

## Agreement for a “Permanent Cessation of Hostilities” and a “peaceful solution” of the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia

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After about two years of brutal fighting that led to an estimated loss of 5 to 6 hundred thousand lives, the Ethiopian government of Abiy Ahmed and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) signed an agreement for a “permanent cessation of hostilities” and disarmament of TPLF troops. They did so on 2 November 2022 in Pretoria, South Africa, after a relatively short negotiation under the auspices of an African Union mediation panel led by former Nigerian President Obasanjo, and the active support of the US Envoy Mike Hammer and a UN team. Politically, the parties agreed on continuation of the federal constitution and federal laws of Ethiopia as a basis for the continued existence of the ethnically based federal regions in the country, as well as the establishment of regional governments through federally supervised regional elections. Accordingly, all the lands that were designated within the Tigray state by the former federal government will remain in Tigray. The current regional government in Tigray, which was established through regional elections run by the former Tigray state government itself, will, however, have to stop operating. A new one is to be elected through federally established election procedures. TPLF forces are to be disarmed within about a month (!), and Ethiopian federal forces will take responsibility for the country’s international borders and other federal assets and institutions such as international airports.

Not much of a political settlement is detailed in the agreement. Many independent observers and Tigrayan supporters of the TPLF have in fact interpreted the points of the agreement which dwell on military disengagement and the disarming of TPLF troops, as “surrender terms” resulting from the defeat of the TPLF. They argue that solutions to “political grievances” of the Tigray people, including greater devolution of powers to the regional state, and the holding of a referendum for separation are not addressed. Some Tigrayan parties that formed the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) along with the TPLF, are thus declaring that their struggle will continue in one form or another until such objectives are achieved.

Indeed, the TPLF led Tigrayan rebel leaders that negotiated the peace deal may have felt they had no choice but to accept the less than optimal terms they signed:

- a) They were surrounded from all sides by an array of allied forces - the ENDF from the south, the Afar militias from the east, the Amhara militias from the west, and Eritrean troops from the north, finding it difficult to feed themselves let alone replenish their military supplies, particularly ammunition;
- b) All government services and economic activity in the Tigray region were completely shut, with inadequate humanitarian supplies allowed to pass only intermittently at whim by the Ethiopian government;
- c) TPLF leaders had hoped for heavy international pressure (including sanctions) on and denial of international assistance and facilitation to the Abiy government leading to its economic weakness if not collapse – which didn’t happen to the degree desired; and finally,
- d) TPLF leaders had counted on the rebellion of other ethnic groups, particularly the Oromos, the largest ethnic group in the country – in fact the largest ethnic group in Africa next to the Hausas in Nigeria - against PM Abiy and his Prosperity Party which advocate the abolition of the federation and formation of a centralized unitary state in the country. Some Oromo groups and other minorities are indeed fighting the government, but the Oromos as a whole remain divided. Their uprising against the Abiy government and the Amhara militias has thus remained insignificant.

The critical issue regarding the Tigrayan war has indeed been the role of “external” and non-central-government forces. These include 1) Eritrean forces who have been invited by the Abiy government to assist in the fight against the Tigrayan rebels; and 2) Amhara and Afar militias not under the control of the Federal Government. These latter two joined the fight against the TPLF to “regain control” of territories in the west (Welkait and other areas of western Tigray and northern Amhara regions), and the east which they claim traditionally belonged to them. These areas, the Amharas and Afars claim, were taken by the TPLF to be part of the regional state of Tigray. The territorial configuration of the current Ethiopian regional states was drawn in the 1990s, when the earlier EPRDF (led by the TPLF) established the federation and the ethnically based federal states. The Afars in the East and Amharas in the west have argued that territories traditionally Afar and Amhara lands, have been sliced out of their traditional homelands and added to Tigray on the pretext that the majority currently speak Tigringa. Afar and Amhara regional militias have thus taken opportunity of the war between the central government and the Tigray Regional State to fight against the Tigrayans, not necessarily with the government, to regain their traditional lands “annexed to Tigray.”

The Eritreans also have a grudge of their own against the TPLF. Eritrea fought a 2-year war against TPLF-led Ethiopia in 1998-2000 on account of a border claim it had against Ethiopia. All these lands are on the Eritrea-Tigray border. More than 70,000 troops died in that bitter war among the former allies. Although the two countries finally agreed to approach the International Court of Justice for arbitration, and the Ethiopia- Eritrean Border Commission (EEBC) so formed gave its ruling on the border, a ruling both parties had agreed to be “final and binding”, Ethiopia demanded it wanted to discuss with Eritrea possible changes to the decision before implementation. The Eritrean government interpreted this Ethiopian position as refusal to implement the decision, and a situation of no-peace-no-war existed between the two countries for almost two decades. When anti EPRDF sentiments rose in Ethiopia leading to the resignation of the TPLF nominated Prime Minister (PM Hailemariam Desalegn) in 2018, Abiy Ahmed, an opponent of the TPLF, was elected to become Prime Minister. President Isaias of Eritrea saw his chances for a payback against the TPLF. Abiy also needed Isaias, an enemy of his enemy, to be his ally, and the two signed a deal to accept and implement the EEBC decision on the border, and establish close cooperation between the two governments to diminish the political influence and control of the TPLF in Ethiopia and Tigray. The TPLF was consolidating its position within Tigray in opposition to Abiy Ahmed who, as mentioned earlier openly espoused his intent to abolish the ethnic federation in the country. The TPLF saw these declarations and the growing closeness between Abiy and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki as an alliance designed to weaken its power in Tigray and influence in Ethiopia as a whole. The rest is history: The war between the Abiy federal government and Tigray started in November 2020 with the full engagement of Eritrean troops on the side of the Abiy government.

Since the peace agreement was signed in Pretoria earlier this month, ground fighting between the ENDF and the TDF has subsided, though there have been sporadic drone attacks by ENDF forces against selected Tigrayan targets. Eritrean and Amhara, forces which are expected to withdraw from Tigray according to the agreement, however remain in Tigray and are reported to be continuing to attack TDF troops and terrorize TPLF supporters. In fact, there are reports that Eritrea is increasing its troop deployment to Tigray, possibly to also keep its army occupied and looting, and ironically contain growing resentment and rebellions within its ranks against being sent to “fight” a war inside Ethiopia.

It remains to be seen whether Abiy and his federal army (ENDF) will – and can – act to effect the withdrawal of Eritrean forces, as well as Amhara and Afar militias, from federally constituted Tigrayan territory. Such will determine whether the agreement signed with the

TPLF moves towards building peace or degenerates back to renewed fighting and chaos, not only in Tigray, but most likely in the rest of the country as well. Peace will also depend on the commitment made by the TPLF, albeit under duress, to abide by the obligations it agreed to honour, including the total disarmament of TPLF (TDF) forces, consistent with the stipulations of the Pretoria agreement. As the reality stands, both obligations are not easy to count on as these depend also on the behavior and actions of the engaged external forces not so easily controlled by the two signatories.

Given the multiplicity of factors that need to work for stable peace to have a chance in Ethiopia, taking firm steps to demarcate the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and starting broad based and inclusive national dialogue in Ethiopia to discuss and agree on the future configuration of the Ethiopian state would be appropriate next steps to move on.



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Haile Menkerios is an Eritrean-born South African diplomat who specialises in conflict resolution. Haile is a career diplomat, and his most recent positions include Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General and head of the United Nations Office to the African Union. Haile's previous roles included serving as Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for Sudan and South Sudan, as well as head of the United Nations Mission in Sudan, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs in New York, and several senior posts in United Nations Headquarters and missions in the field dealing with issues of peace and security.