Allegations of widespread sexual violence and continuing attacks on civilians highlight still precarious situation in Tigray with elections looming.

This document provides an analysis of the current situation in the Tigray region of Ethiopia and the implications for aid agencies working in the area. Watch the Vigil InSight video.

SUMMARY

- Violence continues despite the federal government claiming to have regained control of Tigray late last year.
- Credible allegations of widespread sexual violence and attacks on civilian health facilities continue.
- Eritrean troops are yet to leave, though growing international pressure has led to a promise that they will do so.
- Most reported violence is located in and around main towns and highways, but incidents elsewhere may well be underreported.

Geographical overview of Tigray and surrounding regions
RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN TIGRAY

The Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), a regional armed political movement established in 1975, eventually grew to lead the coalition that governed Ethiopia between 1991 and 2019. It refused to join a new coalition in 2019, leading it to order regional elections in Tigray the following September. These were dismissed as illegitimate by the federal government in Addis Ababa, triggering the so-called Tigray War on 04 November 2020.

Ethiopian federal forces, supported by Eritrean troops and militias from the neighbouring Amhara and Afar regions quickly overran the TPLF, capturing the Tigrayan capital Mekelle on 28 November, after which Prime Minister Abiy declared the Tigray operation “over”. The total number of casualties is disputed but an estimated 2,500,000 people have been displaced.

At least five Ethiopian NGO aid workers who were killed since the start of the conflict. In a 15 March report, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported that nearly 70% of health facilities in Tigray had been looted and more than 30% damaged; a claim dismissed by Peace Minster Muferiat Kamil. Low level clashes persist as federal forces continue to track and arrest key members of the TPLF.

There have been multiple allegations of possible war crimes with the European Union now reportedly considering targeted sanctions against several individuals in Eritrea for their alleged role in human-rights abuses. Last month, meanwhile, Amnesty International reported that Eritrean troops had massacred hundreds of civilians in the town of Axum. More recently, MSF staff reported on 23 March that they had witnessed Ethiopian soldiers stop two public buses, before separating men from women and shooting dead four men. This followed an apparent ambush on an army convoy nearby on the main road between Mekelle, and the city of Adigrat.

The fighting has also led to numerous and credible claims of sexual violence perpetrated by Ethiopian soldiers, Eritrean troops and pro-government militiamen (see separate cluster maps and Insecurity Insight’s report Sexual Violence in Ethiopia’s Tigray Region). These were condemned by senior UN officials on 22 March leading Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to respond by dismissing some as “TPLF propaganda or exaggeration” but adding that any soldier responsible for “raping” or “looting communities in the region will be held accountable, as their mission is to protect”. This suggests that the government fears that the reports are undermining its international support. The UN’s deputy humanitarian coordinator for Ethiopia made further claims on 25 March.

Cluster map showing the number of incidents (based on reported survivors) of sexual violence in the Tigray region, 03 November 2020 to 21 March 2021.

Note: This map is based on data from Insecurity Insight based on publicly reported information. Incidents include sexual violence that can be described as mass rape (multiple survivors), gang-rape (multiple perpetrators), single rape (one survivor one perpetrator), and sexual assault. The map also includes incidents of rape reported to hospitals for which the location of sexual violence was not reported. Location for some of the incidents is approximate due to lack of information. For each reported survivor, one incident is counted.1
Meanwhile, the Biden administration has called for unfettered access for humanitarian agencies to the Tigray region as well as the withdrawal of the various militias supporting the Ethiopian forces’ operations. Ethiopian Deputy Prime Minister (and Foreign Minister) Demeke Mekonnen was explicit in rejecting any foreign “interference” in Tigray in a 20 March meeting with a delegation led by US Senator Chris Coons. Nonetheless, Prime Minister Abiy said on 26 March that Eritrea had agreed to withdraw its troops from Ethiopian territory.

RECOMMENDED MITIGATIONS

Options include:

- Ensure communication with local staff and partners in the area, including regular check in protocols.

- Ensure up-to-date travel information is used to plan road trips, particularly on the main North-South A2 and East-West Travel on B30 highways.

- Be aware of the current and legacy unexploded ordnance (UXO) and legacy landmine threat in areas where operations are planned or being considered – coordinate with Ethiopian Mine Action Office, United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), Mines Advisory Group (MAG) etc.

- Develop strong in-country coordination with other agencies, and local security forces to build and maintain situational awareness.

- Be aware that Eritrean refugee camps were targeted by pro-government actors in the period before the Tigray War. The federal government wanted to close the Hitsats refugee camp, a move opposed by many and aid agencies, and several aid worker deaths appear to have been related to military operations intended to accelerate the closure of the camp.

- Be aware of the ethnic complexities in this conflict that will affect local staff and partners security in multiple ways.

- Be aware of the risk of sexual violence that may affect local staff or partners. For guidance on responding to sexual violence see here.
TREND ANALYSIS

Available data (illustrated in the map below) shows that the majority of violence remains concentrated around the regional capital Mekele. There have however also been significant spikes in violence around other major towns such as Axum Adigrat and Adwa.

Other incidents have largely been concentrated on the more significant North-South and East-West highways. It should however be noted that INGOs report that datasets are very much incomplete and this is particularly likely to be the case in more isolated rural areas.

Heat map showing violent incidents in the Tigray area, 01 November 2020 to 21 March 2021.

Note: This map is based on the ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project) dataset and includes the ACLED events covering armed clashes, airstrikes, violent attacks on civilians (including shelling), looting, and protest-related violence.

PREDICTION

• The government’s 19 March ultimatum to TPLF fighters to surrender within a week, its rejection of international calls for greater humanitarian access, and the removal of militias indicates that operations against the TPLF will continue.

• However, increasing international pressure over sexual violence is likely to see a crackdown on poorly controlled militias as well as a denial that sexual violence has been sanctioned as a strategy of war.5 It is likely that this will be accompanied by greater efforts to restrict access by media and humanitarian monitors. It may involve misinformation and attempts to discredit witnesses or those who report incidents.

• Federal and regional elections are scheduled for early June of this year. The breakaway of the TPLF from the ruling coalition in 2019 highlights the volatility of Ethiopia’s weak and fragmented party system. There is consequently an increased risk of political violence ahead of the polls, particularly in Tigray.

• Violence in other parts of the country, such as that involving the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in the western Ataye region, will persist as the government remains focused on Tigray and the forthcoming elections, limiting its military capabilities elsewhere.

• This in turn will increase the threats linked to road travel to Tigray from Addis Ababa given likely fighting around towns such as Ataye on the main A2 North-South highway.

• The wider regional threats from both COVID-19 and locust swarms have been overshadowed by the fighting but will remain a significant threat to the population - with recent rains increasing reports of swarms growing in Ethiopia and the wider region.

• According to ACAPS, an estimated 23.5 million people will need humanitarian assistance in the first quarter of 2021, up from 19 million people in need at the end of 2020.

• The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile is now 79% complete according to the Ministry of Water, Irrigation and Energy, with environmental and social impacts downstream certain to grow as it fills over the coming years. This has the potential to further damage relations with both Sudan and Egypt although the reduced flood risk in Ethiopia may have a locally beneficial impact on agriculture and settlement.

ABOUT VIGIL INSIGHT

This incident analysis is part of Vigil InSight, a joint initiative by HawkSight, DHC, Gunn and Insecurity Insight.

It is prepared from information available in local, national and international news outlets, consultations with key informants and data from Insecurity Insight Aid in Danger project and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

The incidents reported are not a complete nor a representative list of all events that affected the provision of aid delivery and have not been independently verified.

All decisions made, on the basis of, or with consideration to, such information remains the responsibility of their respective organisations.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Friday, 30 April – Sunday, 02 June – Easter
Wednesday, 12 May - Thursday, 13 May - Eid al-Fitr
Saturday, 05 June – Ethiopian General Election – increased political violence likely in the run up to the polls.

1 This map is an underestimation of the number of sexual violence incidents that have occurred. For example, aggregated data (not fully displayed on this map) indicates that 750 rape cases were admitted to a hospital in Mekelle City and 174 cases in Adigrat by March 2021.

2 Mass rapes refer to incidents involving multiple survivors attacked at the same time in the same location, gang-rapes refer to incidents committed by multiple perpetrators, single rapes refer to incidents describing a single survivor and perpetrator. For each reported survivor, one incident is counted.

3 Insecurity Insight collated data from multiple public sources and confidential contributions from aid agencies. The data may differ from other sources. The data is part of the Aid in Danger project. For more information on Insecurity Insight visit our website on Aid Security and Bi-weekly News Brief, or subscribe for updates.


5 It has been recognised that in some conflicts sexual violence is used as a strategy of war (to ethnically cleanse, displace, terrorise and humiliate populations) or to destroy social and cultural cohesion or as a means of creating cohesion between combatants, including reward mechanisms.