the UNHCR pledged support for them while in Sudan. Although the first relief convoy reached Mekelle on 12 December, Ethiopia refuses to allow independent commissions to enter the province to investigate human rights violations.

The Weakening of the African Union. The UN Security Council was due to deliberate on the conflict in Tigray on 24 November, but its African non-permanent members—Niger, South Africa, and Tunisia—insisted on giving priority to the AU diplomatic mission, which was being prepared. As a result, only some UNSC members met informally, without conclusions, as the AU assumed the main role in calming the conflict. The AU sent a delegation of former presidents (from South Africa, Mozambique, Liberia) to Addis Ababa to mediate. However, the Ethiopian authorities declared the conflict an internal matter and the TPLF unworthy of party status, invoking the principle of non-interference in the UN Charter and AU Constitutive Act. The visit of the former presidents did not prevent Ahmed from announcing during their stay the launch of the “final phase” of the operation—the offensive on Mekelle.

Ethiopia's rejection of the African diplomatic initiative marginalises the AU. The country is home to the AU's most important institutions and has historically used the organisation to promote the law-based international order.

The AU, which does not have its own strong tools for enforcing peace, builds its significance by consolidating the community approach to crises in Africa. After the genocide in Rwanda, it developed with Ethiopia's participation the principle of intervention in the event of a crisis threatening serious violations of human rights. In the past decade, AU mediation has been standard in settling African conflicts. The organisation's role grew following the successful mediation (by Ahmed himself) in Sudan in 2019. It also aims to play a greater role in Libya where a Zimbabwean diplomat was recently appointed as Assistant Secretary-General and Coordinator of the UN Support Mission.

Conclusions. Although the Ethiopian authorities declared victory and an end to the conflict in Tigray, it has entered a guerrilla phase and military operations will continue. Given the widespread support for the TPFL in the province, some form of recognition of it as a party will be necessary to stabilise the situation politically. In the long term, Ethiopia will be open to talks, which will be supported by the European Union. Poland could play an active role here and maintain visible interest in Ethiopia in international organisations. In September and October, Polish paramedics from Polish Centre for International Aid (PCPM) joined the WHO mission in Addis Ababa at one of the largest hospitals treating COVID-19 in Africa. The Mai-Kadra massacre and other human rights abuses will certainly be discussed at the 46th session of the UN Human Rights Council.

Even though the TPLF started the conflict and a firm reaction from the central government was necessary, the crisis will make it harder for Ahmed to enact reforms. Also, the radicalised TPLF may adopt an openly secessionist stance. The dispute with the AU will weaken Ethiopia's international position. This is important in view of the dispute with Egypt over the [Great Renaissance Dam](#) and Nile waters. The Ethiopian authorities hope that after U.S. President Donald Trump, who favoured Egypt, leaves office, the incoming Biden administration will take a more balanced position.

The instrumental use of the principle of non-intervention and acting against the AU's fundamental principles will reduce the role of this organisation in future conflicts. Making it more difficult is the change of AU presidency in January 2021 to the politically unstable Democratic Republic of the Congo, which will not be strong.