



Statement of

Lauren Ploch Blanchard
Specialist in African Affairs

Before

Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and
International Organizations
U.S. House of Representatives

Hearing on

“The Unfolding Conflict in Ethiopia”

December 1, 2020

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

TE10058

Overview

The outbreak of hostilities in Ethiopia's Tigray region in November reflects a power struggle between the federal government of self-styled reformist Prime Minister Abiy (AH-bee) Ahmed and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a former rebel movement that dominated Ethiopian politics for more than a quarter century before Abiy's ascent to power in 2018.¹ The conflict also highlights ethnic tensions in the country that have worsened in recent years amid political and economic reforms. The evolving conflict has already sparked atrocities, spurred refugee flows, and strained relations among countries in the region. The reported role of neighboring Eritrea in the hostilities heightens the risk of a wider conflict.

After being hailed for his reforms and efforts to pursue peace at home and in the region, Abiy has faced growing criticism from some observers who express concern about democratic backsliding. By some accounts, the conflict in Tigray could undermine his standing and legacy.² Some of Abiy's early supporters have since become critics, accusing him of seeking to consolidate power, and some observers suggest his government has become increasingly intolerant of dissent and heavy-handed in its responses to law and order challenges.³ Abiy and his backers argue their actions are necessary to preserve order and avert further conflict. They blame the TPLF and militant ethnic nationalists for violence that has plagued Ethiopia since he took office. Many Ethiopians viewed the TPLF's rule as authoritarian, and abuses committed under its leadership fueled resentment in many communities.⁴

The Tigray conflict occurs alongside tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt over management of the Nile waters. The Trump Administration's attempt to mediate that dispute strained U.S. relations with Ethiopia, which viewed the effort as biased toward Egypt. The Administration has suspended a substantial amount of bilateral aid to Ethiopia over the Nile issue.

The hostilities in Ethiopia threaten a range of U.S. interests in the strategically important Horn of Africa, including regional stability, ensuring that Ethiopia remains committed to counterterrorism and stabilization operations in neighboring Somalia, maintaining a long-running development partnership with Ethiopia, and preventing a worsening humanitarian crisis. The conflict not only poses a potential threat to Ethiopia's political transition, but may also have implications for the fragile transition underway in neighboring Sudan.

Ethiopia's Political Transition

The election of Abiy by Ethiopia's parliament in April 2018 marked the beginning of a political transition in the country, 27 years after the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power following the collapse of a Marxist regime known as the Derg. Days prior, Abiy—a former military intelligence officer and deputy president of Oromia, Ethiopia's most populous regional state—had been elected chairman of the ruling EPRDF coalition in its first contested leadership election. Abiy was the first Oromo (Ethiopia's largest ethnic group) to lead the coalition, long dominated by the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), one of the EPRDF's four ethno-regional parties.⁵

¹ Under Ethiopian naming convention, individuals are generally referred to by their first name rather than their last name.

² See, e.g., David Pilling, "How Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed went from man of peace to a leader at war," *Financial Times*, November 6, 2020; "Ethiopia's democratic transition is in peril," *The Economist*, September 19, 2020; Nic Cheeseman and Yohannes Woldemariam, "Ethiopia's dangerous slide toward civil war," *Foreign Affairs*, November 12, 2020.

³ See, e.g., Abel Abate Demissie and Ahmed Soliman, "Unrest threatens Ethiopia's transition under Abiy," Chatham House, July 24, 2020; Jawar Mohamed, "The war in Tigray is a result of Ethiopia's mismanaged transition," November 2020.

⁴ Jason Burke, "Rise and fall of Ethiopia's TPLF – from rebels to rulers and back," *The Guardian*, November 25, 2020.

⁵ The TPLF was one of the groups that fought against the Der, Soviet-allied military junta. It joined with an Amhara group to form the EPRDF in 1989. The TPLF clashed with another rebel group, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), after the Derg's ouster and fostered the creation of the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Front (OPDO) to represent the Oromo in the EPRDF. OPDO was renamed the Oromo Democratic Party in 2018.

Figure 1. Ethiopia at a Glance

Capital: Addis Ababa

Comparative area: slightly less than twice the size of Texas

Population, growth rate: 108 million, 2.56%

Median age: 19.8 years

Life expectancy: 67.5 years

Infant mortality: 35.8 deaths/ 1,000 live births

Total fertility rate: 4.41 children born/woman

Literacy: 49.1%

GDP: \$93 billion; \$960 per capita (2019)

GDP growth: 8.97% (2019), 1.95% (2020 est.)

Ethnic groups: Oromo 35%, Amhara 28%, Tigray 7%, Sidama 4%, Welaita 3%, Gurage 3%, Somali 3%, other 13% (2016 est.)

Religions: Ethiopian Orthodox 44%, Muslim 34%, Protestant 19%, traditional 3%, Catholic 1% (2007 est.)

Source: Map created by CRS. Data from the CIA World Fact Book and International Monetary Fund, 2020 data unless otherwise indicated.

Abiy's election came in response to growing pressure on the government after more than two years of protests that began in Oromia and were fueled by state violence and repression.⁶ The Oromo community's perceived marginalization by ethnic Tigrayan and Amhara political elites has historic roots, and tensions worsened under TPLF dominance.⁷ Oromo mobilization inspired protests by others, including some Amhara (the country's second largest ethnic group), whose grievances against the TPLF include a territorial dispute with Tigray that dates back to the EPRDF's division of Ethiopia into ethno-regional states in the 1990s.⁸ Human rights groups estimate that security forces killed over 1,000 Ethiopians during the 2015-2017 protests, and the government acknowledged detaining over 29,000 people, including opposition leaders, in the crackdown.⁹ Amid the protests and unrest, sporadic hate crimes and attacks on

⁶ The protests began in 2014 over the proposed expansion of Addis Ababa into Oromia region to accommodate the government's economic development plans. Oromo protested the lack of community consultation and perceived economic marginalization and dispossession. The protests resumed in 2015 and spread, spurred by a heavy-handed government response. See Margaux Pinaud and Clionadh Raleigh, "Data analysis: The roots of popular mobilization in Ethiopia," *The Global Observatory*, June 16, 2017.

⁷ Hassen Hussein and Mohammed Ademo, "Ethiopia's original sin," *World Policy Journal*, September 1, 2016.

⁸ The Amhara claim that the TPLF seized some of their lands during the campaign to depose the Derg and annexed it to Tigray when they took power, killing and evicting their farmers. For more on the disputes, see International Crisis Group (ICG), *Bridging the Divide in Ethiopia's North*, June 12, 2020.

⁹ Amnesty International (AI), "Ethiopia: After a year of protests, time to address grave human rights concerns," November 9, 2016; "Ethiopia lifts emergency rule imposed last October after months of unrest," *Reuters*, August 4, 2017.

businesses owned by Tigrayan elites spurred fears that ethnically-targeted violence could escalate. In early 2018, then-Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned, paving the way for new leadership to facilitate reforms that he asserted “would lead to sustainable peace and democracy.”¹⁰

Upon taking office, Abiy committed to opening the country politically and economically. In its first 100 days, Abiy’s government released tens of thousands of political prisoners, lifted the state of emergency, removed terrorist designations on opposition groups, closed a notorious detention facility, and granted amnesty to jailed dissidents. He replaced top security chiefs, fired prison officials, loosened press restrictions, and began a process to amend repressive laws. He also sought peace with domestic insurgent groups, initiated a rapprochement with Eritrea that brought a formal end to a decades-long border dispute, and pursued a peacemaker role in the region—efforts that earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. Abiy has sought to liberalize the economy, opening some sectors and state enterprises to foreign investors.

Rising Ethnic Tensions. Alongside Abiy’s reforms, ethnic conflicts increased across the country, driving displacement and spurring concerns about Ethiopia’s stability. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated in September 2020—prior to the onset of the current conflict in Tigray—that conflict had displaced more than 1.2 million Ethiopians since the beginning of the year, down from a peak of over three million in 2019.¹¹ U.N. officials say ethnic violence has reached “an alarming level” over the past two years and note that the stigmatization of certain ethnic groups, including the Tigray, Amhara, Somali, and Oromo, among others, has “significantly contributed to ethnic intolerance” in the country.¹² The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Early Warning Project has included Ethiopia in its list of countries experiencing ongoing mass killing since 2016.¹³ Human Rights Watch (HRW) has noted the “proliferation of official and unofficial armed groups operating with limited oversight” and competing narratives of historical injustices among the country’s ethnic communities.¹⁴ Beyond the arrests of some former high-level officials in late 2018, HRW assessed in early 2020 that there had been little progress on accountability for past abuses.¹⁵

Ethnic violence began to rise before Abiy took office, but some observers suggest a link to the rapid liberalization that he oversaw: “The lid was on things and now it is off. The problem is keeping the pot from boiling over,” explained a former U.S. ambassador.¹⁶ The political opening that allowed Ethiopians to vent grievances may also have created an environment conducive to score-settling and hate-speech. Experts have noted growing ethno-nationalism within some communities, and suggest that strains in the ruling coalition contributed to the tensions.¹⁷ Some Ethiopians have described the government response to communal unrest as insufficient.¹⁸ Abiy’s government has appeared to defer to the state governments, for example, on how to manage ethnic militias, including former rebel groups—with mixed success.

¹⁰ “Ethiopia PM Hailemariam Desalegn in surprise resignation,” *BBC*, February 15, 2018.

¹¹ IOM, “Ethiopia records more than 1.8 million internally displaced in 2020,” September 15, 2020. According to IOM, 1.8 million Ethiopians were displaced in 2020: 1.2 million displaced by conflict, over 350,000 by drought, and 150,000 by floods.

¹² U.N., “UN high-level officials express deep concern over escalating ethnic tensions in Ethiopia,” November 12, 2020.

¹³ Early Warning Project, *Countries at Risk for Mass Killing 2019-2020*, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, November 2019. The Project defines mass killing as 1,000 or more civilians deliberately killed by armed forces (government or non-state) over the period of a year or less, because of their membership in a particular group.

¹⁴ HRW Horn of Africa Director Laetitia Bader (@LaetitiaBader), Twitter, November 24, 4:57 pm EST; HRW, “To heal, Ethiopia needs to confront its violent past,” May 28, 2020.

¹⁵ HRW, “Ethiopia,” *World Report 2020*.

¹⁶ Quoted in Leake Teweke and Kulle Kursha, “Ethiopia uncorked,” *Ethiopia Insight*, February 12, 2019.

¹⁷ Nizar Manek, “Abiy Ahmed’s reforms have unleashed forces he can no longer control,” *Foreign Policy*, July 4, 2019; Tom Gardner, “Shadow falls over Ethiopia reforms as warnings of crisis go unheeded,” *The Guardian*, March 14, 2019; International Crisis Group (ICG), *Preventing Further Conflict and Fragmentation in Ethiopia*, July 19, 2019.

¹⁸ Tom Gardner, “Shadow falls over Ethiopia reforms as warnings of crisis go unheeded,” *The Guardian*, March 14, 2019;

Background on the TPLF, the EPRDF, and Ethnic Federalism

The TPLF, which launched an insurgency against the Derg regime in 1975, led the EPRDF's ascent to power in 1991. The EPRDF used ethnolinguistic differences as the basis for restructuring Ethiopia's administrative divisions in the 1990s, and enshrined in the 1994 constitution a system of ethnic federalism, which nominally granted self-rule and rights of self-determination to ethno-linguistic groups. Tigray is one of Ethiopia's ethno-regional states—inhabited predominately by ethnic Tigrayans and governed since 1991 by the TPLF. The aim of ethnic federalism was to address historic communal grievances by decentralizing authority. In practice, however, the EPRDF centralized decision-making within its leadership, which fueled grievances among some communities.¹⁹ The system also put ethnic belonging at the center of politics and linked it to territory, stoking competition and fragmentation along ethno-regional lines that some have compared to the ethno-nationalism in the former Yugoslavia.²⁰

When the EPRDF took power in 1991, its chairman, TPLF leader Meles Zenawi, became Ethiopia's head of state. Meles remained Ethiopia's leader until his death in 2012. He spearheaded policies that produced rapid economic growth and raised Ethiopia's development indicators, but critics accused Meles of suppressing dissent and ensuring that his minority Tigrayan ethnic group dominated government and senior positions in the security forces. His successor, Hailemariam, acknowledged a power struggle in the coalition after leaving office in 2018: "whenever I brought reforms before the EPRDF, these were always undermined by the TPLF, who felt that they owned the existing order."²¹

Hotly contested polls in 2005 were marred by violence and by the detention of thousands of opposition members, journalists, and civic activists. The government tightened political space in the aftermath. In 2010, the EPRDF won 99.6% of the votes in elections deemed unfair by Western election observers. (Abiy was elected to parliament that year.) The EPRDF and its allied parties won all the legislative seats in the 2015 polls, which African Union (AU) observers said were technically "satisfactory," while noting laws limiting civic participation. Western observers did not participate.

The EPRDF stifled dissent through laws and electoral regulations that gave it a decisive political advantage.²² Several laws enacted in 2008-2009 had a notably adverse impact on democratic space. The Charities and Societies Proclamation imposed stringent government oversight of civil society groups, severely limiting foreign funding. Human rights groups criticized the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation for its expansive definition of terrorism, harsh penalties, low standards for evidence, and the broad authority it gave to security forces. The government jailed numerous opposition activists and journalists on terrorism-related charges. Media laws also restricted the press; Ethiopia ranked as one of the world's most censored countries and among the top jailers of journalists worldwide until 2018, when Prime Minister Abiy commenced reforms.²³

Democratic Backsliding? While Abiy's political reforms drew domestic and international praise in the first years of his term, his government has since attracted concerns regarding democratic backsliding.²⁴ When the government revised the electoral laws in 2019, some opposition parties objected, saying the changes would make it more difficult for them to challenge the ruling coalition.²⁵ In December 2019, Prime Minister Abiy led a move to merge the EPRDF's component and allied parties into a single party, the Prosperity Party, bringing an end to the EPRDF and its coalition structure. The TPLF objected and refused to join, as did some in Abiy's own Oromo Democratic Party.²⁶ One of Abiy's most prominent critics, Oromo opposition politician Jawar Mohammed, described the Prosperity Party's formation as a shift away from multinational federalism to a centralized state, alleging that Abiy was steering the country back toward authoritarian rule.²⁷ Jawar was arrested in July 2020, during protests following the death of a popular Oromo singer, and now faces charges of inciting ethnic violence and terrorism. Jawar's

"Ethiopia's reforming prime minister runs into a roadblock of ethnic unrest," *Washington Post*, August 25, 2018.

¹⁹ Goitom Gebreluel, "Should Ethiopia stick with ethnic federalism," *Al Jazeera*, April 5, 2019.

²⁰ Florian Bieve and Wondemagegn Goshu, "Don't let Ethiopia become the next Yugoslavia," *Foreign Policy*, January 15, 2019.

²¹ Greg Mills, "Ethiopia's need for 'deep renewal,'" *Daily Maverick*, August 15, 2018.

²² See, e.g., HRW, "Hope for Revision of Ethiopia's Draconian Laws?" August 27, 2018.

²³ For more detail, see the State Department's annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*.

²⁴ See, e.g., Freedom House, "Ethiopia Working Group Statement: Ethiopia's path to a more stable and democratic future is increasingly at risk," August 12, 2020.

²⁵ "Ethiopia's Opposition parties criticize election law changes," *Reuters*, August 24, 2019.

²⁶ See, e.g., "Lemma Megerssa dismisses Medemer, Prosperity Party," *Addis Standard*, November 29, 2019.

²⁷ Jawar Mohammed, "How Ethiopia's transition to democracy derailed," *Addis Standard*, October 28, 2020.

supporters and some independent observers view his prosecution, and that of other opposition politicians arrested during the July unrest, as politically motivated.²⁸ The government shut down the internet for three weeks during the unrest, during which thousands, including journalists, were detained.

Elections Delayed. Ethiopia's election board announced in March 2020 that national and regional elections, then scheduled for August, would be postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The parliament (now dominated by the Prosperity Party), whose term was set to expire in October, subsequently extended its term, and Abiy's, drawing rebuke from the TPLF, which termed the move unconstitutional. The Tigray regional government, led by the TPLF, went ahead with its regional council elections in September, despite the federal government warning that the vote would be illegal. The TPLF won over 98% of the seats, with official turnout at 97%.

The brewing tensions between Abiy's government and the TPLF came to a standoff, with the Tigray government arguing that the federal government's term expired in October, and the federal government similarly terming the regional government unlawful and moving to cut federal funds to Tigray. The TPLF protested the budget cut as unconstitutional. The federal government's decision in October to reshuffle the leadership of the military's Northern Command, based in Tigray, exacerbated the tensions: the TPLF argued Abiy had no authority to make the changes, accusing Abiy's government of partnering with the Eritrean government—a decades-long foe of the TPLF—to “bring the people of Tigray to their knees.”²⁹ The Northern Command reportedly had more than half the Ethiopian military's personnel and mechanized divisions, a legacy of Ethiopia's long standoff with Eritrea. The command also reportedly had a large portion of Tigrayan officers.³⁰

The Unfolding Conflict in Tigray

In the early hours of November 4, Prime Minister Abiy announced the beginning of military operations in Tigray, accusing TPLF forces of attacking federal forces in the regional state. Abiy's government has described those attacks as high treason and termed the military's actions in Tigray “law enforcement operations.”³¹ The federal government has since accused the TPLF of seeking to instigate conflicts along ethnic and religious lines across the country to make it “ungovernable.” The TPLF denies initiating the conflict on November 4, accusing Abiy of starting a war “to consolidate his personal power.”³²

The conflict pits members of Ethiopia's security forces against each other, with the military reportedly divided along ethnic lines. The TPLF, supported by Tigray regional security forces and militia, seized heavy weapons from the Northern Command at the onset of the fighting.³³ The military, supported by militia from neighboring Amhara region, has carried out ground operations and airstrikes in Tigray, but denies hitting civilian targets. The TPLF has accused Eritrea of sending tanks and troops into Tigray to support Ethiopian forces, an allegation both governments deny. The TPLF has also suggested that the United Arab Emirates has supported Ethiopia with drones flown from the Eritrean cities of Asmara and Assab, where the Emirati military maintains a base.³⁴ (Abiy says Ethiopia has deployed its own drones for surveillance in the conflict.) The TPLF has launched several rocket attacks on installations in Eritrea's

²⁸ Simon Marks, “Ethiopian opposition leader appears in court on terror charges,” *VOA News*, September 21, 2020.

²⁹ Tigray Communication Affairs Bureau, Facebook post, October 25, 2020. See also “Once enemies, Ethiopia and Eritrea ally against Tigray,” *Deutsche Welle*, November 29, 2020.

³⁰ ICG, *Clashes over Ethiopia's Tigray Region: Getting to a Ceasefire and National Dialogue*, November 5, 2020.

³¹ Office of the Prime Minister, *The Ongoing Law Enforcement Operations in Tigray: Causes and Objectives*, November 14, 2020.

³² Jason Burke, “Ethiopian troops ‘liberate’ key town in Tigray, claim officials,” *The Guardian*, November 16, 2020.

³³ For more on the forces involved in the conflict, see “Factbox: The forces fighting in Ethiopia's Tigray conflict,” *Reuters*, November 13, 2020.

³⁴ TPLF Spokesman Getachew Reda (@reda_getachew), Twitter, November 15, 2020, 2:20 am EST.

capital, Asmara, in what it says is retaliation for Eritrea's involvement in the conflict. (Some refugees have described indiscriminate artillery shelling and rocket fire that they say came from the direction of the Eritrean border.³⁵) The TPLF has also conducted rocket strikes against two airports in the Amhara region that it cites as being used to support military operations in Tigray.

The federal government has cut phone and internet communications with Tigray and restricted journalists' access to the region, making it difficult to verify information. One journalist permitted to visit a town in Tigray taken by government forces was denied access to the hospital to assess the number dead or injured.³⁶ Both sides have sought to shape the narrative through their respective media outlets. Federal authorities issue "Fact Check" statements to disseminate positions and contradict "misrepresentations" in the international media.³⁷ The government has cautioned media outlets and international organizations "to thoroughly investigate and verify information" received from refugees in Sudan, accusing the TPLF of infiltrating the refugee community to spread disinformation.³⁸ Several Ethiopian journalists have been detained since the conflict began, including the senior editor of the *Addis Standard*, who has been charged with "attempts to dismantle the Constitution through violence" and "outrage against the Constitution."³⁹

The Humanitarian Toll and Mass Atrocity Risks. By some estimates, thousands have been killed and many more displaced during the first weeks of combat. As of November 30, over 45,000 refugees had fled into Sudan, where humanitarian agencies are struggling to rebuild facilities last used during Ethiopia's famine in the 1980s. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is planning for as many as 200,000 or more refugees over the next six months if the conflict continues. Aid agencies estimate conservatively that over a million people in Tigray and neighboring states could need aid due to the conflict, in addition to 850,000 pre-conflict aid beneficiaries in Tigray.⁴⁰ Humanitarians have struggled to determine the scale of displacement inside Tigray, given restricted access. They have raised alarm with the weeks-long disruption of access to existing aid beneficiaries, including 96,000 Eritrean refugees living in camps in Tigray. Ethiopian refugees fleeing from Tigray into Sudan have shared accounts from the conflict-affected region, but a precipitous drop in refugee flows the week of November 23 has fueled concerns that Ethiopian forces have moved to restrict their flight.⁴¹

U.N. experts warn that there is a high risk of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity in the country.⁴² A mass killing in the western Tigray town of Mai Kadra on November 9 is the worst-known incident to date, with some witnesses accusing Tigrayan youth militia and local security forces of killing hundreds of ethnic Amhara civilians.⁴³ Federal authorities cited the incident as another justification for their operations against the TPLF. Some Tigrayan refugees from Mai Kadra, however,

³⁵ Giulia Paravicini, "Rockets fired at Eritrean capital from Ethiopia, diplomats say," *Reuters*, November 13, 2020.

³⁶ Robbie Corey-Boulet, "Inside a Tigray town scarred by Ethiopian conflict," *AFP*, November 24, 2020.

³⁷ See, e.g., State of Emergency Fact Check (@SOEFactCheck), Twitter, State of Emergency FACT Sheet: Common Misrepresentations of Ethiopia's Law Enforcement Operation, November 28, 2020, 8:33 am EST.

³⁸ State of Emergency Fact Check (@SOEFactCheck), Twitter, November 24, 2020, 10:30 am EST.

³⁹ Simon Allison, "Blackout makes it hard to report on Ethiopia's civil war," *Mail & Guardian*, November 16, 2020.

⁴⁰ OCHA, "Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update – Situation Report No. 6," November 26, 2020.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Will Brown, "After the bombs they attacked with knives, claim Ethiopians fleeing peace prize winner's war," *The Telegraph*, November 23, 2020; John Sparks, "Tigray crisis: No clothes, no money, no possessions. Ethiopian refugees flee ethnic persecution," *Sky News*, November 24, 2020; "Concern grows for civilians in Mekelle as Ethiopia battles Tigray rebels," *Africa News*, November 26, 2020.

⁴² United Nations, Note to Correspondents: UN High-Level Officials Express Deep Concern Over Escalating Ethnic Tensions in Ethiopia, November 12, 2020.

⁴³ Amnesty International, "Ethiopia: Investigation reveals evidence that scores of civilians were killed in massacre in Tigray state," November 12, 2020; *Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, Rapid Investigation into Grave Human Rights Violation in Maikadra Preliminary Findings*, November 24, 2020.

have implicated pro-government forces in the violence, suggesting that Amhara militia targeted Tigrayans after the military took the town from the TPLF, and that Tigrayan youth acted in self-defense.⁴⁴ Mai Kadra is located in a part of Tigray that ethnic Amhara claim as their traditional land, and a long-running territorial dispute over the area has fueled communal tensions.

In addition to the Mai Kadra killings, refugees from Tigray have reported ethnically-targeted attacks in other parts of the region against Tigrayans by security forces and Amhara militia.⁴⁵ U.N. officials have noted reports of arbitrary arrests, killings, discrimination, and stigmatization of Tigrayans across the country. Some Tigrayan civil servants and security forces have reportedly been detained, including peacekeeping troops deployed in South Sudan and forces deployed in Somalia.⁴⁶ The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission has expressed grave concern that “security measures designed to apprehend certain suspected individuals overstepped their remit...thereby affecting a wider community.”⁴⁷ Human rights experts have warned of an increasing risk of retaliatory ethnic violence, and the prospect for violence to increase in other parts of the country due to opportunism or a heightened sense of grievance.⁴⁸

Control of Mekele. On November 22, Prime Minister Abiy issued a 72-hour deadline for the TPLF to surrender before a “final phase” of operations, aimed at removing the TPLF from Tigray’s capital city, Mekele, which is home to approximately 500,000 people. A military spokesman said the people of Mekele should “save themselves” before the government’s deadline expired.⁴⁹ U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet expressed alarm at the military build-up around the city, calling “the highly aggressive rhetoric on both sides” over a prospective fight for Mekele “dangerously provocative” and noting concern that it would lead to “further violations of international humanitarian law.”⁵⁰ She and other human rights experts warned that shelling the city would be a war crime, and could be considered a form of collective punishment.⁵¹ The TPLF declared that its people were “ready to die in defense of our right to administer our region” and pledged to “arm each and every civilian to defend Mekele.”⁵²

Within hours of the military launching its offensive on Mekele on November 28, Prime Minister Abiy declared military operations in Tigray complete, saying that federal forces had taken full control of Mekele and that police would henceforth pursue the TPLF leadership.⁵³ Abiy suggested that the government would now install a provisional regional government and focus on rebuilding the region and providing humanitarian aid. With access to the city and the wider region still restricted, however, the situation there remains unclear, and reports suggest that fighting continues outside the city and in various parts of Tigray. The International Committee for the Red Cross reports that Mekele’s hospitals have faced an influx of trauma patients.

⁴⁴ Robbie Corey-Boulet, “Questions linger among the corpses of an Ethiopian massacre,” *AFP*, November 25, 2020, Noé Hochet-Bodin and Elliott Brachet, “En Ethiopie, le mystère du village de Maïkadra révèle la profondeur des conflits ethniques,” *Le Monde*, November 30, 2020.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Will Brown, “After the bombs they attacked with knives, claim Ethiopians fleeing peace prize winner’s war,” *Daily Telegraph*, November 24, 2020; Mohammed Amin, “Tigray refugees recount the horrors of Ethiopia’s new conflict,” *The New Humanitarian*, November 19, 2020.

⁴⁶ Colum Lynch and Robbie Gramer, “U.N. fears Ethiopia purging ethnic Tigrayan officers from its peacekeeping missions,” *Foreign Policy*, November 23, 2020.

⁴⁷ Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, Statement, November 30, 2020.

⁴⁸ Philip Kleinfeld, “Ethiopia’s other conflicts,” *The New Humanitarian*, November 23, 2020.

⁴⁹ “Ethiopia PM gives Tigray forces 72 hours to surrender regional capital,” *Reuters*, November 22, 2020.

⁵⁰ U.N., “Ethiopia: Threat of major hostilities in Mekelle seriously imperils civilian lives – Bachelet,” November 24, 2020.

⁵¹ Laetitia Bader (@LaetitiaBader), Twitter, November 22, 2020, 8:48 am EST.

⁵² “Tigray force: Ethiopia mechanized division ‘completely destroyed,’” *Al Jazeera*, November 24, 2020.

⁵³ Office of the Prime Minister, “Mekelle under command of the National Defense Forces,” November 28, 2020.

The communications blackout in Tigray makes it difficult to assess the respective claims of federal authorities and the TPLF regarding the state of the conflict, which appears to be shifting into an insurgency. While Abiy has declared victory, the TPLF says the war is not over, calling the federal and Amhara regional forces “invaders.”⁵⁴ Since withdrawing from Mekele, the TPLF has fired more rockets at Eritrea; it also claims to have shot down an Ethiopian fighter jet and detained some Eritrean soldiers. U.N. officials describe the conflict as ongoing, and have raised alarm with the reported abduction of Eritrean refugees in Tigray by Eritrean forces, calling on Abiy to address the issue “as a matter of urgency.”⁵⁵

Diplomatic Efforts to End the Conflict. In the early weeks of the conflict, several foreign governments, including the United States, called for an immediate cessation of hostilities and dialogue to resolve the conflict. The Interreligious Council of Ethiopia made a similar call. Abiy’s government resisted international efforts to mediate between the two sides, putting the African Union (AU), whose headquarters Ethiopia hosts in Addis Ababa, in a difficult position. The current AU chairman, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, nevertheless appointed three former African leaders—Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia, Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique, and Kgalema Motlante of South Africa—as envoys with a mandate to mediate an end to the conflict. U.N., European, and U.S. officials expressed support for the AU initiative, despite Abiy’s refusal to negotiate with the TPLF. EU officials warned in late November that the conflict was already “seriously destabilizing the region,” stating that “dialogue is the only way forward.”⁵⁶

Implications for Ethiopia’s Transition. While the Government of Ethiopia has sought to portray its operations against the TPLF as swift and decisive, some analysts have warned since the onset of hostilities that the government’s actions could spur another Tigrayan insurgency (it would be the third since 1943).⁵⁷ While federal forces have taken various towns and cities in Tigray, the TPLF claims the military has suffered heavy casualties. “The TPLF’s historic capacity to wage guerilla warfare from the rural mountains of Tigray may not be definitively eroded by its losses in conventional warfare,” argues one analyst.⁵⁸

The International Crisis Group, among others, has described the conflict as “one symptom of a broader crisis,” attributing Ethiopia’s conflicts to tensions over the distribution of power and resources in the federal system.⁵⁹ Some from Abiy’s own Oromo community have expressed concerns that the conflict could further fragment the country. One describes the Tigray conflict as “a battle over the character of the Ethiopian state,” with Abiy and his allies pursuing their vision of a centralized and unitary state while others, including the TPLF and the Oromo opposition, seek greater ethno-regional autonomy.⁶⁰ A protracted conflict could threaten prospects for Ethiopia’s postponed elections, which the election board suggests will be held in late May or June 2021. Other conflicts in the country, including a simmering insurgency led by the Oromo Liberation Army in Oromia, could also affect the elections.

Regional Implications. Regional experts have raised concern over the potential for the conflict in Tigray to spread beyond Ethiopia’s borders.⁶¹ As noted above, Eritrea may already be involved. Sudan, in

⁵⁴ “Ethiopia’s Abiy relishes victory, Tigrayan leader says war unfinished,” November 30, 2020.

⁵⁵ “UN: Ethiopia’s victory claim doesn’t mean war is finished,” *Associated Press*, November 29, 2020; “Eritrean refugees cut off from aid, threatened by Ethiopia’s continuing conflict,” November 30, 2020.

⁵⁶ European Union, Ethiopia: Statement by High Representative/Vice President Josep Borrell on his meeting with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, Mr. Demeke Mekonnen, November 24, 2020.

⁵⁷ “As Ethiopia’s army declares daily victories, its people are being plunged into violence,” *The Guardian*, November 24, 2020.

⁵⁸ Aly Verjee, “Ethiopia’s problems will not end with a military victory,” U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP), November 24, 2020.

⁵⁹ ICG, “Steering Ethiopia’s Tigray crisis away from conflict,” October 30, 2020.

⁶⁰ Awol Allo, “How Abiy Ahmed’s Ethiopia-first nationalism led to civil war,” *Al Jazeera*, November 24, 2020.

⁶¹ See, e.g., Aly Verjee and Susan Stigant, “What Ethiopia’s brewing conflict means for the country—and the region,” USIP,

the midst of a fragile transition of its own, now hosts a growing number of Ethiopian refugees. The conflict may also have implications for the participation of Ethiopia—a top peacekeeping troop contributor—in global peacekeeping operations. Reports suggest that Ethiopia has reinforced its Tigray offensive by recalling over 3,000 personnel from Somalia, where it has thousands of troops deployed, both bilaterally and as part of the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), to help stabilize the country and counter Al Shabaab.⁶² Ethiopia has also reportedly detained 200 or more Tigrayan soldiers who were posted in Somalia. Some experts warn that a worsening conflict in Ethiopia could severely weaken the regional counterterrorism mission in Somalia and further worsen center-periphery tensions there.⁶³

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

The conflict in Tigray erupted as Abiy was engaged in a high-stakes standoff with Egypt (and to a lesser extent, Sudan) over the management of the Nile waters. Their long-running dispute flared in 2020, as Ethiopia moved toward completion of Africa's largest hydroelectric power project, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). For Ethiopia, where almost 70% the rural population lacks access to electricity, the GERD would significantly expand domestic power capacity and allow the country to sell excess electricity to its neighbors. The project has been a source of national pride for Ethiopians, and a rallying point amid its domestic troubles in recent years. For Egypt, which relies on the Nile for domestic hydropower, agriculture, and most of its water needs, the prospect of upstream countries controlling the river's flow has become an existential issue. For nearly a century, Egypt has been the main beneficiary of international agreements—to which the upstream countries were not party—apportioning shares of the Nile's waters. Roughly 85% of the water flowing into Egypt comes from the Nile's main tributary, the Blue Nile, which originates in Ethiopia and merges in Sudan with the White Nile.

In late 2019, U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin offered to host negotiations between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan on the GERD, reportedly after a request from Egypt's President Sisi to President Trump.⁶⁴ The three countries made progress in subsequent meetings and reached consensus on how Ethiopia should fill and operate the dam during times of sufficient rainfall, but remained at odds over issues related to drought mitigation and dispute resolution. The talks broke down in February 2020, after the United States “facilitated the preparation of an agreement” on the dam.⁶⁵ Egypt initialed the document, which Secretary Mnuchin suggested addressed “all issues in a balanced and equitable manner.” He stressed that “final testing and filling should not take place without an agreement.” Ethiopia called his statement unacceptable and biased.

AU Chairman Ramaphosa offered to facilitate a new round of talks on the GERD in June 2020. Amid those negotiations, tensions increased when satellite imagery showed the dam reservoir's volume increasing. An extension of the AU-led talks defused a standoff over the initial filling, but there has been little progress in the talks since. In August, the State Department notified Congress that it was suspending some foreign assistance to Ethiopia, pending “more constructive engagement” by its government in the talks. The aid freeze affects non-humanitarian aid totaling over \$260 million, of which more than \$30 million was expiring and has since been redirected elsewhere. A majority of the suspended aid focuses on health programs, but democracy and governance and security assistance programs are also impacted.

November 12, 2020; Nizar Manek and Mohamed Kheir Omer, “Sudan will decide the outcome of the Ethiopian civil war,” *Foreign Policy*, November 14, 2020; Vanda Felbab-Brown, “What Ethiopia's crisis means for Somalia,” Brookings, November 20, 2020.

⁶² “U.N. fears Ethiopia purging ethnic Tigrayan officers from its peacekeeping missions,” *Foreign Policy*, November 23, 2020.

⁶³ Vanda Felbab-Brown, *op. cit.*

⁶⁴ “U.S. halts some foreign assistance funding to Ethiopia over dam dispute with Egypt, Sudan,” *Foreign Policy*, August 27, 2020.

⁶⁵ Treasury Department, Statement by the Secretary of the Treasury on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, February 28, 2020.

U.S.-Ethiopia Relations

The U.S.-Ethiopia relationship dates back over 100 years. Successive U.S. administrations have described Ethiopia as an important development and regional security partner. U.S. officials have also expressed concern at times regarding democratic governance, human rights, and, since 2016, internal unrest. For over a decade, relations have centered on shared efforts to counter terrorism and instability in the region, and to alleviate endemic poverty and food insecurity. The United States is Ethiopia's top humanitarian donor.

The Ethiopian diaspora in the United States has encouraged Congress's engagement on U.S. policy toward the country. During the 115th Congress, the House agreed to H.Res. 128, which pressed for greater respect for human rights and inclusive governance in Ethiopia. A similar resolution was introduced in the Senate. The resolutions attracted significant attention from both the diaspora and Ethiopia's government.

Prime Minister Abiy's election and the political transition in Ethiopia presented an opportunity for the United States to improve and deepen its relationship with the country, make inroads for U.S. investment and trade, and advance several U.S. foreign policy objectives, including in a context of rising competition in the region with other global powers.⁶⁶ U.S. officials welcomed Abiy's efforts to promote reforms in the country and peace in the region, and promised support for several of his initiatives. His replacement of the long-serving heads of the military, intelligence service, and police in 2018 presented an opportunity to improve the U.S.-Ethiopia security relationship, which had been constrained by human rights concerns and other tensions. The State Department hosted the first Ethiopian Partnerships Forum in 2019, convening over 400 private sector leaders and public policymakers from the United States and Ethiopia to "raise awareness of Ethiopia's recent economic reforms and emerging business opportunities, accelerate American investments to transform Ethiopia's economy, and envision a new future of engagement between the two countries."⁶⁷ In March 2020, Ethiopia's finance minister announced that the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation was poised to facilitate as much as \$5 billion in U.S. investment there.

Bilateral relations cooled as the GERD negotiations faltered and the Trump Administration withheld aid. FY 2020 aid allocated for Ethiopia, including for health, development, and security assistance, totaled over \$435 million (not including emergency humanitarian aid). More than \$172 million of that bilateral aid total is affected by the aid freeze, which could have implications for the United States' ability to respond to the Tigray conflict and its potential impact on Ethiopia's transition.

State Department officials expressed deep concern with the onset of fighting in Tigray and urged immediate efforts to restore peace, de-escalate tensions, and protect civilians.⁶⁸ They condemned the TPLF's missile attacks on Eritrea and airports in Amhara, and urged Eritrea's "continued restraint." In contrast to their European counterparts, U.S. officials did not initially push for mediation, suggesting that the parties were not receptive to it.⁶⁹ On November 23, though, the National Security Council issued a statement on Twitter calling for mediation and supporting the AU Chairman's efforts to end the conflict.⁷⁰ Secretary Pompeo subsequently underscored that message in a call with Prime Minister Abiy on November 30, reiterating "grave concern regarding the ongoing hostilities" and calling for a complete end

⁶⁶ For more, see, e.g., Jason Mosley, *Ethiopia's Transition: Implications for the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea Region*, SIPRI, March 2020; USIP, *Final Report and Recommendations of the Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena*, October 29, 2020; and Zach Vertin, *The Gulf, the Horn, and the New Geopolitics of the Red Sea*, Brookings, August 8, 2018.

⁶⁷ State Department Office of Global Partnerships, "Ethiopia Partnerships Forum," May 15, 2019.

⁶⁸ Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, "Escalating Violence in Ethiopia's Tigray Region," Press Statement, November 4, 2020.

⁶⁹ State Department, Briefing with Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Tibor P. Nagy and U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia Michael A. Raynor on the Situation in Ethiopia's Tigray Region, November 19, 2020.

⁷⁰ National Security Council (@WHNSC), Twitter, November 23, 2020, 2:03 pm EST.

to the fighting and “constructive dialogue to resolve the crisis.” The Secretary also urged Abiy’s government to ensure respect for human rights of Tigrayans and other ethnic groups, while highlighting continued U.S. support for Ethiopia’s reform agenda.⁷¹

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS’s institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.

⁷¹ State Department, Secretary Pompeo’s Call with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy, Press Release, November 30, 2020.