



Finding a Path to Peace in Ethiopia's Tigray Region

Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°167
Nairobi/Brussels, 11 February 2021

What's new? After weeks of fighting in Ethiopia's Tigray region, federal troops removed the regional government and declared victory. Yet thousands have died, hundreds of thousands are at risk of starvation and the conflict continues. Addis Ababa has established an interim administration, but ousted Tigrayan politicians say they will fight back.

Why did it happen? Relations between Addis Ababa and Mekelle tanked after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018 and Tigray's leaders lost federal power. Tensions spiked when Tigray defied central authority by holding regional elections in September, culminating when Tigrayan forces captured the national military command in the region, triggering federal intervention.

Why does it matter? The conflict has poisoned relations between Tigrayan and other Ethiopian elites and inflamed public opinion in Tigray against the federal authorities, who may well struggle to administer a restive region. If Addis Ababa's energies are drained by enforcing its rule on Tigray, other Ethiopian ethno-nationalist forces may be emboldened.

What should be done? To get Tigray's public on side, Ababa Ababa should ensure that Eritrean and Amhara regional forces that participated in the intervention withdraw. It also should urgently allow aid to reach all Tigrayans who need it. Ultimately, inclusive dialogue is needed to address federal-Tigray disagreements and wider disputes over regional autonomy.

I. Overview

Following weeks of conflict, Ethiopian federal forces declared victory over the northern Tigray region's leadership after taking the capital Mekelle on 28 November 2020. The army says it is mopping up, although ousted Tigrayan leaders and the UN say fighting is still widespread. The war has killed thousands and displaced maybe a third of Tigray's population amid reports of atrocities by all sides. More than 4.5 million people in Tigray reportedly require emergency food aid and hundreds of thousands could starve. Federal troops are backed by Amhara factions claiming areas they say Tigray annexed in the early 1990s. It is now apparent that Eritrean troops intervened to support Ethiopia's army, though both Asmara and Addis Ababa deny it. Whether or not the federal government achieves all its military goals, it will need to work with

chunks of Tigray's former regional administration and win popular acceptance to avoid being seen as an occupying force. It should curtail the Amhara and Eritrean troop presences and let aid flow. Inclusive national dialogue to heal this and other political divides is essential.

The war between Addis Ababa and Mekelle was driven by bitter divisions over power sharing. Tigray's leaders lost much of the disproportionate federal influence they long held, and which incurred the resentment of other political elites and many Ethiopians, after anti-government protests paved the way for Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to take office in 2018. Acrimony grew and, when Abiy consolidated his rule by fusing other regional ruling parties in late 2019, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Tigray's governing party, refused to join. In June, federal authorities extended all governments' terms after COVID-19 delayed elections. Tigray balked and, in defiance of federal rulings, ran a regional poll in September. Addis Ababa then classified Tigray's new executive as unconstitutional, with Mekelle saying the federal government had no legal authority after its original term expired in early October. The mutual delegitimisation put the two sides on a collision course.

Fighting started in the late hours of 3 November, sparking Ethiopia's worst security crisis in decades. Tigray's forces fired the first shots after they partnered with Tigrayan federal military officers to take over the Ethiopian armed forces command located in the region, killed or detained soldiers who refused to defect, and commandeered armaments that comprised the bulk of the national military's hardware. Tigrayan leaders said they acted in anticipation of a federal intervention they thought was imminent. The same day, Abiy sent tens of thousands of Ethiopian National Defence Force soldiers, backed by Amhara region paramilitaries and militiamen, to battle Tigray's defence forces. Eritrea's army soon joined the offensive from the north.

The federal military intervention removed the TPLF administration from the seat of power in the space of a month, with Addis Ababa establishing a provisional replacement in Mekelle from whence the TPLF leadership fled. It has come at great cost, however, and most wanted Tigrayan leaders are still at large despite some of them being killed (including a former foreign minister) and arrested in recent weeks. Still, a large majority of Ethiopians outside Tigray, including non-Tigrayan opposition leaders and some from the region itself, appear to support federal actions in the region. Many endorse Addis Ababa's view that the TPLF was responsible for abuses when in power and has since sponsored ethnic conflicts in order to undermine reforms. The federal government says it will rebuild infrastructure damaged during the intervention and restore public services that were interrupted. A federal state of emergency is in place until early May in Tigray and, so far, no elections are scheduled for the region though they are set for 5 June everywhere else in the country.

Battlefield dynamics are hard to verify, due to a communications blackout, but whichever way the conflict goes – toward the Tigray forces' revival, their defeat or their endurance as an insurgency – it will be an uphill struggle to persuade most Tigrayans to support an administration they deem to be occupiers, especially given atrocities by Eritrean and Amhara forces. As the conflict began, Crisis Group argued that dialogue between Tigray's leadership and Addis Ababa was still necessary and appropriate. Abiy and others rejected such talks, arguing that mutinous TPLF leaders had destabilised the country and must face justice. But widespread local opposition to a federally imposed administration means that, at a minimum, Addis Ababa must

take decisive steps lest it face stiffened resistance. To increase the chances of local cooperation, the federal government should roll back Eritrean deployments and reverse Amhara territorial occupations, which are provocative for many Tigrayans.

Ethiopia's external partners need to weigh in. The Biden administration should intensify its call for Abiy's government to end Eritrea's involvement and implore allies in the Gulf to deliver the same message to Asmara. All actors should press for the Amhara territorial claims to be assessed by a federal boundary commission and then addressed through political negotiations. The U.S., European Union and African Union (AU) should continue to press federal authorities to allow untrammelled access for rights investigators and media outlets to all of Tigray. To date, movement restrictions and a telecommunications blackout have prevented vulnerable populations from receiving assistance and rendered claims of atrocities by both sides hard to verify. External partners should push for independent probes of all sides' allegations.

A humanitarian catastrophe resulting from mass starvation will make matters immeasurably worse. In past conflicts, Tigrayan resistance has been fuelled by Addis Ababa's refusal to allow relief supplies. Abiy's administration should allow aid agencies untrammelled access to Tigray to prevent the large-scale deaths that interim administration officials, themselves appointed by the federal government, have warned could be imminent. Addis Ababa says it is delivering aid to those in need, but humanitarian actors say the assistance is insufficient. Federal authorities may also calculate that permitting aid will offer Tigrayan forces a chance to resupply and thus prolong the fighting. But the alternative – hundreds of thousands of preventable deaths – would be unacceptable: it might constitute a crime under international law, would shred any hope of winning over Tigrayans and would tarnish Abiy's reputation abroad. With European and U.S. backing, AU peace envoys should urge the government to prioritise aid deliveries.

In the end, Ethiopia's feuding elites will need to resolve the core dispute over Tigray's autonomy and, more broadly, over the balance of power between central authorities and Ethiopia's regions as well as the role of ethnicity in the federal system if the transition under Abiy is to proceed without worsening turmoil. Unrest elsewhere in Ethiopia and the growing hostilities with Sudan mean that authorities can scarcely afford a lengthy – and costly – campaign in Tigray. It is ever clearer that only an inclusive national dialogue stands a hope of addressing Ethiopia's festering, fundamental political divisions.

II. A Costly and Divisive War

Armed conflict pitting forces led by Ethiopia's federal military against the leadership of Tigray region has come at a high cost that could fuel national and even regional instability. Over two months after Abiy declared victory on 28 November 2020, fighting blights much of Tigray, communications remain down in much of the region and authorities still block the media and aid agencies from entering large swaths of territory.¹

¹ The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said on 22 January that "active hostilities continue to be reported in Western, North-Western, Central, East and South-East Tigray zone". "Ethiopia – Access Snapshot – Tigray region (as of 19 January 2021)", OCHA, 22 January 2021.

The war has killed thousands, including civilians at the hands of federal and Eritrean troops or Amhara and Tigrayan militiamen.² It may have displaced more than two million people inside Tigray and prompted almost 50,000 mostly Tigrayan refugees to flee into Sudan, according to the interim administration and the UN, which last month reported a “dire” humanitarian situation.³ In Tigray, 1.6 million people depended on aid even before the war. The conflict has now cut off many of them from that assistance, and interim Tigray rulers appointed by Addis Ababa now say the number in need is more than 4.5 million, around three quarters of the region’s population.⁴

The two sides advance competing stories about the situation on the ground. Federal officials say they have liberated the region from oppressive TPLF rule and established a provisional government to restore public services in the region.⁵ Tigray’s erstwhile leaders retort that they are attacking and defeating federal and allied forces that have perpetrated abuses in Tigray on a vast scale.⁶

Though details are sometimes sketchy, it is possible to piece together a rough narrative of the war to date. The final trigger for conflict was when Tigray’s regional paramilitaries, assisted by Tigrayan federal military officers, took over almost all the army’s Northern Command on 3 November, capturing heavy weapon stockpiles, and detaining or killing officers and soldiers who resisted.⁷ After a massive military mobilisation, Addis swung the momentum back in its own favour in the following three weeks. The army took control of west Tigray – cutting off Tigray’s traditional wartime supply line through eastern Sudan – and pushed its way down main roads into major

The TPLF has issued a series of communiqués saying its forces inflicted heavy casualties on federal forces in the course of December, but these are impossible to verify. Message from Gebre Gebretsadkan, Tigray Defence Forces spokesperson, “Dimtse Woyanne breaking news TDF Victory”, video, Dimtse Woyane, 29 December 2020. UN and aid agency requests for access to Tigray remained pending with the federal ministry of peace in early February, despite a November UN agreement with the government. Crisis Group telephone interviews, UN officials and humanitarian workers, January 2021.

² Neither side has provided official statistics, but reports from rights groups, media outlets and civilians interviewed by Crisis Group indicate that the death toll is in the thousands. An Ethiopian intelligence official told Crisis Group that upward of 10,000 combatants from all sides had been killed in the fighting and many more injured. Crisis Group telephone interview, December 2020. Crisis Group has been unable to corroborate these figures.

³ “Over 2 million people displaced by conflict in Ethiopia’s Tigray region – local official”, Reuters, 6 January 2021.

⁴ “Ethiopia: Tigray Region Humanitarian Update Situation Report”, OCHA, 6 January 2021. In its 22 January “snapshot”, OCHA said most roads were inaccessible, with the regional health bureau able to reach only five of 40 hospitals. It said Tigray’s “health system has reportedly collapsed” due to workers being killed or fleeing, the looting of dozens of health centres and theft of equipment, including ambulances.

⁵ When the war broke out, federal authorities closed banks in Tigray and shut down internet and telephone service. Authorities partially restored telephone connections in some areas under federal control after taking the regional capital. Crisis Group telephone interview, journalist in Mekelle, November 2020.

⁶ Statement by Tigray regional government, 25 December 2020. See also “Dr. Debretsion Gebremichael’s Statement, 30 January 2021”, Eritrea Hub, 31 January 2021.

⁷ Tigrayan forces took control of the Northern Command, the largest of the military’s regional units. Tigrayan forces were unable to take over the 5th Mechanised Division near Dansha in western Tigray. “Top official of TPLF admits attacking Northern Command”, Ethiopian News Agency, 14 November 2020.

cities such as Shire, Adwa and Axum to the north west of Mekelle, before taking the regional capital on 28 November.⁸

Forces from neighbouring Amhara region backed the federal offensive, while multiple reports indicate that Eritrea's army also assisted Ethiopian troops, although top federal officials deny Asmara's involvement.⁹ Fears arose of a bloodbath in Mekelle after an Ethiopian colonel said citizens would receive "no mercy" if they did not separate from Tigray's leaders.¹⁰ In the event, the regional capital was spared the worst. Tigrayan leaders and fighters retreated from Mekelle, saying they wanted to save civilian lives, so leaving the door open to federal forces.¹¹ Still, the destruction has been severe across the region. Ethiopia's air force bombed and used drones against military and civilian infrastructure targets in Tigray. Tigrayan officials and civilians accuse Eritrean troops of mass killings, systematic looting and vandalism, claims which aid workers back.¹² The TPLF launched missiles at airports in Amhara region's capital Bahir Dar on 14 and 20 November, and the Amhara city of Gondar on 14 November.¹³ Federal officials said Tigray's forces destroyed Axum airport's runway and bridges leading to Mekelle.¹⁴

The swift federal gains on the battlefield emboldened Abiy and others who believe TPLF leaders must face punishment for fuelling ethnic conflict across Ethiopia and attacking the military, saying their defeat is necessary for Ethiopia to move forward. The prime minister's 8 November reshuffle of top ministers and security officials, including the military chief of staff, could be read as a signal that Addis Ababa is determined to act vigorously.¹⁵ Outside Tigray, incensed by the Tigrayan attack on the military and a reported Tigrayan militia massacre of Amhara civilians, Ethiopians show broad support for the war, donating in blood drives and in some cases contributing a month's salary to help fund the intervention.¹⁶ Seemingly convinced that the TPLF are renegades seeking to thwart the transition and preserve their past privileges, and buoyed by its territorial gains and popular support, Abiy's office rejects the idea of any dialogue with the ousted leadership. Instead, it has vowed to press on with what it portrays as the roundup of "criminals".¹⁷

⁸ About 3,000 Ethiopian troops have reportedly been redeployed from Somalia. "Ethiopia withdraws thousands of troops from neighbouring Somalia", Bloomberg, 13 November 2020.

⁹ "Tigray crisis: Eritrea's role in Ethiopian conflict", BBC, 28 December 2020; "Refugees come under fire as old foes fight in concert in Ethiopia", *The New York Times*, 28 December 2020; "Exclusive: U.S. says reports of Eritrean troops in Ethiopia are 'credible'", Reuters, 11 December 2020.

¹⁰ "Ethiopia warns civilians of 'no mercy' in Tigray offensive", Associated Press, 22 November 2020. Crisis Group Statement, "Averting a Bloodbath in Ethiopia's Mekelle", 27 November 2020.

¹¹ "Tigray leader vows to fight on after Abiy declares victory", AFP, 1 December 2020.

¹² Crisis Group telephone interviews, November-December 2020 and January 2021.

¹³ "Rocket attacks damage airport areas in Bahir Dar, Gondar cities, government blames TPLF", *Addis Standard*, 14 November 2020.

¹⁴ "Ethiopia's Tigrayan forces destroy Axum airport, says media", Reuters, 23 November 2020.

¹⁵ The reshuffle placed Abiy loyalists in key positions and removed those, such as former military chief General Adem Mohammed, whom the premier saw as insufficiently committed to the intervention. Among other appointments, Deputy Prime Minister Demeke Mekonnen was made foreign minister while General Birhanu Julia was appointed head of the military. Crisis Group interview, former federal official, November 2020.

¹⁶ Crisis Group telephone interviews, private- and public-sector workers, December 2020.

¹⁷ "The causes and course of the Tigray conflict, according to Abiy Ahmed", *Ethiopia Insight*, 22 December 2020.

Federal officials have taken several apparently discriminatory measures amid the war fervour and deepening polarisation. Some ministers have spoken out against ethnic profiling, which is welcome.¹⁸ Still, authorities have detained numerous Tigrayan military officers, including those manning peacekeeping missions.¹⁹ Addis likewise has recalled some Tigrayans working at embassies abroad, and federal police managers have told some Tigrayans not to come to work.²⁰ Police in Addis Ababa have raided Tigrayans' residences, detaining hundreds, while federal authorities have asked Ethiopians to present their local identity cards before they fly abroad, and then blocked some Tigrayans from leaving.²¹ The central bank suspended accounts opened at branches in Tigray. The Attorney General's Office froze assets of 34 Tigrayan companies operating under a conglomerate with TPLF ties and the finance ministry created a new trustees' board for them.²²

While federal officials assert that they are targeting only TPLF leaders and sympathisers, many Tigrayans disagree.²³ As one alarmed Tigrayan put it:

This war is waged not against the TPLF only but against Tigrayan people in general. They are striving to liquidate [Tigray's] political identity and remove it from the map without due regard for whether or not the people get exterminated in the process.²⁴

Federal leaders justify the war, which they call a law enforcement operation, by arguing that allowing impunity in this instance would set a destabilising precedent that would encourage future acts of rebellion and that entering into dialogue now would reward the TPLF for treason.²⁵ Addis Ababa has a strong case for intervention, given the Tigray leadership's decision to take over the military's Northern Command (though Tigrayan assertions that some form of federal intervention was prepared beforehand

¹⁸ "They once ruled Ethiopia. Now they are fighting its government", *The New York Times*, 26 November 2020.

¹⁹ The foreign ministry has asked the African Union to dismiss its Tigrayan head of security. "Ethiopian police seeking lists of ethnic Tigrayans – U.N. report", Reuters, 13 November 2020.

²⁰ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Tigrayan federal police officer, Ethiopian diplomat and embassy worker, November and December 2020.

²¹ Tigrayans in the highest echelons of the business and diplomatic worlds appear not to have been spared. Some media reports indicate that Ethiopian Airlines chief executive officer Tewolde Gebremariam was blocked from leaving the country while the federal military chief of staff accused World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom, a former senior TPLF official, of supporting the Tigrayan forces, a claim he denied. "Anxiety and foreboding as Ethiopia conflict entangles Tigrayans", *Al Jazeera*, 18 November 2020; "They once ruled Ethiopia. Now they are fighting its government", *op. cit.*; "Ethiopia accuses WHO chief Tedros of backing Tigray rebels", Reuters, 19 November 2020; "WHO boss Dr Tedros denies supporting Tigray leaders", BBC, 19 November 2020.

²² Press release, Attorney General's Office, 17 November 2020. "EFFORT Corporate Group-Board of Trustees is Established", Ministry of Finance, 23 December 2020.

²³ "HARDtalk: Gedion Timothewos – Attorney General, Ethiopia", BBC, 27 November 2020.

²⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, university lecturer from Tigray, November 2020.

²⁵ "Context for the Current Situation in Ethiopia – The Evolution of Criminality", Office of the Prime Minister, 12 November 2020. The Prime Minister's Office also argues that Tigray's leaders rejected repeated federal attempts to mend divides over the last two years. Abiy met African Union peace envoys on 27 November, but his office says there will be no negotiations with the TPLF "clique" or "junta". "Ethiopian PM rejects Tigray conflict talks in AU meeting", Associated Press, 27 November 2020.

are not without merit).²⁶ Taking the anti-TPLF argument further, according to a foreign ministry statement, the party's removal is the most "significant" of the reforms the government has undertaken to date.²⁷ It added:

The international community has to understand the ordeal Ethiopia and Ethiopians went through for over 27 years. For the record, Abiy inherited in 2018 an Ethiopia and Ethiopians abused by a rotten, kleptocratic and ethno-nationalist group that not only robbed the country but also reduced it to a clannish, fake federalism which has left nothing but a deeply divided society.²⁸

Still, the price of Addis's intervention could be the unleashing of stronger ethno-nationalist feelings, including broadening popular support for elements of the Tigrayan elite that demand secession.²⁹ The de facto Amhara annexation of parts of south and west Tigray heightens concerns.³⁰ West Tigray is now patrolled by Amhara security forces, while some towns in both the west and south are being run by Amhara administrators.³¹ Amhara nationalists claim these parts of Tigray as rightly belonging to their region, and say they intend to stay. West Tigray purportedly has experienced grave ethnic massacres.³² The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, a body accountable to parliament, says a Tigrayan militia killed 600 mostly Amhara civilians in Maykadra on 9 November.³³ Tigrayans who escaped to Sudanese refugee camps say Amhara militiamen attacked many of their kin in Maykadra town and elsewhere in west Tigray.³⁴

²⁶ "The causes and course of the Tigray conflict, according to Abiy Ahmed", op. cit.; "Amhara region police chief reveals how region's police force guided federal steel-clad mechanized forces to join 'war' in Tigray", *Addis Standard*, 4 January 2021. In response to the TPLF activity, he said, the army sprang into action: "[W]e had already done our homework, and accordingly deployment of forces had taken place in our borders from east to west. The war started that night after we have already completed our preparations".

²⁷ "Debunking the Civil War Narrative and the Burden of the Nobel Peace Prize: Commentary on Current Politico-security Dynamics in Ethiopia. Limited Military Operation or Civil War?", Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 20 November 2020.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ A number of Tigrayan nationalist parties, but not the TPLF, openly campaigned for secession in the run-up to the 7 October poll in Tigray. Secession is a constitutional right for the regions under Ethiopia's constitution and, absent a quick political settlement, these demands could gain greater currency among many Tigrayans who oppose the federal intervention. See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°162, *Steering Ethiopia's Tigray Crisis Away from Conflict*, 30 October 2020.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, former senior federal official, Addis Ababa, November 2020.

³¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, journalist in Mekelle, November 2020. Crisis Group telephone interview, journalist in Gondar, November 2020. After the major Amhara incursion, Maykadra was controlled by Amhara security forces; its administrator arrived from the Amhara city of Gondar; the same is true of Humera. "Inside a Tigray town scarred by Ethiopian conflict", AFP, 25 November 2020. For background on Amhara-Tigray border tensions, see Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°156, *Bridging the Divide in Ethiopia's North*, 12 June 2020.

³² The UN human rights chief has corroborated reports of serious abuses of civilians. "Exceedingly Worrying and Volatile Situation in Ethiopia", UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 9 December 2020.

³³ "Tigray: Maikadra Massacre of Civilians is a Crime of Atrocity", Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 24 November 2020. An aid organisation told Crisis Group that 90 Amhara civilians with blade wounds arrived at a health clinic at Abdurafi in Amhara on 10 November. Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2020.

³⁴ "After the bombs they attacked with knives, claim Ethiopians fleeing peace prize winner's war", *Daily Telegraph*, 23 November 2020. An aid group told Crisis Group in a December telephone in-

The Eritrean deployment of troops into Tigray in November has also exacerbated tensions. Tigrayan witnesses have told the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission that Eritrean and Amhara forces looted homes and committed atrocities.³⁵ While Addis Ababa and Asmara have denied Eritrea's role, the new head of the military's Northern Command and Mekelle's federally appointed interim mayor acknowledge it.³⁶ Foreign officials, UN employees and aid agencies say Eritrean troops attacked refugee camps in Tigray and abducted Eritrean asylum seekers.³⁷ Tigrayans also accuse them of shooting dead hundreds of civilians in towns, including around 100 sheltering at a church compound in Edaga Hamus on 30 November and more than 200 in Wukro in late November, partly, they say, when locals resisted the Eritrean looting of Sheba Leather Industry and Semayata Dimensional Stones Factory, and in Axum around the same dates.³⁸ Purportedly in response to Eritrea's role, Tigray's forces launched missiles at military targets near the Eritrean capital three times in November.³⁹

III. Roots of Tension and Routes to War

Underpinning the conflict lies a bitter power struggle and a deep rift over how to rule Ethiopia. The TPLF, which, along with allied rebels, forced a centralising military regime from power in 1991, made self-determination the basis of Ethiopia's multinational federation in 1995. As representatives of a minority ethnicity – albeit a historically powerful one – Tigrayan leaders protected group rights via a system known as ethnic federalism, which entailed the devolution of power to nine newly created regions, or federal states, based largely on ethno-linguistic identity. Their opponents saw the approach as a divide-and-rule strategy to ensure Tigrayan hegemony.⁴⁰ The system gave

interview that Amhara militia had detained many Tigrayans and that western Tigray was now partly depopulated of Tigrayans. Crisis Group telephone interviews, aid agency officials, November and December 2020.

³⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, Debretsion Gebremichael, TPLF chair and former Tigray president, December 2020. "Brief Monitoring Report on the Situation of Civilians in Humera, Dansha and Bissober", Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 17 January 2021.

³⁶ "Mekelle city interim mayor admits presence and participation of Eritrean forces in Tigray conflict", *Addis Standard*, 4 January 2021; "We don't want it": North Command chief on Eritrean army in Tigray; says army didn't let alien forces in. Full speech", *Addis Standard*, 6 January 2021.

³⁷ Crisis Group telephone interviews, November and December 2020. "Refugees come under fire as old foes fight in concert in Ethiopia", op. cit. Many Eritreans flee to Ethiopia to escape indefinite conscription and state repression. Crisis Group telephone interviews, UN officials and senior aid worker, December 2020. Eritrean attacks on refugees were corroborated in a news report that also said Tigrayan militia killed Eritrean refugees in revenge attacks for Eritrea's role in the conflict. "Eritrean refugees caught in crossfire of Ethiopia's Tigray war", AFP, 1 February 2021.

³⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, relatives of victims and human rights researcher, December 2020 and January 2021. For documentation of alleged Eritrean atrocities, see also Jan Nyssen, "The Situation in Tigray by the End of 2020", unpublished manuscript, January 2021. Claims are hard to verify independently, given there has been no media access and telecommunications in those areas remain closed.

³⁹ "Ethiopia's Tigray leader confirms firing missiles at Eritrea as fighting escalates", Associated Press, 15 November 2020.

⁴⁰ See, for example, "Ethiopia: TPLF's Strategy of Divide-and-Rule has Exhausted its Steam and Utility", Nazret, 19 September 2016.

regions their own constitutions and legislatures responsible for security and swathes of public policy. The constitution went so far as to allow groups to secede, although in practice the TPLF-dominated ruling coalition suppressed individual and collective rights. Some of those broadly in the prime minister's political camp and who support the war to remove the TPLF see it as an opening to de-ethnicise the federal system.⁴¹

From the outset of the federal era, Ethiopian nationalists and others opposed the system for hardening ethnic differences and blamed the TPLF for repression and wielding disproportionate power within the federal government and ruling coalition. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a grouping of four regional ruling parties, including the TPLF, that was allied with five governing parties from the other federal states, constrained opponents, denied civil liberties and centralised policymaking, keeping a lid on dissent. Opposition to the EPRDF increased after government forces shot dead almost 200 protesters and jailed thousands of opponents following a disputed 2005 poll. The TPLF was pre-eminent in the coalition – which split the voting weight equally between its four regional parties despite large demographic differences – with TPLF and EPRDF chair Meles Zenawi serving as prime minister from 1995 until his death in 2012. Tigrayans dominated the armed forces and security services, which political opponents and rights groups routinely accused of abuses.

The differences between the ethno-nationalist and pan-Ethiopian visions for the country grew deeper due to entrenched enmity between TPLF leaders and Abiy. After the prime minister came to power in the wake of three years of mass protests in Oromia and Amhara regions against the coalition's rule, federal officials accused Tigray's leaders of blocking political and security reforms.⁴² They refused, for instance, to comply with an arrest warrant issued for former national intelligence chief Getachew Assefa, a TPLF politburo member who opposed Abiy's bid for the premiership. Tigrayan officials shot back at Abiy and allies for describing the EPRDF era as "27 years of darkness" and allegedly scapegoating Tigrayan officials for rights abuses and corruption.⁴³ Tigray's leaders were also angered at what they perceived as federal tolerance of Amhara groups blocking roads into Tigray and federal favour shown to their opponents, such as the late Asaminew Tsige, a former Amhara security chief and an anti-TPLF hardliner.⁴⁴

Abiy's 2018 rapprochement with Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, for which Ethiopia's leader received the Nobel Peace Prize the following year, also became a source of anger for Tigray's leaders. They came to see the rapprochement between Addis Ababa and Asmara as primarily an alliance against the TPLF, largely based on Isaias' history of hostility toward them. Indeed, the Tigray leadership had led Ethiopia during the 1998-2000 war between the two nations over issues relating to Eritrean independence, economic and trade policies and territorial disputes. Isaias' October 2020 visit to Ethiopian military sites fuelled Tigrayan suspicions that Eritrea's leader was set

⁴¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, leading opposition figure, November 2020.

⁴² "HARDtalk: Gedion Timothewos – Attorney General, Ethiopia", *op. cit.*

⁴³ See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°160, *Toward an End to Ethiopia's Federal-Tigray Feud*, 14 August 2020.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

on making good his promise that the 2018 changes in Ethiopia were “game over” for the TPLF.⁴⁵

With no resolution of the underlying tensions in sight, the prime minister’s decision in 2019 to merge regional ruling parties into a single, unitary one further strained his relations with the TPLF. Eight of the country’s governing parties – that is, all except the TPLF – joined to establish the Prosperity Party. The TPLF’s refusal to sign up grew partly out of fears that the merger would dilute Tigray’s autonomy, but it cost the party its share of federal power. After TPLF representatives became the sole opposition bloc in the national parliament, federal authorities moved to rid the central government of remaining officials nominated by the party.

The National Electoral Board’s March decision to delay polls due to COVID-19, followed by the House of Federation’s extension, in June 2020, of all governments’ terms until elections, was another step on the escalatory path. The TPLF saw those decisions as further provocation, arguing (like some other Abiy opponents) that the premier’s mandate was limited to shepherding the country to elections and that he should have included the opposition formally in decisions related to elections once the original terms expired.⁴⁶ They said the delay beyond legal term limits was unconstitutional, complaining that the Prosperity Party was increasingly monopolising a transition the prime minister had promised would lead to multiparty democracy.⁴⁷ Addis Ababa argued, with some justification, that the process to extend all governments’ terms was constitutional.⁴⁸ The idea of Tigray holding its own regional election, however, then became a totemic issue of self-rule for the TPLF and, apparently, many Tigrayans. The party, already omnipresent in Tigray’s institutions, easily won polls held on 9 September in defiance of federal orders.⁴⁹

At stake in Tigray’s election was not so much who would wield political power; that the TPLF would win an overwhelming majority was never in doubt. Rather, the issue was whether the electorate backed the party’s decision to defy federal authorities. As it happened, the TPLF won the backing of 98 per cent of the 2.6 million Tigrayans who voted – almost half the region’s whole population, so the vast majority of voting-age Tigrayans. Competing opposition parties adopted even harder-line Tigrayan nationalist positions, including advocating secession.⁵⁰ Critics say the result was undermined by TPLF repression, boycotts by other opposition parties, and the lack of federal and international oversight.⁵¹

The poll set the stage for the subsequent hostilities. The House of Federation declared the ballot unconstitutional and thus the federal authorities considered Tigray’s

⁴⁵ “PM Abiy, President Isaias visit Ethio-Engineering Group”, Ethiopian News Agency, 16 December 2020; “Game over for ethnic federalism: Isaias”, *Ethiopia Insight*, 12 February 2020.

⁴⁶ See Crisis Group Commentary, “Managing the Politics of Ethiopia’s COVID-19 Crisis”, 15 April 2020.

⁴⁷ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Toward an End to Ethiopia’s Federal-Tigray Feud*, op. cit.

⁴⁸ “Ethiopia’s Tigray region vote unconstitutional, lawmakers say”, Bloomberg, 5 September 2020.

⁴⁹ The TPLF won 98.2 per cent of the vote and all 152 seats. “Tigray elections: it has been announced that TPLF has won the regional elections in Tigray”, BBC Amharic, 11 September 2020.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, journalist based in Mekelle, November 2020.

⁵¹ Gizachew Abebe, “The election has indeed become a referendum”, Addis Maleda, 21 September 2020. In January, the electoral board cancelled the TPLF’s registration for participating in rebellion and asked three regional opposition parties that have applied for registration for an explanation of their participation in the “illegal” Tigray election. “NEBE cancels registration of TPLF”, Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 18 January 2021.

new cabinet and legislature illegitimate. In turn, Mekelle rejected the Abiy administration's authority, saying its original term had expired in early October.⁵² That month, Addis Ababa moved ahead with a plan to redirect budget transfers away from Tigray's executive, which the regional government claimed would be a fundamental breach of the federal arrangement.⁵³ Unless Tigray's leadership took the unlikely step of disavowing the election it had just made a major political statement by holding, federal authorities appeared bound to act.

Before the outbreak of conflict, federal officials told Crisis Group that their plan was to weaken Tigray through economic measures in order to force compliance.⁵⁴ One said the TPLF's downfall was at hand, as was restoration of Amhara land. In Mekelle, the mood was defiant: Tigray leaders said they would not sit idly by while federal action continued to undermine the region.⁵⁵ Tigray rejected Abiy's attempt to change the leadership of the military's Northern Command, based in Tigray, arguing that the federal government no longer had legal authority. Amid Tigrayan claims of a military build-up, on 3 November, regional authorities seized control of as much of the military stationed in Tigray as they could, working in tandem with Tigrayan officers within the national army, killing those who resisted and detaining those who remained loyal to Addis Ababa.⁵⁶ Late on 3 November, Abiy announced the intervention. On 5 November, parliament voted for a six-month state of emergency in Tigray and two days later to dissolve the regional government and replace it with an interim administration.⁵⁷ The war was under way.

IV. An Uneasy and Unstable Future

For now, Addis Ababa is intent on securing an outright military victory. It rejects negotiations with Tigray's ousted leaders and has issued arrest warrants for at least 349 Tigrayan government and military elites, 124 of whom it says it has detained and some of whom it has killed, including former Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin.⁵⁸ Federal authorities have established a new interim administration in Tigray, led by Mulu Nega, a Tigrayan federal education junior minister. The administration is supposed to stay in place until elections are held. Authorities have also replaced regional and zonal leaders with newly appointed non-TPLF Tigrayan officials, a mix of academics, opposition party representatives and bureaucrats, to work directly with existing

⁵² See Crisis Group Briefing, *Steering Ethiopia's Tigray Crisis away from Conflict*, op. cit.

⁵³ Tigray's leaders told Crisis Group in October that, as regional states formed the federation, the central government could not bypass Tigray's executive to deliver funding directly to district administrations. Crisis Group interviews, Mekelle, October 2020.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, federal officials, Addis Ababa, October 2020.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Tigrayan officials, Mekelle, October 2020.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior federal official, Addis Ababa, November 2020. On 30 November, Tigray authorities released 4,000 of those soldiers. "Ethiopia crisis: Tigray force 'still fighting' despite army Mekelle push", BBC, 2 December 2020.

⁵⁷ "Ethiopia parliament dissolves Tigray leadership", BBC, 7 November 2020.

⁵⁸ "Arrest warrants issued for 76 generals, high-ranking military officers, subordinates over treason", Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 18 November 2020; "Arrest warrant issued for TPLF junta members", Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 13 November 2020; Alex de Waal, "In Memoriam: Seyoum Mesfin, Ethiopian Peacemaker and Patriot", *African Arguments*, 14 January 2021.

district and village-level administrators – although there are indications that, at least in Mekelle and Shire cities, the local TPLF councillors have left their posts, as have the police in the regional capital.⁵⁹

Addis Ababa contends that its measures enjoy popular backing in Tigray and signal the end of the TPLF as a political force.⁶⁰ “The reality is the criminal clique is thoroughly defeated and in disarray, with insignificant capacity to mount a protracted insurgency”, the Prime Minister’s Office said on 7 December.⁶¹ The TPLF, its supporters and many other Tigrayans see things differently and profess their commitment to fighting on.⁶² Most of the wanted Tigrayan leadership remains at large, although a former president, an ousted deputy president and TPLF founders are among those captured and killed. TPLF leaders continued issuing (unsubstantiated) claims of battlefield victories by the Tigray Defence Forces weeks after their loss of control of the regional government.⁶³

Even if Tigrayan forces are fully defeated, it will be an uphill battle to persuade former officials and the bulk of Tigray’s population to support the federally imposed interim government. Although realities on the ground are difficult to assess given lack of access, many Tigrayans believe that Ethiopian and, particularly, Eritrean forces have committed atrocities, which is intensifying opposition to the intervention.⁶⁴ Moreover, the region has a long history of resistance and the TPLF has an extensive grassroots network, having built political and governance structures down to the village level during its decades of rebellion and rule.⁶⁵ The federal government may count on its ability to restore stability and rebuild Tigray, as well as on the TPLF’s failure to live up to its vows of resistance, and so turn Tigrayan public opinion in Addis Ababa’s favour. Yet continued elite and popular resistance to the provisional administration, coupled with growing backing for secession fuelled by sustained federal military rule, are at least as likely outcomes. Indeed, many Tigrayans express newfound support for independence.⁶⁶

Tigrayan anti-federal sentiment has been further exacerbated by Amhara control of parts of west and south Tigray.⁶⁷ As many Amhara see it, when the federation took

⁵⁹ “Tigray interim government plans regional, zonal overhaul”, *The Reporter*, 21 November 2020. “About 84 per cent of civil servants in Mekelle reported so far to return to work: interim admin”, Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 19 December 2020; “Tigray Interim Administration’s discussions with elders and residents of Shire town”, video, YouTube, 4 December 2020. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Mekelle and Shire residents, December 2020.

⁶⁰ “The People of Tigray Have Proven in Practice That They Are Not with the Greedy Junta”, statement, Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 28 November 2020.

⁶¹ “Current phase of rule of law operations in Tigray region”, Office of the Prime Minister, 7 December 2020.

⁶² “Tigray regional government statement”, 25 December 2020.

⁶³ “Brief from the Tigray National Regional Government on the Current Conflict in Ethiopia”, Tigray Friendship Liaison Office, 2 December 2020; “Ethiopian military says it killed 15 members of rebellious Tigray forces, captured 8 others”, Reuters, 10 January 2021. The Tigray Defence Forces is the name Tigray’s ousted leadership gave to Tigray’s security forces when the war broke out.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Tigrayan opposition leader and Tigrayan activists, December 2020–January 2021.

⁶⁵ For example, before the TPLF rebellion from 1975, Tigrayans had also risen up against Emperor Haile Selassie’s government in 1943.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Tigrayan activists, November and December 2020.

⁶⁷ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Bridging the Divide in Ethiopia's North*, op. cit.

shape in the early 1990s, the TPLF annexed the Welkait area in what is now West Tigray Zone and the Raya area in South Tigray Zone. Regardless of the legitimacy of both sides' claims, plenty of Tigrayans resent the new reality. West Tigray, which has already seen extreme intercommunal violence at Maykadra and elsewhere, is an ethnic tinderbox. Unless the federal government rolls back Amhara control there and in South Tigray Zone – as requested by Tigray's interim leader appointed by Addis Ababa – the situation is likely to complicate any settlement.⁶⁸ An added complication is fighting between Ethiopian and Sudanese forces in border areas that Sudan claims but were increasingly settled by mostly Amhara farmers in recent decades. Amhara factions will be especially reluctant to relinquish their hold on the reclaimed territory in Tigray now that Sudan has taken over these lands.⁶⁹

Similarly, until Eritrean troops leave Tigray, and Addis Ababa responds adequately to Tigrayan reports of Eritrean looting and atrocities, it will be a major challenge for the interim administration to win the backing of the region's population. Many Tigrayans believe that Eritrean forces have pursued a deliberate strategy of ransacking factories and hospitals in order to cripple Tigray, thereby eliminating its elites as regional rivals.⁷⁰ The situation puts Abiy's government in a bind, as so far, the federal executive has denied Eritrean involvement, while Eritrean military support may have helped federal forces gain the upper hand against their Tigray foes. Curtailing Eritrea's military involvement could have implications for the military campaign. Still, the continued Eritrean presence comes at a large political cost and it is hard to see how Tigrayans will accept the federal government's interim arrangements while it continues.

Unless such grievances are reduced in a way that is acceptable to both federal authorities and Tigrayan citizens, Addis Ababa may be forced to administer the region using increasingly coercive means. Already, the government insists to aid agencies that it will handle food distribution, raising fears among diplomats and UN officials that assistance is being used as a political tool.⁷¹ For many Ethiopians, an iron-fisted federal approach would be justified given their views on the damage wrought by the TPLF since 1991. Yet the human and political cost could be massive if millions of needy Tigrayans do not receive life-saving assistance and if Tigrayan resentment of federal rule festers as it becomes more draconian. The food crisis would worsen, further catalysing Tigrayan secessionist sentiment and setting up years of instability. Tigrayan

⁶⁸ The de facto alteration of inter-regional boundaries in the wake of the intervention could trigger other land grabs elsewhere in a federation that has numerous territorial disputes. The Amhara moves were criticised by some political leaders from the Oromo, the other major bloc in the ruling Prosperity Party. Prosperity Party Oromia branch spokesman Taye Dendea, "Raya and Wollo", 9 December 2020. Abiy said territorial disputes should be decided in consultation with the people and based on the findings of the Administrative Boundaries and Identity Issues Commission. "Elections 2021 Discussions with Political Parties and Civil Society Organisations", Office of the Prime Minister, 2 December 2020. For the Tigray interim administrator's stance, see Mulu Nega Kahsay, "We have made our stance on the issue clear to the Amhara region", Facebook, 16 January 2020.

⁶⁹ "Local official in Amhara region accused Sudan of invading large swaths of land, stealing and destroying more than \$25m worth property", *Addis Standard*, 28 December 2020.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Tigrayan leaders and activists, November-December 2020 and January 2021.

⁷¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, European Union aid official, November 2020.

interim administration officials seem conscious of not only the human cost, but the strategic risks of hundreds of thousands starving to death due to the absence of aid.⁷²

The uncompromising federal approach toward the TPLF to date also suggests an overstated sense of the party's wrongdoing. The TPLF for years largely controlled a repressive system, Tigrayan officials within it committed crimes and other Tigrayans benefitted from ethnic patronage. But some former EPRDF officials now condemning the party were also culpable for abuses. Overall, the federal era has seen important gains, despite the system's defects and excesses that led to the mass protests on which Abiy rode to power. Major donors considered the EPRDF government an efficient aid spender and dependable peacekeeping ally. While the EPRDF's civil rights record was woeful, it maintained overall stability and its pervasive control came with a much-lauded focus on state-led development, including social services and infrastructure investments that reduced poverty. Its opponents may despise the system for dividing Ethiopians, but the multinational federal order the TPLF instituted is valued by other Ethiopians for its role in protecting formerly suppressed ethnic identities.

Tigrayans are not the only ones who might protest against the federal intervention. Some other ethno-nationalists view it with alarm and consider it a violation of a key tenet of the federal order: regional autonomy as protection from coercive central authority. Despite having campaigned against the TPLF, for example, some Oromo activists now support the Tigrayan resistance.⁷³ Such sentiment risks fuelling problems elsewhere in Ethiopia. The two main Oromo opposition parties may boycott this year's poll after the arrest of leaders and members in July.⁷⁴ There is also renewed state intolerance of dissent.⁷⁵ In Benishangul-Gumuz region, ethnic Gumuz militia are reportedly killing Amhara and others. While the Gumuz complain of marginalisation, Amhara factions say they face ethnic cleansing on land that was historically part of Amhara provinces. This broader discontent, which also is exacerbating splits in the ruling Prosperity Party, poses challenges for elections now set for 5 June, even if the federal government pacifies Tigray.⁷⁶

⁷² In leaked minutes of a meeting between Ethiopian regional officials and aid workers, a regional official said many Tigrayans could already be dying and urged swift assistance. "Starvation crisis looms as aid groups seek urgent Tigray access", Al Jazeera, 19 January 2021.

⁷³ "How Abiy Ahmed's Ethiopia-first nationalism led to civil war", Al Jazeera, 2 December 2020.

⁷⁴ "Opposition party Oromo Federalist Congress says it will find it 'extremely hard' to take part in coming elections under existing conditions", *Addis Standard*, 9 December 2020.

⁷⁵ "Arrest of cameraman in Ethiopia signals wider crackdown", *The New York Times*, 30 December 2020; "Lidetu bailed after charges of trying to topple state by penning transition plan", *Ethiopia Insight*, 14 December 2020.

⁷⁶ Dendea, "Raya and Wollo", op.cit.; "Threatening a Military Intervention in a Constitutionally Established Region without the Federal Government's Consent is Tantamount to Starting a War between People", press release, Benishangul-Gumuz Prosperity Party, 15 December 2020.

A further challenge is the escalating border tension with Khartoum, partly in areas adjacent to Tigray, a standoff that is occurring amid the dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.⁷⁷ In early December, Sudan's military moved to occupy border areas it claims, as Ethiopia's armed forces were focused on the fighting in Tigray. Amid belligerent rhetoric from both sides, and Ethiopia demanding a Sudanese withdrawal before talks, there is a risk of further escalation. That would leave Ethiopia's stretched federal forces having to fight on yet another front, while Sudanese military elements could attempt to open up supply lines for Tigray's so far isolated resistance.⁷⁸

V. Potential Pathways to Peace

Regardless of the scenario that unfolds, the underlying political divides among competing visions for Ethiopia, of which this conflict is but one symptom, will remain. Success on Addis Ababa's terms is unlikely to mollify anti-federal feelings among Tigrayans. Persistent resistance would sap federal resources and, perhaps, encourage other ethno-nationalist groups, particularly in Oromia, to press their claims through more civil and armed action.⁷⁹

If the federal government rejects dialogue with the ousted Tigrayan leadership, it should at least do what it can to avoid further alienating Tigrayans. That means, first, avoiding a humanitarian catastrophe that would inflame local sentiment and reduce space for a political settlement down the line. Authorities should swiftly accede to international demands – echoed by Tigray interim officials – for complete access to offer life-saving assistance. Donors, and particularly the African Union's trio of peace envoys, should press this message home. Following the EU's lead, others, including the U.S., should unite to insist that humanitarian agencies get full access to all of Tigray, via a deal with Tigrayan forces if necessary.⁸⁰ At present, the federal government seems more concerned about keeping the pressure on Tigray's fugitive leaders than it does about Tigrayans' welfare. But unless Abiy's government finds a way to allow aid to quickly reach millions of starving Tigrayans, the perceived benefits of military gains at the TPLF's expense will be dwarfed by the catastrophic impact of the conflict on civilians.

The federal government, Tigray's removed leaders, humanitarian actors, rights groups and activists offer vastly different versions of events and the situation on the ground, thus widening divisions and hindering concerted action. In order to rectify this situation, the federal government should permit journalists to report from inside

⁷⁷ See Crisis Group Statement, "Nile Dam Talks: A Short Window to Embrace Compromise", 17 June 2020.

⁷⁸ Nizar Manek and Mohamed Kheir Omer, "Sudan will decide the outcome of the Ethiopian civil war", *Foreign Policy*, 14 November 2020.

⁷⁹ Since the arrest of several Oromo opposition leaders in July, violence has increased in Oromia. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Oromo opposition activists, November 2020. Also see "Oromia special force kills 142 OLF-Shene militants in West Wellega Zone", Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 18 November 2020.

⁸⁰ "EU delays 90 million euros in aid to Ethiopia over Tigray crisis, document shows", Reuters, 16 December 2020.

Tigray and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission to conduct more investigations into all reported atrocities, with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights also being allowed to carry out its own probes. The federal government should also grant unrestricted access to Ethiopian civil society groups, such as the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, and international outfits, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

Other steps could help avoid furthering the perception that Tigrayans are being persecuted indiscriminately. Where possible, the federal government should stick to plans to work with district and village leaders and maintain the existing Tigrayan civil service, notwithstanding that many employees are TPLF members. Federal authorities should also put a stop to the harassment – including by federal entities – of Tigrayans across the country, which undermines their claims to be targeting only TPLF leaders.

The issue of Amhara and Eritrean forces is also critically important and must be addressed. The Amhara takeover of territory within Tigray, along with Tigrayan anger at Eritrea's role, are inflaming the situation. Addis Ababa ought to roll back the Amhara hold in south and west Tigray, so making way for Tigray's interim administration, while curtailing Eritrea's presence. A federal boundary commission should expedite its work assessing Amhara territorial claims, with its recommendations then forming the basis for Amhara-Tigray negotiations on the issue. African and international actors should encourage this approach, with the EU also putting pressure on Asmara – including potential aid cuts – if Isaias does not withdraw his troops. The Biden administration should repeat its call for an Eritrean withdrawal and also urge its Gulf allies, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, who have relatively strong influence over Asmara, to deliver that message to their ally.⁸¹

While these measures can help ease the situation, they will not resolve the underlying reasons for the war: the Amhara-Tigray territorial dispute will linger, as will the stark – and violent – disagreement between defenders of Tigrayan autonomy and opponents of the TPLF. Tigray's conflict was exacerbated by pre-existing divisions between proponents of the multinational federal order and advocates for a stronger central government and a national politics less defined by ethnicity. To create conditions for fair elections planned for June, and to address Ethiopia's core schism, a comprehensive national dialogue is needed. To ensure the requisite inclusivity and lower the political temperature, Addis Ababa should offer an amnesty to jailed Ethiopian opposition leaders ahead of these talks.⁸²

⁸¹ See, for example, Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°65, *The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa*, 6 November 2018.

⁸² Several opposition leaders are being prosecuted after being arrested in July 2020. For example, veteran politician Lidetu Ayalew is charged with preparing for regime change after distributing a transitional government plan. "Lidetu bailed after charges of trying to topple state by penning transition plan", op. cit. Jawar Mohammed, an Oromo politician whom officials and activists, especially from Amhara, accuse of inciting violence, is also charged with plotting an insurrection. "Ethiopian prosecutors charge Jawar with training terror group in Egypt", *Ethiopia Insight*, 25 September 2020.

VI. Conclusion

The federal dispute with Tigray was political in nature and required a political solution. Instead, as tensions ratcheted up, both sides dug in. The result is a costly war. Federal authorities have claimed victory; indeed, they did quickly succeed in turfing Tigray's leaders out of their regional stronghold. But fighting continues and even were it to calm, the political standoff would remain. For peace to come to Tigray, Abiy's government will have to do its utmost to convince Tigrayans to work with the interim government on rebuilding Tigray, including the majority of those from the ousted TPLF. Should it fail to do so, Addis Ababa could win the war but lose the peace. More broadly, the questions of regional autonomy and self-determination, and the clash between different visions of the country's future that underpin the Tigray conflict will persist, not just in Tigray but elsewhere, too. Only dialogue can resolve questions of such integral importance to the country's future.

Nairobi/Brussels, 11 February 2021

Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

After President & CEO Robert Malley stood down in January 2021 to become the U.S. Iran envoy, two long-serving Crisis Group staff members assumed interim leadership until the recruitment of his replacement. Richard Atwood, Crisis Group's Chief of Policy, is serving as interim President and Comfort Ero, Africa Program Director, as interim Vice President.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, Iceland Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Ireland, Japan International Cooperation Agency, the Principality of Liechtenstein Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, United Nations Development Programme, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the World Bank.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations and organizations: Adelphi Research, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Facebook, Ford Foundation, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Global Challenges Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and Stiftung Mercator.

February 2021



International Crisis Group

Headquarters

Avenue Louise 235, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38

brussels@crisisgroup.org

New York Office

newyork@crisisgroup.org

Washington Office

washington@crisisgroup.org

London Office

london@crisisgroup.org

Regional Offices and Field Representation

Crisis Group also operates out of over 25 locations in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America.

See www.crisisgroup.org for details

PREVENTING WAR. SHAPING PEACE.