



SOLACE GLOBAL

TIGRAY CONFLICT

THE FALL OF LALIBELA

AUGUST 2021

Ethiopia: Tigray Conflict

The Fall of Lalibela

Executive Summary

- Since rejecting a June ceasefire offer the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) have been pushing into neighbouring regions such as Afar and Amhara.
- On 6 August, the TPLF seized control of Lalibela, a holy city and UN World Heritage Site, further raising fears that the conflict is at a point of further escalation.
- As a result of this push, the federal government's rhetoric has become extreme with the head of USAID even calling it dehumanising, warning it could lead to further human rights atrocities such as ethnic cleansing.
- On 8 August, Sudan recalled its ambassador after its offer to mediate in the conflict was rejected by the Ethiopians.

On 6 August, it was reported that Tigrayan fighters had seized control of a UN world heritage site in the neighbouring Amhara region. As a result of this news the Ethiopian government, stated that they would be forced to respond to the Tigrayans if they didn't stop expanding into neighbouring regions. This seizure can be seen as the culmination of a week's long push by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) into neighbouring regions such as Afar and Amhara. This push comes after the TPLF rejected a last-minute ceasefire from the federal government, after the TPLF successfully recaptured the Tigrayan capital, Mekelle.

As the TPLF have continued their push into the neighbouring territory, the war of words between the TPLF and the Ethiopian government has become increasingly inflamed. This has caused concern internationally, as such language has historically been utilised before a period of ethnic cleansing or genocide.

As a result of the fall of Lalibela to the TPLF, the deputy president of Amhara announced that there was a need for the Amhara people to begin their defence. This raises the prospect of further inter-ethnic conflict in the country. Meanwhile, the federal government have stated that they will be taking all necessary measures to protect Lalibela, which again further raises the prospect of an escalation in the conflict.

As the conflict continues to spill out of Tigray and drag more of Ethiopia's many ethnic and religious tribes into it, it is possible that the country could find itself host to a complex internal conflict based on ethnicities and the struggle for political power.

Background

Prior to 2018, the TPLF controlled Ethiopia's federal government, and key sectors and companies in the nation's economic life. In 2018, Abiy came to power after large scale protests against the TPLF domination of the country. Since the accession of Abiy to power, he has tried to scale back the TPLF domination in the country.

The current conflict began in November 2020 when Prime Minister Abiy sent troops into the Tigray region to try and remove the TPLF, who were the regional ruling party. The TPLF had, prior to 2018, dominated Ethiopia's national politics before the rise of Abiy. There has been concern among the political party they were being pushed further away from the centres of power in the country. The federal intervention in Tigray came after the TPLF had launched an attack on a federal military installation.

These federal troops were also backed up by troops from neighbouring Eritrea and militia fighters from Amhara. Whilst the TPLF were initially toppled, the campaign swiftly became bogged down as the TPLF adopted guerrilla tactics. Alongside this, the conflict became notorious for accusations of human rights abuses, and atrocities committed by both sides. Meanwhile there were reports that up to 50 percent of the Tigray region was under the control of the Eritrean armed forces who were supposedly pursuing their own objectives, and not beholden to Abiy or the Ethiopian government.

A major turning point in what had become something of a stalemate occurred in June 2021 when the TPLF successfully retook the regional capital Mekelle. This triggered the Ethiopian government to issue an

immediate ceasefire proposal. Whilst this was most likely done to save face on their part, had it been accepted by the TPLF it could have paved the way for the resolution of the conflict. Instead, the TPLF rejected the ceasefire proposal and began to push forward into neighbouring provinces. Culminating in the capture of Lalibela, in the Amhara region.

So far, the TPLF have been rebuffing calls for them to withdraw back into the Tigray region. As a result, the Ethiopian government has said that patience is 'wearing thin' and that they are being pushed to mobilise the "entire defensive capabilities of the state". Such rhetoric further risks a continual destabilisation of the country and shows that, as the conflict is increasingly spilling out of the Tigray region, it is becoming increasingly harder to contain.

Tigrayan Advances

In early July, the TPLF announced that they would accept a ceasefire in principle, as long as certain conditions were met and abided to. These included the withdrawal of all armed forces relating to Eritrea and Amhara from the Tigray region. However, the federal government in Addis Abbas, refused to open negotiations with the group, as they class the TPLF as a terrorist group.

As a result, the TPLF continued their advances as well as recruiting additional troops. Humanitarian workers in the region reported that many young Tigrayan men were making their way to the front lines to take up arms and fight for the TPLF. The fighting is believed to have resulted in the displacement of more than 50,000 locals from their homes, while TPLF fighters are accused of burning and looting homes and business as well as massacring local residents.

Not long after the capture of parts of Afar, the TPLF spokesperson stated that they intended to use Afar as the launchpad for their fighting against the militias from Amhara. The militias from Amhara were accused of carrying out systematic ethnic cleansing in the west of Tigray during the earlier phase of the conflict. They also remained in control of a swath of western Tigray, which TPLF officials had also expressed a wish to reclaim.

As a result of these advances, by the end of July, the group were reported to be in control of three areas of the strategically important Afar region, including the symbolic town of Lalibela. The area is vital for two reasons. First, the capture of Lalibela is seen as significant given its holy nature for millions of Orthodox Ethiopians. Local residents stated that that the city of Lalibela fell with no fighting, with one even saying that there was no security presence, and as the TPLF arrived they began dancing in the main square to celebrate.

Secondly, the Afar region is essential to the Ethiopian government as it houses the major road and rail routes that link Addis Ababa, and wider landlocked Ethiopia to Djibouti and the sea making it vital for trade. Whilst the city of Lalibela has a symbolic significance due to its holy nature, it is not necessarily the most strategic city in Amhara that the Tigrayan's have been able to capture in recent weeks. Kobo, which is located about 100 kilometres east of Lalibela, has also in recent days fallen to Tigray control.

Resistance here was more robust, with reports of several days of heavy fighting, in which the TPLF were using heavy artillery and mortars. The town is strategically located on the main A2 road which connects the federal capital Addis Ababa with the capital of the Tigray region, Mekelle. Further to this, Kobo is also located only 12 kilometres south of the regional border between Tigray and Amhara. When Kobo fell the Amhara militias who were defending it retreated south to the town of Weldiya, which is located on one of the main roads to Djibouti.

The advance also shows that the TPLF have been able to successfully penetrate deep into Amhara, despite the efforts of local soldiers and militia fighters to stop the advance to the Tigrayan forces. Further advances towards Kombolcha to the south and into the Mile Serdo Wildlife Reserve would see Addis Ababa cut off from its major road and rail trade networks, greatly isolating the Ethiopian government.

Global Criticism

The ongoing Tigrayan advances and the associated continual spread of the conflict have now forced a further estimated 250,000 people to become internally displaced within the country. The continued federal blockade of the Tigray region is also impacting on food supplies. It is now believed the combination of the fighting and

the blockade have resulted in 5.2 million people being dependent on food aid, whilst around half a million are already in a condition of famine.

As a result of these factors, global criticism of the situation has been forthcoming. The UN and the US have both reiterated long standing calls for all parties to end the hostilities and work towards a ceasefire. The rhetoric in the last two weeks coming from the government indicates that the situation is likely to escalate before it becomes any better.

The Sudanese have meanwhile recalled their ambassador to Ethiopia after a spokesperson for the Ethiopian Prime Minister dismissed the possibility of Sudanese mediation in the conflict. Ethiopia accused Sudan of using the Tigray conflict to enter Ethiopian territory and stated Sudan was not “credible” as a mediator. Relations between Sudan and Ethiopia have long been strained over a border dispute that can be traced back to the early 20th century.

Ethnic Cleansing

There have also been widespread concerns over ethnic cleansing in the conflict. Ever since fighting first broke out, there have been accusations and counter accusations of ethnic cleansing and human rights abuses. These have included the use of starvation used as a tactic, as well as massacres and mass rape. Further to this there are reports that Tigrayans in other parts of Ethiopia have begun being arrested by police and detained in camps, whilst Tigrayan owned businesses have begun being shut down by local authorities.

There is also rising international concern about the language being deployed on both sides, especially from the federal government. On 18 July, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia in a statement used words such as “cancer”, “weeds” and “disease” when referring to Tigrayans, and further declared that they needed to “wiped out”. Meanwhile the Tigrayans have been saying that they need to “degrade” those who are standing in their way.

It is feared that such harsh and dehumanising rhetoric is only likely to increase the tensions that already exist. Indeed, history shows that such rhetoric tends to only further drive, or come before, ethnically motivated killings and atrocities. The fact that there are reports that in some areas Tigrayans have been sent to camps and have had their businesses targeted only serve as a further early warning sign that there is now a high probability that some form of mass ethnic violence will occur.

What Next?

It remains unclear how the current crisis will be solved and whether the country will survive the current conflict. Ethiopia has suffered protracted internal conflicts before and not broken up, including the civil war between 1974 and 1991. However, as the current violence and abuses spread, they both will become harder to stop. As a result, this conflict, and the accompanying nationalist and dehumanising rhetoric, will only serve to drive demands for autonomy from Tigray and other regions.

These demands could then grow into calls for independence making a complete collapse and breakup of the country is a possibility. Already, regions of the country that are not suffering conflict, in particular in the south, are increasingly agitating for greater regional statehood or autonomy, a potentially worrying sign about how weak Ethiopia’s federal bonds are. Tigrayans supposedly seek greater autonomy alongside an agreement on their fears about losing power, as opposed to full scale independence.

It is likely that the federal government and the Amhara militias will respond to the Tigrayan takeover of parts of Amhara, and also Afar. They may also look to again advance into Tigray. It is likely in the immediate future that the situation in the country will remain volatile, and the security situation will continue to deteriorate. The fact that the federal government have the support of a large numbers of citizens who are not ethnically Tigray, heightens the risk of continued conflict. It also makes it less likely that the federal government will be willing, at the current time, to come to the negotiating table and try and seek a negotiated peace.

The news that Tigrayans have been placed in camps, alongside the rhetoric being deployed against them, should also worry international observers that the situation could descend into one of ethnic cleansing in a short space of time. Indeed, Addis Ababa regularly sees large scale pro-government and anti-Tigrayan rallies.

This dynamic will only serve to prolong the conflict. Whilst a full breakup of Ethiopia remains unlikely due to its long continuous history as a state, it is likely that the country could find itself heading towards another large-scale civil war. This civil war based on around competing ethnicities and their desire for power, autonomy or even independence is likely to be much more vicious than the previous Ethiopian civil war. The conflict, based around ethnicities, demands for autonomy and the competition for power, is also almost certain to see some scale of human rights abuses. Incidents of ethnic cleansing and genocide also cannot be ruled out.



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