

Ethiopia

A year into the war in Ethiopia, and rebellious forces from the country's Tigray region have pushed to within a day's drive of the capital city Addis Ababa and are threatening to march on the city. The situation has been further complicated by the announcement late on 4 November 2021 by a broad coalition of Ethiopian armed groups and political actors who say that they will form a new alliance on Friday 5 November "in response to the scores of crises facing the country" and to fight against Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. As fighting continues on the ground and concerns grow about the security situation in the capital, the United Nations Security Council is set to hold a public meeting on Friday afternoon about the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia as calls earlier in the week for a ceasefire by the East African bloc and the European Union have gone unanswered.

Fighting Continues One Year After Initial Launch of Operations

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops into the Tigray region in November 2020 in response to what he said were attacks on army camps by the governing party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), notably the seizure by forces loyal to the TPLF of military bases in Tigray. The TPLF reported at the time that it had acted because the military was preparing to strike after the region held an election in September 2020 in defiance of federal orders. The operations were launched amidst heightened tensions between Tigrayan leaders and the federal government in Addis Ababa. While the TPLF had dominated Ethiopian national politics for nearly thirty years, it lost much of its influence when Prime Minister Abiy took office in 2018. Since then, the TPLF has accused the prime minister of centralizing power at the expense of the country's regional states, accusations which he has denied.

While at the time of the launch of operations in the Tigray region Prime Minister Abiy had promised a swift victory, one year on the fighting has continued, with the conflict triggering a humanitarian crisis that, according to the UN, has left hundreds of thousands of people facing famine-like conditions. Thousands of people have been killed and a further 2.5 million have been forced to flee their homes. While Tigrayan forces were initially beaten, by late June 2021, they had regrouped and in July they recaptured most of the region and have since pushed into the neighbouring regions of Amhara and Afar. In October, the year-long conflict dramatically escalated with Ethiopia's military launching airstrikes on the capital of the Tigray region, Mekele. While the government had initially dismissed reports about the bombardments, calling them an "absolute lie," state media later confirmed that the air force had struck TPLF targets.

With the TPLF now appearing to prepare to advance on the capital city, Prime Minister Abiy this week urged unity in the fight against Tigray rebels, stating that victory was possible if the "full force" of the country was brought against the rebels. On 5 November, the Ethiopian army called on former personnel to re-join the military to fight the advance of Tigrayan forces on the capital.

State of Emergency

On Tuesday 2 November, Ethiopia's cabinet declared a nationwide state of emergency effectively immediately, with authorities in the capital Addis Ababa telling citizens to prepare to defend the city as fighters from the northern Tigray region threatened to march towards the city. The Ethiopian House of People's Representative ratified the six-month state of emergency on 4 November, amidst the expanding conflict.

State-affiliated Fana Broadcasting reported on Tuesday that "the state of emergency is aimed to protect civilians from atrocities being committed by the terrorist TPLF group in several parts of the country," referring to the TPLF that has been fighting the federal government for the past year. The six-month state of emergency will allow for

roadblocks to be established, transport services to be disrupted, curfews to be imposed and for the military to take over in certain areas, amongst other things. Furthermore, anyone suspected of having links with “terrorist” groups could also be detained without a court warrant, while any citizen who has reached the age of military service could be called to fight. At the time of the announcement, Justice Minister Gedio Timothewos told a state media briefing that “our country is facing a grave danger to its existence, sovereignty and unity. And we can’t dispel this danger through the usual law enforcement systems and procedures,” adding that anyone violating the emergency would face three to ten years in prison, for offences such as providing financial, material or moral support to “terrorist groups.”

In the Ethiopian capital, authorities have told residents to prepare to defend their neighbourhoods after Tigrayan forces indicated that they might advance on the city. State media reported on 2 November that city officials had outlined new measures for the capital’s five million residents, including that all firearms be registered within two days and that preparations be made to secure the city. Kenea Yadeta, chief of the city’s Peace and Security Administration Bureau, disclosed that “all residents must be organized by blocks and neighbourhoods to protect peace and security in their home area in coordination with security forces, who will coordinate activities with community police and law enforcers,” adding that “there will be recruitment and organizing of the city’s youth to work in coordination with security forces to protect peace and security in their area.” He also disclosed that “all sections of society” must cooperate with efforts to increase alertness, including landlords and hotel owners checking IDs of tenants and guests, and that those publishing “fake information” on social media would be ordered to cease immediately.

TPLF Makes Fresh Advances

The announcement of a state of emergency across Ethiopia comes as Tigrayan fighters say that they have captured the strategic towns of Dessie and Kombolcha in the neighbouring region of Amhara in recent days, and have also indicated that they may advance further south, on the capital Addis Ababa. While government soldiers were still battling for control of the two key towns, which are located some 400 km (250 miles) from the capital, much of the northern region of the country remains under a communications blackout, with access for journalists being restricted, and therefore making it complicated to independently verify any battlefield claims. However the capture of Kombolcha, which is on a highway that links the capital of the landlocked country to the port of Djibouti, would be a strategic win for Tigrayan fighters. As this highway is seen as being vital to Ethiopia’s economy, Tigrayan fighters would be able to exert pressure on the federal government in Addis Ababa by restricting the flow of trade. Capture of this highway could also enable the TPLF to create a humanitarian corridor, in which supplies coming from Djibouti would be sent directly to the Tigray region, effectively providing much needed humanitarian relief to the area while bypassing the federal government. Meanwhile confirmation of the capture of the large town of Dessie, located 385 km (240 miles) from Addis Ababa, would signify the furthest south in Amhara that the TPLF has reached since pushing into the region in July.

However, claims that the TPLF has captured the two towns have been dismissed by government spokesman Legesse Tulu, who maintains that soldiers are still battling for control. On 31 October, Prime Minister Abiy reported that federal troops were fighting on four fronts against the Tigrayan forces. Days later on 4 November, the Ethiopian government accused Tigrayan forces of exaggerating their territorial gain. This came after the TPLF reported on 2 November that its forces were closing in on the town of Mille, which would enable them to cut off the highway that links neighbouring Djibouti to Addis Ababa. This report was dismissed by the federal government on 5 November, with government spokesman Tulu rejecting the claim and stating that fighting was 80 km (50 miles) from Mille. He further disclosed that there was fighting at least 100 km (60 miles) north of Shew Robit, a town in the Amhara region

that is located on the A2 highway, which also links to Addis Ababa, which would put fighting about 57 km (36 miles) south of Kombolcha. Tigrayan forces also confirmed this week that they are in the town of Kemise in Amhara state, 325 km (200 miles) from Addis Ababa. While the government reported on 5 November that TPLF commander Colone Guesh Gebrehiwot had been captured on 4 November during fighting near Dessie, in Amhara, the TPLF has so far not commented on this report.

New Anti-Government Alliance Announced and Ceasefire Calls Unanswered

In early November 2021, nine anti-government factions announced that they are forming an alliance to push for a political transition in Ethiopia, in a move that is likely to increase pressure on Prime Minister Abiy as rebel forces advance on the capital city. Two of the factions, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and the Agaw Democratic Movement (ADM) have confirmed the move, stating that the pact will be signed in Washington on 5 November. The alliance, which includes the TPLF, is known as the United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Forces, with its members stating that the front is being formed “to reverse the harmful effects of the Abiy Ahmed rule on the peoples of Ethiopia and beyond” and “in recognition of the great need to collaborate and join forces towards a safe transition.” Prior to this announcement, the OLA had already joined with the Tigrayan forces.

As of 5 November, Tigrayan forces have managed to push to within a day’s drive of the capital Addis Ababa. However, they still have a long way to go before reaching the city, notably a continued fight through the neighboring region of Amhara. They could also face resistance from those Ethiopians who are concerned about the TPLF’s return to power, a position that it held for nearly three decades before Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018. Within Addis Ababa, there is opposition to TPLF rule, notably since the party oversaw a crackdown that netted 30,000 people in the wake of elections in 2005. Likewise, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has a long journey to win back support both domestically and regionally. Within the region of Oromiya, which surrounds Addis Ababa, divisions remain amongst the communities. While Prime Minister Abiy is part Oromo, he has lost some support within this community after security forces detained thousands of Oromos, with some accusing the prime minister of not doing enough for his community. Furthermore, the TPLF has formed an alliance with the OLA, which is also fighting the central government, with both groups due to sign an alliance in Washington on 5 November. However, in the event that fighting reaches the outskirts of Addis Ababa, Prime Minister Abiy could again call on Eritrea’s help. Eritrean troops had previously entered Tigray back in November 2020 to support Ethiopian troops. While they mostly pulled out in June, after a number of reports of mass killings of civilians and gang rapes, accusations that Eritrea has denied, they could again deploy in a bid to pushback fighters from targeting the capital Addis Ababa. In preparation for a potential battle in the capital city, the Ethiopian federal armed forces appealed to retired soldiers and veterans to rejoin the military, setting a 24 November deadline to register.

Regionally, diplomats have indicated that the threat to march on Addis Ababa could be a tactic by the TPLF to force the prime minister to either resign or to call for a ceasefire and launch talks. The capture of strategic cities could also be used as a mechanism by the TPLF to cut the landlocked country from the region’s main seaport, in turn increasing pressure on Abiy’s government. International partners are also increasing their calls for a ceasefire and talks in a bid to end the ongoing conflict. Regional heavyweights Uganda and Kenya, as well as donors including the United States and the European Union have all called for an end to fighting though so far, there is little sign that either side wants discussions to be held.

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