

**Understanding the 2020-2021 Tigray Conflict in Ethiopia –
Background, Root Causes, and Consequences**

A 2020-2021-es etiópiai Tigráj-háború –
A konfliktus háttere, okai és következményei

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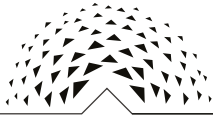
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Abstract: The military offensive unleashed on 4 November, 2020 by the central government in Addis Ababa against the regional state of Tigray is the culmination of escalating tensions between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, in power since 2018, and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Ethiopian federal troops, supported by the military forces of Amhara regional state and the Eritrean army, quickly occupied the main towns in Tigray by late November 2020, but Tigrayan forces retained control of large areas, particularly in the mountainous regions, where fighting continued. An offensive launched in June 2021 by the Tigrayan forces resulted in the recapture of the main towns, including Tigray's capital Mekelle, leading the Ethiopian government to declare a unilateral ceasefire. There are numerous testimonies on major abuses and killings of civilians and clerics by the occupying forces, as well as looting of key infrastructure, leading to a major humanitarian crisis. Humanitarian aid has been hampered by continued fighting and access restrictions. The ceasefire raised hopes that massive humanitarian aid can finally be delivered, but statements made by Abiy Ahmed in June 2021, denying the existence of famine in Tigray and accusing aid organizations of supporting Tigrayan rebels, raise fears that the government's strategy may be to maintain a blockade of Tigray, further exacerbating an already catastrophic humanitarian situation. In addition to analysing the immediate causes and consequences, this study also shows that this conflict has its roots in the long history of a country composed of more than 80 ethnic groups.

Keywords: Ethiopia, regional state of Tigray, Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)

Összefoglaló: Az Addisz-Abeában működő központi kormány által a Tigráj regionális állam ellen 2020. november 4-én indított katonai offenzíva a 2018 óta hatalmon lévő Abiy Ahmed miniszterelnök és a Tigráji Népi Felszabadítási Front (TPLF) közötti feszültségek növekedésének csúcspontja. Az etióp szövetségi hadsereg az Amhara regionális állam katonai erői és az eritreai hadsereg támogatásával 2020 november végére gyorsan elfoglalta Tigráj főbb városait, bár a tigráji erők továbbra is nagy területeket tartottak ellenőrzésük alatt, különösen a hegyvidéki régiókban, ahol folytatódtak a harcok. A tigráji erők 2021 június végén indított offenzívája lehetővé tette a főbb városok visszafoglalását, köztük Tigráj fővárosát, Mekelle-t, amit követően az etióp kormány egyoldalú tűzszünetet hirdetett. Számos jelentés szól a megszálló erők által elkövetett súlyos visszaélésekről és civilek és szerzetesek meggyilkolásáról, valamint a létfontosságú infrastruktúra kifosztásáról, ami súlyos humanitárius válsághoz vezetett. A humanitárius segítségnyújtást a folyamatos harcok és a hozzáférés korlátozása akadályozza. A tűzszünet felcsillantotta a reményt, hogy végre nagy mennyiségű humanitárius segélyt lehet célba juttatni, de Abiy

Ahmed 2021 júniusában tett nyilatkozatai, amelyekben tagadta, hogy éhínség lenne Tigrájban és a segítségszervezeteket a tigríji lázadók támogatásával vádolta, felvetik a félelmet, hogy a kormány stratégiája lehet Tigráj blokádjának fenntartása, ami tovább súlyosbítja az amúgy is katasztrofális humanitárius helyzetet. A közvetlen okok és következmények elemzése mellett ez a tanulmány azt is bemutatja, hogy ez a konfliktus a több mint 80 etnikai csoportból álló ország hosszú történelmében gyökerezik.

Kulcsszavak: Etiopia, Tigráj regionális állam, Tigríji Népi Felszabadítási Front (TPLF)

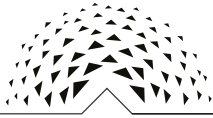
BACKGROUND

An overview of Ethiopia's geographical and historical background is key to understanding the root causes, stakes, and consequences of the Tigray conflict.

POPULATION

Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic and multilingual country with more than 80 ethnicities. It is the second most populous country on the African continent. In 2020, its population was estimated at approximately 114 million. Ethiopia's 80 ethnic groups are extremely unequal in numerical and territorial importance. Based on the 2007 census, the Oromos and the Amharas, representing 34.5 percent and 26.9 percent of the population, respectively, are the most important demographic entities. Somalis (6.2%), Tigrays (6.1%), Sidamas (4.0%), Gurages (2.5%), Welaytas (2.3%), Hadiyas (1.7%), Afars (1.7%), and Gamos (1.5%) together account for 26% of Ethiopians. The remaining 13% comprises a multitude of ethnicities. In the south of the country, the regional state called "Southern Peoples, Nationalities and Nations" is by itself a federation of over 45 ethnic groups.

Ethiopia is the second largest host country for refugees in Africa. At the beginning of 2020, it was hosting more than 735,000 refugees, of which 100,000 had arrived in 2019. 99% of the refugees are from the four neighbouring countries: South Sudan (329,000), Somalia (191,600), Eritrea (139,300), and Sudan (42,300).



GEOGRAPHY

Ethiopia, with an area of 1,106,000 km², is “the roof of Africa”: the highlands form two vast expanses separated by the great East African Rift Valley, with Tigray occupying the northern part of the highlands. A steep 2,000-meter escarpment marks the boundary between the highlands to the West and the Afar Triangle, an arid depression to the east. To the southeast lies the Ogaden plateau, a vast semi-desert area. North of the Blue Nile, the highlands fall sharply on an arid depression of the Sudanese confines.

Figure 1
Reliefs of Ethiopia



(Source: Atlas Encyclopædia Universalis)

POLITICAL SYSTEM

Ethiopia has been a federal republic since 1994, with the official name “Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia,” and it is subdivided into nine ethnically-based regional states (“Killil”), each with a large degree of autonomy, and two autonomous cities with regional state status (Addis Ababa and Dirre Daoua).

Figure 2
Administrative division of Ethiopia into regional states



Contrary to the usual view provided by many historians and what is taught in the country’s schools and universities, Ethiopia until recently was never a state organized around a central power based in Addis Ababa. Historical Ethiopia was composed of a multitude of autonomous regions and communities, under the sovereignty of an emperor called “King of Kings”. Addis Ababa was founded in 1881 and only became the capital of Ethiopia at the end of the nineteenth century.

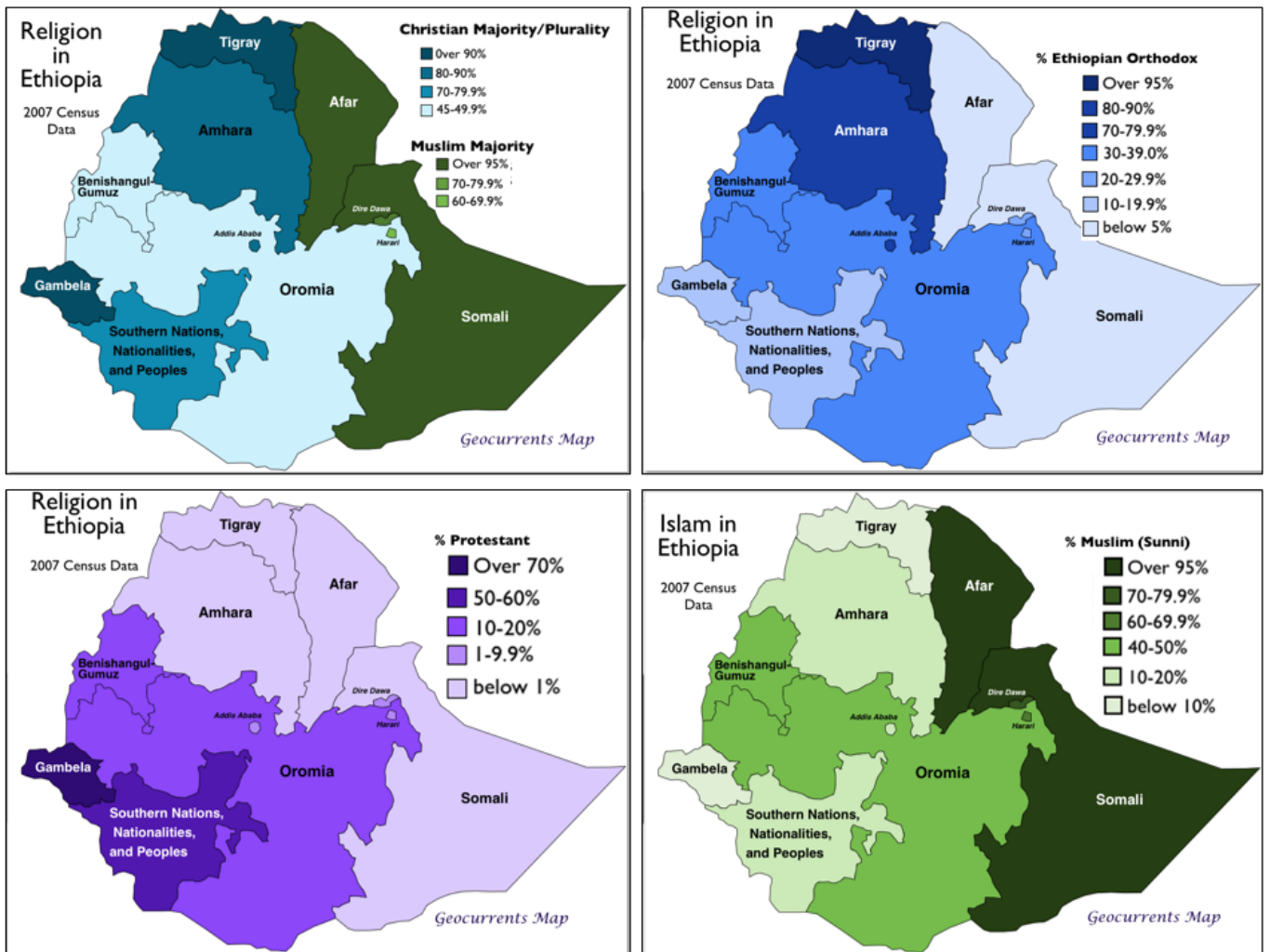
Even today, the various ethnic communities living outside the major cities, which make up about 80 percent of Ethiopia’s population, organize a significant part of their lives according to their own local laws and customs, in a hybrid relationship with the laws of the federal state, sometimes in conflict with them, other times in balance. The Ethiopian state is composed of historically very different territories, with the highlands region that constituted historical Ethiopia (only one-third of today’s Ethiopia) and the peripheric regions that were occupied by the Ethiopian state in the late nineteenth century, where there were several former states and a significant number of non-state societies with strong traditions of self-governance



RELIGION

98% of the population claims a religious affiliation. Based on the 2007 census, the distribution of religions is as follows: Christians: 62.8%, broken down as 43.5% Orthodox, 18.6% Evangelical, and 0.7% Catholic; Muslims: 33.9%, mostly Sunni; Traditional religions: 2.6%; Other: 0.6%.

Figure 3
Geographical distribution of the main religions



The *Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church* is not only a religious organization but also an institution whose origins date back to the fourth century, very closely linked to the history of the country and to Ethiopian identity in the highlands region that constitutes the historical part of Ethiopia. It is particularly dominant in the regional states of

Tigray, Amhara, and in parts of Oromiyaa. The *Evangelicals* appeared from the nineteenth century onwards and have made significant progress since 1984. They are mainly present in regions outside the historical part of Ethiopia, particularly in the southwest. *Catholicism*, despite several attempts to introduce it since the sixteenth century, has only been firmly established since the 1830s, with French and Italian missionaries playing a key role in its establishment. The Catholic Church is organized into 13 eparchies¹ spread throughout the country. A large proportion of the Catholics are in the south of the country, while northern Tigray also has a relatively large Catholic community in the Addigrat region. *Muslims* have been present since the seventh century, the beginning of Islam, when some of Mohammed's followers fled to the kingdom of Aksum due to the persecution of the first Muslims by the polytheistic chiefs of Mecca. They are dominant in Oromiyaa, Somali, and the Afar regional states.

SOME ELEMENTS OF ETHIOPIA'S HISTORY

THE KINGDOM OF AKSUM AND THE BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

The kingdom of Aksum was an important state in the Horn of Africa. It was formed in the first century around the city of Aksum and continued until the tenth century. The Aksumite kingdom was concentrated in the highlands of Tigray and Eritrea. Territorial control was highly variable and sometimes included territories in northern Sudan, Yemen, and for a long period some entry points along the Red Sea coast. Around the year 440, Axumite king Ezana adopted Christianity, and subsequent kings were also Christians. This adoption of Christianity by the kings probably aimed to strengthen ties with the Byzantines, who were their main allies, and it is at the origin of today's Eritrean and Ethiopian Orthodox churches.

Aksum is also the presumed location of the Ark of the Covenant. According to legend, the Ark was brought to Aksum and deposited in the Church of St. Mary of Zion by Menelik, the legendary son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba according to Ethiopian tradition.

This Christian heritage explains the current richness of the Orthodox heritage in the highlands area of Ethiopia, especially in Tigray, where there are many ancient churches and monasteries. The highlands region remained independent and protected from outside influences over the centuries even after the extinction of the Aksum Kingdom, which allowed the preservation of the original specificities and traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox religion, still alive today.

1 In the Eastern Churches, eparchy is the equivalent of the diocese.



ETHIOPIA FROM THE NINETEENTH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT DAY

NINETEENTH CENTURY – MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

The progressive colonization of the African continent during the nineteenth century by the European powers involved the entire African continent, except Ethiopia, which was the only area of Africa not to have been colonized, apart from a short period of Italian occupation between 1935 and 1941.

Figure 4
Evolution of Ethiopia's borders²



Source: [The history of Africa every year](#)

2 The coastal part that later became Eritrean was originally Egyptian and was transferred by the British to the Italians around 1885.

Ethiopia in its current borders is a relatively modern creation. Historical Ethiopia was about one-third the size of present-day Ethiopia and covered the geographical territory of the highlands between Addis Ababa and Asmara (the capital of Eritrea), including Tigray. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that Ethiopia, through the conquests of Emperor Menelik II, began to colonize the peripheral regions constituted as independent sultanates or kingdoms, which were gradually absorbed by Ethiopia. Menelik II initiated the creation of a centralized state organized around the capital Addis Ababa. This was later continued by his successors, resulting in imposed centralism under the predominance of the Amharic culture and language.

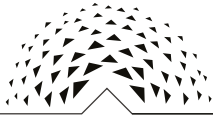
1970 - 1991

The reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, who had ruled the country since 1930, came to an end with the 1974 revolution, which was taken over by the DERG military junta controlled by Colonel Mengistu, who imposed a Marxist dictatorship on the country for almost 20 years, continuing the logic of authoritarian centralism.

In the face of this dictatorship, regional nationalist movements were organized, among which the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) played a key role in the resistance to the regime and later its overthrow in 1991. In 1989, under the initiative of the TPLF, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was formed from an alliance of four ethnic parties: the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (ODPO), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEDPM).

1991 - 2018

In 1991, rebel forces overthrew Colonel Mengistu's dictatorship, and the EPRDF came to power. The new EPRDF government broke with the centralizing policy that had been in place for decades, creating the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The new constitution of 1994 reorganized the administrative division of Ethiopia from 13 Provinces to 8 regional states and two autonomous cities with regional state status, Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa (see the map above showing Ethiopia's administrative division). It was the clear failure of the centralizing and authoritarian policy around a dominant ethnic group, the Amharas, that led the country's new leader, Meles Zenawi, from the Tigray ethnic group, to decentralize the country into a federal republic, with the motto "managing unity in diversity". Since 1994, the EPRDF coalition has always won the elections.



This federalism is based on ethnicity and language, with each regional state named not by a geographic term but by the name of an ethnic group (except for the southern regional state, which is referred to as “Southern Peoples, Nationalities and Nations”). The ethnic criterion on which the redrawing of the Ethiopian administrative map was based may be considered artificial, since none of the regional states are ethnically homogeneous. However, this administrative redrawing reflects the new government’s desire to create a federation of peoples.

Tigray Province before 1994 was the result of an artificial administrative division made by the central state, and it included Afar territories that had never been governed by the Tigrayans. It was for this reason that in 1994 those territories returned to the Afar. On the other hand, Haile Selassie had subjected Tigray’s western territories to the multi-ethnic Begemder province, although in 1994 it was decided to attach them to the Tigray regional state because these territories were Tigrinya-speaking.

Since the Tigrayans played the main role in overthrowing the communist dictatorship in 1991, the TPLF dominated political life, although they did not exclude the other ethnic parties of the EPRDF, to whom they gradually transferred some positions, especially over the last ten years. Nevertheless, the TPLF ensured that it retained control of the security forces, the police, and the army, which was largely made up of Tigrayan soldiers. The fact that the Tigrayans make up only 6 percent of the Ethiopian population was a source of tension with representatives of other ethnic groups.

In 2012, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who had led the country since 1991, passed away. He was replaced by his Deputy Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn. The new Prime Minister was from the Wolaytta ethnic group, which is a good example of the transfer of responsibilities to other ethnic parties intended by the TPLF.

2018 – 2020: ABIY AHMED COMES TO POWER – POLITICAL AND ETHNIC TENSIONS ESCALATE

The government led by Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn faced growing protests fueled by demands from the country’s majority Oromo and Amhara peoples. The protests were harshly repressed, with a state of emergency declared in February 2018, followed by Hailemariam Desalegn’s resignation. On 2 April, the parliament elected Abiy Ahmed, leader of the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization, as Prime Minister. Abiy Ahmed is a Pentecostal Christian, of Oromo origin on his father’s side and Amhara on his mother’s side. Abiy Ahmed says he wants to unify Ethiopians and run the country in a centralized manner to eliminate inter-ethnic tensions. This approach amounts to a return to the centralist politics of pre-1991.

After Abiy Ahmed came to power, tensions between the new Prime Minister and the TPLF began to escalate:

In July 2018, Abiy Ahmed signed a Peace Agreement with Eritrean President Isaias Afewerqi, which ended the state of conflict between the two countries that had existed since the 1998-2000 Ethiopian-Eritrean war about the disputed territories to the north of Tigray. Addis Ababa unconditionally recognized the borders established in 2002, following the Algiers agreements. The 2018 peace treaty is barely more than a page long and makes no mention of the details and modalities of the creation of the new border. This signing means that several territories north of Tigray will eventually have to be returned to Eritrea.

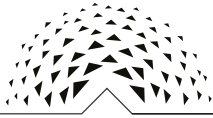
In late 2018, corruption trials targeted Tigrayan leaders, and the TPLF saw this as a move to attack the Tigrayan elite.

In December 2019, the EPRDF coalition was reorganized, and its name changed to “Prosperity Party” (PP). It comprises the four former EPRDF parties, joined by parties from the other five regional states that had previously been allied with the EPRDF but were not part of it. Abiy Ahmed’s goal was to unify the nation and break with the previous state-controlled economic policy by implementing liberal economic reforms, and leaving more room to the private sector. As a result of increasing internal tensions, the TPLF left the reorganized coalition, believing that the federal policy they had implemented since 1991 was a better way to deal with the country’s deep ethnic divisions. The TPLF also felt that the liberal outlook of the Prosperity Party was at odds with their approach to economic development based on state intervention, which they believed had helped ensure Ethiopia’s economic growth.

In March 2020, the government announced the postponement of the national elections initially scheduled for August 2020³, officially because of the COVID pandemic. The TPLF did not accept the postponement, seeing it as a move by Abiy Ahmed to stay in power. The election was, however, held in Tigray, and it was won overwhelmingly by the TPLF and its leader Debretsion Gebremichael. This situation led to each side considering the other illegitimate: the Addis Ababa government did not recognize the result of the Tigray election, organized against the central government’s decision, and the TPLF considered the Addis Ababa government to be illegitimate because it had overstayed its official term. This led to a breakdown in relations between the central government and the Tigray leadership. TPLF representatives no longer participated in the work of the parliament.

This escalation of tensions inevitably led to the outbreak of armed conflict in early November 2020.

3 The elections were finally held on 21 June, 2021, but at the time this document was finalized (1 July, 2021), the election results had still not been published.



CHRONOLOGY OF THE CONFLICT

It is difficult, if not impossible, to know which protagonist “fired first”. In fact, it does not really matter, as the outbreak of the conflict was the culmination of two years of growing tension between the two parties. According to some sources, the Amhara armed forces had been preparing to intervene militarily in western Tigray since 2018.

What is known is that on 3 November, 2020, the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) attacked several federal military bases of the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF). Debretsion Gebremichael said this was a pre-emptive operation in response to the regrouping of federal troops on Tigray’s southern border and the central government’s plan to launch a military operation to arrest Tigray’s leaders⁴.

In response to the attacks on the armed bases, Abiy Ahmed declared on 4 November a six-month state of emergency in Tigray and announced the launch of a military operation. On 5 November, the federal army began to conduct air strikes.

According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), the Tigray authorities, led by the dominant political party TPLF, have a large military force, estimated to be around 250,000 men combined. This includes (1) the Tigray Defence Force (TDF), which is the regional state’s army commanded by Gen Tsadqan Gebretensae, a military strategist who led the fight against the Mengistu dictatorship, (2) well-trained village militias, and (3) the regional police force that joined the TDF. In addition, the TPLF enjoys significant support from the six million Tigrayans. Indeed, the TPLF is deeply rooted in the people of Tigray, as it is not only a political party but also an organization that has implemented many development programs in Tigray over the past 30 years and has defended the interests of the Tigrayans.

These large Tigrayan military forces probably explain why the Amhara armed forces and the Eritrean army joined the Ethiopian army in the land occupation of Tigray, the federal army probably being weak compared to the Tigrayan forces. In addition, at the beginning of the conflict in November 2020, many Tigrayan soldiers left the federal army ENDF to join the Tigrayan forces.

The Ethiopian and Eritrean governments initially denied that the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) had entered Tigray, and it was not until more than five months later that Eritrean President Isaias Afewerqi and Abiy Ahmed finally acknowledged the presence of Eritrean troops while announcing that they would soon be withdrawn.

On 12 November, 2020, the Ethiopian government claimed to have seized the western part of Tigray. In the following days, the main towns in Tigray were gradually occupied by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces, until they took control of Tigray’s capital city Mekelle, after which Abiy Ahmed declared the military confrontation to be over. The reality was quite different: the TDF still retained control of large areas, especially in the hard-to-reach mountainous areas, so that fighting continued over much of Tigray.

4 According to unverified oral sources, military aircraft flew from Addis Ababa to Tigray on 3 November with orders to arrest the Tigray leaders

The maps below are a simplified representation of how control of Tigray has evolved during the conflict between November 2020 and May 2021. The actual situation is much more complex, as many areas of Tigray have been disputed between the TDF and Ethiopian and Eritrean forces (ENDF, EDF), particularly in northern and central Tigray.

Eritrea took advantage of the conflict to annex areas of northern Tigray that the border commission established under the Algiers agreements had granted them, particularly the Badme region and the northern Irob District, which until then had not been returned to them despite the signing of the July 2018 peace agreement between Abiy Ahmed and Isaias Afewerqi. However, Eritrean forces also invaded northern and central Tigray far beyond this border line.

In the initial phase of the conflict, the Amhara military forces took control of the western part of Tigray, which before 1993 was part of the Amhara-dominated Begemder Province, causing more than 60,000 people to flee to neighbouring Sudan. The situation is similar in the Raya-Rayuma region of southern Tigray, occupied by Amhara Fanno militias.

EVOLUTION OF THE CONTROL OF THE TIGRAY FROM NOVEMBER 2020 TO MAY 2021

On 1 May, 2021, the Ethiopian government classified the TPLF as a terrorist organization, suggesting that the authorities of Addis Ababa have no intention of seeking a political solution to the crisis.

In June 2021, Tigrayan troops launched the “Alula” offensive. The TDF regained ground, and Addigrat was recaptured on 22 June, as was Mekelle on 28 June. On the same day, the ENDF military, together with the Tigray interim administration that had been appointed by the federal government in early December 2020, fled the regional capital, and the Ethiopian government declared a unilateral ceasefire in Tigray until the end of the farming period. The Amhara Regional State authorities declared their intention not to evacuate the areas that had been controlled by Amhara Regional State Special Forces since November 2020.

The authorities in Addis Ababa said that the ceasefire “will enable farmers to till their lands, aid groups to operate without any military movement around”. However, recent statements by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, denying the existence of famine in Tigray and accusing humanitarian aid organizations of trying to support Tigrayan rebels, raise concerns that the government’s strategy may be to maintain a blockade of Tigray with the objective to topple the TPLF leadership. Such a blockade would worsen an already catastrophic humanitarian situation.



Figure 5
Pre-November 2020 map



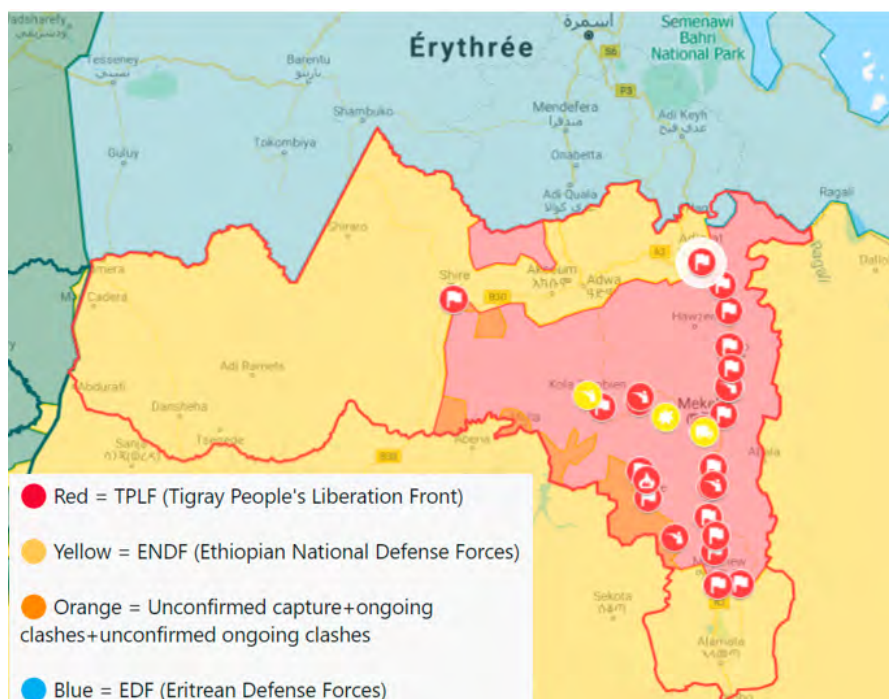
Source: [Daniel Passport, Tigray's border conflicts explained](#), Passport Party.

Figure 6
January 2021 map



Source: [Where the Tigray conflict changed borders](#)

Figure 7
May 2021 map



Source: [Map of the conflict in the Tigray region which started on 4 November 2020](#)

NB: The maps do not provide details of the extent of military control by the Tigrayan forces TDF, Amhara forces, Ethiopian (ENDF), and Eritrean (EDF) armies.

HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES OF THE CONFLICT

ATTACKS AGAINST CIVILIANS AND CLERICS, LOOTING

In a video posted on Twitter on 8 May, 2021 by a member of an American charity organization, Abune Mathias I, patriarch of the Tewahedo Orthodox Church of Ethiopia and belonging to the Tigray ethnic group, denounced an ongoing genocide in Tigray. This statement, although not endorsed by the Holy Synod of the Tewahedo Orthodox Church, seems to be confirmed, at least in part, by numerous reports of serious abuses and massacres committed against civilians and clerics by the Ethiopian and Eritrean occupation forces, as well as the destruction and looting of key infrastructures, in particular hospitals, schools, factories, agricultural infrastructures, drinking water facilities, and even holy places.



For example, Amnesty International reported that in the days following the capture of Aksum on 19 November, 2020, Eritrean troops engaged in widespread looting of civilian properties and extrajudicial executions. From 28 to 29 November, 2020, Eritrean soldiers shot civilians in the street and conducted systematic house-to-house searches, arbitrarily executing men and children. The massacre was carried out in retaliation for an earlier attack by militiamen joined by residents armed with sticks and stones. Also in Aksum, Ethiopian federal troops and Amhara militias reportedly killed more than 750 people who were gathered in Aksum's Mariam of Zion Cathedral on 15 December, 2020. In western Tigray, hundreds of civilians were executed in May Kadra when federal ENDF troops supported by Amhara Regional State Special Forces and Amhara Fanno militias captured the town in early November 2020. Initial reports indicated that Tigrayan militants killed hundreds of Amhara civilians, but further investigations in March 2021, while confirming these initial reports, also revealed that Amhara Fanno militias killed hundreds of Tigrayan civilians and evicted many Tigrayan families from their homes.

There are also numerous reports of sexual abuse by men in uniform. According to a report by Sarah Charles of USAID, Ethiopian health authorities recorded at least 950 cases of sexual violence between March and April 2021 alone. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) projects that approximately 22,500 survivors of sexual violence in Tigray will need clinical care in 2021. According to Mark Lowcock, the U.N.'s humanitarian chief, rape and sexual violence is used to pursue political and military objectives in Tigray.

The non-governmental organization Europe External Program with Africa (EEPA) has collected testimonies on brutalities against clerics, holy sites, and Tigray heritage, which included attacks on several monasteries. For example, EEPA reports a monk's testimony about the January 2021 attack on the Debre-Damo monastery by the Eritrean army with heavy artillery, who reportedly believed that TPLF leaders were hiding there. The Al-Nejashi mosque in Negash, one of the oldest in Africa, was also damaged by shelling.

The Catholic Eparchy of Addigrat reports numerous cases of damage and the looting of public and private buildings immediately following the takeover of Addigrat by the Ethiopian federal army and Eritrean forces, including several buildings owned by the eparchy, such as the priests' residence, St. Mary's Agricultural University in Wuqro, and the clinic and the school in Edaga Hamus, which were damaged and completely looted.

REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDPs)

Since the conflict began in November 2020, approximately 2 million people have been forced to move within Tigray, and some 63,000 people have fled to Sudan from western Tigray following the occupation by Amhara forces. Many IDPs are dependent on host communities for basic needs such as food and water, straining already limited resources. Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, has seen the largest influx

of conflict-displaced people, with overcrowded conditions, inadequate assistance, and shortages of medicine and food.

In addition, residents of some villages and small towns have fled to rural areas where some are hiding in the mountains to save their lives.

Before the conflict began, Tigray had four main refugee camps, May Ayni, Adi Harush, Shimelba, and Hitsats, which housed nearly 100,000 Eritreans according to UNHCR. Several sources report that hundreds of refugees were executed in late 2020 and early 2021. The Shimelba and Hitsats camps were looted and destroyed in January 2021, with some fleeing to the two remaining camps of May Ayni and Adi Harush.

MAJOR HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

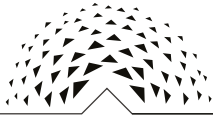
Numerous reports confirm that a major humanitarian crisis is underway and worsening in Tigray and neighbouring regions, which, combined with the effects of Ethiopia's current deep economic crisis, could eventually contribute to migration abroad, including to Europe. Moreover, the crisis in Tigray has ended 30 years of development and hope, and many Ethiopians, especially middle-class Ethiopians, are considering emigrating, believing that Ethiopia has returned to the hell of the 1980s.

Before the conflict began, there were already 1.6 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in Tigray out of an estimated total population of 6 million. According to estimates by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), 4 million people faced high levels of acute food insecurity in Tigray territory in May-June 2021, with more than 350,000 people who are in a situation described as catastrophic due to food insecurity, malnutrition, disease, and famine.

The population under food insecurity is spread across hundreds of rural communities in the mountainous areas, as well as in urban and peri-urban areas where displaced people are seeking assistance. The conflict is having a severe impact on rural communities by eliminating many primary sources of food and income. The start of the conflict coincided with the harvest season, resulting in the loss of more than 90 percent of the crop in 2020. In addition, the loss of animals used for field work and the destruction of seed supplies and agricultural fertilizers could result in a shortage of agricultural resources for several years.

Due to looting by military forces, only 16 percent of hospitals and health centres are fully functional. About a quarter of all schools in Tigray have been damaged and looted, preventing many children from receiving schooling since November 2020.

The conflict has also resulted in the destruction of essential water and sanitation infrastructures. It is estimated that approximately 250 motorized water pumping systems in the cities are out of service due to lack of fuel and electricity, damage, looting, or vandalism. The status of about 11,000 hand pumps in various rural areas is unknown. As a result, many people do not have access to clean water.



HUMANITARIAN NEEDS – CURRENT RESPONSE

Numerous international agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are mobilized on the ground to provide the much-needed emergency assistance in Tigray. However, the aid provided falls short of the immense needs - 5.2 million people need humanitarian assistance - and the continued fighting in several territories in Tigray complicates the delivery of humanitarian aid, particularly in rural mountainous areas. The risk for NGO employees is very high; several of them have been killed since November 2020, the latest tragedy being the murder of three members of Médecins Sans Frontières on 25 June, 2021.

Food assistance is currently the largest component of the humanitarian response, supplemented by medical support, shelter, and non-food relief items. Beyond emergency humanitarian assistance, there will be a longer-term need for support in the following areas:

- Supply of materials and tools necessary for agricultural production, in particular seeds, fertilizers, and agricultural production equipment;
- Re-establishment of drinking water supplies;
- Rehabilitation of services and infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools, that have been damaged and looted by military forces;
- Reconstruction or restoration of holy places (churches, monasteries) that have been destroyed or damaged and looted; search for and repatriation of stolen treasures from churches and monasteries;
- Psychological support for traumatized people, especially those who have suffered sexual abuse;
- Actions in favour of reconciliation, peace building.

If the strategy of the Addis Ababa government is indeed to maintain the blockade of Tigray, this would greatly worsen the already dire humanitarian situation in Tigray.

CONCLUSION

The conflict between the central government and the Tigray leaders has a much deeper origin than the sequence of events since 2018: an ideological confrontation over how Ethiopia should define itself, i.e. the sharing of power between the central government and local authorities. Two approaches have been in competition in Ethiopia for more than a century, a federal approach based on the country's multi-ethnic tradition and history, leaving a large degree of autonomy to the different peoples and communities under the aegis of a central government that manages these different autonomous units. This is the approach advocated

by the TPLF, although their leaders probably did not give enough room to the other ethnic political parties when they were at the head of the governing coalition. The other approach, implemented by Abiy Ahmed, defends the vision of a unified state around a central government based in Addis Ababa as a solution to eliminate inter-ethnic conflicts, based on an imaginary ideal of a unified historical Ethiopia. It appears that this ideology leads to the opposite of what is intended, namely the disintegration of society and a huge humanitarian crisis.

Perhaps the lessons of the conflict in Ethiopia should be a source of reflection for the leaders in European Union, which is the scene of ideological confrontations that have some common points with Ethiopia, even if the historical and human contexts are of course completely different.