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Ethiopia's Transition and the Tigray Conflict

Updated September 9, 2021

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CRS REPORT
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Committees of Congress

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SUMMARY

R46905

September 9, 2021

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Ethiopia's Transition and the Tigray Conflict

The conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region has fueled a large-scale humanitarian crisis and attracted international concern, amid reports of starvation and atrocities. The war has taken a heavy human and economic toll, and it is spreading beyond Tigray. The Ethiopian government has resisted various calls for peace talks with Tigrayan insurgents, led by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The TPLF, a party representing one of Ethiopia's ethnic minorities, had been the dominant political party in the country's ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition for almost three decades, until Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018. The TPLF was the ruling party in the regional state of Tigray when the conflict began.

Repression and abuses of power under the EPRDF, which some Ethiopians attribute specifically to the TPLF, fueled grievances and spurred a mass protest movement that brought Prime Minister Abiy to power. Abiy, a member of the EPRDF, pledged to open the country politically and economically, and commenced reforms. His efforts to mend ties with neighboring Eritrea, long strained by a border conflict and an antagonistic relationship between the TPLF and the Eritrean regime, won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. Later that year, Abiy merged the EPRDF coalition into a new Prosperity Party. The TPLF opposed the party's creation, viewing it as part of an agenda to shift Ethiopia from a federal to a unitary state. Tensions between the TPLF and Abiy's government rose, and an election dispute in 2020 led federal and Tigray regional authorities to challenge each other's legitimacy. On November 4, 2020, Abiy announced military operations in Tigray, following an attack by Tigrayan forces on a military base in the region. The federal government described the attack as unprovoked and constituting treason, while the Tigray government asserted that its forces were acting in self-defense against a planned federal assault. Federal authorities have since accused the TPLF of orchestrating ethnic violence across Ethiopia to make it ungovernable. In May 2021, the Ethiopian government designated the party as a terrorist group.

The conflict has evolved into an apparent civil war in northern Ethiopia. It pits an array of armed groups aligned with the federal government—including the militaries of Ethiopia and Eritrea, paramilitary forces from Ethiopia's regional states, and informal militia—against an ethnic insurgent force led by a former head of Ethiopia's military and composed of former soldiers, Tigray regional security forces, militia, and civilian recruits. Abuses against civilians in Tigray by government-aligned forces have reportedly fueled insurgent recruitment. The conflict was initially concentrated in Tigray, parts of which have been occupied by forces from the neighboring Amhara region and by Eritrean troops, but an insurgent offensive in June 2021 led the federal government to withdraw its military from much of the region and declare a temporary ceasefire. The self-declared Tigrayan Defense Forces (TDF) have since launched incursions into Amhara and Afar regions in what they describe as an effort to break a government-imposed blockade on their region and press the government into negotiations. Federal and regional authorities, meanwhile, have launched a mass recruitment drive and deployed paramilitary units from other regional states to the front lines, and Eritrea has deployed more troops into northern Ethiopia. A new defense agreement with Turkey, and reported acquisitions from Iran, may provide Ethiopia's military with additional capabilities.

The war has had a devastating impact on Tigray, and increasingly threatens surrounding areas. United Nations (U.N.) Secretary-General António Guterres has called the humanitarian situation in Tigray, where 5.2 million people need food aid and hundreds of thousands are facing starvation, "hellish." U.N. and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) officials have described a de facto humanitarian blockade on Tigray. Aid agencies reported their food stocks in Tigray depleted in August. Health facilities have been damaged and looted, and lack basic medicines and supplies. Humanitarian access has been a problem throughout the conflict. Aid agencies say they now have access to deliver assistance inside Tigray, but their ability to bring aid supplies into the region is extremely restricted. Without sufficient supplies, the U.N. Humanitarian Coordinator warned in early September that the humanitarian situation was set to worsen dramatically.

U.N. officials assert that all parties to the Tigray conflict have committed serious abuses, including widespread sexual violence, extrajudicial executions, mass killings, and forced displacement, some of which may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. They have described the use of rape and starvation as weapons of war. State Department officials suggest Ethiopian security forces have committed acts of ethnic cleansing and accuse forces aligned with the federal government of a violent campaign of collective punishment against the people of Tigray. Reports indicate that ethnic Tigrayans have been targeted based on their ethnicity, and hate speech and dehumanizing language are rising. Aid workers and Eritrean refugees have also been attacked in Tigray, and concerns about revenge attacks have grown as the TDF has moved into Amhara and Afar. "Inflammatory rhetoric and ethnic profiling are tearing apart the social fabric of the country," Secretary-General Guterres warned in August. The U.N. Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide has expressed alarm over the situation in Tigray, where some observers say atrocities may constitute genocide.

The war in northern Ethiopia overlaps with other conflicts in the country, including in Abiy's home region of Oromia, where his government has faced rising political discontent and a growing insurgency. Reports of a nascent military alliance between the Tigrayan and Oromo insurgents, and possibly other armed groups, raises the prospect of a wider war and adds to concerns over Ethiopia's stability. Eritrea's involvement in the Tigray conflict and rising tensions between Ethiopia and Sudan also fuel concerns about a potential regional conflict. Ethiopia-Sudan border tensions have been exacerbated by the Tigray dispute, further complicating efforts to resolve a dispute between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan over a new dam on the Nile. The Tigray conflict has also strained Ethiopia's role as a leading troop contributor to peace and stabilization operations in the region, including in Somalia, from which Ethiopia has withdrawn some of its forces to reinforce operations in the north.

The Tigray conflict has had a negative impact on U.S. relations with Ethiopia, long viewed as a strategic regional partner and currently the largest recipient of U.S. humanitarian and development assistance in the world. The United States has called on the warring parties to negotiate a cessation of hostilities and withdraw their respective forces from areas into which they have advanced since the conflict began. U.S. officials have also called for unfettered humanitarian access and an end to attacks against aid workers. The Biden Administration has restricted security assistance and some economic aid to Ethiopia based on human rights grounds, and it has imposed some sanctions on individuals in Ethiopia and Eritrea involved in human rights abuses in Tigray. The Administration says there is "overwhelming" evidence that Eritrea's military "has engaged in a pattern of serious human rights abuse in Tigray," and it is undertaking a review to determine whether human rights violations in the region constitute crimes against humanity or genocide.

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Overview

The election of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in early 2018 by Ethiopia's parliament marked the beginning of a political transition in the East African country, almost three decades after the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition took power following the collapse of a brutal Marxist military regime known as the Derg. The EPRDF had grown increasingly authoritarian and intolerant of dissent, and it won 100% of the seats in parliament in Ethiopia's 2015 elections.[1] Abiy, chosen as the EPRDF's new leader in response to popular protests and unrest, promised a transition to multiparty democracy. He was hailed as a reformer in his first year in office, and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 after reconciling with neighboring Eritrea. His leadership has since come under scrutiny amid concerns of backsliding on reforms, an unfolding civil war in northern Ethiopia, and violence in other areas of the country.[2]

The conflict in Tigray—a region of six million people—and surrounding areas of northern Ethiopia has drawn international concern in light of a worsening humanitarian crisis and reported atrocities. It is not Ethiopia's only conflict: over 800,000 people were estimated to have been displaced by other conflicts in the first half of 2021.[3] "Increasing intercommunal and interethnic conflicts across the country are putting Ethiopia's unity and territorial integrity at risk," a State Department official told Congress in June, describing the Tigray conflict as the worst of them.[4]

Instability in Ethiopia has implications for U.S. interests there and in the broader region. Ethiopia is routinely one of the largest annual recipients of U.S. humanitarian and development aid. The level of need in the country was already high before the Tigray conflict began in late 2020, in a region struggling with overlapping natural disasters, conflicts, and Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). Ethiopia is Africa's second most populous country, and among a population of over 110 million, almost 24 million people are estimated to need humanitarian aid in 2021.[5] The number of Ethiopians in need is almost three times what it was in early 2020.

The U.N. estimates that over 5.2 million people in Tigray, roughly 90% of its population, need emergency food aid. Experts estimate that between 400,000 and 900,000 people are already facing famine conditions.[6] In June, the U.N.'s top humanitarian official accused Eritrean forces, who are aligned with Ethiopia's troops, of blocking aid and using starvation as a weapon of war.[7] Ethiopian officials reject reports of famine and allegations that aligned forces have restricted aid.[8]

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[1] See, e.g., Human Rights Watch (HRW), *"One Hundred Ways of Putting Pressure": Violations of Freedom of Expression and Association in Ethiopia*, March 24, 2010; International Crisis Group (ICG), *Ethiopia After Meles*, August 22, 2012; and Yosef Badwaza, "Ethiopia: The election that isn't," Freedom House, April 28, 2015.

[2] Cara Anna, "Peace was swift in Ethiopia under Abiy. War was, too," *Associated Press* (AP), November 17, 2020 and Samuel Getachew, "Ethiopia could return to its dark days as 'Abiy-mania fades," *Washington Post*, December 3, 2020.

[3] CRS tally of displacements reported in the International Organization for Migration Displacement Tracking Matrix.

[4] Statement of Acting Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Robert F. Godec, House Committee on Foreign Affairs (HFAC), *The Conflict in Ethiopia*, hearing, June 29, 2021.

[5] U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Humanitarian Needs Overview: Ethiopia*, February 2021 and Daily Briefing Highlights, May 12, 2021.

[6] Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, *Ethiopia: IPC Acute Food Security Analysis*, June 2021; Statement of USAID Acting Assistant Administrator Sarah Charles, HFAC, *The Conflict in Ethiopia*, hearing, June 29, 2021.

[7] "UN: Hunger, Rape Rising in Ethiopia's Tigray," *VOA News*, April 15, 2021; "UN official accuses Eritrean forces of deliberately starving Tigray," *Reuters*, June 14, 2021.

[8] "Ethiopia's Tigray crisis: Abiy Ahmed denies reports of hunger," *BBC News*, June 21, 2021.

The humanitarian response to the crisis in Tigray has been constrained not only by armed actors, but by bureaucratic impediments. A temporary ceasefire declared by the Ethiopian government in late June 2021 has not improved the humanitarian outlook: U.N. officials have since described Tigray as under a de facto humanitarian aid blockade.[9] The government has cut electricity, telecommunications, and banking services for the region and blocked commercial transit, and aid agencies face extensive hurdles in moving supplies and personnel into Tigray.[10] The expansion of the conflict into neighboring regions in July and mass mobilization of fighters add to concerns as security conditions deteriorate. In August, Abiy called for all eligible civilians to join the armed forces to fight the Tigrayan forces, who announced a nascent alliance with another rebel group.

The Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) asserts that multiple actors in the conflict, including the Ethiopian military, have committed abuses that may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, including widespread sexual violence, extrajudicial executions, mass killings, and forced displacement.[11] Cultural heritage sites have been damaged and looted, as have health facilities, factories, and other civilian structures.[12] Armed actors have reportedly blocked aid and destroyed crops, livestock, and food stocks.[13] A European envoy says Ethiopia's leaders spoke to him of an intention to "wipe out Tigrayans for 100 years," in what "looks … like ethnic cleansing."[14] U.S. officials assert that Ethiopian security forces have committed acts of ethnic cleansing and have accused Eritrean forces of a violent campaign that amounts to the collective punishment of Tigray's people.[15]

The U.N. Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide has expressed alarm over the situation in Tigray and other parts of the country, highlighting concern with hate speech, ethnic profiling, and attacks on civilians based on religion and ethnicity. She cautioned in early 2021 that "the risk of atrocity crimes in Ethiopia remains high and likely to get worse," absent an urgent response.[16] The Special Adviser cited "a failure to address ethnic violence, stigmatization, hate speech, religions tensions" as contributing factors. She warned of a deteriorating situation in late July, noting that communal violence had reached an unprecedented level and described dehumanizing language by top political leaders in relation to the Tigray conflict as being of "utmost concern."[17]

The United States "will not stand by in the face of horrors in Tigray," a senior State Department official asserted in June.[18] USAID Administrator Samantha Power traveled to Ethiopia in August,

[9] U.N. Security Council, Remarks by U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres, August 26, 2021; U.N., Statement by Acting Humanitarian Coordinator for Ethiopia Grant Leaity, September 2, 2021.

[10] "EU decries Ethiopia 'siege of Tigray,'" *AFP*, July 6, 2021; ICG, "The Dangerous Expansion of Ethiopia's Tigray War," July 30, 2021; Declan Walsh, "This Ethiopian road is a lifeline for millions. Now it's blocked." *New York Times*, July 29, 2021; Philip Kleinfeld, "Tigray response hit by suspensions, blockade," *New Humanitarian*, August 9, 2021.

[11] Office of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR), "Ethiopia: Persistent, credible reports of grave violations in Tigray underscore urgent need for human rights access – Bachelet," March 4, 2021.

[12] "'No more sacred places': Heritage sites under siege in Tigray conflict," *AFP*, April 30, 2021 and "In Tigray's war, ancient Christian and Muslim houses of worship are increasingly under attack," *The Globe and Mail*, May 10, 2021.

[13] World Peace Foundation, *Starving Tigray*, April 6, 2021; "EU decries Ethiopia 'siege of Tigray'," *AFP*, July 6, 2021.

[14] "EU envoy: Ethiopian leadership vowed to 'wipe out' Tigrayans," *AP*, June 18, 2021.

[15] HFAC, *The Biden Administration's Priorities for U.S. Foreign Policy*, hearing, March 10, 2021 and Statement of Acting Assistant Secretary Godec, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (SFRC), *Ethiopia in Crisis: U.S. Strategy and Policy Response*, hearing, May 27, 2021.

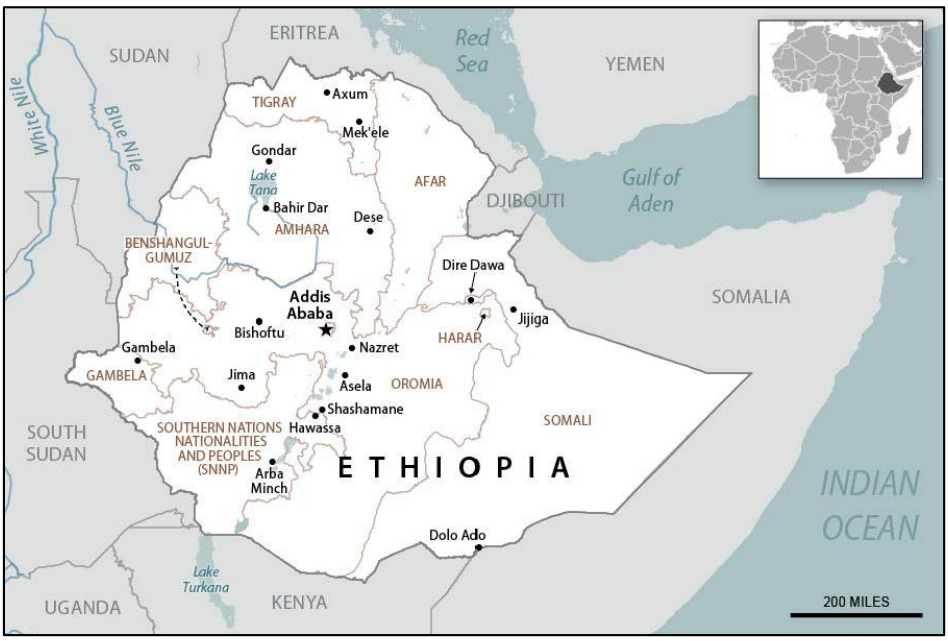
[16] U.N., Statement by the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide on Ethiopia, February 5, 2021.

[17] U.N., Statement by the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide on the continued deterioration of the situation in Ethiopia, July 30, 2021.

[18] Statement of Acting Assistant Secretary Godec, HFAC, *The Conflict in Ethiopia*, op. cit. and USAID Administrator Samantha Power (@PowerUSAID), Twitter, June 9, 2021, 8:54 am EST.

and on behalf of the Biden Administration called on the warring parties to negotiate a cessation of hostilities and withdraw their forces from areas taken since November, to hasten aid delivery, and to end what she termed a commercial blockade of Tigray.[19] The Administration has restricted security assistance to Ethiopia on human rights grounds and imposed sanctions on individuals in Ethiopia and Eritrea involved in human rights abuses in Tigray. It is conducting a review to determine whether abuses committed there constitute crimes against humanity or genocide.

Figure 1. Map of Ethiopia



Source: CRS graphic. Some borders shown are contested.

Background: The Transition and Prelude to Conflict

The EPRDF, a coalition of ethno-regional parties, was dominated by the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), one of the ethnically based rebel groups that united to oust the Derg. Under Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, the TPLF chairman who led Ethiopia for two decades until his death in 2012, members of his Tigrayan ethnic group (estimated at 7% of the population) held a disproportionate number of top government and security posts. The TPLF's dominance in the coalition continued under Meles's successor, Hailemariam Desalegn (who is ethnic Wolayta), and abuses of power by the government generated resentment within Ethiopia's broader population.

Prime Minister Abiy's election in 2018 came in response to mounting pressure on the EPRDF after more than two years of protests led by the country's largest ethnic group, the Oromo, and by members of the second largest group, the Amhara. These protests were fueled by historic grievances, state violence, and mass arrests. Abiy, the EPRDF's first Oromo leader, committed to opening Ethiopia politically and economically. His government released political prisoners, removed terrorist designations on opposition groups, and loosened media and civil society restrictions. He replaced top security chiefs and appointed an unprecedented number of women to senior posts. Abiy invited political dissidents in exile to return, and brought some into government. He also sought peace deals with the country's insurgent groups and initiated a

[19] USAID, Administrator Samantha Power holds press conference, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, August 4, 2021.

rapprochement with Eritrea that formally ended a decades-long border dispute—efforts that earned Abiy the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019.

Abiy faced growing concerns about the direction of the transition.[20] Alongside reforms, ethnic conflict in Ethiopia increased during his tenure, driving displacement. U.N. officials say the ethnic violence in the country has reached "an alarming level" in recent years, and the stigmatization of certain ethnic groups has "significantly contributed to ethnic intolerance."[21] Ethnic Amhara, for example, have raised alarm about targeted violence against their community; some say Abiy's government has not done enough to address the threat.[22] Others contend the government's response to ethnic conflicts has fueled intercommunal rivalries.[23] Some regional officials say Ethiopia's conflict prevention and resolution tools are inadequate, while Human Rights Watch suggests efforts to pursue justice and reconciliation have been insufficient.[24]

Condemning what he characterized as divisive ethnic politics, Abiy led a merger of the EPRDF's ethno-regional parties and allied ones into a new Prosperity Party in late 2019, formally ending the EPRDF coalition. The TPLF objected and refused to join the new party. Some in Abiy's Oromo Democratic Party also objected, calling the merger rushed and lacking consultation.[25] Some proponents of Ethiopia's ethnic federal system and greater cultural and regional autonomy viewed the creation of a new party that centralized decisionmaking as a sign of Abiy's intent ultimately to move away from multinational federalism to a unitary, centralized state.[26] (Ethnic federalism, in which regions are defined by ethnicity, is a topic of intense debate in Ethiopia: one recent survey found that a majority of Ethiopians favor a federal system of government but are divided on whether regions should be defined by ethnicity or geography.[27])

With Abiy's dissolution of the EPRDF, relations with the TPLF—already strained—frayed further. While many Ethiopians cheered efforts to prosecute former officials and elites for abuses and alleged corruption, the TPLF viewed the anti-corruption prosecutions as excessively targeting Tigrayans and TPLF-linked businesses, and saw the party increasingly cast as a scapegoat for the country's ills.[28] Ethnic Tigrayans, meanwhile, suggest they felt increasingly isolated and unsafe.[29]

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[20] Freedom House, "Ethiopia Working Group: Ethiopia's path to a more stable and democratic future is increasingly at risk," August 12, 2020; "Ethiopia's democratic transition is in peril," *The Economist*, September 19, 2020; ICG, *Keeping Ethiopia's Transition on the Rails*, December 19, 2019 and "War and repression in Ethiopia make national dialogue ever more pressing," January 29, 2021.

[21] U.N., "UN officials express deep concern over escalating ethnic tensions in Ethiopia," November 12, 2020.

[22] Robbie Corey-Boulet, 'It was a war': Ethnic killings cloud Ethiopia's election buildup," *AFP*, June 3, 2021.

[23] See, e.g., Statement by Acting Assistant Secretary Godec, op. cit.

[24] U.N. Security Council, Statement by Ambassador Martin Kimani, Permanent Representative of Kenya on Behalf of the A3+1, August 26, 2021; Latitia Bader, "To heal, Ethiopia needs to confront its violent past," HRW, May 28, 2020.

[25] Salem Solomon, "Efforts to end Ethiopia's ruling party draw criticism from within," *VOA News*, December 4, 2019.

[26] TPLF critics contend that federalism was only nominally practiced under the EPRDF, which centralized power despite its advocacy for the right to self-rule. For more on the new party's formation, see, e.g., Teferi Mergo, "The war in Tigray is a fight over Ethiopia's past—and future," *Foreign Policy*, December 18, 2021; Awol Allo, "Why Abiy Ahmed's Prosperity Party could be bad news for Ethiopia," Al Jazeera, December 5, 2019. For more on the ethnic federalism debate, see, e.g., Goitom Gebreluel, "Should Ethiopia stick with ethnic federalism," April 5, 2019, and Addisu Lashitew, "How to stop ethnic nationalism from tearing Ethiopia apart," *Foreign Policy*, February 11, 2021.

[27] According to the survey, 6 out of 10 Ethiopians favor a federal over a unitary system, while almost 4 in 10 view federalism as too divisive. If federalism is maintained, roughly half favor regions based on ethnicity. Afrobarometer, "Ethiopians embrace federalism but are split over whether it should be ethnic or geographic," August 25, 2020.

[28] "How Abiy's effort to redefine Ethiopia led to war in Tigray," *World Politics Review*, December 8, 2020.

[29] See, e.g., James Jeffrey, "Power shift creates new tensions and Tigrayan fears in Ethiopia," February 14, 2019.

After an expansion of political rights and civil liberties during the first half of Abiy's term, human rights groups began reporting signs of closing political space, such as renewed restrictions, arbitrary arrests, and harassment of opposition party members and journalists.[30] Some critics accused Abiy, a former military officer and senior intelligence official, of trying to consolidate power and steering Ethiopia back toward authoritarian rule.[31] Among the most prominent of Abiy's critics has been media mogul-turned-politician Jawar Mohammed, a dual national who renounced his U.S. citizenship in 2020 to qualify as a candidate for parliament. Jawar and several other opposition politicians were arrested in mid-2020 (discussed below) and remain in detention.

In early 2020, citing COVID-19 concerns, Abiy's government postponed the general elections that were scheduled for August 2020 and extended its term—an act that the TPLF dismissed as unconstitutional. The TPLF-led regional government proceeded with Tigray's state council elections in September, despite federal objections and warnings from Abiy and parliament.[32] The election disputes led federal and regional authorities to challenge each other's legitimacy, with the federal government reducing federal budget support to the region and the Tigray regional government declaring that federal authorities lacked legal authority. A subsequent federally ordered change of command for military forces stationed in Tigray became a flashpoint.[33]

The Conflict in Tigray

On November 4, 2020, Prime Minister Abiy announced the start of military operations in Tigray, following a TPLF attack on a military base that Abiy asserted had forced the federal government into a military confrontation.[34] His government described the TPLF attack as high treason and termed the military's actions "law enforcement operations."[35] Federal authorities have since accused the TPLF of instigating conflicts along ethnic and religious lines to make Ethiopia "ungovernable," and in May 2021 designated the party a terrorist group.[36] The TPLF denies initiating the conflict, asserting that the government had massed troops on Tigray's borders days beforehand and that Tigray forces moved to take the base after officers defected and warned of a pending attack.[37] The TPLF accused Abiy of starting a war "to consolidate his personal power."[38]

The International Crisis Group (ICG), which had warned for months of a looming conflict, says that while Tigray's government may have "struck first," assertions that the federal intervention was prepared beforehand have merit.[39] Press reports suggested movements of federal troops in the

[30] HRW, *World Report 2021*, January 23, 2021, and Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2020*, March 2020.

[31] Abel Abate Demissie and Ahmed Soliman, "Unrest threatens Ethiopia's transition under Abiy," Chatham House, July 24, 2020; Jawar Mohamed, "How Ethiopia's transition to democracy derailed," *Addis Standard*, October 28, 2020 and Jawar Mohamed, "The war in Tigray is a result of Ethiopia's mismanaged transition," November 2020.

[32] In May 2020, when the TPLF declared it would proceed with elections for its state council (the state-level legislative body), Abiy warned that "the government will be forced to take any measures to assure the safety of the people and the country," if Tigray held elections unilaterally. "A message on current affairs," video, YouTube, May 7, 2020.

[33] "Crisis staring Tigray, Federal governments in the eye as army caught in mix," *Addis Standard*, October 31, 2021.

[34] Office of the Prime Minister, "TPLF attacks Ethiopian National Defense Forces base in Tigray," November 4, 2020.

[35] Office of the Prime Minister, "The Ongoing Law Enforcement Operations in Tigray," November 14, 2020.

[36] Office of the Prime Minister, "Updates on the unfolding developments in Ethiopia," November 6, 2020.

[37] Declan Walsh, "'I didn't expect to make it back alive': An interview with Tigray's leader," *New York Times*, July 23, 2021.

[38] Jason Burke, "Ethiopian troops 'liberate' key town in Tigray, claim officials," *The Guardian*, November 16, 2020.

[39] ICG, "Toward an end to Ethiopia's federal-Tigray feud," August 14, 2020, "Steering Ethiopia's Tigray crisis away from conflict," October 30, 2020, "Finding a path to peace in Ethiopia's Tigray region," February 11, 2021; "As Ethiopian troops exit Tigray, time to focus on relief," July 9, 2021; ICG Senior Analyst William Davison

days before the TPLF attack, and senior Sudanese officials say they discussed the prospective conflict with Abiy a week before it started, when Abiy asked them to secure the border.[40] By some accounts, operations against the TPLF were planned in coordination with Eritrea.[41] The day before fighting began, Tigray's regional president held a press conference, declaring that his government had prepared its regional force "not in need of a war, but if the worst comes, to defend ourselves."[42] (Each of Ethiopia's regional states administers its own paramilitary "special forces.") A European Union (EU) statement issued that day expressed deep concern with the mounting tensions and warned all parties" to "abstain from provocative military deployments."[43]

The fighting in Tigray turned members of Ethiopia's security forces against each other, along ethnic lines. Tigray regional security forces and informal militia, joined by Tigrayans in the army, reportedly seized heavy weapons from the federal forces at the onset of the fighting. The Ethiopian military, supported by Eritrean troops and regional security forces and ethnic militia from the neighboring Amhara region, carried out ground operations and airstrikes. Human rights groups reported that indiscriminate artillery fire on urban areas resulted in civilian casualties; the military denies targeting civilian areas.[44] The TPLF accused the United Arab Emirates (UAE) of supporting Ethiopia with armed drones flown from Eritrea.[45] (Abiy maintains Ethiopia has used its own drones during the conflict, for surveillance.) The TPLF launched several rocket attacks on installations in Eritrea's capital in November, in stated retaliation for Eritrea's role in the conflict. The TPLF also fired rockets at airports in Amhara that it stated were supporting air operations.

The federal government claimed victory after taking Tigray's capital, Mekele, in late November and publicly declared an end to military operations, installing an interim regional administration in Mekele. The conflict continued, however, and security conditions deteriorated in Tigray as the warring parties vied for control of territory. The Abiy administration rejected calls for peace talks and denied the presence of Eritrean forces in Tigray for months—despite reports of abuses attributed to them—before publicly stating in March that Eritrean soldiers were acting to secure their border.[46] The Eritrean presence has extended beyond the border area, and reports, which U.S. officials call credible, suggest Eritrean forces have sometimes donned Ethiopian uniforms.[47]

The Conflict Spreads

A major shift in the conflict occurred in June 2021, when the Tigrayan insurgents, who call themselves the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF), launched a new offensive, taking Mekele and other parts of the region. The TDF's commander, General Tsadkan Gebretensae led Ethiopia's military

(@wdavison10), Twitter, August 27, 2021, 8:44 am.

[40] "Is Ethiopia headed for civil war?" *Foreign Policy*, November 5, 2020; Cameron Hudson, "The unintended consequence of Ethiopia's civil war might be a border war with Sudan," Atlantic Council, March 3, 2021; "Sudanese troops have been deployed on the border in agreement with Ethiopia's PM," *Sudan Tribune*, January 17, 2021.

[41] Mesfin Hagos, "Eritrea's role in Ethiopia's conflict and the fate of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia," *African Arguments*, December 4, 2020.

[42] "'We have prepared our military of special force not in need of a war, but if the worst comes,' Debretsion Gebremichael," *Addis Standard*, November 2, 2020.

[43] European External Action Service, "Ethiopia: Statement by the High Representative/Vice President Josep Borrell on the latest developments," November 2, 2020.

[44] HRW, "Ethiopia: Unlawful shelling of Tigray urban areas," January 11, 2021.

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

[46] Abiy Ahmed Ali (@AbiyAhmedAli), Twitter, March 26, 2021, 12:46 am EST.

[47] See, e.g., "'Our Season': Eritrean troops kill, rape, and loot in Tigray," *AP*, May 28, 2021; U.S. Mission to the U.N., Statement by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield on the Situation in Ethiopia's Tigray Region, April 15, 2021.

from 1991 to 2001. He describes the resistance in Tigray as being led by "the duly elected Government of Tigray," not solely by the TPLF, which he says remains Tigray's ruling party.[48] While TPLF leaders play a key role in the leadership of the insurgent force, the TDF appears to draw support from beyond the party among Tigrayans.[49] (Ethiopian authorities object to the use of the term TDF: the federal media authority briefly revoked the license of a local media outlet in July for using it, contending that it advanced the agenda of a terrorist group.[50])

Less than two weeks after the TDF launched its operation in June, Ethiopia's army withdrew from much of Tigray, and federal authorities announced a temporary ceasefire on June 28. Officials declared that the ceasefire would facilitate aid distribution and allow farmers in Tigray to plant, asserting that the TPLF was "no longer an existential threat" to the country and that its military and organizational capacity had been "obliterated."[51] They acknowledged that they faced an insurgency, however, saying that the army was "not ready to exchange fire with people in Tigray who have been misled by TPLF propaganda," and that the ceasefire "would help the people of Tigray to reflect on the pros and cons of colluding with a terrorist group." Some reports suggest that the army suffered major losses in June.[52] The TDF claims to have routed eight divisions and captured 8,000 prisoners of war; it marched thousands through Mekele after taking the city.[53]

The government's declaration of a ceasefire did not end the war. Tigrayan leaders dismissed it as cover for military losses rather than a humanitarian gesture, and they denounced the continued presence of forces from Amhara in western Tigray—which the Amhara government has sought to claim as its territory (discussed below)—and pledged to "liberate" the area. The warring parties traded blame for the destruction of bridges on two of the four roads into Tigray when the military withdrew, which has blocked aid access via those routes. Some observers suggest that Amhara forces sabotaged the bridges to stymie TDF efforts to retake Western Tigray.[54] Eritrean forces, meanwhile, reportedly withdrew from much of Tigray but remained in border areas. By August the United States reported that "large numbers" had re-entered Ethiopia.[55] The TDF asserts that it will fight until the federal government lifts the blockade on Tigray and agrees to dialogue on a political solution to the conflict.[56]

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[48] "Tigray crisis: A conversation with General Tsadkan Gebretensae, Tigray Defense Force Central Command," *The Elephant*, July 9, 2021. Tsadkan, who had fallen out with the TPLF during a leadership split in 2001, had been critical of what he described as authoritarianism and state brutality under the EPRDF. He had publicly welcomed Abiy's initial reforms, but had also warned of troubles in the Tigray-federal relationship and concerns over Abiy's deal with Eritrea. He says he joined the resistance after the conflict began, because the government had "invited foreign forces to invade our country." "'Ethiopia is in transition defined by no clear direction': Tsadkan Gebretensae," *Ethiopia Observer*, January 8, 2021 and "Former TPLF General reveals hopes and fears in Tigray," TesfaNews, August 22, 2018.

[49] See, e.g., interviews cited in William Davison (@wdavison10), Twitter, September 3, 2021, 9:34 am EST.

[50] Addis Standard, Statement of fact on the suspension of Addis Standard, July 19, 2021.

[51] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Media Briefing by State Minister Redwan Hussien and General Bacha Debele briefed media on unilateral ceasefire in Tigray, June 30, 2021. In the June 30 address, Prime Minister Abiy noted the challenges facing the army in fighting an insurgency and suggested a pause would give the population time to reflect.

[52] Declan Walsh, "How local guerrilla fighters routed Ethiopia's powerful army," *New York Times*, July 11, 2021.

[53] Declan Walsh, ""Tigrayan forces parade Ethiopian soldiers through regional capital," *New York Times*, July 2, 2021.

[54] ICG, "As Ethiopian troops exit Tigray, time to focus on relief," July 9, 2021.

[55] OCHA, *Tigray: Humanitarian Access Snapshot (July 2021)*, August 13, 2021 and Treasury Department, Treasury Sanctions Eritrean Military Leader in Connection with Serious Human Rights Abuse in Tigray, August 23, 2021.

[56] "Ethiopia's Tigray crisis: Rebels vow to fight on until blockade ends," *BBC*, August 2, 2021.

In July, regional forces from other parts of Ethiopia reportedly deployed to the Afar-Tigray border to reinforce the army.[57] The TDF moved into Afar in what it said was an operation against the amassing forces.[58] Some observers speculated that the TDF might seek to cut off the road and rail line to Djibouti's port, through which 95% of Ethiopia's maritime trade transits, in an effort to force the federal government into negotiations. (That route—through Afar—was blocked for days in July by protests and violence between communities in Afar and Ethiopia's eastern Somali region, who are involved in a simmering border dispute unrelated to the Tigray conflict).[59]

Regional authorities in Amhara, Afar, and Oromia called for civilians to take up arms in July, signaling a further escalation of the conflict. In early August, the TDF, which also advanced south into Amhara, took Lalibela, a UNESCO World Heritage site home to 13th century rock-hewn churches, reportedly without any shooting.[60] Heavy fighting has been reported in other areas of Amhara, however, and some reports suggest Tigrayan forces have razed villages killed civilians, and looted aid supplies during their offensive; the TDF denies targeting civilians and has called for an independent investigation of the incidents.[61] Amidst this fighting, a minority group in Amhara, the Qemant, have accused Amhara forces and militia of attacking their communities and displacing thousands, some who have fled as refugees to Sudan.[62] Amhara officials assert some Qemant have become a proxy force for the TPLF (an allegation Ethiopian officials have also made against armed groups in other regions).[63] With all sides mobilizing civilians to fight, distinguishing civilians from combatants has become more challenging for journalists and human rights monitors as reports of possible new atrocities emerge.[64]

The expansion of the conflict into Afar and Amhara has displaced over 300,000 people and made another 1.7 million people food insecure.[65] The TDF says it will accept a ceasefire when its conditions are met, and in the interim it will take "appropriate measures to ensure the safety and security of our people."[66] The Tigrayan forces aver that they prefer a peaceful resolution to the crisis and are willing to negotiate. They have also called for a "transitional arrangement and an inclusive political process... to address the political and constitutional problems afflicting the

[57] "Three more regions reinforce Ethiopian army, Amhara against Tigray forces," *Reuters*, July 16, 2021.

[58] "Ethiopia's Afar region urges civilians to fight Tigray rebels," *AFP*, July 23, 2021.

[59] "Protesters block Ethiopia rail link after clashes leave 300 dead," *Bloomberg*, July 27, 2021.

[60] "Lalibela: Ethiopia's Tigray rebels take Unesco world heritage town," *BBC*, August 5, 2021.

[61] In early September, after U.S. officials implicated Tigrayan forces in looting aid supplies in Amhara, they clarified that USAID had verified one incident of "a combination of TPLF fighters and local community members" looting a partner aid agency's warehouse, and had unconfirmed reports of two other incidents. On reported TDF abuses, see, e.g., Zecharias Zelalem, "'They are out for revenge': Evidence of war crimes as rebels road out of Ethiopia's Tigray region," *The Telegraph*, August 11, 2021. On reports of looting, see Declan Walsh (@DeclanWalsh), Twitter, September 7, 2021, 2:45 am EST; U.S. Embassy in Ethiopia, Access to Humanitarian Assistance, September 3, 2021.

[62] "Caught in the crossfire, Ethiopian minority flees to Sudan," *AFP*, August 21, 2021.

[63] Officials in the Benishangul-Gumuz region have similarly referred to ethnic Gumuz insurgents as "TPLF agents" and termed them an associated "terrorist group." See, e.g., "Benishangul Gumuz Regional State vows to take 'final measures' against 'TPLF agents,'" *Addis Standard*, September 9, 2021. For more context, see Maria Gerth-Niculescu, "Anger, fear run deep after months of ethnic violence in western Ethiopia," The New Humanitarian, February 23, 2021.

[64] See, e.g., "Tigray forces killed 120 civilians in village in Amhara – Ethiopian officials," *Reuters*, September 9, 2021.

[65] WFP, "WFP expands emergency response as up to 7 million people face hunger crisis in northern Ethiopia," September 7, 2021.

[66] In early July, Tigrayan leaders identified the following conditions for a ceasefire: the withdrawal of forces from Amhara and Eritrea to pre-war territories, unimpeded aid access and the return of telecommunications, electricity and other services, the release of political prisoners and detained Tigrayan members of the military, and accountability for atrocities. In late July, they added a call for a transitional arrangement and inclusive political process. Getachew Reda (@reda_getatchew), Twitter, July 4, 2021, 5:43 am EST; July 7, 2021, 10:04 am EST; and July 29, 2021, 4:00 am EST.

country." In early August the TDF announced talks over a preliminary military alliance with an Oromo rebel group that seeks Abiy's ouster; the extent of their cooperation is unclear.[67]

Communications Blackouts, Media Access, and Contested Narratives

Communications cuts, access restrictions, propaganda, and disinformation have made it difficult to confirm information on developments in Tigray. Phone and internet connections were cut when the conflict began, and the parties trade blame for the outages. Communications were later restored in some areas. Groups that monitor internet freedom attribute the shutdown to the federal government—there have been at least 13 internet shutdowns in Ethiopia under the Abiy administration.[68] All communications were cut again in late June, and the military dismantled U.N. satellite communications equipment in Mekele.

Federal authorities did not grant journalists access to Tigray during the first four months of the conflict, and access since has been subject to authorization. Journalists covering the war have faced threats, intimidation, and arrest. Ethiopian journalists are especially vulnerable, but foreign correspondents and researchers also have reported harassment.[69] The government expelled ICG's Ethiopia analyst in November and in May revoked the accreditation of a New York Times reporter whose coverage of abuses by government-aligned forces was reportedly seen as creating diplomatic pressure.[70] When reports of troops blocking aid emerged in May 2021, Secretary Blinken issued a statement of concern, calling Eritrean and Amhara forces' conduct particularly problematic and urging their withdrawal.[71] Days later, the Foreign Ministry alleged the existence of "a concerted campaign to exert undue pressure against Ethiopia," referencing "unfair and unwarranted" international statements on the humanitarian and human rights situation and refuting reports of a crackdown on the press.[72] (On the same day, CNN reported that Ethiopian troops had threatened the staff of a Tigray hospital for "tarnishing Ethiopia's image" in media reports.[73])

The warring parties and their supporters disagree on basic facts, some academics note: "How it started, who is to blame… the relative strength of the combatants, the opinions of the people of Tigray, and whether any atrocities have been committed (and if so, by whom) are all matters of vigorous dispute."[74] Both sides have sought to shape the public narrative on the conflict through their media outlets and social media.[75] Activists and diaspora members also use social media to circulate information about the crisis and influence public discourse.[76]

Federal authorities issue "Fact Check" statements to contradict what they characterize as misrepresentations in international media.[77] The government alleges that the TPLF has infiltrated the refugee camps in Sudan to spread disinformation, and its statements discounting abuses reported by refugees have led some observers to accuse the government of a systematic campaign to discredit refugee accounts.[78] Pro-government social media accounts allege that the TPLF has infiltrated media and human rights organizations or provided them with false information.[79]

The Prime Minister's spokesperson has accused unnamed foreign actors of an "orchestrated attack that is condescending in nature, often patronizing in tone; belligerent in approach and destructive in the outcome." She asserts that Ethiopia is the victim of false narratives spread by TPLF "sympathizers" abroad.[80] Abiy has accused the international community of ignoring TPLF crimes and suggests that some seek "to resuscitate and use the terrorist group for their own agenda."[81] Eritrean officials have made similar accusations against the United States.[82] Some Ethiopian officials have alleged a regime change conspiracy by the West, while others have accused aid organizations of smuggling weapons to the TPLF.[83]

Tigray: Humanitarian and Human Rights Concerns

The situation in Tigray is one of the worst food emergencies globally: aid agencies estimate that 5.2 million people there need food aid.[84] USAID's Famine Early Warning Systems Network

[67] "Ethiopia's Tigray forces seek new military alliance," *Reuters*, August 11, 2021.

[68] Netblocks, "Internet disrupted in Ethiopia as conflict breaks out in Tigray region," November 4, 2020, and Access Now, Open letter to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali, June 18, 2021.

[69] See, e.g., "Ethiopia's Tigray conflict and the battle to control information," *Al Jazeera*, February 16, 2021, and reports by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) on Ethiopia.

[70] ICG, "Ethiopia expels crisis group senior analyst," November 22, 2020, and Abdi Latif Dahir and Declan Walsh, "As Ethiopia fights in Tigray region, a crackdown on journalists," *New York Times*, May 13, 2021.

[71] State Department, "Continuing atrocities and denial of humanitarian access in Ethiopia's Tigray," May 15, 2021.

[72] Ethiopian MFA, Press statement, May 18, 2021.

(FEWS NET) reported in May that some Tigrayans were experiencing famine conditions, and in June, the U.N. and aid partners released analysis indicating that over 350,000 people were facing catastrophic conditions and warning that the situation was expected to worsen.[85] After the Ethiopian government challenged that analysis, an international committee of humanitarian experts concluded in July that, despite data gaps, there was clear evidence to support an estimate of 400,000 people in catastrophic conditions.[86] USAID assesses that the number already in famine conditions may be up to 900,000 people.[87] The U.N. Secretary-General has described the situation as "hellish."[88] UNICEF reports that over 2.2 million children in northern Ethiopia are acutely food insecure and estimates a ten-fold increase in Tigray's annual caseload of children needing treatment for acute malnutrition over the next year.[89] UNICEF also reports that almost half of all pregnant and breastfeeding women in Tigray are acutely malnourished. Farmers in much of the region missed the planting season, and the next harvest is expected to be a fraction of normal yields. Roughly a third of Tigray's population, over two million people, are internally displaced.

Aid delivery has been constrained by bureaucratic impediments, movement restrictions and threats by armed actors, hostilities, and infrastructure damage.[90] Eritrean troops reportedly have restricted or blocked access to parts of the region, and have been implicated in rapes, killings, and the looting and destruction of medical facilities, food stocks, crops, and livestock.[91] U.S. officials

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[73] "Ethiopian soldiers armed with guns and grenades raid hospital featured in CNN report," *CNN*, May 18, 2021.

[74] Nic Cheeseman and Yohannes Woldemariam, "Ethiopia's perilous propaganda war," *Foreign Affairs*, April 8, 2021

[75] Tessa Knight, "How Twitter became a battlefield to shape Ethiopia's Tigray conflict narrative," *Daily Maverick*, April 23, 2021 and Claire Wilmot, Ellen Tveteraas, Alexi Drew, *Dueling information campaigns: The war over the narrative in Tigray*, The Media Manipulation Casebook available at mediamanipulation.org.

[76] Ibid.

[77] See, e.g., State of Emergency Fact Check (@ETFactCheck), Twitter, November 28, 2020, 8:33 am EST and Ethiopia Current Issues Fact Check (@ETFactCheck), Twitter, August 11, 2021, 5:01 am EST.

[78] See, e.g., State of Emergency Fact Check (@ETFactCheck), Twitter, November 24, 2020, 10:30 am EST; Office of the Prime Minister (@PMEthiopia), Twitter, November 30, 2020, 5:08 am EST; Ethiopian MFA, Statement regarding the latest report by Amnesty International, August 11, 2021; and Will Brown and Judd Devermont, "The UN Must End the Horrors of Ethiopia's Tigray War, *Foreign Policy*, March 8, 2021.

[79] Wilmot, Tveteraas, Drew, *Dueling information campaigns*, op. cit.

[80] Office of the Prime Minister, Press Briefing Transcript, June 3, 2021.

[81] Office of the Prime Minister, Statement on Current Affairs and a National Call, August 10, 2021.

[82] "Eritrea blames US support for Tigray's leaders for the war," *AP*, June 8, 2021.

[83] See, e.g., State Minister of Peace Frealem Shibabaw (@FrealemShibabaw), Twitter August 1, 2021, 1:21 am EST; Ethiopian MFA, Government statement on factors that stall the unilateral humanitarian ceasefire, July 15, 2021.

[84] World Food Programme (WFP), "UN agencies concerned by looming famine in Northern Ethiopia," June 10, 2021 and "Ethiopia Food Security Outlook, June 2021 to January 2022," August 2021.

[85] A famine declaration requires evidence of that at least 20% of the population in an area faces an extreme lack of food, 30% of children are acute malnourishment in 30% of children, and a crude death rate over 2 deaths per 10,000 people in the affected area per day. Households may be facing famine conditions even if the area is not classified as in famine. Data limitations can constrain famine declarations. FEWSNET, "Many in Tigray face food security Emergency as national needs reach five-year high," May 17, 2021.

[86] IPC Global Famine Review Committee, *Famine Review of the POC Acute Food Insecurity Analysis*, July 2021.

[87] USAID, Statement by Administrator Samantha Power on the Humanitarian Situation in Ethiopia, August 19, 2021.

[88] "UN says humanitarian conditions 'hellish,'" *AP*, August 19, 2021.

[89] UNICEF, Press Briefing, Geneva, July 30, 2021.

[90] OCHA reports on access issues in a monthly report, *Tigray: Humanitarian Access Snapshot*.

[91] See, e.g., Robbie Corey-Boulet, "Eritrean troops block, loot food aid in Tigray: documents," *AFP*, April 27, 2021, and "Anti-farming 'campaign' under way in Tigray," *AFP*, May 11, 2021.

assert that the Ethiopian and Eritrean militaries have "laid waste to Tigray's food supply," and accuse Ethiopia's military allies of seeking to "eliminate livelihoods."[92] In March, Médecins Sans Frontièrs (MSF) reported a "deliberate and widespread attack on health care," documenting facilities that had been looted, vandalized and destroyed, with much of the damage appearing intended "to render them nonfunctional."[93] "Health workers are threatened, mobile health teams are systematically prevented from accessing certain populations, health facilities remain unsafe," the U.N. reported in May.[94] That report noted armed actors accusing aid workers of "supporting the former government [the TPLF], and carrying weapons." Three MSF staff were killed in June. U.N. reports indicate that restrictions by military forces severely impeded humanitarian access to rural areas—where needs are most severe—until their withdrawal.

The change in territorial control has enabled expanded humanitarian access within Tigray since late June: aid agencies report that access internally is now largely "feasible and secure, with some 75% of the region fully accessible" (the U.N. categorized most of Tigray as only partially accessible or hard to reach earlier in the conflict; see figures in the **Appendix**.)[95] Access into Tigray is significantly restricted, however. From July through August, one road into Tigray was passable, and "insecurity, extended delays with clearances of humanitarian supplies, and intense searches at checkpoints" have severely limited the movement of humanitarian cargo into the region.[96] Aid experts have called federal government protocols for approving humanitarian supplies and personnel entering the region "a major impediment."[97] USAID says a de facto blockade has resulted, and it has accused the government of "obstructing humanitarian aid and personnel, including land convoys and air access."[98] U.S. diplomats have warned that the denial of humanitarian access is a violation of international humanitarian law and can constitute a war crime. In an August U.N. Security Council briefing, the U.N. Secretary-General also referred to the situation in Tigray as a "de facto humanitarian blockade."

OCHA reports that a minimum of 100 trucks of food and nonfood aid supplies must enter Tigray daily to sustain humanitarian operations. From early July through August, however, 335 trucks—roughly 9% of what was needed—were able to cross into the region.[99] Prepositioned food stocks ran out in mid-August, and during the last two weeks of the month no trucks were able to move into Tigray, per U.N. officials, due to federal and regional administrative constraints. The government eased some impediments in early September allowing several convoys to enter, but whether aid agencies will be able to sufficiently increase and maintain humanitarian cargo flows into the region to prevent the situation from significantly worsening remains to be seen.

With Tigray's banking, telecommunications, and electricity services cut, aid agencies are struggling with a lack of fuel, cash, and access to communications.[100] Fuel is needed not only to distribute aid, but to run generators for health facilities and water services. Aid agencies need

[92] USAID, Administrator Power at the U.S.-EU High level roundtable on the Humanitarian Emergency in Tigray, June 10, 2021.

[93] MSF, "Widespread destruction of health facilties in Ethiopia's Tigray region," March 15, 2021.

[94] OCHA, *Tigray: Humanitarian Access Snapshot (May 2021)*, June 11, 2021.

[95] OCHA, *Ethiopia – Tigray Region Humanitarian Update*, August 19, 2021.

[96] Ibid.

[97] IPC Global Famine Review Committee, op. cit.

[98] USAID, *Ethiopia – Tigray Crisis*, Fact Sheet #10, FY2021, July 30, 2021 and Statement by Administrator Samantha Power on the Humanitarian Situation in Ethiopia, August 19, 2021.

[99] U.N., Statement by Acting Humanitarian Coordinator for Ethiopia, September 2, 2021.

[100] Local authorities partially restored power to major towns via a hydroelectric plant in Tigray on August 21, 2021.

cash to sustain operations. The military dismantled the satellite connections of U.N. agencies in Mekele when it left the city, and authorities have since prohibited communications equipment from being brought into Tigray. The commercial blockade, meanwhile, has resulted in severe shortages of basic commodities and many Tigrayans can no longer afford necessities.[101] Federal officials have said the resumption of services is dependent on the TPLF declaring a ceasefire.[102]

The federal government has denied responsibility for humanitarian access problems, contradicting the reports of aid agencies, the U.N., and USAID.[103] In July 2021, the government suspended the operations of the MSF Holland and the Norwegian Refugee Council, accusing the groups of disseminating misinformation, work permit violations, and unauthorized satellite communications equipment.[104] Experts warn that the suspensions may further inhibit reporting by aid agencies for fear of reprisals by the government against their organizations and staff.[105]

Threats and violence against aid workers have increased over the course of the conflict, during which at least 23 aid workers in Tigray have been killed.[106] Drivers transporting aid cargo have reported increasing harassment, threats, and looting along the route to Tigray. U.N. officials have warned that accusations by Ethiopian authorities alleging that aid workers are biased or "arming the other side" are dangerous; USAID Administrator Power has called rhetoric from Ethiopian officials against humanitarians "troubling and harmful."[107]

Eritrean Refugees in Tigray

The U.N. refugee agency (UNHCR) has repeatedly raised alarm over the safety of Eritrean refugees in Tigray, many of whom fled forced military conscription and other abuses in Eritrea.[108] Tigray was home to over 95,000 refugees when the conflict began, most living in camps and reliant on aid. Two camps near the Eritrean border—hosting nearly 34,000 refugees—were reported to have been "systematically destroyed" in early 2021; UNHCR says refugees were caught in the crossfire and some may have been killed or forced by Eritrean forces to return to Eritrea.[109] Some refugees fled to other camps, but thousands are missing. Accounts of new attacks on refugees in the remaining camps emerged in July; the State Department says reports that "armed forces affiliated with the TPLF and Tigrayan militias" were responsible are credible.[110] The attacks have elevated concerns for safety of the 25,000 Eritreans in those camps, given their

[101] OCHA, *Ethiopia – Tigray Region Humanitarian Update*, September 2, 2021.

[102] Peter Mwai, "Ethiopia: What do we know about aid going into Tigray," *BBC News*, August 15, 2021.

[103] "Aid access to Tigray remains stalled, despite ceasefire," *The New Humanitarian*, July 12, 2021.

[104] Kaamil Ahmed, "Ethiopia suspends aid groups for 'spreading misinformation,'" *The Guardian*, August 6, 2021.

[105] Philip Kleinfeld, "Tigray aid response hit by suspensions, blockade," *The New Humanitarian*, August 9, 2021, and Kelly Moss and Jacob Kurtzer, "Humanitarian suspensions and the politicization of aid in Ethiopia," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 12, 2021.

[106] U.N. Country Team in Ethiopia, Statement on the killing of 23 aid workers, September 1, 2021.

[107] "Claims of bias against aid workers in Tigray 'dangerous', says UN," *Al Jazeera*, August 4, 2021, and USAID, Statement by Administrator Power, op. cit.

[108] UNHCR, Statement attributable to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi on the situation in Ethiopia's Tigray region," December 11, 2020.

[109] Zecharias Zelalem, "Refugee camps in Ethiopia appear to have been systematically destroyed," *VICE News*, February 3, 2020, UNHCR, Remarks by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi at the press conference in Addis Ababa, February 1, 2021.

[110] State Department, Press Briefing, August 5, 2021.

proximity to ongoing hostilities and the prospect that refugees may become scapegoats for abuses some Tigrayans attribute to Eritrean forces. UNHCR has commenced an effort to relocate them.

Human Rights Concerns

Access and communications problems in Tigray have inhibited reporting on human rights violations.[111] In March 2021, OHCHR announced the launch of a joint investigation with a state entity, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), into reported abuses during the conflict. The U.N. High Commissioner noted that "deeply distressing reports of sexual and gender-based violence, extrajudicial killings, widespread destruction and looting of public and private property by all parties continue to be shared with us." She said that her office had corroborated information on several incidents, including the shelling of cities and mass killings by Eritrean forces in Axum and Dengelat.[112] Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and EHRC have each documented the killing of civilians in Axum.[113] Among other incidents, as many as 160 people in the town of Bora may have been executed by Ethiopian troops in January, and in February, over 180 civilians in Abi Adi were reportedly killed in house-to-house searches by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces.[114] A military airstrike on Togoga, a market town, killed dozens and wounded almost 200 in June, according to health workers, who say soldiers blocked first responders. A military spokesman said those injured were fighters in civilian clothes.[115]

Ethiopian officials cite a mass killing that occurred early in the conflict, in the western Tigray town of Mai Kadra, among their justifications for operations against the TPLF. An early EHRC report suggested that at least 600 people were killed; a subsequent federal investigation reported 229 deaths.[116] Some witnesses say Tigrayan youth militia and local security forces killed hundreds of ethnic Amhara civilians.[117] Other witnesses have implicated pro-government forces in the violence, suggesting that Amhara militia targeted Tigrayans after the military took the town.[118] A Reuters investigation suggests there were two rounds of killing—first of Amhara by ethnic Tigrayans and then revenge killings of Tigrayans by Amhara forces—leaving over 700

[111] Will Brown, "Massacres, rapes and starvation: Breaking through the blackout to expose Tigray's 'crimes against humanity,'" *The Telegraph*, May 15, 2021.

[112] OHCHR, op. cit.

[113] According to Ethiopia's Attorney General, a federal investigation determined that 110 civilians were killed by Eritrean troops in Axum, but he suggested 70 of them "might have been irregular combatants." Amnesty International (AI), *Ethiopia: The Massacre in Axum*, February 26, 2021; HRW, "Eritrean forces massacre Tigray civilians," March 5, 2021; EHRC, "Tigray: Killing of Civilians in Axum," February 26, 2021; and Attorney General of Ethiopia, "A Summary of Efforts to Ensure Accountability Regarding Violations of International Humanitarian Law and Other Legal Norms in the Regional State of Tigray," May 21, 2021.

[114] Lucy Kassa and Nabih Bulos, "In an out-of-sight war, a massacre comes to light," *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 2021 and Lucy Kassa, "'Their bodies were torn into pieces': Ethiopian and Eritrean troops accused of massacre in Tigray," *The Telegraph*, April 7, 2021.

[115] Jason Burke, "Scores killed in Ethiopian airstrike on Tigray market," *The Guardian*, June 24, 2021.

[116] Attorney General of Ethiopia, "A Summary of Efforts to Ensure Accountability Regarding Violations of International Humanitarian Law and Other Legal Norms in the Regional State of Tigray," May 21, 2021.

[117] AI, "Ethiopia: Investigation reveals evidence that scores of civilians were killed in massacre in Tigray state," November 12, 2020; EHRC, *Rapid Investigation into Grave Human Rights Violation in Maikadra*, November 24, 2020.

[118] "Questions linger among the corpses of an Ethiopian massacre," *AFP*, November 25, 2020, and "En Ethiopie, le mystère du village de Maïkadra révèle la profondeur des conflits ethniques," *Le Monde*, November 30, 2020.

dead in total.[119] The EHRC has acknowledged reprisal attacks against Tigrayans, noting that it did not have enough information on them when it issued its original report.[120]

Mai Kadra is located in Welkait, a part of western Tigray that ethnic Amhara claim as their traditional land, and a long-running territorial dispute over the area underlies the communal violence and reports of forced displacement and other abuses that have occurred there since the war began.[121] In February, the *New York Times* reported allegations of ethnic cleansing, citing internal U.S. government reporting that Amhara forces were "deliberately and efficiently rendering western Tigray ethnically homogeneous through the organized use of force and intimidation" and that "whole villages were severely damaged or completely erased."[122] In March, Tigray's interim authorities accused Amhara regional forces of "forcibly removing people of Tigrayan origin" from western Tigray and relocating them to the town of Shire, home to the largest concentration of IDPs in Tigray (over 400,000, most of them from western Tigray).[123] More than 100,000 people fled or were relocated from western Tigray during the exodus from February through March, amid reports of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, and disappearances, particularly of young men.[124] Secretary Blinken noted "acts of ethnic cleansing, which we've seen in western Tigray" in congressional testimony during that period."[125]

The relocations occurred in the context of claims by Amhara regional officials that Abiy had approved the incorporation of disputed territories in western and southern Tigray into Amhara. Interim regional officials that Abiy appointed to lead the Tigray government disputed the Amhara claim, contending that forces from Amhara "took advantage of the security gap" to "invade and forcibly occupy our land." Amhara officials assert that the land "was taken by force and now has been returned by force."[126] In July, after the TPLF reclaimed Mekele, its leader used similar words: "They have taken the land by force, so we will take it back by force."[127]

Federal and Amhara regional forces remain in control of much of Western Tigray, despite the military's withdrawal from the rest of the region in late June. In late July, bodies—some showing signs of torture and execution-style killings, according to doctors and forensics experts—began appearing in the river that flows from Tigray into Sudan. Some reports suggest they are evidence of ongoing atrocities in Western Tigray.[128] Refugees who have fled Humera, a city near the Sudanese border, say thousands ethnic Tigrayans are being held in detention facilities in the city.

U.N. officials have noted "widespread and systematic" rape and sexual assault in Tigray, which they say has been used as a weapon of war, perpetrated by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops, Amhara

[119] "How ethnic killings exploded from an Ethiopian town," *Reuters*, June 7, 2021.

[120] "Ethiopia's human rights chief as war rages in Tigray: 'We get accused by all ethnic groups,'" *The Guardian*, June 2, 2021.

[121] ICG reported in mid-2020, "At worst, some senior Ethiopian politicians warn, such a scenario could lead to 'war', pitting the Tigray region and its supporters in the federal army against the Amhara region and possibly the central government itself." ICG, *Bridging the Divide in Ethiopia's North*, June 12, 2020.

[122] Declan Walsh, "Ethiopia's war leads to ethnic cleansing in Tigray region, U.S. report says," *New York Times*, February 26, 2021.

[123] "Thousands kicked off contested land in Ethiopia's Tigray: Official," *AFP*, March 8, 2021.

[124] "Land dispute drives new exodus in Ethiopia's Tigray," Al Jazeera, March 31, 2021; OCHA, *Ethiopia – Tigray Region Humanitarian Update*, March 13, 2021.

[125] HFAC, The Biden Administration's Priorities for U.S. Foreign Policy, op. cit.

[126] Samuel Gebre, "Ethiopia's Amhara seizes disputed territory amid Tigray war," *Bloomberg*, March 16, 2021.

[127] Declan Walsh, "'I didn't expect to make it back alive': An interview with Tigray's leader," op. cit..

[128] "Men are marched out of prison camps. Then corpses float down the river," *CNN*, September 8, 2021.

Special Forces, and aligned militia.[129] The U.N. Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict has cited acts of sexual violence "with a level of cruelty beyond comprehension."[130] U.S. officials contend that Ethiopia's military, with allied forces, "launched a campaign to shatter families and destroy the reproductive and mental health of their victims."[131] Journalists and human rights groups have documented accounts of rape victims who say they were targeted by members of these forces based on their ethnicity.[132] One report suggests the existence of "rape camps."[133] In August 2021, Amnesty International released a report suggesting "a pattern" of sexual abuse featuring torture, insults, and ethnic slurs by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops and allied militia, and noting "sadistic brutality" in some attacks, mostly attributed to Eritrean soldiers.[134] Ethiopian officials say soldiers implicated in rape are being prosecuted; several members of The Elders, a group of world leaders founded by Nelson Mandela, say the prosecutions have been "far from adequate given the scale of reported abuses."[135]

Outside Tigray, human rights groups and journalists have reported ethnic profiling and harassment, arbitrary detentions, and forcible disappearances of Tigrayans, including in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital.[136] Authorities have reportedly closed dozens of Tigrayan-owned businesses in the city. Ethiopian soldiers of Tigrayan ethnicity have been detained, and are reportedly being held with other Tigrayans in detention centers across the country.[137] Over 135 Ethiopian soldiers of Tigrayan origin have reportedly sought asylum in Sudan and South Sudan, where they were deployed as U.N. peacekeepers.[138]

The head of Ethiopia's Orthodox Church, an ethnic Tigrayan, asserted in May that a genocide was underway, citing killings and rapes and suggesting "they want to destroy the people of Tigray."[139] Former U.N. official Dr. Mukesh Kapila, who raised the alarm on atrocities in Darfur, observed,

> If you look at the pattern of killings and other incidents including sexual violence, use of starvation—there is a pattern of genocidal events. They're taking place in close juxtaposition to each other. This points to a degree of orchestration. The fact that these

[129] "UN warns sexual violence being used as weapon of war in Ethiopia's Tigray region, *RFI*, April 16, 2021.

[130] Remarks by U.N. Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict Pramila Patten, "The crisis in Tigray: Women and girls under violent assault," April 22, 2021.

[131] USAID, Administrator Power at the U.S.-EU High Level Roundtable, op. cit.

[132] See, e.g., Amnesty International, *"I don't know if they realized I was a person": Rape and other sexual violence in the Conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia*, August 11, 2021; Cara Anna, "'Leave no Tigrayan': In Ethiopia, an ethnicity is erased," *AP*, April 7, 2021; and Lynsey Addario and Rachel Hartigan, "A grave humanitarian crisis is unfolding in Ethiopia. 'I never saw hell before, but now I have.'" *National Geographic*, June 1, 2021.

[133] Hayelom Mekonnen, Bridget Conley, Alex de Waal, Delia Burns, "What 'rape as a weapon of war' in Tigray really means," World Peace Foundation, August 10, 2021.

[134] Amnesty International, *"I don't know if they realized I was a person ... "* op. cit.

[135] The Elders, "The UN and AU must act now to prevent famine and end atrocities in Tigray, Ethiopia," June 14, 2021. In late May, Ethiopia's Attorney General reported that three soldiers had been convicted of rape and 25 others indicted. "Ethiopia convicts 3 troops of rape, charges 28 for killings, *Associated Press*, May 21, 2021.

[136] "Ethiopia's crackdown on ethnic Tigrayans snares thousands, *Reuters*, May 7, 2021; "'Purely ethnic profiling': New wave of Tigrayans detained," *AP*, July 13, 2021; and HRW, "Ethnic Tigrayans forcibly disappeared," August 18, 2021.

[137] "Cara Anna, 'Clean out our insides': Ethiopia detains Tigrayans amid war," April 29, 2021

[138] "Ethnic profiling of Tigrayans heightens tensions in Ethiopia," *The New Humanitarian*, December 16, 2020 and "Ethiopian peacekeepers moved to Sudanese refugee camp after seeking asylum," *Reuters*, May 11, 2021.

[139] "Ethiopian Orthodox Church Patriarch condemns Tigray 'genocide,'" *CNN*, May 8, 2021.

> genocidal acts are taking place in repeated places – points toward an organization, it points toward a strategy."[140]

Tigrayan activists and some outside observers have also raised concern about possible acts of genocide in Tigray, as have some Members of Congress.[141] Rhetoric by Ethiopian officials, including Prime Minister Abiy—who publicly referred to the TPLF as a "cancer" and a "weed" that must be uprooted—has drawn concern from U.S. officials, among others, regarding the prospect for dehumanizing language to incite ethnically-motivated atrocities.[142]

Beyond Tigray: Concerns of a Wider War and State Collapse

The war in northern Ethiopia overlaps with other conflicts in the country, including in Abiy's home region of Oromia, where his government has faced a growing insurgency and rising discontent. Reports of a nascent military alliance between the Tigrayan and Oromo insurgents, and possibly other armed groups, raise the prospect of a wider war and add to concerns over Ethiopia's stability. Abiy's ruling Prosperity Party won an overwhelming victory in the June 2021 elections (discussed below), but violence across the country underscores deep divisions.

Eritrea's involvement in the war and rising tensions between Ethiopia and Sudan also fuel concerns about a regional conflict. The Tigray conflict has exacerbated the Ethiopia-Sudan border tensions, further complicating efforts to resolve a dispute between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan over a new dam on the Nile. The Tigray conflict has also strained Ethiopia's role as a leading troop contributor to peace and stabilization operations in the region, including in Somalia, from which Ethiopia has withdrawn some of its forces to reinforce operations in northern Ethiopia.

Elections amid Insecurity and Polarization

Amidst the fighting in Tigray, Ethiopia held what Prime Minister Abiy termed the country's "first attempt at free and fair elections" on June 21, 2021.[143] The elections took place against the backdrop of multiple security crises, not only in Tigray, and voting did not occur in roughly a fifth of the 547 constituencies, leaving millions of Ethiopians unable to participate. Elections were not held in Tigray. Election officials cited security concerns, "malfeasance," and logistical problems in their decision to postpone elections in other parts of the country as well. Elections in two regions, Somali and Harari, and dozens of constituencies (82 in total, not including Tigray's 38) were postponed until September 30, 2021. Two major opposition parties boycotted the June polls, leaving ruling party candidates running unopposed in some constituencies.

Where elections were held, Abiy's party won 410 parliamentary seats while opposition and independent candidates won 15. The party also dominated the regional council elections. Voter turnout reportedly exceeded 90% in most regions, prompting questions about the genuineness of

[140] Will Brown, "Massacres, rapes and starvation: Breaking through the blackout to expose Tigray's 'crimes against humanity'" *The Telegraph*, May 15, 2021.

[141] Will Brown, "Massacres, rapes and starvation," op. cit.; Senator Patrick Leahy, "Statement on the Situation in Tigray, Ethiopia, June 5, 2021; and remarks by Representatives Gregory Meeks and Michael McCaul in HFAC, *The Conflict in Ethiopia*, hearing, June 29, 2021.

[142] Abiy Ahmed Ali (@AbiyAhmedAli), Twitter, July 18, 2021, 3:48 am EST and USAID, Administrator Samantha Power Holds Press Conference, August 4, 2021.

[143] "Ethiopia votes in test for PM Abiy amid reports of abuses," *AP*, June 21, 2021.

the vote.[144] The election process is not yet complete, but the Prosperity Party's parliamentary wins in June position Abiy for reelection as prime minister in early October.

In addition to Tigray, other parts of Ethiopia were under states of emergency during the elections due to insurrections or ethnic violence, and Ethiopians had debated whether the country could hold credible elections amidst the range of security and other challenges.[145] Abiy's government had commenced some political reforms, but the detention of high-profile opposition politicians, reports of harassment and interference in opposition parties' campaigns, and narrowing media space prompted questions about the ruling party's commitment to democracy.[146] Ethiopia's top election official noted that despite efforts to level the playing field, opposition candidates faced "restricting challenges" in some areas and "malfeasance" led to election delays.[147]

The United States expressed "grave concern" with the pre-election environment.[148] According to one international observer mission, the June elections "showed important improvements over past elections," but "the electoral environment fell short of key standards concerning human and civil liberties, electoral campaigning, adequate security for all parties, and overall peace and security."[149] The United States described the process as "not free and fair for all Ethiopians" and stressed the need for the country to "come together to confront growing divisions."[150]

The Abiy administration has struggled with growing political discontent in Oromia, Ethiopia's most populous regional state. The grassroots movement among ethnic Oromo that brought Abiy to power fueled expectations there, amid surging Oromo nationalist sentiment and hopes of greater regional autonomy. The return of the exiled Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), a political party and former insurgent movement that signed a peace deal with Abiy's government in 2018, had initially spurred optimism about electoral options for voters in the region. Abiy's creation of the Prosperity Party, however, fueled concerns among some Oromo about a return to centralized rule. Abiy spoke critically of ethnic nationalism, including among Oromo, and his pan-Ethiopian orientation led some Oromo to view him as increasing allied with Amhara elites.[151]

Tensions in Oromia escalated in 2020. The murder of a popular Oromo musician and activist—who had become critical of Abiy—triggered mass protests and violent unrest in the region in mid-2020; over 250 people were killed, some reportedly in ethnically-targeted attacks.[152] The government blocked the internet for weeks and arrested thousands, including journalists, activists, and opposition leaders. Among those still detained are politicians Jawar Mohammed, Bekele Gerba, and Eskinder Nega, who face charges of inciting ethnic violence and "terrorism." The two

[144] The election board reported turnout of 99% in Addis Ababa, 97% in Afar, 96% in Oromia—rates that election observers say are extremely high—and above 90% in all but one region. The International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), *Ethiopia June 21, 2021 National Elections Report*, August 5, 2021.

[145] See, e.g., "Adem Abebe, "Ethiopia's encumbered elections," *International Politics and Society*, June 14, 2021; Tsedale Lemma, ""He promised peace. Then he tore his country apart." *New York Times*, June 21, 2021; and Awol Allo and Feven Girmay, "Why Ethiopia's elections should be postponed," *Al Jazeera*, June 18, 2021.

[146] "Ethiopia's next poll could be more competitive. But big challenges remain," The Conversation, February 8, 2021; Nic Cheeseman and Yohannes Woldemariam, "Ethiopia's dangerous slide toward civil war," *Foreign Affairs*, November 12, 2020; USIP, "Ethiopia: Contemplating elections and the prospects for peaceful reform," April 29, 2021.

[147] Birtukan Mideksa, "Ethiopia's elections: A new life for an old hope,' *The National Interest*, June 20, 2021

[148] State Department, "Elections in Ethiopia," June 11, 2021.

[149] IRI/NDI, op. cit

[150] State Department, "Building a Stronger Democracy in Ethiopia," June 25, 2021.

[151] Ermias Tasfaye, "Ethiopia: The fate of Oromia under Abiy's Prosperity Party," *The Africa Report*, August 30, 2021.

[152] EHRC, "'It did not feel like we had a government': Violence & human rights violations following musician Hachalu Hundessa's Assassination," January 1, 2021.

leading Oromo opposition parties, the OLF and the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), ultimately decided to boycotted the elections, citing the harassment and detention of their leaders, candidates, and members, among other concerns.[153] Oromia has the largest block of seats in the lower house of parliament (almost a third), and with the Prosperity Party's main rivals in Oromia not on the ballot, its candidates dominated the region's polls.

Abiy faces armed opposition in Oromia. Rebel activity and counterinsurgency operations have caused mass displacement there and in surrounding areas. Mass detentions, extrajudicial killings, and other abuses attributed to security forces have reportedly fueled support for the opposition.[154]

As noted above, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) announced in August a new military alliance with the TPLF. The OLA is a splinter faction of the OLF that did not disarm in 2018 and later renewed its rebellion, accusing the government of reneging on commitments in the peace deal. The government calls the faction OLF-Shene, or "Shene," and has designated it, alongside the TPLF, as a terrorist organization. These terrorist designations are the first since the government rescinded designations on opposition groups after Abiy took office. The prospect of an alliance between the TPLF and OLA, which reportedly made territorial gains in 2021, increases concerns about a widening war. The two groups say their partnership is based on principles of "respect for self-determination and human rights."[155] Historically, the TPLF and OLF were both strong proponents of the constitutional right to ethno-regional self-determination.[156] The TPLF is reportedly debating whether it now seeks secession. Its leader says the decision depends on "politics at the center," but he suggests "If they don't want us, why should we stay?"[157]

Economic Troubles Worsen

The war in northern Ethiopia has taken a heavy economic toll on Ethiopia, and concerns about the country's security and stability have had an impact on foreign investment inflows and economic growth, compounding effects from the COVID-19 pandemic.[158] The International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecasts GDP growth of just under 2% for 2021, down from 6% in 2020, after averaging over 9% during the last decade. The Tigray conflict has cost the government over $1 billion, and as the conflict expands, the cost will rise.[159] Ethiopia is struggling with an acute foreign currency shortage, and the inflation rate has surged.[160] In what may signal a cash crunch, the Foreign

[153] "OLF officially out of upcoming election, continues call for release of jailed leaders, members," *Addis Standard*, March 10, 2020, and Oromo Federalist Congress, Statement Regarding Ethiopia's Upcoming Elections, March 4, 2021.

[154] "A hidden war threatens Ethiopia's transition to democracy," *The Economist*, March 21, 2020; "Ethiopia's Oromia conflict: Why a teacher was killed 'execution-style,'" BBC, January 16, 2021; and AI, *Beyond law enforcement: human rights violations by Ethiopian security forces in Amhara and Oromia*, May 29, 2020.

[155] Simon Marks, "New armed alliance challenges Ethiopia premier as crisis worsens," *Bloomberg*, August 11, 2021.

[156] Ethiopia's 1995 constitution provides for the right of any nation, nationality or people in Ethiopia to self-determination and to secession, For more on this, see, e.g., Marishet Mohammed Hamza, "TPLF-OLA alliance is a prelude to Tigray's secession," September 2, 2021, and Amanda Cats-Baril, *Constitutional Brief: Self–Determination*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), September 2018.

[157] Declan Walsh, "'I didn't expect to make it back alive,'" op. cit.

[158] Economist Intelligence Unit, "Ethiopia's sheen begins to tarnish," August 19, 2021; "Ethiopia's economy battered by Tigray war," *BBC News*, August 30, 2021.

[159] U.N. Security Council, Remarks by U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres, August 26, 2021.

[160] Official inflation was 30% in August, but economist Steve Hanke of Johns Hopkins University, who calculates implied inflation rates using a purchasing power parity (PPP) model, suggested an annual measured inflation rate of over 45% in early September. He argues that a government's official statistics don't capture the reality of inflation. Steve Hanke (@Steve_Hanke), Twitter, August 13, 2021, 10:54 am EST.

Ministry has announced the closure of over 30 diplomatic missions abroad. In August, the central bank directed banks to suspend lending based on collateral, as officials suggested "economic sabotage" was destabilizing the economy.[161] Ethiopia is soliciting contributions for the war, including from the diaspora. Federal authorities have asked banks and other businesses to contribute; civil servants have reportedly been asked to donate a month's salary.[162]

China's Exim Bank is withholding $339 million in credit over concern that it will exacerbate Ethiopia's growing debt and repayment problems (China is the country's biggest lender and trading partner).[163] Ethiopia seeks to restructure its external debt, estimated at $25 billion in 2020 and which includes a $1 billion Eurobond due in 2024, under the G20's Common Framework. Several of Abiy's economic reforms, including efforts to open the telecommunications sector, are progressing: a U.S.-backed consortium of global telecom companies won an $850 million operating license bid in May. Planned U.S. funding for the bid, however, could be affected by U.S. concerns related to the Tigray conflict.[164] Alongside donor concerns, reports suggest the uncertainty around Ethiopia's stability may be deterring some foreign investors.[165]

Regional Impacts

Ethiopia's increasing fragility affects the broader region. Ethiopia has often been characterized as an anchor state in the Horn, and it ranked for several years—until 2020—as the world's largest peacekeeping troop contributor, with forces deployed in U.N. missions in neighboring Sudan and South Sudan, and in Somalia as part of a U.N.-backed African Union (AU) mission, AMISOM, to counter the Al Qaeda affiliate Al Shabaab and stabilize the country.[166] Reports suggest that Ethiopia reinforced its operation in Tigray by recalling a large number of troops from Somalia (where thousands have been deployed both under national command and as part of AMISOM), with possibly security implications for Somalia.[167] Escalating bilateral tensions with Sudan, which have been exacerbated by the Tigray conflict, have led the Sudanese government to call for the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces from the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Abyei, a contested area between Sudan and South Sudan. Ethiopia has been the mission's main troop contributor since its inception a decade ago.

New arms deals could further elevate tensions in the Horn. In August, Ethiopia and Sudan both reached military cooperation agreements with Turkey, which seeks to increase its influence in the region. Bellingcat and Janes have meanwhile reported on open source analysis suggesting that Ethiopia may have acquired combat-capable UAVs from Iran for the Tigray conflict.[168]

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[161] "Ethiopia suspends loans using asset-based collateral, citing 'economic sabotage,'" *Reuters*, August 12, 2021.

[162] "Bankers perplexed by war contributions, request clarification," *Addis Fortune*, August 14, 2021.

[163] "China's EximBank witholds $339 mln to Ethiopia, cites debt repayment pressures," *Reuters*, August 16, 2021.

[164] "U.S. sanctions muddle vodafone funding for Ethiopian entry," *Bloomberg*, May 24, 2021.

[165] Bidding has opened for a second telecom license. MTN, Africa's largest wireless carrier, which bid in the first round, is not expected to participate, reportedly viewing the risk as outweighing the benefit. "Africa's largest wireless carrier to shun Ethiopian bid," *Bloomberg*, August 5, 2021. See also, "Instability may make Ethiopia a hard sell to foreign investors," *Al Jazeera*, February 5, 2021.

[166] Ethiopia lost its position as the top U.N. troop contributor in 2020.

[167] "Ethiopia withdraws thousands of troops from neighboring Somalia," *Bloomberg*, November 13, 2020 and "UN fears Ethiopia purging ethnic Tigrayan officers from its peacekeeping missions," *Foreign Policy*, November 23, 2020.

[168] Wim Zwijnenburg, "Is Ethiopia flying Iranian-made armed drones?" Bellingcat, August 17, 2021; Jeremy Binnie, "Ethiopia may have Iranian UAVs," Janes, August 18, 2021; and Stijn Mitzer and Joost Oliemans, "Iranian Mohajer-6 drones spotted in Ethiopia," Oryx Blog, August 11, 2021.

The Nile Dam Dispute

The Tigray conflict coincides with a high-stakes standoff among Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan over management of the Nile waters. The long-running dispute has flared as Ethiopia moves toward completion of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), Africa's largest hydroelectric power project. The GERD is expected to significantly expand Ethiopia's domestic power capacity and allow the country to sell excess electricity to its neighbors. The project has been a source of national pride, and a rallying point amid domestic troubles. For Egypt, which relies on the Nile for hydropower, agriculture, and most of its water needs, the prospect of upstream countries controlling the river's flow is viewed as an existential threat. For nearly a century, Egypt has been the main beneficiary of international agreements—to which upstream countries were not party—apportioning shares of the Nile's waters. Roughly 85% of the water flowing into Egypt comes from the Blue Nile, which originates in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia's decision to begin filling the dam's reservoir in July 2020 before reaching an agreement with Egypt and Sudan on the GERD's filling and operations sparked outrage downstream. The Trump Administration tried to mediate a deal on the GERD's filling and operations, but the talks stalled in early 2020 after Ethiopia accused the United States of bias toward Egypt. The AU has since tried, unsuccessfully, to break the deadlock with new talks. Egypt and Sudan, with support from the Arab League, have sought U.N. Security Council intervention. The Council has, to date, deferred to the existing AU mediation effort but indicated U.N. willingness to provide support to resolve the dispute. Ethiopia has accused Egypt of trying to destabilize Ethiopia and supporting the TPLF and other armed groups.[169]

Tensions between Ethiopia and Sudan

Sudan hosts over 60,000 refugees from Tigray, and tensions between Ethiopia and Sudan have risen in the past year over al-Fashaga, a contested border area that runs along the western edge of Tigray and Amhara regions. The border there has never been formally demarcated, but under colonial-era treaties al-Fashaga was Sudanese territory.[170] Under a compromise deal between the two governments in 2008, Ethiopia acknowledged the boundary (favoring Sudan), and Sudan allowed Amhara farmers to remain and cultivate the land, which has significant agricultural potential. When the TPLF lost power in 2018, ethnic Amhara condemned the deal as having been made in secret, without consulting Amhara officials. Sporadic clashes between Sudanese forces and Amhara militia have since occurred, and in late 2020—as Sudan increased its military presence on the border to monitor refugee flows and TPLF troop movements—the countries' militaries clashed in the contested region. Sudan's military destroyed several Ethiopian administrative facilities and army outposts and expelled Amhara farmers from the area.[171]

[169] See, e.g., "'Egypt working to destabilize Ethiopia, East Africa,'" *Anadolu Agency*, January 23, 2021.

[170] The United States considers the territory part of Sudan, according to the State Department.

[171] Alex de Waal, "Why Ethiopia and Sudan have fallen out over al-Fashaga," *BBC*, January 3, 2021; and Yasir Zaidan, "Ethiopia-Sudan border skirmishes spark fears of a wider war," *World Politics Review*, March 1, 2021.

Talks between the governments stalled as Ethiopia took a harder line, accusing Sudan's military of invading Ethiopian land and insisting that Sudan recognize the territory as Ethiopia's. Both sides have strengthened their border deployments, increasing the prospect of direct conflict.[172] Ethiopia and Sudan have also traded accusations of proxy support for rebel groups.[173] The dispute further complicates the Nile dam talks; Ethiopian officials have accused Egypt of conspiring with Sudan's military to undermine Ethiopia, including through support to the TPLF.[174]

U.S. Policy and Assistance

Successive U.S. Administrations have described Ethiopia as an important development and regional security partner, while periodically expressing concern regarding political space, human rights, and unrest. Relations have centered on efforts to alleviate food insecurity and poverty, improve health indicators, and counter terrorism and instability in the region. The Tigray conflict has strained the relationship.

U.S. officials viewed Ethiopia's political transition in 2018 as an opportunity to improve and deepen bilateral ties, make inroads for U.S. investment and trade, and advance other foreign policy objectives, including in the context of rising global power competition in the region.[175] The United States welcomed Abiy's initial efforts to promote reforms and peace in the region, and pledged support for several of his initiatives. His replacement of long-serving security chiefs in 2018 improved the security relationship, which had been constrained by human rights concerns, among other issues. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), encouraged by Ethiopia's reforms, determined in late 2018 that the country was eligible for an MCC threshold program.[176] The State Department hosted an Ethiopian Partnerships Forum in 2019 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."[177] In early 2020, Ethiopia announced that the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) was poised to facilitate up to $5 billion in U.S. investment there.[178]

The humanitarian crisis and reported atrocities in Tigray have raised concerns among U.S. policymakers and some Members of Congress, who have pressed Secretary Blinken and other senior officials for greater U.S. engagement on the situation in hearings, correspondence, and legislation.[179] S.Res. 97, which the Senate passed by Unanimous Consent in May, called on the Administration to push for a cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of Eritrean forces, to

[172] "Eritrea forces deployed in disputed Sudan-Ethiopia area, UN says," *Bloomberg*, March 24, 2021.

[173] "Ethiopia provides military support to Sudanese rebels in Blue Nile state: official agency," *Sudan Tribune*, March 8, 2021 and "Security forces kill scores of civilians, Ethiopia accuses Egypt & Sudan for persistent violence," *Addis Standard*, March 8, 2020.

[174] "Sudan and Ethiopia trade accusations in border conflict," *Reuters*, February 20, 2021.

[175] Jason Mosley, Ethiopia's Transition: Implications for the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea Region, SIPRI, March 2020 and USIP, Final Report and Recommendations of the Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena, October 29, 2020.

[176] The MCC requires a country to pass 10 of 20 indicators to be considered for a compact (threshold program requirements are lower). The MCC determined Ethiopia to have passed eight in FY2019, but only six in FY2021.

[177] State Department Office of Global Partnerships, "Ethiopia Partnerships Forum," May 15, 2019.

[178] David Pilling, "US ready to back Ethiopian reform with $5bn investment," *Financial Times*, March 5, 2020.

[179] SFRC, The Nomination of Antony Blinken to be Secretary of State, hearing, January 19, 2021; The Nomination of Linda Thomas-Greenfield to be U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., hearing, January 27, 2021; and Pending Nominations, hearing, March 3, 2021; and HFAC, U.S. Foreign Policy Priorities, op. cit.

mitigate the humanitarian crisis, to support an inclusive national dialogue process, to pursue accountability for abuses in Tigray, and to use "all diplomatic, developmental, and legal tools" to prevent further ethnic-based violence and promote multi-party democracy in Ethiopia. H.Res. 445 similarly calls for the removal of Eritrean forces and for all belligerents to cease hostilities, improve humanitarian access, and cooperate with human rights investigations. It also calls for Secretary Blinken to urgently determine whether atrocities in Tigray amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, and urges targeted sanctions on those responsible for atrocities. Both resolutions express strong disapproval of the escalation of political tensions into armed conflict.

In March 2021, Senator Chris Coons traveled to Ethiopia at President Biden's request to convey the Administration's "grave concerns about the humanitarian crisis and human rights abuses in the Tigray region and the risk of broader instability in the Horn."[180] Prime Minister Abiy rejected a U.S. call conveyed by Senator Coons for a ceasefire, but acknowledged publicly for the first time that Eritrean troops were in Tigray, asserting that Eritrea had agreed to withdraw them.

The State Department subsequently named former U.S. diplomat and U.N. official Jeffrey Feltman as the first U.S. Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa. Secretary Blinken has described the appointment as demonstrating the Administration's commitment to "lead an international diplomatic effort to address the interlinked political, security, and humanitarian crises in the Horn," with Ethiopia among the envoy's top priorities.[181] Feltman has expressed deep concern about "increasing political and ethnic polarization throughout the country," and suggested that the Tigray crisis is "symptomatic of a broader set of national challenges that have imperiled meaningful reforms."[182] He says the United States will work with partners to secure a ceasefire, end the conflict, provide humanitarian aid, and hold accountable those responsible for abuses.

The withdrawal of Eritrean forces has been a priority for the Biden Administration, which has sought to coordinate with like-minded governments on the Tigray crisis. In March, the EU imposed sanctions on Eritrea's intelligence agency over human rights violations, after suspending budget support for Ethiopia over aid access restrictions in Tigray. The Group of Seven (G7) countries and the EU High Representative have called the presence of foreign forces in Tigray "deeply disturbing and destabilizing" and pressed for Eritrea's swift withdrawal.[183] The statement also called for an inclusive political process in Tigray, and a broader inclusive political process in Ethiopia "to enable credible elections and wider national reconciliation."

[180] Statement by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on Senator Coons Travel to Ethiopia, March 18, 2021.

[181] Secretary of State Blinken, "Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa," April 23, 2021.

[182] State Department, Travel by U.S. Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman, May 14, 2021.

[183] G7 Foreign and Development Ministers' Meeting: Communique, May 5, 2021.

U.N. Security Council and African Union Engagement on Tigray

The U.N. Security Council has been unable to reach consensus on Tigray.[184] Russia, citing respect for Ethiopia's sovereignty, and China have reportedly blocked efforts to put Ethiopia on the Council's formal agenda. The Council has held two open briefings on the situation, under the "peace and security in Africa" agenda item. Human rights groups and some international leaders have called on the Security Council, and the African Union (headquartered in Ethiopia), to do more.

In November 2020, shortly after the conflict began, then-AU chairman Cyril Ramaphosa deployed three former African heads of state to Addis Ababa in an effort to resolve the crisis, but Abiy rejected their mediation offer.[185] In December, AU Commission head Moussa Faki described Ethiopia's military operation in Tigray as legitimate, while noting that the human suffering there was cause for concern.[186] AU engagement on the Tigray conflict has since been muted. Faki and Ethiopia's foreign minister agreed in March to have an AU entity, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR), conduct an investigation into human rights abuses in Tigray, but when the ACHPR launched its commission of inquiry in June, the foreign ministry denounced it as outside the scope of the government's invitation—for a joint investigation with an Ethiopian entity—and lacking legal basis.[187]

The Elders, a group of former world leaders, have called for the AU "to recognize the true gravity of the situation, and fulfil its mandate to ensure peace and stability on the continent. The spill-over effects of the Tigray conflict, including the forced displacement of people across borders, directly threaten regional stability."[188] Former Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, an Elders member, has urged the AU leadership to facilitate a political solution to the crisis. In late August, former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo was named as the AU High Representative for the Horn of Africa region. While the war in northern Ethiopia is not specifically cited in his mandate, he is expected to "intensify" AU engagements to advance peace and stability in the Horn, and African diplomats say pursuing a peace process in Ethiopia is on his agenda.[189]

In May, the Biden Administration announced visa restrictions for "current or former Ethiopian or Eritrean government officials, members of the security forces, or other individuals—to include Amhara regional and irregular forces and members of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)—responsible for, or complicit in, undermining resolution of the crisis in Tigray," including those who have conducted abuses or hindered aid access.[190] "Should those responsible… fail to reverse course," the State Department warned, "they should anticipate further actions from the United States and the international community."

In August, the Treasury Department imposed sanctions on the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) chief of staff, General Filipos Woldeyohannes, pursuant to Executive Order 13818, which implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Title XII, Subtitle F of P.L. 114-328).[191] The designation is based on his command of the EDF, which the United States has

[184] For more on Council dynamics, see, e.g., Security Council Report, "Ethiopia (Tigray): Open Briefing, *What's In Blue*, July 2, 2021 and Richard Gowan, "Learning to live with a limited Security Council, ICG, July 29, 2021.

[185] Shewit Woldemichael, "The reality of the AU's response to crises," Institute for Security Studies, January 7, 2021.

[186] "African Union says Ethiopia acted legitimately in Tigray," *AP*, December 21, 2020.

[187] Ethiopian MFA, Press Statement, June 17, 2021.

[188] The Elders, "The UN and AU must act now to prevent famine and end atrocities in Tigray," June 14, 2021. See also a May 2021 letter from José Ramos-Horta, Ban Ki-moon, Danilo Turk, Tarja Halonen, Lakhdar Brahimi, Gunnar Stålsett, and Adama Dieng at https://thecommunity.com/global-leaders-to-prime-minister-abiy-ahmed-the-letter/.

[189] African Union, The Chairperson of the AU Commission appoints former President H.E. Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria as High Representative for the Horn of Africa, August 26, 2021; U.N. Security Council, Statement by Ambassador Martin Kimani, Permanent Representative of Kenya on Behalf of the A3+1, August 26, 2021.

[190] These restrictions were imposed pursuant to authority under Section 212(a)(3)(C) of the Immigration and Nationality Act. See 8 U.S.C. 1182(a)(3)(C). State Department, Actions to Press for the Resolution of the Crisis in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia, May 23, 2021.

[191] For background on this sanctions tool see CRS In Focus IF10576, *The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act*, by Michael A. Weber and Edward J. Collins-Chase.

found to be responsible for "massacres, looting and sexual assaults" in Tigray.[192] Citing IDP accounts, the Treasury Department has attributed to the EDF "a systematic effort... to inflict as much harm on the ethnic Tigrayan population as possible;" the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and "a means to terrorize and traumatize the entire population;" and "a 'scorched earth' policy intended to prevent IDPs from returning home."

The Biden Administration has imposed restrictions on economic and security assistance for Ethiopia and new defense trade controls, based on the human rights situation in Tigray.[193] Humanitarian aid is exempt from the restrictions, as is assistance for health, food security, basic education, women and girls, human rights and democracy, good governance, and conflict mitigation (which together compose the bulk of U.S. aid to Ethiopia). The United States is withholding support for new multilateral development bank lending that does not address basic human needs and has asked partners to do the same. The conflict and humanitarian crisis could affect Ethiopia's African Growth and Opportunity Act eligibility if unaddressed, U.S. trade officials say. Broad restrictions on assistance to Eritrea were already in place.

"I am deeply concerned by the escalating violence and the hardening of regional and ethnic divisions in multiple parts of Ethiopia…. Political wounds cannot be healed through force of arms," President Biden said in May, urging Ethiopian authorities to promote reconciliation, human rights, and respect for pluralism.[194] The United States has called for withdrawal of Amhara forces from western Tigray, the TPLF from Amhara and Afar, and Eritrean forces from Ethiopia; unfettered aid access and an end to the commercial blockade; and a negotiated ceasefire.

U.S. Assistance to Ethiopia

Ethiopia is currently the largest recipient of U.S. humanitarian and development assistance in the world.[195] The United States is Ethiopia's top humanitarian donor, providing over $650 million in FY2020 emergency aid and over $893 million to date in FY2021.[196] Of these funds, the United States has provided almost $600 million for the Tigray response since the war began. Separately, bilateral development and other nonemergency aid totaled over $640 million in FY2019, most of it for health, development, and food security programs. The Trump Administration allocated over $700 million in FY2020 bilateral aid, but later "paused" more than $170 million in assistance, as well as additional prior-year funds (over $270 million was frozen in total) in response to Ethiopia's decision to begin filling the GERD without an agreement with the downstream countries. The Biden Administration delinked the aid suspension from the GERD dispute, but some funds remain suspended in light of the deteriorating humanitarian and human rights crisis.[197] The Administration has yet to indicate whether DFC engagement will be affected, but it has suspended security assistance for Ethiopia, citing a consistent pattern of gross human rights violations by Ethiopia's government.[198] The FY2022 aid request of $304 million does not include International Military Education and Training (IMET) funding for the first time in years.

[192] Treasury Department, Press Release, August 23, 2021.

[193] State Department, "United States' actions to press for the resolution of the crisis in the Tigray region ... ," op. cit.

[194] White House, Statement by President Joe Biden on the Crisis in Ethiopia, May 26, 2021.

[195] U.S. Mission to the United Nations, Remarks at a U.N. Security Council Briefing on Ethiopia and the Situation in Tigray, August 26, 2021.

[196] USAID, *Ethiopia – Complex Emergency Fact Sheet*, Fact Sheet #3 FY2021, August 9, 2021.

[197] "U.S. continues assistance pause to pressure Ethiopia to end Tigray conflict," *VOA News*, April 27, 2021.

[198] Sec. 116 and Sec. 502B of the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of 1961, as amended.

Appendix. Aid Access in Tigray

Figure A-1. Access to People in Need of Food Aid in Tigray

Changes from March to July 2021

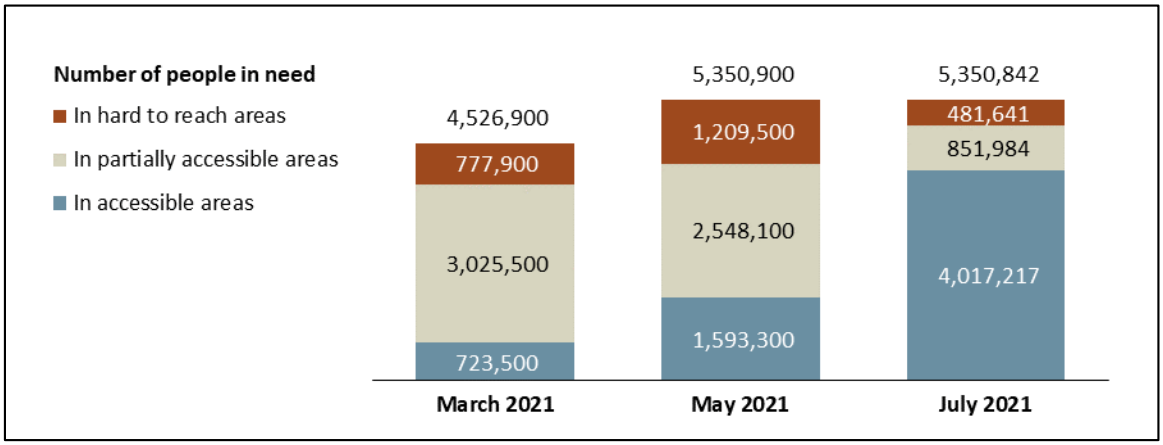
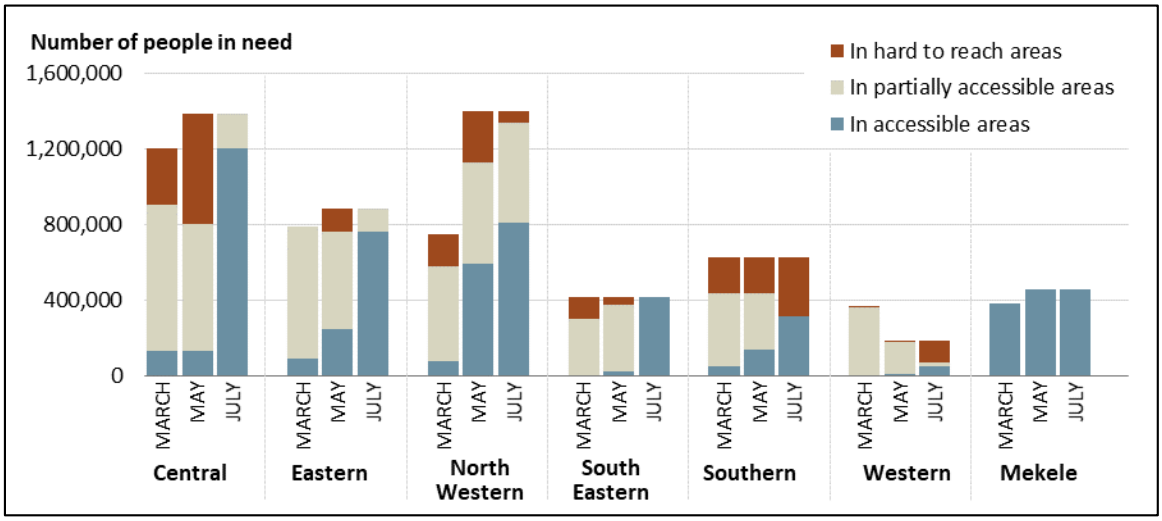


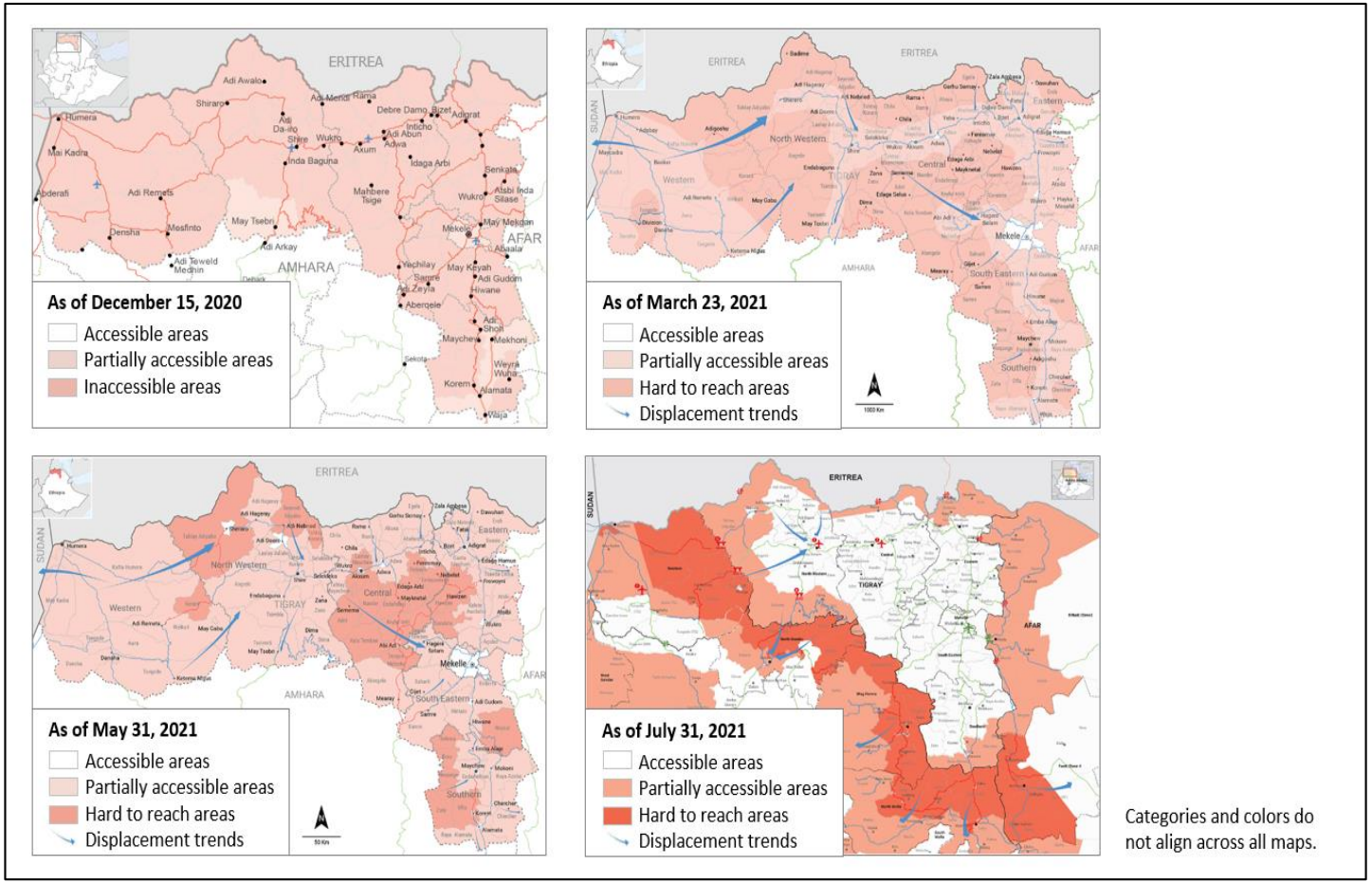
Figure A-2. Access to People in Need (Changes by Zone)



Source: OCHA, *Tigray: Humanitarian Access Snapshots.* Graphs by CRS Research Assistant Sarah R. Collins and Amber Wilhelm.

Notes: Figures as of March 31, May 31, and July 12, 2021

Figure A-3. Changes in Aid Access During the Tigray Conflict



Source: OCHA, *Tigray: Humanitarian Access Snapshots*

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