



Ethiopia and Tigrayans Pursue a Complicated Peace

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The recognition by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed that the use of force in Tigray province has been ineffective is, with international diplomatic efforts, conducive to ending the Ethiopian civil war. Preparations are underway to start direct talks between the central government and the Tigrayan leadership. EU and U.S. envoys primarily seek to unlock basic services from the Ethiopian government for the inhabitants of Tigray.

From a Hot to a Cold War. The civil war in Ethiopia that started in November 2020 was, until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the most intense and bloody active armed conflict in the world. According to researchers from the University of Ghent, by the end of 2021 about 500,000 people had died because of it. On the government side, the Ethiopian federal army (ENDF) was involved, but the main burden of the fighting was carried by ethnic paramilitary forces from the neighbouring Amhara province and troops from allied Eritrea. The Tigray Defence Forces (TDF), which fought the paramilitary and federal forces, is a guerrilla-style grouping based on the main political movement of the province, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which was dominant in the central government of Ethiopia from the 1990s to 2018. While the conflict was initially politically motivated, serving to consolidate Ahmed's power over the regions, it evolved into a war against the Tigrayans as an ethnic community. The central authorities detached the province from the state structures, cut it off from the supply of food and basic services (including electricity and banking), massively arrested and removed Tigrayans from administration throughout the country, and the Amharic and Eritrean forces brutally attacked civilians and destroyed cultural goods in the province. The public debate was dominated by rhetoric treating the Tigrayan people (7% of the Ethiopian population) as enemies and strangers. Consequently, separatist sentiments prevailed in Tigray. However, neither side managed to achieve a decisive military advantage, and as a result, the fighting ceased at the beginning of this year. The break in hostilities was

accompanied by signs of preparations for further stages of the confrontation.

From the beginning of this year, however, changes in the balance of power in Ethiopia and the region began to foster peaceful solutions. The Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church became more vocal in criticising what he called the "Tigrayan genocide". In January this year, Ahmed unexpectedly released imprisoned opposition activists, including some Tigrayan leaders, in an effort to renew his legitimacy. In March, Ahmed opened access to the province for humanitarian aid, and the first convoys soon arrived there. Then, in May the TDF freed 4,000 Ethiopian prisoners of war. That same month, the Ethiopian PM turned against the strongly anti-Tigray Amharic nationalists, until now his main political base. With the loss of power in Somalia of President [Mohamed "Farmajo"](#), the pro-war alliance of [Ethiopian, Somali, and Eritrean](#) leaders, who jointly sought to eliminate the TPLF, ended.

Mediation Disputes. In March this year, Ahmed publicly expressed possibility of talks with the Tigrayans for the first time. In June, the Ethiopian government and, later, the Tigray side appointed negotiating teams. However, a basic problem has turned out to be the lack of agreement on the mediator. The Ethiopian authorities want former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, the African Union (AU) special envoy to the Horn of Africa in this role. As early as November 2021, he met separately with Tigrayan leaders in the regional capital of Mekelle and with government officials in Addis Ababa. However, the Tigrayan side does not trust him, accusing him of supporting the government. Back in June 2021, Obasanjo, as head of an AU observation mission,

legitimised the controversial elections in Ethiopia, conducted during the war and despite the imprisonment of opposition leaders. The AU also did not criticise the Ahmed government for violating human rights during the conflict, which the rebels considered a sign of partiality and a betrayal of its principles. Tigrayan leaders instead declared their confidence in the impartiality of the outgoing Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta (Kenya is now a non-permanent member of the UNSC), who has undertaken his own mediation initiatives. They also call for the expansion of the format of the talks to include the EU, the U.S., the UN, and the United Arab Emirates. So far, the Ethiopian authorities have consistently insisted on Obasanjo, on whose initiative in July this year the AU proposed to include Eritrea in the talks, which the Tigrayans perceived as a provocation.

China is also trying to play an active role in the region. It appointed seasoned diplomat Xue Bing to the newly created position of special envoy for the Horn of Africa. His ambition is to champion peace processes in this part of the continent, but the regional conference he organised in June this year made no contribution to resolving the Tigray conflict. Russia supported the Ethiopian authorities by voting in the UNGA against the establishment by the Human Rights Council (HRC) of a commission for investigating war crimes in Tigray and by including Addis Ababa on the list of capitals [visited by its foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov](#), in July this year. This translates into the government's perception of Russia as a state supporting the central government.

Activation of the EU and the U.S. At the beginning of August, an unprecedented visit of a delegation of EU and U.S. special envoys to the Horn of Africa, Annette Weber and Mike Hammer, respectively, accompanied by UN envoy Hanna Tetteh and the ambassadors of the UK, Canada, and Italy, to the Tigrayan capital took place. After talks with the Tigrayan leaders, they issued a statement that can be read as a position on the conditions for effective negotiations. In relation to mediation, they, like the UN envoy, used wording suggesting a combination of Kenyan and AU initiatives to gain the trust of the Tigrayan side. As the most urgent need, they indicated the immediate restoration of electricity, banking, telecommunications, and other services and supplies in the province. The envoys made the issue of the full lifting of the blockade a test of goodwill by the Ethiopian authorities. At the same time, they declared their readiness to provide humanitarian support (e.g., fuel supplies, fertilisers) to all provinces that suffered during the conflict, including the pro-government Amhara and Afar. Calling on both sides to “refrain from hate speech and provocative rhetoric”, they emphasised the need to work out a new *modus vivendi* to save Ethiopia's territorial integrity.

In response, the prime minister's security advisor accused them of being biased and uncritically adopting the Tigrayan perspective. He emphasised the need to maintain AU mediation, but also expressed the government's openness to humanitarian aid, although reports by organisations operating in the field contradict this.

The Obstacles and Chances of Overcoming Them. By maintaining a partial blockade on Tigray and refusing to change the mediation format, the Ethiopian authorities are seeking to start talks from a position of force, which makes it difficult to build trust between the parties. For this reason, the parties have not yet agreed a common vision of peace that would constitute a starting point for detailed discussions (typically expressed in the form of a declaration of principles). One of the foundations of the peace process must be to establish the scale of the crimes committed during the war and account for them. For this purpose, HRC researchers were to visit Tigray simultaneously to the diplomatic mission, but the central authorities prevented them from reaching the provincial borders. Even if the Tigray leaders were willing to reach an agreement with the government, they are under internal pressure to deliver a referendum on some form of self-determination, without which they will lose social legitimacy in the province. The authorities in Addis Ababa want to prevent this, fearing centrifugal tendencies elsewhere in the country. So far, no talks have taken place regarding the ownership of the western part of Tigray, which was taken over by the Amharas at the beginning of the war. Both sides refer to historical arguments for controlling it. There are ongoing displacements and persecutions of Tigrayans, who are now a minority, in this area. A possible correction of the provincial borders to the pre-war state would trigger acts of revenge, which would risk a return to open conflict.

Despite these serious difficulties, the current circumstances, including the cessation of fighting and the readiness of both sides to dialogue and enter into certain compromises, such as mutual recognition and limiting the role of radicals, for the first time allow an outline of the prospect of ending the conflict in Tigray. For the EU and the U.S., diplomatic success in Ethiopia would be symbolic proof of their “return to the game” in the face of the [growing influence of Russia](#) and China in Africa. Their envoys should use the example of the success of the Qatari mediation (and not the AU's) between the Chadian government and the rebels concluded in the 9 August agreement to convince the Ethiopian authorities of the benefits of a possible change of lead mediator. It would also be beneficial to the credibility of the AU itself.