

# Ethiopia

Flash Analysis and Prediction  
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## UN air flights into Mekelle will be suspended due to the risk to aircraft from indiscriminate fire as the Ethiopian government steps up airstrikes, further stretching humanitarian support in Tigray

The UN suspended all flights into Mekelle, the regional capital of Tigray, on 22 October, following instructions from the Mekelle airport control tower to abort a UN flight landing. The aircraft, from the UN Humanitarian Air Services (UNHAS), had received permission from officials in Addis Ababa to fly 11 aid workers into Mekelle. However the control tower issued an “abort” alert when the government launched airstrikes in the area. The Ethiopian Air Force had been targeting the city for the previous four days as part of the ongoing offensive against the TDF as the Ethiopian government seeks to reclaim territory lost to the Tigrayan forces. The Ethiopian government stated that they were aware the UN aircraft was in the area, but added that the UN and military had different flight patterns and timings in an attempt to deflect criticism. The TPLF have reported that their air defence units knew that the plane was in the area, and restrained from firing on aircraft in flight to prevent what it called “crossfire”, implying that the Ethiopian government was setting up the UN aircraft to be hit by the defence anti-aircraft fire. The Ethiopian government has rejected this claim.



### Analysis

The TPLF accusation has some credence – though will be difficult to prove. Martin Griffiths, the head of the UN’s OCHA, stated that the UN had not received any warning that there would be airstrikes in Mekelle and had received authorisation from officials in Addis Ababa for the flight to go ahead. Air traffic controllers in Addis flight would therefore have known that the UN plane would be in the area at the same time as Ethiopian airstrikes were taking place. This therefore backs up the TPLF claim expressed in a Tweet by spokesperson Getachew K Reda who asked why “the government cleared UN plane to fly to Mekelle only to send in its fighter jets to raid civilian targets”. Whether this was the intention and if so would have deliberately put the lives of 11 aid workers at risk, is still unverified. In any case, the UN has now suspended flights into Mekelle. Further efforts to support the ongoing humanitarian situation in Tigray will certainly be slowed in weeks ahead. Indeed, the incident highlights an apparent escalation in efforts by the Ethiopian government to constrain humanitarian efforts in the current conflict to an extent that they may not refrain from letting aid workers be harmed.



### Prediction

- The UN will only restart air flights to Mekelle and to areas in Amhara, when the government either guarantees that UN flights will not be in the same area as airstrikes or that airstrikes stop altogether – though both are **HIGHLY UNLIKELY**.
- The Ethiopian Government will continue to concentrate air strikes against the Tigrayan capital Mekelle, to maintain pressure on the TDF/ TPLF - both militarily and politically. Some airstrikes have reportedly hit close to civilian targets; one on 22 October allegedly damaged the university in Mekelle.
- The intensity of the air strikes is **UNLIKELY** to increase into a major air offensive for now given the TPLF’s proven air defences (they shot down a Hercules military transport aircraft in January) and the fragility of Ethiopia’s economy. Indeed, this will pressure the government to push for more foreign direct investment (FDI), where possible. Furthermore, limited airstrikes will allow the government to maintain they are targeting TDF military infrastructure and not

civilians. This is however **LIKELY** to change if Turkey supplies its Bayraktar TB2 armed drones (used to great effect by Azerbaijan in last year's conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh) as promised, as the fear of losing valuable aircrew will be greatly reduced.

- The Ethiopian government's attacks will also continue with limited airstrikes in the Amhara and Afar provinces against TDF infrastructure. The TDF have claimed that they have halted the current government offensive and are now in the vicinity of the towns of Dessie and Kombulcha, though are still securing the area to the north of these two towns. Dessie is strategically placed on three major transportation routes - the B21 (leading west towards Sudan), the A2 (leading SW towards Addis) and the B11 (leading east towards Djibouti and its port). If the TDF are able to secure this town and Kombulcha (also on the A2) then they will be able to control one of the main transportation intersections in the country, slowing down the movement of goods within Ethiopia (though goods will still be able to use the A1 to Addis), and also continuing the goal of securing a supply route to the Sudanese border.
- The Ethiopian government's efforts to constrain humanitarian activity will increase, especially if the TDF appear to be gaining strategically. Indeed, both sides have been accused of humanitarian abuses and there are credible reports that the TDF is using aid supplies to support its forces. Both sides' efforts to control humanitarian activities therefore escalate – especially if the conflict grows – which is **HIGHLY LIKELY**. Neither side appears concerned by the threat of international sanctions.



## Mitigation

- Continued interaction by the UN with both sides to ensure that aircraft can fly safely into the area.
- Continued pressure by international donors to both sides to allow UN aircraft to have safe passage, with no threat from either the Ethiopian government or TDF forces.
- Both sides must note flight patterns and allow aircraft passage. However, this may be difficult to account for rogue aircraft/and especially drone flight patterns.

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