



Armed Conflict

16

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Ethiopia Analysis: Conflict in Tigray Regional State escalates as multiple ethnic security forces deployed in bid to stop TPLF advances on July 16

Executive Summary

- Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) forces continued southward, retaking strategic towns of Korem and Alamata, and the Raya region, further highlighting the Tigrayans' determination to regain all territory lost to the federal government and its Amhara allies over the past eight months.
- In response, the federal government's deployment of troops from Oromia, Sidama, and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) states is aimed at augmenting the resistance to the TPLF advance currently spearheaded by the Amhara troops and militias in the border regions.
- While the deployment of multiple ethnic forces will likely benefit federal efforts against the TPLF, the approach risks causing instability elsewhere in Ethiopia, as Oromia, SNNPR, and Sidama all have prominent security challenges that require a strong security presence.
- Increasingly, all sides of the conflict are motivated by fears of an existential threat, as the Tigrayans face humanitarian crises and other states or ethnic groups look to the historical precedent of TPLF ambition in taking over the country following the last civil war.
- In terms of the conflict over the coming weeks, the TPLF will likely be weakened by continued lack of supplies, however, the Tigrayans will continue to use the advantage of fighting on familiar territory to inflict losses on the various other ethnic forces and federal government.
- **Those operating or residing in Ethiopia are advised to avoid all travel to Tigray Region, including areas administered by Amhara, due to the ongoing conflict.**

Please be advised

- On July 14, PM Abiy Ahmed in a statement pledged to repel attacks by "enemies" of Ethiopia. Abiy stated that while he was committed to peace, even if it came at a "cost", attacks by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) would not be tolerated.
- The PM's statement came after TPLF forces on July 13 took control of Korem and Alamata cities, as well as the entire Raya zone in Southern Tigray, which borders Amhara Region, and was being administered by the Amhara Regional State and its associated militias.
- At the time of writing, TPLF forces are reportedly further advancing toward Amhara Region to retake disputed towns such as Wolkait Tegede and Setit Humera.
- Following these developments, the Amhara government directed its forces on July 15 to adopt an offensive position against the TPLF in 10 localities and claimed that the state would not tolerate the TPLF's actions.
- Additionally, on July 15, reports citing government officials stated that ethnic Amhara troops would be supported by reinforcements from Oromia Regional State, as well as the Sidama and Southern

Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' (SNNPR) regions.

- At the time of writing, the troops from Sidama and SNNPR have already reached the front line in western Tigray. Reinforcements from Oromia are reportedly currently en route to the area.
- These formal troops are also being supported by thousands of ethnic Amhara militiamen, who perceive the TPLF's advance into land they claim to historically be part of Amhara as an existential threat.
- Meanwhile, outside of Tigray Regional State, reports on July 15 indicate that government security forces have intensified crackdowns and detentions of ethnic Tigrayans in Addis Ababa and other parts of the country. Multiple businesses owned by ethnic Tigrayans were also shut, citing unspecified "security threats".
- Also on July 15, the Ethiopia Media Authority (EMA) withdrew the license of a prominent local media outlet, which it accused of advancing the agenda of a "terrorist group". The media platform has regularly covered TPLF advances and criticized the government.



Assessments & Forecast

Recent TPLF successes, PM Abiy's statement to motivate aggressive recruitment, mobilization along Tigray-Amhara disputed areas

1. The declaration by PM Abiy Ahmed that the government would "defend and repel these attacks by our internal and external enemies" signals the end of the unilateral ceasefire in Tigray Regional State announced by the government on [June 28](#). Given that the ceasefire was declared by the government after whole regiments of Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) were forced to retreat to neighboring states, and other contingents were captured and paraded by advancing TPLF forces in Mekelle, this means that the truce was relatively meaningless. Over the past week, TPLF forces have continued to gain momentum and support as they advanced throughout the eastern and southern Tigray Region and are now in the process of recapturing land administered by the Amhara Region government. Given the emotive narrative of the TPLF recapturing territory perceived to be theirs, the Tigrayans have managed to recruit aggressively from the countryside,

adding local citizens and returning diaspora to its ranks as it aims to expel federal forces and its allies from Tigray.

2. In this context, the first and strongest obstacle that the TPLF will face as it bids to regain all its lost territories is the presence of ethnic Amhara troops and militias, especially in the border regions. The direction from the Amhara government to its troops to adopt an offensive position is a clear indication of the regional governments to engage with the TPLF, regardless of the cost.

FORECAST: As is the case with the Tigrayans, ethnic Amhara will be loath to cede hard won territory back to the TPLF, and will likely organize concerted resistance over the coming weeks, leading to prolonged and violent clashes between both sets of troops. Given the relatively irregular nature of conflict in the area, with militias and local citizens involved in the fighting, there remains a heightened possibility of small-scale but casualty heavy clashes in border villages as both Tigray and Amhara forces aim to regain territory. While the TPLF appears to have great offensive momentum at the time of writing, it remains unclear how much longer the group can sustain its push, given that Tigray has seemingly been cut from aid supplies, with significant shortages in food and other essential supplies. The federal government and its allies will further attempt to stop any aid from reaching Tigray as a means to force the TPLF to retreat or agree to negotiations.

Ethnic mobilization to exacerbate conflict, additional states drawn in due to historical, existential fears over TPLF ambition

1. **FORECAST:** The conflict will further be exacerbated by ethnically charged rhetoric employed by political leaders as they portray the threat to each other as existential. The TPLF will likely allude to the behavior of the ENDF and allied forces in Tigray where war crimes have been reported, and more broadly across Ethiopia against Tigrays, as evidence of the government's intent to fully suppress the ethnic group. Similarly, the Amhara government will face increasing pressure from radical ethno-nationalistic opposition parties, such as the the National Movement of Amhara (NaMa), to act decisively against the TPLF forces. Indeed, NaMa called for the mobilization of the ethnic Amhara population on July 13, likely as a means to portray itself as championing the defense of Amhara territory from the TPLF. These ethnically charged calls for combat will further be driven by the historical precedent of the Ethiopian civil war, as Amhara leaders continue to propagate that the TPLF will not be content with only conquering Amhara territory, but are instead looking to march to Addis Ababa and regain their [previous dominance](#) over the polity.
2. Given these conditions, the involvement of forces from Oromia, SNNPR, and Sidama states is a highly significant development, and risks further exacerbating an already volatile conflict. The involvement of forces from areas that have not generally been affected by the Tigrayan conflict thus far is likely an indication that Addis Ababa perceives that the ethnic Amhara forces will require assistance against the TPLF. This is especially given the allegedly extensive losses suffered by the ENDF over the past six months, most notably since the TPLF launched a major offensive in June, which led to the recent ENDF retreat from Mekelle and Tigray in general. PM Abiy likely used his influence over the regional governments of Oromia and SNNPR to convince the administrations to send state troops to help with the federal government's conflict against the TPLF.
3. In the case of Sidama forces, the government likely used the fact that the ethnic Sidama were [granted statehood](#), with PM Abiy championing the process despite previous governments denying the ethnic group the chance to hold a referendum given legitimate concerns over state cohesion if ethnic groups were allowed to pursue statehood. More broadly, however, the various ethnic groups likely agreed to help the federal government against the TPLF as a result of historic grievances against ethnic Tigrayans over their outsized importance in the years where Ethiopia was governed by the [Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front \(EPRDF\)](#). This is notable, given that all these ethnic groups have traditional rivalries with each other mostly over disputes regarding territorial control of parts of one another's territory. In this context, the fact that these disparate forces have agreed to assist the Amharan forces against the TPLF underscores the perception that

the Tigrayans superseded any threat posed to their lands from other rival ethnic groups.

Conflict to escalate in Tigray, leaving security vacuum in other states, with ethnic Tigrayans increasingly vulnerable nationwide

- 1. FORECAST:** The bolstering of troops on the Tigrayan frontier will likely prove to be beneficial in the federal government's aim of degrading TPLF capabilities, especially given that the Tigrayan forces are likely to be outnumbered and will continue to be encumbered by supply shortages as the conflict continues. However, the fact that the TPLF is engaged with enemy forces on familiar territory will be a significant factor over the coming weeks, as already seen by the routing of ENDF regiments, especially in the rugged interior regions. Thus, in areas where the TPLF may be outnumbered, they may continue to see successes, particularly using military equipment successfully captured from the ENDF during the offensives launched in June.
- 2. FORECAST:** While Amhara troops may be somewhat better equipped to deal with the topographical challenges, soldiers from Oromia, SNNPR, and Sidama are likely to be highly vulnerable with regards to TPLF ambushes and skirmishes. More broadly, the deployment of troops from regions not directly connected to the Tigray conflict will have a [debilitating effect on the security situations in these states](#). For instance, the large-scale redeployment of Oromo troops to Tigray creates a security vacuum in the state, which will likely be an advantage to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) "Shene" faction, as they aim to capture and consolidate territorial gains in western Oromia. Similarly, SNNPR remains highly volatile as various ethnic groups clash with each other over territorial disputes. These conditions mean that the government will likely have to balance various security concerns nationwide, as it seeks to regain superiority in Tigray, and that additional violence is expected to be reported in several regions of the country.
- 3. FORECAST:** More broadly, the ethnic profiling and detention of Tigrayans in Addis Ababa further inflames anti-Tigrayan sentiment across the country, thereby making it difficult for either side to compromise and come to an equitable settlement. This policy, along with the shuttering of the prominent media organization, underscores PM Abiy's heightened threat perception against ethnic Tigrayans who may or may not support the TPLF. Such policies will also lead to sustained international criticism over the government's policies that further divide the country, and may result in aid and military cuts over the coming months. Given these conditions, the security situation in Ethiopia, both in Tigray and nationwide, over the coming weeks is likely to be highly tense.

Recommendations

1. Those operating or residing in Ethiopia are advised to avoid all travel to Tigray Region, including areas administered by Amhara, due to the ongoing conflict.
2. Those in Tigray Region are advised to minimize all movement. Consider contingency and evacuation plans when possible.