

Security Advisory - Ethiopia

SUMMARY

Violence continues in the northern Tigray region of Ethiopia, with reports emerging that hundreds have been killed on both sides of the conflict.

REFUGEES REPORT KILLINGS

With the conflict in the northern Tigray region ongoing, reports have emerged from refugees and eyewitnesses that hundreds may have been killed on both sides of the conflict. Refugees fleeing the conflict have also claimed that both sides have committed atrocities against civilians, adding that hospitals in the region are struggling to cope.



Amnesty International reported late on 12 November that “scores and probably hundreds” of civilians have been killed in the ongoing conflict. In a statement, Amnesty disclosed that it could confirm that “scores, and likely hundreds, of people were stabbed or hacked to death in Mai-Kadra (May Cadera) town in the South West Zone of Ethiopia’s Tigray region on the night of 9 November,” adding that it had seen and “digitally verified gruesome photographs and videos of bodies strewn across the town or being carried away on stretchers.” Amnesty has indicated that the victims were mainly ethnically Amhara residents of the southwestern Tigray region, adding that witnesses “said forces loyal to the TPLF (Tigray People’s Liberation Front) were responsible.” The TPLF group has denied the allegations and sources, including Amnesty, have not been able to confirm this. This is the first major reported incident of civilian killings in the conflict. In a statement released by the UN’s high commissioner for human rights on Friday, Michelle Bachelet disclosed, “if confirmed as having been deliberately carried out by a party to the current fighting, these killings of civilians would of course amount to war crimes,” adding, “however, the first priority right now must be to stop the fighting and prevent any further atrocities from taking place.”

With communications across the Tigray region unavailable, it has been difficult to verify some of the reports that have been emerging, coupled with difficulty in getting an adequate picture of the situation on the ground. Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has however accused rebel forces in the region of “massacring” scores of civilians. The prime minister stated that Ethiopia’s federal troops fighting loyalists of the TPLF had engaged in the “liberation” of the region, describing this as a “victory for the innocent civilians of Mai-Kadra that were brutally massacred by TPLF forces this week.”

AU SECURITY HEAD DISMISSED

The African Union (AU) has dismissed its security head, an Ethiopian national, after the Ethiopian government accused him of disloyalty to the country amidst the ongoing conflict in the northern Tigray region. The office of the bloc’s chair, Moussa Faki Mahamat, ordered the dismissal of Gebreegziabher Mebratu Melese in a memo dated 11 November. The order came after a 10 November letter from Ethiopia’s defence ministry, which raised its concerns over Melese’s loyalties. While the AU has so far not commented on the dismissal, in its letter to the AU Ethiopia’s defence ministry cited the conflict and described Gebreegziabher as a “Major General,” noting that he was not committed to the AU or the Ethiopian government.

CONTEXT

On 4 November, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced that he had ordered a military offensive in the Tigray region after he accused security forces aligned with the regional TPLF of attacking Ethiopian National

Defence Forces' (ENDF) positions in the state. The operations comes after two years of rising tensions between the TPLF and the federal government in Addis Ababa amidst claims that the Tigray Region was being marginalized by the Prime Minister's sweeping reforms. Prior to that, the TPLF had dominated the government before the appointment of Abiy as Prime Minister in 2018. Tensions however escalated significantly in September 2020 when the TPLF staged their own regional elections in the Tigray region in defiance of a move by the federal government to suspend national elections due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Shortly after the election, the federal government declared the vote illegal while in early October, the upper house of Ethiopia's parliament voted to withhold budgetary subsidies to Tigray. With tensions rising significantly, on 3 November, regional authorities issued a statement, accusing Addis Ababa of planning a war in the Tigray region.

TRAVEL ADVISORY

The situation across the Tigray region remains fluid and the security situation could deteriorate with little notice. Further security operations and clashes are likely in the Tigray region in the near term and disruptions to transportation and communications services are ongoing. There is also a realistic possibility of civilian harm in major flashpoint areas.

A six-month state of emergency has been declared in the Tigray region in response to recent attacks. As of 13 November communications across the Tigray region, including Internet and mobile phone networks, remain blocked, effectively limiting information on the military operations occurring in the region. Overland travel restrictions have also been reported in Mekele, where local authorities have banned civilian vehicles from the roads. Similar restrictions are likely to be imposed in other areas of the Tigray region. Airspace over the region also remains closed as of Friday and flights to Mekel (MQX), Shire (SHC), and Axum (AXU) remain suspended, though those from Gondar (GDQ) resumed on 5 November.

Neighbouring Sudan on 5 November closed its border with Ethiopia in the wake of violence erupting in the Tigray region. Authorities in Kassala state disclosed that the closure is intended to stop any potential entry of fighters into Sudan. It currently remains unclear when the border will re-open.

MS RISK ADVISORY: Anyone currently in the Tigray region is advised to closely monitor the situation and to remain vigilant at all times. You should closely monitor the local media for information on the evolving situation and you should remain aware of ongoing security operations and militant activity. Expect a heightened security presence in several areas. You should carry identification documents with you at all times, avoid large gatherings, protests and demonstrations as they may turn violent with little or no notice, and adhere to all instructions issued by the local authorities and their home governments. Anyone in the Tigray region and planning to travel via the closed airports is advised to monitor the situation, confirm flights itineraries, review contingency and evacuation plans and remain vigilant.

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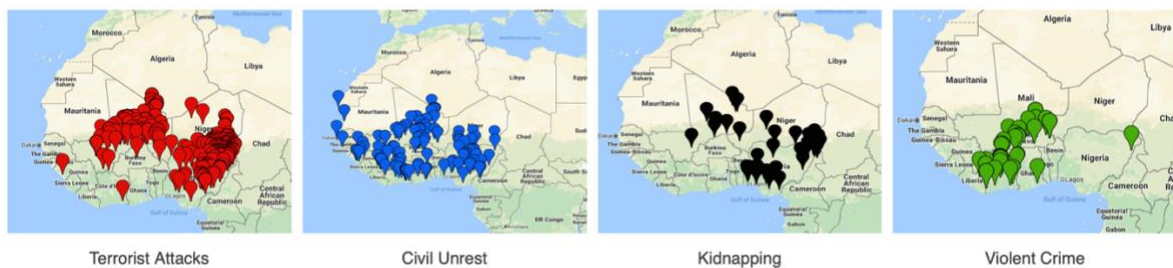
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