

Forum: United Nations Security Council

Issue: The situation in Ethiopia's Tigray

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Introduction:

In 1974, centuries of rule of the Ethiopian empire came to a halt after it was overthrown in a coup d'état initiated by an Ethiopian military junta: the Derg. The coup followed a brutal communist dictatorship led by Mengistu Haile Mariam. Rebel militias across the different communities in the country rose to depose Mengistu leading to over a decade-long civil war between the Derg regime and the militias. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), representing their respective regions of Ethiopia, were the two strongest rebel militias. Following the deposition of the Derg and Eritrea's secession from the nation, in 1991, the TPLF was the most powerful actor in Ethiopian politics. They governed for decades and established a de facto one-party state. However, during this period, Ethiopia experienced immense democratic backsliding and the freedom and fairness of elections were questioned.

Subsequently, mass protests began against the ruling Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn Boshe, political pressure led to his resignation in 2018 and Abiy Ahmed was selected as his successor. Ahmed released political prisoners, removed corrupt TPLF officials and started a new coalition called the Prosperity Party. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, Ahmed postponed the 2020 Ethiopian General Election. In response, Tigray held its own election. Ahmed's condemnation of this election led to a full-on civil war between the government and the TPLF leading to humanitarian crises such as famines, political instability and accusations of war crimes against Ahmed.

Definition of Key Terms:

1. **Coup d'état:** A coup d'état is the violent taking over and overthrowing of a government and its authorities. It usually involves a political faction, a rebel organisation, the military, or a tyrant seizing power illegally.
2. **Legitimacy:** Legitimacy refers to an authority's right to and acceptance of its power, which is usually governing legislation or a regime. A legitimate authority has the right and rationale to exert power. Political legitimacy is regarded as necessary for government, without which a government will face legislative gridlock and eventually collapse.
3. **Militia:** In opposition to the regular army, a militia is a paramilitary force, raised from civilian populations that participate in insurgent actions usually motivated by political and religious ideologies.
4. **Democratic Backsliding:** Democratic backsliding is the loss of a political system's democratic attributes. Free and fair elections are weakened, and rights to freedom of speech, press, and association erode and limit the political opposition's ability to challenge the government, hold it accountable, and put forward alternatives.
5. **Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs):** Individuals or groups of individuals that have been compelled to flee or leave their homes as a result of or to evade armed conflict, violent situations, human rights violations, natural or man-made disasters, who haven't crossed a recognized international boundary.
6. **Civil War:** A civil war is a violent conflict involving a state and non-state actors within the territory of the state. Civil wars are thus differentiated from interstate conflicts.
7. **Censorship:** The act of preventing part or all of a book, film, work of art, document, or other forms of communication from being accessed or shared with the public, usually for political reasons, because it is deemed offensive or damaging, or because it includes information that an entity wishes to be concealed.

Background Information

Origins of the Ethiopian Empire and the communist coup d'état

Ethiopia is a diverse country situated in the horn of Africa. The origins of Ethiopia stem from the Ethiopian empire which spanned the geographic region of modern-day Ethiopia and Eritrea. The empire, formed in 1270 when the Solomonic dynasty overthrew the preceding Zagwe dynasty, was an imperialist entity which established control over a vast spread of distinct communities, tribes and ethnicities. It garnered great influence over the African horn region. The empire was well-known for being the only native African state to successfully resist the Scramble for Africa in the 19th century. This permitted it to remain in power into the 20th century, except of a short stint under Italian East Africa in the 1930s and 40s.

Unfortunately, many ethnic groups within the empire were treated as second and third-class citizens and there were frequent tensions and land disputes between different nations within the empire. Furthermore, the last emperor Haile Selassie possessed authoritarian tendencies. He had progressed toward constitutional monarchy, but seeming indifferent to the misery caused by famines in 1972 and 1974, his popularity suffered. Eventually, Haile Selassie was removed in a military coup by the Ethiopian Military junta called the Derg in 1974. Ethiopia's new ruler, Mengistu Haile Mariam, established a Marxist state, killed tens of thousands of political opponents, and allied with the Soviet Union. During the 1980s, Ethiopians faced starvation as a result of a war with Somalia and severe droughts, which sparked internal instability and independence movements in the regions of Eritrea and Tigray.

Ethiopian Civil War and the rise of TPLF

A plethora of militias rose from different regions of the country to fight against the dictatorship, this led to the commencement of the decades-long Ethiopian civil war. The two most powerful rebel militias in Ethiopia were the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which represented their respective areas. The Tigrayan and Eritrean ethnic groups were known to be marginalized by the central government throughout the 20th century in comparison to the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups that make up a majority of Ethiopians. These two militias came together alongside other groups to form the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In 1991, the EPRDF successfully toppled the dictatorship. Eritrea subsequently declared independence and seceded from the

state. This left the TPLF as the single most powerful political force in Ethiopia. A transition administration was created shortly after, with Meles Zenawi as its prime minister. A new democratic constitution was formed, and Eritrea's independence was recognized peacefully.

For the next 27 years, Tigrayans ruled Ethiopia under a governing coalition led by the TPLF. Ethiopia had evolved into a stable country under Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. It saw rapid economic expansion and was closely associated with the United States. However, Ethiopia experienced democratic backsliding during the period. It emerged as virtually a one-party state and the TPLF-led administration had aggressively suppressed political opponents and limited freedom of expression. In government prison institutions, torture was prevalent. Furthermore, in 1998, a decades-long war with Eritrea was declared resulting in greater instability, especially in the northern region of Ethiopia. The TPLF was also observed to favour Tigrayans. Nevertheless, Tigray remained one of the poorest regions in Ethiopia.

The rise of Abiy Ahmed & Growing tensions between Ahmed and the TPLF

Following the passing of Prime Minister Zenawi in 2012, the TPLF struggled to maintain their grip on power. The TPLF's evident corruption, authoritarian rule, human rights breaches and unpopular policies such as the Addis Ababa Master Plan (which saw to the expansion of the boundaries of the nation's capital Addis Ababa) were met with mass protests across the country from 2015 to 2017. Prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn Boshe resigned, paving the way for the young and promising Abiy Ahmed to take his place.

Ahmed strengthened relations with Eritrean dictator Isaias Afwerki. They negotiated a peace treaty which formally resolved the Ethiopian-Eritrean war and permitted Ahmed to receive the Nobel peace prize in 2019. Afwerki had a long-standing enmity against the Tigrayans. Initially, his ministry was backed by the TPLF due to his popularity. However, Ahmed freed political prisoners, ousted corrupt TPLF leaders, and formed the Prosperity Party, a new alliance that the TPLF refused to join. He disbanded Tigrayan security forces and prosecuted some for corruption and human rights violations. Furthermore, conflicts were erupting amongst ethnic groups across Ethiopia. To mediate these uprisings, Ahmed employed methods used by his predecessors. Political opponents were imprisoned, there was immense censorship of the internet, journalists were put under pressure and police responded brutally to the protests across the country. The Tigrayan leadership was enraged, and they retreated to Tigray, their

stronghold. Tensions increased at an exponential rate. The feud reached a boiling point in September 2020 when Tigrayans held regional parliamentary elections in disobedience of Ahmed, who had postponed the 2020 general election across Ethiopia due to COVID-19 regulations. This postponement was seen as undemocratic and a strategy to cement Ahmed's power. Ahmed declared this election as 'illegal' and the TPLF declared that federal intervention would mean a 'declaration of war'.

Current Situation

The Tigray War

TPLF soldiers ambushed a government military base in Tigray in November 2020, claiming it was a pre-emptive action against federal forces planning to attack them from a neighbouring province. Ahmed authorised a military campaign against the TPLF after a few hours, intending to curb increased political instability caused by the TPLF's actions. His promises of a rapid and bloodless victory, however, were swiftly shattered. Along with this, Ahmed also declared a six-month state of emergency. Eritrea also aligned itself with the Ethiopian government during the conflict, sending thousands of military personnel into the Tigray region. This was mostly to capitalise on growing instability in Ethiopia to gain regional superiority, an action a part of Eritrea's somewhat opportunistic foreign policy and to manifest EPLF's bitter opposition against the TPLF. The TPLF and allies withdrew to rural areas where they conducted guerilla warfare after federal forces captured the Tigrayan capital of Mekelle. In June 2021, following a defeat, the Ethiopian military was forced to retreat from Tigray, and thousands of government personnel were seized. Despite attempts to approach the capital of Addis Ababa, the rebels were pushed back to the northern regions, with conflict spilling over to the Afar and Amhara regions. Ahmed is also dealing with turmoil in Oromia, Ethiopia's most populous area, where the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), a local rebel organisation, had joined forces with the TPLF to depose Ahmed.

The Tigrayan Humanitarian Crisis

The prolonged and destructive war has yielded a grave humanitarian crisis in the Tigray region. UN-led investigations suggest at least 9.4 million people in northern Ethiopia require immediate assistance. With infrastructure being destroyed and supply chains being cut, there have been major food and resource shortages in northern Ethiopia, with rampant malnutrition

and starvation widespread. However, humanitarian groups claim that the government-imposed embargo of Tigray has resulted in fewer than 10% of essential relief assistance reaching the region. UN aid flights found it difficult to land in Mekelle due to conflict and government air strikes. Ethiopia has also suspended many UN humanitarian aid officials with claims of meddling in their affairs and sympathising with the rebels. Since December 2020, more planes have been permitted to land in Tigray. However, vehicle access remains restricted, putting the lives of tens of thousands of vulnerable children in jeopardy, with a risk of nearly a million succumbing to famine. The government has been accused of destroying aid supplies and cutting off TPLF-controlled regions to induce a famine, almost as a weapon of war and elimination. The Ethiopian government has been seen to hold back aid trucks and destroy bridges to further decrease access to aid. Tigrayan farmers have also been prevented by the government from planting crops on their land, which could ease the food shortage.

Furthermore, the conflict has displaced over two million people, with a vast majority internally displaced. Many have crossed the border into neighbouring Sudan, increasing the pressure on resources over there, whilst others are temporarily placed in UN-sponsored camps of Mai Aini, Adi Harush, Shimelba and Hitsats. UNHCR reported that the Shimelba and Hitsats camps were destroyed and all humanitarian facilities were looted and vandalised. Moreover, investigations highlight the prevalence of mass killings in Tigray, especially of children. Violations of human rights continue unabated. As part of what the US calls an ethnic cleansing effort, ethnic Amhara militias have pushed tens of thousands of Tigrayans from their homes. Additionally, Tigrayan women and girls were subjected to rape, gang rape, sexual enslavement, sexual mutilation, and other types of torture by soldiers and militias, who frequently used ethnic insults and death threats. The UN has concluded that both sides have committed atrocities, but the majority have been committed by the Ethiopian military.

Failures of Action & Developments

Amidst the persistent humanitarian crises and the civil war, Ahmed held a general election in 2021 that excluded millions of Ethiopians that were unable to participate. This was seen as another attempt by Ahmed to cement his power. Thousands of ethnic Tigrayans were imprisoned by Ethiopian security forces when the battle with the TPLF escalated in 2021, alleging security concerns. Ahmed used aggressive rhetorics in his rallies, referring to his opponents as "cancer" and "weeds" that he pledged to "bury in a deep pit." Under immense

political pressure internationally, Ahmed reached a deal with the Tigrayans to de-escalate conflict whilst withdrawing Eritrean troops from the region, however, Eritrean personnel have failed to substantially withdraw to this day. The government had called for a ceasefire, but this was rejected by the TPLF with the justification that enemy troops were still present in the region. However, the situation has eased in recent months, with the withdrawal of TPLF forces from Afar and Amhara and the release of Tigrayan POWs from the Ethiopian government. Furthermore, March 2022 saw a somewhat successful humanitarian ceasefire. This has however not been fully implemented and negotiations fail to have been conducted between parties. Thus, war rages on due to the growing OLA, risks of the fighting spreading and the unimproved humanitarian crisis.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Ethiopia

The Ethiopian government led by Abiy Ahmed and the Prosperity Party coalition is currently waging war against the TPLF in the Tigray region. Ahmed claims that the government sees the TPLF as the enemy and not the Tigrayan people, arguing that the TPLF's action of calling a regional election in defiance of the government was an act to create and increase political instability and undermine the legitimacy of the Ethiopian government. Ahmed sent around 140,000 active personnel from the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), along with weaponry aid from the United Arab Emirates. Ahmed initially announced that this was a "law and order operation" with the intention for it to be bloodless. However, it evolved into a persistent and deadly conflict, especially with the involvement of Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) personnel. The Ethiopian government has been accused of locking up journalists and committing a vast range of war crimes, including inducing and aggravating the famine in Tigray. Ahmed has been accused of plotting this conflict with Eritrean dictator Isias Afwerki, long before the 2018 resolution of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war. With this, Ahmed and the Ethiopian government have come under major pressure from international bodies, worsening their relationship with the UN and the United States. The Ethiopian government has been seen as unwilling to comply with pressures from the UN and have dismissed UN personnel in Ethiopia with the justification that the UN were breaching their national sovereignty. Despite a ceasefire

being called, ENDF troops remain active in the Tigray region, with Ahmed hell-bent on weakening the TPLF and cementing his power.

Eritrea

The EPLF and TPLF have been bitter rivals ever since working together in the EPRDF coalition during the Ethiopian civil war. With TPLF as the common enemy, EPLF leader Isias Afwerki has become closely aligned with Ahmed, which led to the formal end of the Ethiopia-Eritrea war in 2018. Eritrea's involvement in the war stemmed from the fact that they saw the bordering TPLF as a threat to their national security and they wanted to capitalise on this opportunity to seize increased influence over the African horn region. Thus, Eritrea sent over 40,000 EDF personnel into Tigray to aid ENDF and allied militias in the war against the TPLF. Eritrean involvement has been seen to increase the scale of the war. The Eritrean government has also been accused of war crimes and alleged ethnic cleansing for their brutality in Tigrayan villages, especially in the case of the Axum massacre, killing 800 civilians. Eritrea also held northeastern territory in Tigray. Eritrea has also been accused of allegedly training and using Somali personnel in their war effort. A major condition of the humanitarian ceasefire between the ENDF and TPLF was a total withdrawal of EDF troops from the region, but this withdrawal has not been completed to this day.

Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) is a political party and paramilitary organisation that has ruled Ethiopia for decades under the EPRDF coalition, currently led by Debretsion Gebremichael. Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed's ministry was initially supported by the TPLF. However, due to Ahmed's work of cracking down on top TPLF officials and freeing political prisoners, tensions grew between the parties. In response to Ahmed's postponement of the 2020 elections, the TPLF held an illegal regional election, which prompted a violent response from the government after the TPLF allegedly attacked an ENDF base in Tigray. Amidst the war, Tigrayans have been subjected to discrimination and ethnic cleansing. Tigrayans have been discriminated against by losing their jobs, mass arrests and suspensions of bank accounts. In the Afar and Amhara regions, the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) have been alleged to the extrajudicial slaughter of civilians, haphazard shelling and shooting, sexual violence as a weapon of war, the use of human shields, mass looting and damage of infrastructure and personal property. The TPLF have allied themselves with the ethnic

nationalist OLA to overthrow Ahmed. In March 2022, following a humanitarian ceasefire, the TPLF withdrew from Afar and Amhara and agreed to a ceasefire and negotiation when enemy troops have successfully left the region.

People's Republic of China & Russian Federation

As P5 members, both Russia and China have a great influence on the international and the UN response to the conflict. Both have blocked scheduling UNSC meetings to discuss the conflict. As the UN human rights council in Geneva decided to establish a three-member team to probe atrocities in Ethiopia's civil war, China reiterated its objection to "any politicisation of human rights matters." Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Ethiopia's capital was regarded as a show of Beijing's support for Prime Minister Ahmed's administration amidst the war. Russia has been pushing the idea that the crisis in Tigray is an internal issue that should be addressed by the Ethiopian government without outside intervention. They claim that the Ethiopian government's efforts should not be negated by the international community by throwing support toward the 'defiant' TPLF.

United States of America

The United States, a P5 member, has condemned the violence in the Tigray region and has committed to resolving the conflict as soon as possible. Tibor Nagy, the United States' Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, criticised the TPLF's rocket assaults on Asmara, calling it an unjustified attack on Eritrea and an effort to internationalise the bloodshed. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has called on Eritrean and Amhara militia personnel to leave Tigray immediately. He also requested that the African Union and regional allies collaborate with the US to address the Tigray problem. Joe Biden, the US President, has repeatedly contacted Ahmed and asked him to initiate negotiations with the TPLF to end the bloodshed. Biden has also placed sanctions against the TPLF, Eritrean and Ethiopian governments for prolonging the conflict and committing human rights abuses.

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

The United Nations has been committed to restoring peace in Ethiopia as soon as possible and alleviating the humanitarian crisis and the human rights abuses in the Tigray region. The World Food Programme (WFP) has helped ease the food shortage in Tigray as

millions are on the brink of famine. UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) planes carried WFP aid and humanitarian aid officials into the Tigray region. However, there were a plethora of difficulties in transporting aid into the region amidst conflict. This included safety of transport which included frequent attacks on convoys as they transported humanitarian cargo into the region and trucks being held up or being unable to travel due to damaged infrastructure. Nevertheless, significant units of aid were delivered to conflict-ridden communities in northern Ethiopia. However, in January 2022, due to lack of funding, poorly-established supply chains and transportation difficulties, WFP seized their operations, further aggravating the crisis in the region. Furthermore, many UN aid workers working to deliver aid to IDPs in refugee camps in Northern Ethiopia, such as the Shimelba and Hitsats camps have been detained with the justification of sympathising with the rebels and meddling in Ethiopia's internal affairs. Additionally, UN officials have worked hand in hand with the African Union to continuously pressure the Ethiopian government to call for a ceasefire and enter negotiations with the TPLF. A report published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, highlights the war crimes and atrocities committed by both parties. The UNHRC also voted in December 2021 to establish a commission to investigate human rights abuses in the Tigray conflict which found abuses committed by all parties involved. United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres welcomed the March 2022 humanitarian ceasefire and further called for the restoration of public services such as banking, electricity and telecommunications in Tigray and the increased implementation of aid in the region.

Minor Resolutions have been passed by the UN, but many have failed as member states deem UN involvement as a breach of Ethiopia's national sovereignty. Some of the following resolutions have been passed before the start of this conflict but their legislation applies to this conflict.

- Protection of Civilians, 24th May 2018, (**S/RES/2417**)
- Calling for the withdrawal of EDF troops from Tigray, 8th July 2021, (**A/HRC/RES/47/13**)
- Strongly Condemning Attacks against Medical Facilities, Personnel in Conflict Situations, 3rd May 2016, (**S/RES/2286**)
- Establishing the United Nations Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, 30th September 2009, (**S/RES/1888**)

- Strengthening justice and accountability and calls for a survivor-centred approach in the prevention and response to conflict-related sexual violence, (S/RES/2467)

Possible Solutions

Solutions must not infringe on the sovereignty of Ethiopia and Eritrea and are good compromises to prevent vetoes from P5s.

- A UN-mandated national dialogue including government officials, freed opposition party leaders and regional leaders on Ethiopian federalism and regional boundaries.
- The re-establishment of the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) to oversee the withdrawal of Eritrean troops and the implementation of ceasefires.
- Urging the Ethiopian government to remove or ease censorship laws regarding the conflict to increase transparency.
- The creation of a platform for the TPLF and the Ethiopian government to negotiate a peace treaty.
- Negotiating with involved parties to remove the de facto blockade of aid to both parties in the conflict and restore aid supply chains and transportation to alleviate the humanitarian crisis.
- The creation of a UN-led investigative committee, including TPLF, Ethiopian and Eritrean officials to investigate war crimes, human rights abuses and sexual violence acts committed by parties in the conflict.
- Promote and encourage the Ethiopian government to pass hate crime legislation and discrimination protections to protect ethnic minorities from discrimination.
- Sanctions on Eritrea to pressure them to withdraw EDF troops more rapidly from the Tigray, Amhara and Afar regions.

Bibliography

Useful Links

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0cYHw-joZI> (Neutral and informative summary video on the topic at hand)
- <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/08/ethiopia-troops-and-militia-rape-and-abduct-women-and-girls-in-tigray-conflict-new-report/> (A good article addressing sexual violence against women amidst the conflict)
- <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/167-finding-path-peace-ethiopian-tigray-region> (An excellent article summarising the conflict and suggesting solutions)
- <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/ethiopia-s-tigray-refugee-crisis-explained/> (Good article addressing the refugee crisis induced by this conflict)
- <https://theconversation.com/eritrea-is-involved-in-tigray-to-boost-its-stature-why-t-his-strategy-could-backfire-175591> (An interesting article addressing the Eritrean involvement in the conflict)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6aL-5QReoDc> (An Al Jazeera news report that provides some interesting insights on the issue)

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