

Ethiopia: Situation Report

This document provides an analysis of the current situation and the implications for aid agencies.
14 September 2021

Aid delivery into areas held by the TDF / TPLF, especially Tigray, will stay piecemeal, while both sides' continuous claims of military success will remain difficult to verify. Meanwhile Ethiopia's economy will likely suffer as a result of the ongoing conflict.



SUMMARY

- Aid supplies, especially into Tigray, will remain piecemeal, though government-held areas in Afar and Amhara will **LIKELY** see wider distribution; pressure from the international community may coerce the Ethiopian government to allow more aid through.
- The “hungry” season (time between planting and harvest when food supplies are low) will exacerbate the humanitarian situation in Tigrayan held areas.
- Ethiopia's economy will remain fragile, with many overseas investors concerned over reputational risk.
- The US is **LIKELY** to maintain pressure on the Ethiopian government, pushing them towards negotiations, though they will be wary of inflicting sanctions that would affect the region or influential US investors such as Boeing.
- The conflict will continue for at least the next three months, with both sides gaining and losing ground, and will **LIKELY** extend further into Afar and Amhara.
- Currently, it is **UNLIKELY** that the conflict will extend in the coming months directly into Addis Ababa or the Somali region of Ethiopia.
- The conflict will largely be contained within Ethiopia for now, though neighbours Sudan and Egypt will **LIKELY** look to covertly aid the TDF/ TPLF and OLF where possible.
- Violence against civilians will continue on all sides and **LIKELY** increase in the next three months.
- Assessments of the context and the most appropriate mitigation measures may differ between HQ INGO staff and national partner organisations and national staff.



MITIGATION

The Ethiopian Government's security force will remain extremely active, so the consequent high rate of incidents means the risk to aid organisations is currently rated as **HIGH** throughout the country, and with Tigray region being rated as **VERY HIGH**. Aid organisations will need to continue their own assessments of how to adjust their security strategies, but there are options available:

Travel

- Consider the safety and security implications for national staff working or traveling across Ethiopia in the context of ethnic violence in regions beyond Tigray.
- Those traveling to the field need to understand local complexities and ensure their team is comprised in a manner that signals neutrality, especially at checkpoints.
- Alternative portable satellite measures (such as Iridium or Thuraya phones) should be considered.

Assessing the situation

- Official statements as well as social media posts should be treated with extreme caution, reviewing both the credibility of the content but also what might be omitted from otherwise factual reports.
- Aid organisations, where possible, should track military positions and ensure all staff avoid them.
- Communication should be held on a regular basis with local civil and military leaders to advise them on the intentions of local programs.



CONTEXT

The World Food Program (WFP) published footage from Northern Ethiopia on 06 September highlighting the humanitarian devastation caused by the Ethiopian Government's de-facto blockade of the area and the 10 months of conflict between the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) and Tigray Defence Force / Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TDF/ TPLF).

This comes as UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres stated that Ethiopia's economy has been significantly affected by the civil war, noting that the conflict had "drained over a billion dollars from the country's coffers".

With the Government's ceasefire over, both sides continue to claim military success. The Government stated that the TDF/ TPLF had been effectively stalled in Northern Gondar and that it had killed over 5,600 "rebels", whilst the TDF/ TPLF reported they had killed 3,073 "enemy forces" though neither side gave a timeline for these figures. The Government meanwhile claimed on 07 September that the TDF / TPLF had been defeated in Afar region and had withdrawn. The TPLF countered that they had merely shifted troops to neighbouring Amhara for an offensive there.

Violence against civilians have also been highlighted on both sides with local officials from the Amhara region claiming on 08 September that the Tigrayan forces had killed 120 people over two days during clashes in the town of Dabat. Meanwhile, a report from the British Daily Telegraph stated that thousands of ethnic Tigrayans were being put into "concentration camps" and "butchered" by pro-Government forces. The state-appointed Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) also claimed on 26 August that civilians in Gida Kiremu district, Eastern Wollega, Oromia region, had reported that the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA / OLA - Shene), which split from the formerly banned opposition Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in 2018, had killed over 150 people the previous week.



ANALYSIS

The information war on aid delivery

The WFP Tweeted on 06 September that about 100 aid trucks were entering Tigray's capital Mekelle, but they added that this was the first major supply convoy since the Government's blockade of Tigray began (see [Ethiopia Situation Report 14 July](#)). Both sides – the TDF / TPLF and the Ethiopian Government – continue to use both propaganda and fake news in an attempt to control the narrative over aid delivery and the humanitarian situation.

The UN has estimated that there are now 2 million Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in Ethiopia, with 90 per cent (5.2 million) of the population in the Tigray region requiring aid, including 400,000 people who are already facing famine conditions. It has called on all parties to allow aid into the area, reporting it needs at least 100 trucks of supplies per day to ensure that the population survives.

Meanwhile, the Ethiopian government claimed on 04 September that 500 aid trucks had reached the Tigray region, with 152 in the past two days, but there has been no independent confirmation of this. The last confirmed aid delivery to Tigray was an emergency food supply on 23 August to the northern Asgede district.

On 31 August the USAID Ethiopia director reported that Tigrayan opposition forces had looted USAID warehouses in the Amhara region over previous weeks. The TDF denied that this happened and implied that USAID had been “cornered” into claiming looting had occurred. The USAID report is credible given the fact that aid deliveries remain scarce, and the TDF / TPLF's efforts to create a logistics corridor into Sudan has stalled (see analysis below re: frontlines), as well as the pressures on the Tigray shadow government to provide food for the population remaining in Tigrayan held areas (including in Amhara and Afar). Indeed, media sites have reported that around 03 September the TDF/ TPLF allegedly looted a UNICEF warehouse in South Gondar. It is also highly likely that the Ethiopian government's claims of humanitarian deliveries into Tigray are overstated.

Impact of the conflict on the economy

Prior to the conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic, Ethiopia's economy was one of the fastest growing in Africa, expanding by an average of **10 per cent** per year up to 2019. However, in 2021 it is reported to have decreased by 4 per cent to just a 2 per cent increase, with a conservative estimate of national debt now at 60 billion USD or 70 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Indeed, one report ([Trading Economics](#)) has stated that Ethiopian military expenditure will increase from 460 million USD to 502 million USD this year alone. With **inflation** now at 30.4 per cent, Ethiopia's investment position remains fragile. That said, at the beginning of September Ethiopian Airlines and Boeing signed a strategic Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) positioning Ethiopia as an aviation hub for Africa. Ethio-Telecom, with over 56.2 million subscribers, has also linked up with two Chinese tech companies – Huawei and ZTE – to expand its 4G service, hoping to increase its subscribers to 64 million by the end of the next Ethiopian fiscal year.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is still on track to form a national government on 04 October, despite disputes over his landslide election win this year, which will provide some economic stability. Indeed, recently Abiy visited both Rwanda and Uganda – both visits termed as “strengthening strategic partnerships”.

JOIN MAILING LIST

How are the frontlines moving?

'Fake news' and propaganda continues with both sides claiming the advantage in the current military conflict, therefore gains and losses from both sides should be taken cautiously.

With the ceasefire over, the ENDF were able to halt further efforts by the TDF / TPLF to gain more ground in both Amhara, and Afar.

Fighting continues in the North Gondar region as the TDF / TPLF push to control the strategic B30 road which is part of the network linking Tigray to the Sudanese border. Indeed, there have been heavy clashes in Dabat (see map) and on the strategic Wukin Mountain, with reports that the TDF/ TPLF have retreated to the higher ground in the Dabat area.

The TDF / TPLF still hold key territory in Afar and Amhara, including the UNESCO designated churches in Lalibela.

The ENDF claimed on 03 September that they had thwarted an TPLF attack, supported by the Sudanese Government, on the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD - see report H2H report 02 August) from the Mahalla area (Sudanese – Ethiopian border). The Sudanese government denied this, however there is some sympathy within it towards the Tigrayan forces, due to concerns over the impact of the GERD downstream in Sudan.

Sudan is being seen as a possible facilitator for peace talks between the Tigrayans and Ethiopian Government due to their relations with the TDF /TPLF. The Ethiopians have turned down Sudanese Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok's previous peace initiative, in part because Sudan buys electricity from Ethiopia.

Protection of civilians

Violence affecting civilians will continue as the conflict spreads. However, with communications either down or sporadic at most, mainstream media sites and embassies or diplomatic organisations such as the UN will find it hard to verify any reports. This means that information shared by local witnesses within Ethiopia will remain key to such incidents and critical examination of social media footage is highly important .

The Ethiopian Government claim that 120 people were killed in Dabat by the TPLF on 08 September appears to have some credence given video interviews carried by a mainstream media site, with strong evidence of fighting between a village militia and the TPLF in the area. However, some of the deaths are more likely the consequence of insufficient protection of civilians during fighting rather than targeted violence against civilians.

Similarly, it is likely that many of the civilian deaths reported by the EHRC and attributed to OLA/OLA-Shene occurred during ongoing clashes between Amhara forces and the OLF in East Wollega due to insufficient measures to protect civilians. Some targeting of specific civilians may also have taken place.

Meanwhile the unverified reports of "concentration" camps, are also likely to have some credence as local sources confirm that certain tribes are being targeted by both sides, with Tigrayan staff often being singled out at checkpoints when travelling outside of Tigray.



PREDICTIONS

- Aid supplies, especially into Tigray, will remain piecemeal, though Government held areas in Afar and Amhara will see wider distribution. Despite the Ethiopian government claims that they have been allowing aid into Tigray, it is highly **UNLIKELY** that these will increase - though some convoys will get through if international pressure on the Ethiopian government, more so from regional and international governments - than UN agencies, persists.

- With the rainy season over and crops still growing, the “hungry season” exacerbates the humanitarian situation within Tigray and areas held by the OLF in Oromia. Communities in these areas will therefore continue to face famine conditions. The Ethiopian government is maintaining siege-like conditions on both TDF/ TPLF and OLF held-areas in order to give themselves the advantage in any diplomatic negotiations, while weakening their positions in any future peace talks.
- Ethiopia’s economy will remain fragile with many investors **LIKELY** concerned over reputational risk. The conflict will undoubtedly also continue to depress GDP, especially if the international community applies further sanctions on the Ethiopian Government, something they have so far been reluctant to do, focusing on piecemeal visa restrictions. With around a quarter of the population on the poverty line – a statistic that is only likely to grow – countries such as the US will remain averse to any direct sanctions that may affect the civilian community.
- The US is **LIKELY** to maintain pressure on the Ethiopian government, pushing them towards negotiations. They have already noted that concern over violence against civilians could affect Ethiopia’s future African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) eligibility. However, it is **UNLIKELY** they will seek to negate the Act for now given Ethiopia’s regional importance. This is because sanctions would impact not just the nation of 110 million people, but the region, as well as influential US investors such as Boeing.
- The conflict will continue for at least the next three months, with both sides gaining and losing ground, and will **LIKELY** extend further into Afar and Amhara – especially along the B30 – as the TDF / TPLF attempt to secure logistical links towards the Sudanese border. The ENDF will look to prevent this, but with an army decimated from its catastrophic defeat in Mekelle last year slowly rebuilding, they are **UNLIKELY** to retake Mekelle in the short term.
- The current conflict between the TDF/ TPLF / OLF and ENDF and provincial militia’s is **UNLIKELY** to reach Addis or the Somalia region in Ethiopia, as the TDF/ TPLF/ OLF do not have the military capability to advance towards either. However other NSAs may look to take advantage of the current focus by the ENDF on the north of the country, and carry out attacks against state actors and infrastructure.
- The tensions created by the conflict as well as the mis- and disinformation will spread beyond the areas of active armed conflict. Relations between staff of different ethnicities and communication and even contingency planning can be impacted in subtle and complex ways.
- The conflict will remain contained largely within Ethiopia for now, though neighbours such as Sudan and Egypt will **LIKELY** look to covertly aid the TDF/ TPLF and OLF where possible. A mooted intervention by the African Union over a negotiated ceasefire is **UNLIKELY** in the short term, as the Tigrayans have accused the AU of being biased towards the Ethiopian government and rejected the AU appointed mediator - former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo – stating it would be “naive to expect this mission to work”.
- Civilians will continue to suffer from actions from all sides in the next three months. Reports on violence against civilians will also be used to build up pressure against the opposing side. There is little evidence that either side is taking particular precautions to protect civilians from harm. Civilian suffering will be used as propaganda via social media. It will remain difficult to verify such claims as the Ethiopian government will maintain a communications blackout throughout the country.
- Outside non-state actors, such as Eritrean troops (who have in the main left the country) – may return to Ethiopia if the TDF / TPLF manage to gain ground towards the Sudan border. This is **LIKELY** to result in further violence against civilians – including **sexual violence** – as the Eritreans and Tigrayans have a long history of enmity.

You may be interested in

- Ethiopia **Country** page.
- Ethiopia **Mailing List**
- Ethiopia **Data**: Available on the Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX).
- Ethiopia: **Sexual Violence** in the Tigray region: 30 March 2021
- Help support our work by sharing this resource with your networks. Please copy and paste this link: bit.ly/EthiopiaSitRep14Sept2021

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