

Ethiopia: Vigil InSight Situation Report

16 June 2021

International aid organisations will face increasing tensions following the labelling of the TPLF and OLF-Shene as terrorist organisations at the start of May, while the general election in six days time will further exacerbate the situation.

This document provides an analysis of the current situation in Ethiopia and the implications for aid organisations working there.

SUMMARY

- The UN has stated that famine is now prevalent in Tigray with at least 350,000 people affected, whilst the US has released 181 million dollars of funding through USAID and is encouraging other donors to support humanitarian relief efforts. The UN are predicting this to be the worst famine the world has seen for 10 years.
- The Ethiopian government's designation of the TPLF and OLF-Shene as terrorist groups is **LIKELY** to affect any aid organisation supporting either the groups or those communities associated with them.
- Elections due on 21 June will most **LIKELY** see Prime Minister Ahmed returned to power. Violence is possible both before and after the elections, though limited credible reporting means assessing the scale and impact of such events will be difficult. Two prominent Oromo parties are boycotting the vote, and severe logistical delays and insecurity across several regions will probably impede voting. This means that many opposition groups are **LIKELY** to perceive the vote as illegitimate, which some have already labelled a 'sham'. Protests around the vote will probably escalate into unrest, as well as bouts of communal violence in Oromia including Addis Ababa.
- Aid programs should aim to be as transparent as possible to all parties, as part of conflict resolution measures, and ensure staff in the field are both resilient and experienced.

MITIGATION FOR AID ORGANISATIONS

Security force activity continues to increase and the consequent high rate of incidents means the risk to aid organisations is currently rated as **HIGH** throughout the country, with Tigray region being rated as **VERY HIGH**. Organisations operating in the area are reporting that there are very severe difficulties in logistics and they are operating in an environment where local communities are being exposed to traumatic incidents.

Aid organisations will need to continue their own assessments of how to adjust their security strategies, but there are options available:

Transparency

- Programmes should be open and transparent where possible, to all parties.
- Specifically at checkpoints.
- Ensure communication with stakeholder communities over programme priorities.
- Ensure transparency over what equipment is carried in vehicles.
- Neutral communication with those in uniform, civilians and IDPs. Be aware that all sides will have some bias against aid organisations as they will be wary of having aid organisations present (and may be hiding atrocities).
- Programs should be designed around your Acceptance Strategy, with community feedback mechanisms which allows you to monitor your acceptance.

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Staffing

- Ensure experienced staff are sent to the field – operational logistics will require **HIGH** levels of ingenuity and resilience.
- Psychological first aid structure or system for staff to be implemented as an operational requirement.
- Recognise the different risks that both international or national staff carry. If staff are from a local ethnic group, they will be less visibly different and have better networks and local knowledge than staff from other parts of the country or internationally, even if they are less qualified. Conversely, they may be more **LIKELY** to be targeted by local actors linked to the security forces.

Communications

- Ensure that communications with HQ are robust and have an alternative means of communications in case of being stopped and drawn into an incident that may deteriorate.
- Emphasize Standard Operating Procedures - including frequent situational reports to HQ.

BACKGROUND

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), an armed political movement established in 1975, grew to lead the coalition that governed Ethiopia between 1991 and 2019. However, it refused to join a new coalition in 2019, leading it to order regional elections in Tigray the following September. These were dismissed as illegitimate by the federal government in Addis Ababa, triggering the so-called Tigray War on 04 November 2020.

Ethiopian federal forces, supported by Eritrean troops and militias from the neighbouring Amhara and Afar regions quickly overran the TPLF with an estimated 2,500,000 people displaced by the fighting.

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) – another regional separatist group founded in 1973 - split from its armed wing, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) in 2018, following a peace agreement with the Ethiopian government. Since then, the OLA (also known as OLF-Shene or OLF-Shane) has been accused by the Ethiopian government of several atrocities involving civilians in Oromia.

There is currently an underlying negativity towards aid organisations in Ethiopia. With the Ethiopian government now portraying the TPLF and OLF–Shene as terrorist movements, and claiming the fighting is nearly over, any CSO / NGO not supporting the government will be perceived as being against it.

Map of Ethiopia showing the regions mentioned in this report



CONTEXT

The Ethiopian government designated the TPLF and OLF–Shene as “terrorist” groups on May 1 following several attacks by the group against infrastructure and civilians in Tigray and the Oromia regions respectively. This comes as elections, delayed from August last year due to the pandemic, will be held on 21 June.

The UN Undersecretary General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock said on 4 June that famine affecting hundreds of thousands was imminent in the Tigray region, with “horrible echoes of the colossal tragedy in Ethiopia in 1984.” He went on to say “access for aid workers is not there because of what men with guns and bombs are doing and what their political masters are telling them to do”. He added that the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed needed to ensure that the Eritrean Army (who are supporting the Ethiopian government against the TPLF) should leave the country, several months after they were originally due to have departed.

ANALYSIS

The Ethiopian government has reiterated its refusal to heed to international pressure for a ceasefire in Tigray on several occasions, including at a press conference on 3 June, where it claimed that counter-insurgency operations were only limited to two areas.

The government will be keen to demonstrate that it is in control of Tigray, playing down current reports of violence and the humanitarian crisis highlighted in comments made by President Joe Biden on 26 May. Biden also demanded that Eritrean and Amhara forces leave, and humanitarian access be granted immediately; sentiments also expressed by the EU and UK in earlier statements. Robert Godec, the acting Assistant Secretary for the US State Department’s Bureau of African Affairs told a Senate panel on 27 May that a “famine-like situation” had been caused by the continuing conflict. This came as the US imposed wide-ranging economic sanctions against Ethiopia on 24 May, including withholding support for new lending from multilateral development banks such as the IMF and WB. If other banks or US allies follow America, then this is **LIKELY** to have a knock-on effect that could affect funds to aid organisations, especially as the US gave Ethiopia one billion dollars in aid last year.

Prime Minister Ahmed and his government still maintain that the main armed protagonists in the Tigray and Oromia regions are the TPLF and OLF-Shene in order to portray any sanctions as unwarranted. State media continues to report TPLF attacks and kidnappings within Tigray. It also claims that the TPLF funds different militia groups in the country including Oromia.

Charges by the Federal Attorney General against 53 Ethiopian National Defence Force personnel for human rights concerns, are **LIKELY** whitewashing intended to distract from further government actions against the TPLF.

In the meantime, Ahmed has stated on several occasions that Eritrean troops had left the country, but on 3 June the government again announced they were leaving. The Somalia government has also denied reports from a UN investigator that Somalian military recruits training in Ethiopia had taken part in fighting in Tigray.

If the Eritrean troops nonetheless remain, human rights reported by numerous observers will persist. There is an increasing risk that aid organisations are also **LIKELY** to be targeted – either because they may have witnessed events or especially if seen as providing aid to members of or communities linked to the TPLF. Indeed, Ahmed was quoted on 6 June as stating that “**Ethiopians should prioritize getting rid of traitors,**” especially those working to stop Ethiopia from “standing on its feet”. Such highly emotive language will **LIKELY** trigger attacks against perceived external threats – such as aid organisations funded by the US / EU / UK or seen to be connected with international efforts to provide humanitarian relief.

Twice deferred elections are now due on 21 June. The government will continue to maintain an element of normality in order to show voters that a democratic process exists, and that despite the current international sanctions they can maintain fiscal discipline. Indeed, at the beginning of June the Council of Ministers approved a 13-billion-dollar draft budget for the coming financial year (which begins on 8 July), an 18% increase on last year.

State media will continue to highlight the efforts of other political parties **campaigning** for the general election, despite two Oromia parties already stating they will boycott it. Ethiopia's electoral board has already suspended voting in Harar and Somali regions citing irregularities and printing problems with ballot papers.

Although the African Union deployed election officials to monitor the elections at the beginning of June, the European Union cancelled their election monitors early May. Ahmed, therefore, will remain in power due to mainly government backed opposition parties campaigning in the election, whilst the only credible opposition has withdrawn from the process. He has been quoted as stating "I would rather die than hand over power to them" and that "No one will be able to form a government in the coming 10 years". Ahmed's office has since denied that he said this, calling the quotes "fake".

Any reports of pre-election violence will **LIKELY** be treated in the same way as claims of human rights abuses reported internationally and will be interpreted as a direct threat to the government.

International concerns about famine in Ethiopia and the Ethiopian government's dismissal of such concerns will put aid organisations addressing food security in the middle of a political conflict with **HIGH** risks to staff and operations. The UN and aid organisations analysis from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) on 10 June said that at least 350,000 people in Tigray are currently experiencing famine, and further millions are at risk from famine, with conflict being the main reason for the situation. The EU and US Aid also issued a joint statement the same day emphasising that the conflict had propelled "400,000 innocent people to the brink of famine".

The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs had previously said at the end of May that 91% of Tigray region's population of nearly 6 million were in need of aid. However, the IPC has not been endorsed by the current Ethiopian government, and the Ethiopian National Disaster Risk Management Commission reported dispatching 77,000 tonnes of food aid to Tigray on 3 June.

Ethiopia's government dismissed the IPC the same day (10 June) stating the warnings were "unsubstantiated" and rejecting the comparison of the current situation in Tigray to the 1984 famine, which killed over two million people. The government perceives any such efforts by outside agencies as interference by foreign entities, and the US government's donation of 181 million dollars in aid is **UNLIKELY** to be welcomed – especially as Washington has said it will provide it via USAID. It is also **UNLIKELY** that other donors will be welcomed, especially if responding to the US government's call for further donations.

The direct threat to aid workers and aid operations in this complex situation has been increasingly highlighted by several incidents where aid workers were killed by indirect fire (IDF):

- On 28 April, an aid worker was killed by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops in Adigrat.
- On 29 May, another aid worker was killed in Kola Temben.

Several aid routes have also been blocked and trucks carrying humanitarian aid have been stopped in recent weeks, whilst ongoing fighting in Tigray has reportedly restricted the movements of humanitarian actors:

- In March, gunmen stopped a humanitarian vehicle between Assosa and Yaso, West Welegga zone, Benshangul-Gumaz region, took all valuables, set the vehicle on fire and killed the driver while a staff member escaped.
- Also in March, an INGO driver was beaten by Ethiopian armed forces on the road between Merkele and Adigrat.
- In November 2020, aid workers were killed during military operations against refugee and IDP camps.

PREDICTION

- The UN has noted that a famine is **HIGHLY LIKELY** within Tigray, leading to a major humanitarian crisis. Aid organisations will **LIKELY** encounter problems delivering aid, especially to IDPs/ refugees, with their neutrality questioned by all sides.
- The humanitarian situation is **LIKELY** to affect other countries bordering Tigray. The government is **UNLIKELY** to let this develop further throughout the country, as happened in the 1980s, due to international pressure.
- Continued sanctions against Ethiopia, including withholding multilateral funding via international banking organisations, could affect funds to aid organisations, though governments will **HIGHLY LIKELY** channel aid to finance INGOs directly.
- It is **HIGHLY UNLIKELY** the Eritrean armed forces will withdraw from Ethiopia, but instead will try to camouflage their actions further. This course of action will lead to fighting continuing, with tensions mounting within major cities both before and after the general election on 21 June.
- Aid organisations will continue to be targeted if they show any efforts to aid the TPLF or OLF–Shene or appear to be aiding communities linked to them.

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