

Ethiopian Government Says Mekelle Has Been Retaken by Federal Forces

Conflict in the restive Tigray region has its origins in failed United States Africa policy

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On November 4, the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) came under attack by the provincial government in the northern Tigray region.

Reports indicate that numerous ENDF personnel were killed while the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) local leadership declared that the administration of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali in Addis Ababa as being illegitimate.

Between 1991 and 2018, the TPLF was the dominant political party within the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) which had fought the former government of Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, the ruler of the country from 1974 to the early 1990s. Mengistu was aligned with the former Soviet Union, the Eastern European socialist countries and Cuba. He was a part of the armed forces grouping known as the Derg, the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), which seized power from the Monarchy under the control of H.I.M. Haile Selassie in 1974 amid a national uprising inside the country.

With the advent of unrest in Ethiopia during early 2018, the former EPRDF leadership of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned from office. Hailemariam said he wanted to pave the way for much-needed reforms creating the conditions for the rise of the incumbent administration of Abiy.

Abiy has described the conflict as an internal matter which does not require the diplomatic and military intervention of the African Union (AU), whose Secretariat is based in Addis Ababa, along with the United Nations and other international bodies. The deliberate and rapid military actions taken by the ENDF was characterized by the Ethiopian government as a law-enforcement operation.

A delegation from the AU visited Ethiopia for discussions with Abiy on November 27. The talks appeared to have been cordial resulting in the issuing of communiques by both the delegation empowered by the current AU Chairperson South African President Cyril Ramaphosa and the federal government in Addis Ababa.

A report published by AllAfrica.com says of the meeting between the AU delegation and Abiy that:

“African Union envoys meeting Friday with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali ended with no apparent progress towards averting an attack on Mekelle, capital of the northern Tigray region. Abiy has demanded that regional forces

surrender and urged international actors not to intervene, saying Ethiopia is capable of resolving the situation internally. The envoys, three former presidents – Liberia’s Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Mozambique’s Joaquim Chissano and Kgalema Motlanthe from South Africa – have been seeking a negotiated solution for the conflict, which has already displaced 43,000 Ethiopians, according to UNHCR. In a statement after the meeting, Abiy expressed ‘utmost gratitude to President Cyril Ramaphosa & his Special Envoys for their concerted effort to understand our rule of law operations,’ he said in a Tweet. ‘Receiving the wisdom & counsel of respected African elders is a precious continental culture that we value greatly in Ethiopia.’ The African Union in a communique described the positions outlined by the prime minister but gave no indication of any further actions by the envoys.” (See [this](#))

Military Clashes Resulting in Humanitarian Crisis

Even though the Ethiopian government has declared victory in the current conflict, TPLF leaders at present are refusing to concede and vowing to continue the fight against the ENDF. The clashes between the ENDF and TPLF loyalists has prompted the departure from the country of tens of thousands of Ethiopians from various nationalities and regions.

Many of the refugees are temporarily settling in eastern Sudan where humanitarian agencies are reporting on their status in a country which is itself undergoing a political transition. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) noted in a November 26 article that those displaced number around 40,000.

The report emphasizes:

“UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and its partners are delivering and distributing life-saving aid, including hot meals, water and latrines for the arrivals. Staff at the Hamdayet border crossing in Kassala State and the Lugdi crossing in Gedaref State, are registering thousands of new arrivals each day. The most vulnerable refugees including older people, pregnant and lactating women and children are receiving special care, including supplementary feeding. But the humanitarian response continues to face logistical challenges. The relocation of refugees away from the border is hampered by logistics and distances, limiting the number of people being transferred to Um Rakuba camp in Gedaref, some 80 kilometres inside Sudan.” (See [this](#))

International Dimensions of the Internal Conflict

Although it has been nearly three decades, the role of the United States government in the current political crisis in Ethiopia cannot be overlooked. Under the administration of former President George H.W. Bush, Sr. in May 1991, the U.S. State Department encouraged and facilitated the seizure of power by the EPRDF.

This was the period of decline and dissolution of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies which had played an enormous role in the efforts by the Mengistu government to create a socialist society under the leadership of the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE).

Herman Cohen, the-then U.S. Undersecretary for African Affairs, had been involved in negotiations to bring about peaceful settlement to the wars in Ethiopia between the Mengistu administration and the EPRDF. Cohen emerged from the talks held in London issuing a statement recognizing the TPLF-EPRDF as the legitimate government in Ethiopia.

In the early phase of the EPRDF government in Addis Ababa, there was extensive military cooperation with the U.S. Ethiopia at the aegis of Washington under successive Republican and Democratic administrations engaged in military operations in neighboring Somalia, which is still not stable even decades after direct and indirect interventions by Washington. Relations with the U.S. and Britain had been very close from the time of the Italian occupation during 1935-1941 to the post World War II period of the Cold War.

When Ethiopia experienced a Revolution stemming from demonstrations and strikes in the early months of 1974, the mass sentiment among many inside the country was in opposition to U.S. foreign policy. Ethiopia turned towards the socialist camp, declaring itself marxist-leninist and eventually attempting to form a vanguard party. Yet the internal problems of the sectional conflicts with the Tigray and Oromo groups prevented the WPE from consolidating its national development policies. In addition, a war of independence waged by Eritrea against the central government lasted from 1961-1991, when the former Italian colony declared itself a sovereign state and two years later, after a referendum on independence was recognized by the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the predecessor of the AU, and the United Nations.

Former Assistant Secretary of State Cohen is still denying rumors related to his political bias towards the EPRDF. A twitter post by Cohen said of the resurfaced allegations that: "I was surprised to see frivolous rumors alleging I have taken money from the TPLF. There is no truth to this." (See [this](#))

An Ethiopian news agency, Borkena.com, reported during mid-November that many people consider Cohen as some sort of "political godfather" of the TPLF. The existing federal system of governance in Ethiopia which Prime Minister Abiy is trying to transcend, has been favored by Cohen. Borkena quoted a Cohen twitter post which asserts that the:

"Best solution for #Ethiopia is a truly decentralized federal system, in which Ethiopia remains unified but each ethnic nation has the self-determination they desire. If Abiy wins militarily, [the] international community should still press for this outcome through political dialogue,' he said." (See [this](#))

The formation of the Prosperity Party (PP) in December 2019 by Abiy is designed to usher in a new era of governance for the country of 110 million, the second-most populous state in Africa. It appears to many that the TPLF is attempting to rekindle its political dominance exercised during its 27-years of undisputed rule. The refusal of the TPLF to join the PP and to hold its own provincial elections after the central government postponed voting due to the COVID-19 pandemic, fueled tensions with the Abiy government in Addis Ababa.

In the last several months, the administration of President Donald J. Trump has interfered in the ongoing talks to resolve the dispute between Addis Ababa and Egypt over the operations of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project which is viewed as essential for the further modernization and industrialization of the Horn of Africa state and its neighbors. After the Ethiopian government refused to accept a U.S. proposal advanced by the Trump White House, Abiy was condemned by administration.

A recent conference call over the question of "normalization" of relations between the Republic of Sudan and the State of Israel, gave an indication of the hostility directed towards Ethiopia by Washington. Trump said during the conversation that the Egyptian government

would have no other choice than to “blow up” the Dam. Such reckless comments could very well have been interpreted by the TPLF as a signal from the U.S. welcoming its hostile action against the central administration of Abiy.

Attempts by the TPLF to bring Eritrea into the conflict has so far failed. Reports on November 29 from Asmara say that there have been six explosions in the capital city of Eritrea without mentioning the exact cause. (See [this](#))

Abiy had negotiated a peace agreement with Eritrea after taking power in 2018, putting an end to the border conflict around Badme which erupted in 1998 and 2000. Abiy was later awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his negotiations with the Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki resulting in the signing of accords and a deepening of bilateral relations.

Since Ethiopia is an important nation within the AU and the international community, with thousands of years of history and cultural contributions, the outcomes of the present crisis will be followed closely by many people throughout the world.

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