

## Security Advisory - Ethiopia

### SUMMARY

**Over two weeks of violence in the northern Tigray region are now further threatening the stability of the wider Horn of Africa region, with neighbouring Eritrea targeted in recent days as Sudan deals with a growing refugee crisis.**



### EXPLOSIONS REPORTED

Late on Friday 13 November, at least two explosions were reported in the cities of Bahir Dar and Gondar, Amhara region amidst continued conflict between the federal government in Addis Ababa and forces loyal to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) administration. A government statement disclosed that a rocket had damaged the airport areas of the cities. Meanwhile a TPLF spokesperson disclosed that while he did not have any information on the reported attacks, any airports used as a base to strike TPLF positions were seen as being legitimate targets. Unconfirmed reports emerging from the two cities indicate that there were also exchanges of gunfire following the explosions, though security forces reportedly quickly regained control.

Fighting has also continued in other parts of the country. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has disclosed that 34 civilians have been killed in an attack on a passenger bus in the western Benishangul-Gumuz region late on Saturday 14 November. The EHRC noted that the death toll was likely to rise as further information became available. It also indicated that there were reports of "similar" attacks, and of people fleeing the violence in other parts of the region.

Meanwhile officials have reported that Ethiopian security officials have arrested fourteen suspected members of al-Shabaab and the Islamic State (IS) group accused of planning terrorist attacks in the capital Addis Ababa and in other parts of the country, the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corp. has reported, citing a statement released by the National Intelligence and Security Service. It disclosed that the terrorist groups are trying to exploit the current situation in the country, referring to the federal government's action in the northern Tigray region.

### HORN OF AFRICA REGION PULLED INTO CONFLICT

As neighbouring Sudan has in recent days reported a flood of refugees fleeing ongoing fighting in Ethiopia, reports emerged that a rocket attack occurred in Eritrea's capital Asmara late on Saturday 14 November. The attack, which initially was suspected to have been carried out by the TPLF, reportedly targeted the Asmara International Airport (ASM) and the Sembel Residential Complex in the south of the city. Around six explosions are reported to have been heard, and both targets are reported to have sustained heavy damage. On Sunday 15 November, the TPLF leader confirmed earlier reports of the attack, in what is a major escalation in the 12-day old conflict in Ethiopia. Debretsion Gebremichael confirmed that "fighting is still continuing in several fronts." The Tigray leader also disclosed that his forces have been fighting "16 divisions" of the Eritrean army "on several fronts for the past few days," though he did not provide an estimate of how many troops he believes Eritrea has deployed. He did however disclose that Eritrean forces have crossed into Ethiopia at Badme, Rama and Zalambessa, three border towns in the restive northern region.

### 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.

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#### 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 16 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 Mekele (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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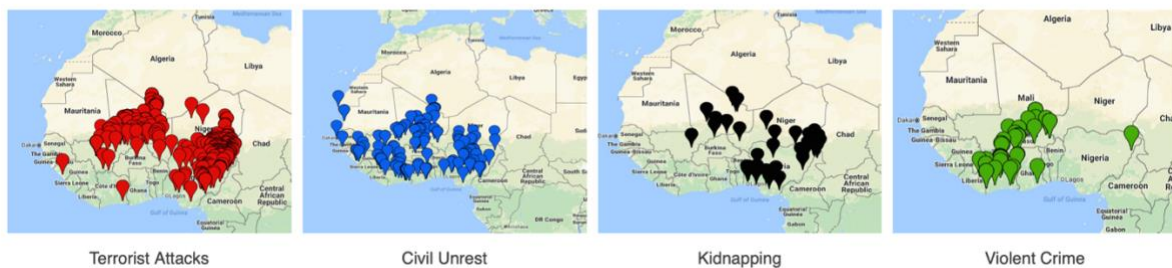
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