

Ethiopia

Flash Analysis and Prediction
20 December 2021



Despite the offer of a ceasefire to the UN by the TPLF, the Ethiopian government will continue to secure areas previously held by the TDF, though will **LIKELY hold off moving any significant distance into Tigray for now, instead targeting senior TPLF members.**

Summary

- The ENDF claimed, plausibly, to have recaptured Kobo and Woldia in Amhara region on 18 December and there are unconfirmed reports of them approaching Korem (in Tigray) on 22 December.
- On 20 December, TPLF spokesman Getachew Reda said that Tigrayan fighters were pulling out of Amhara and Afar.
- An Ethiopian government spokesperson has already dismissed the TPLF's statements that they are withdrawing, and has questioned the TPLF's legal status.
- A withdrawal allows the TDF to shorten its supply lines and regroup (especially if the ENDF bomb the TDF as it will ensure they are seen as the aggressor), while forcing the ENDF and its allied militias to overextend themselves.
- It is **HIGHLY UNLIKELY** that the ENDF will seek to move much deeper into Tigray province itself; instead the ENDF will **LIKELY** use targeted attacks against senior TPLF members.
- The TPLF's call for a no-fly zone over Tigray along with a UN mechanism to verify that Eritrean forces had withdrawn from the region, as well as an arms embargo on Eritrea and Ethiopia, will also undoubtedly be rejected by both Addis and its international backers.
- State Minister for Foreign Affairs Redwan Hussien attended the Turkey-Africa Partnership summit in Istanbul.
- Sudanese Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok met Abiy in Addis Ababa on 13 December to discuss border tensions and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) but the brief meeting was abandoned highlighting continued tensions between the two.
- By initiating dialogue with Turkey, the Ethiopian government is both building their alliances internationally but also underlines that their aim will **LIKELY** be to side-line the TPLF.
- The fact that Hamdok and Abiy's meeting was cut short, along with the continued actions of the Amhara militias mean that further clashes around al-Fashaga are certain.



Analysis

Conflict

The ENDF claimed, plausibly, to have recaptured Kobo and Woldia in Amhara region on 18 December. Two days later, they claimed to have once again recaptured Lalibela – a town that has changed hands twice in recent weeks. Airstrikes and **drone attacks** on Tigray have also continued, notably in Alamata, Tigray, where (according to local sources) the town's main hospital was destroyed over three days of air attacks. The ENDF has also **reportedly now taken** Alamata and pushed on to Korem (just inside Tigray), though this has not been confirmed.

Also on 20 December, TPLF spokesman Getachew Reda said that Tigrayan fighters were pulling out of Amhara and Afar to “open the door to humanitarian aid”. The TPLF’s offer was initially made in a letter to UN Secretary general António Guterres in an attempt to draw the international community into the wider mediation process. Although there have been further tactical withdrawals, we have so far seen no evidence of a wholesale TDF withdrawal from Amhara and Afar. Indeed, by appealing to the UN and offering to pull back, this returns the international focus to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s government, which is already being widely criticised for human rights abuses and the blockade of Tigray with the consequent famine there.

The same day the US State Department said that it hopes the move “opens the door to broader diplomacy”. If the ENDF and allied Amhara militias continue to attack they become entirely and unequivocally the aggressor - with the concomitant reputational damage for anyone that supports them. Indeed, an Ethiopian government spokesperson has already **dismissed** the TPLF’s assertion that they are withdrawing, and has questioned the TPLF’s legal status, “I don’t even know if such an illegitimate entity can send such a letter to a United Nations body...” The Ethiopian government is thereby implying that the TPLF’s offer to the UN cannot be legal – as they have declared the TPLF/ TDF a terrorist entity – and thus negating the proposed ceasefire. Rejecting any ceasefire allows the ENDF to continue to secure areas that the TDF held in Amhara and Afar, whilst also continuing air and drone strikes, which they will maintain are against a “terrorist” organisation rather than a legitimate opposition grouping.

Diplomatic

The Ethiopian State Minister for Foreign Affairs Redwan Hussein attended the **Turkey-Africa Partnership summit** in Istanbul. Speaking on the side-lines, he suggested that the government would ensure “inclusivity of all agendas” in a planned national dialogue intended to redraft the constitution and find a lasting solution to the country’s internal conflicts. This highlights both Turkey’s longer-term **LIKELY** support for the government (both militarily with drones and other equipment) and also the government’s intent to initiate dialogue.

There have also been further clashes between pro-government militias from Amhara and Sudanese troops around the disputed al-Fashaga Triangle with multiple fatalities on both sides. These came despite Sudanese Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok meeting Abiy in Addis Ababa on 13 December to discuss border tensions as well as the impact of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the River Nile’s water level. However, Hamdok stayed for a matter of hours rather than the planned two days. Any further ENDF attempts to support the militias are also **LIKELY** to be met by a robust Sudanese military response.



Prediction

Conflict

- A withdrawal allows the TDF to shorten its supply lines and regroup (especially if the ENDF bomb the TDF as it will ensure they are seen as the aggressor), while forcing the ENDF and its allied militias to overextend themselves further securing territory that has been vacated. That said, further significant movement on the ground will in a large part depend on what Guterres and the UN do with the letter. If nothing, the UN will **LIKELY** be blamed for standing by and watching another possible genocide happen while the discussions are ongoing. Indeed, the latest **UN OCHA** report estimates that 40,000 people are now in **IPC Phase 5 Catastrophe/Famine** as a result of the conflict.
- The Ethiopian government will continue to secure gains that they have so far made against the TDF, in the Amhara and Afar regions. However, it is **UNLIKELY** that they will seek to move much further into Tigray province itself, in the short term (next three weeks), concentrating instead on strategic sites in the province - focusing first on the border areas. A post from Redwan Hussein, State Minister for Foreign Affairs stated “the government

does not have an intention to pursue an all-out military operation in Tigray but it will make sure that the TPLF will not be able to wage an attack anymore". This strategy has been corroborated by two local sources. Indeed, the terrain leading towards Mekelle itself, from Alamata, is mountainous in places - providing viable defensive cover for the TDF. The ENDF could well therefore switch to targeted attacks against senior TPLF members, a point echoed by the Ethiopian government when their spokesperson stated that current air strikes were used only to "neutralise identified terrorist cells and terrorist hideouts".

- The TPLF's call for a no-fly zone over Tigray along with a UN mechanism to verify that Eritrean forces had withdrawn from the region, as well as an arms embargo on Eritrea and Ethiopia, will also undoubtedly be rejected by both Addis and its international backers – especially UNSC members China and Russia. China and Russia's UN vetoes mean that this will be a non-starter unless global public opinion can be mobilised in the same way as during the devastating famine of 1983-85. Regardless, Abiy's aim, in the absence of coordinated international pressure on him, will almost certainly remain the elimination of the TPLF as a coordinated organisation, so fighting and drone/air attacks will undoubtedly continue in the meantime.

Diplomatic

- By initiating dialogue with Turkey, the Ethiopian government is both building their alliances internationally but also underlining that their aim will **LIKELY** be to side-line the TPLF and instead engage with other Tigrayan stakeholders.
- The fact that Hamdok and Abiy's meeting was cut short, along with the continued actions of the Amhara militias mean that further clashes around al-Fashaga are certain as the Sudanese try to prevent the militias from regaining a foothold in the area. The Sudanese, meanwhile, are **LIKELY** to continue their semi-covert support for the TPLF/TDF under the guise of limiting the very real risk of a major famine/genocide in Tigray.



Mitigation

Offices in Addis Ababa and south of the capital

- Aid organisations, including local staff should remain as apolitical as possible.
- All local staff should ensure that no media apps affiliated to sites such as CNN, the BBC, Twitter or Facebook are found on their phones. Staff should remain aware of media sites that are of "concern" to the government and remove them, accordingly, including browser history.

Movement north of Addis Ababa

- Plan all movements carefully.
- Plan operations carefully
- Expect drone attacks on military installations and possibly key infrastructure as well as choke points on road routes.
- Expect drone attacks on supply routes into Sudan.
- Maintain distance from opposition infrastructure or vehicles. This includes civilian infrastructure for example hydropower plants and electricity stations.
- Be aware of surroundings and possible escape routes.

Map showing the locations discussed in the report



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- Previous editions: [20 Dec](#); [06 Dec](#); [12 Nov](#); [08 Nov](#); [26 Oct](#); [12 Oct](#)
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