

Ethiopia: between famine and military stalemate

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Pierre Beaudet in conversation with Paulos Tesfagiorgis

Pierre Beaudet: The war has continued for the last three months without an apparent victory for one side or the other. What is happening on the ground?

Paulos Tesfagiorgis: The Tigray' People's Liberation Front (TPLF) seems to have survived the onslaught by Eritrean forces, Ethiopian Federal Forces, Amhara militias, UAE drones, Some say they included Somali forces who were thrown into the war theatre as they were in military training in Eritrea. By most accounts, the Tigrayan armed forces, which are now calling themselves the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF), are inflicting heavy damage on the Ethiopian army. Even a few kilometers from the capital Mekelle, fighting continues, causing many casualties on the Ethiopian side as well as destruction of military hardware. Some Federal Government soldiers have been taken prisoner by the TDF. Some have been released and are living evidence of the incapacity of the Ethiopian strategy to finish the disagreement militarily and declare victory.

The elite units of the TDF are led by former senior and middle-ranking officers of the Ethiopian army, as well as by former TPLF fighters. They have the advantage of knowledge of the terrain and the support of a very large part of the population. Of course, it is not easy to know exactly what is happening, but one indicator is the silence of the Ethiopian authorities on the current military confrontation. It was normal for the Federal Government to use the media to demonstrate (and exaggerate) its success, even when they arrested old people who were not in the fighting forces or active bureaucrats. But now they are mostly silent, with no images to demonstrate their claimed success.

PB: Why is it that the Ethiopian army cannot win victory?

PT: The Federal Army is just like any other army that is well equipped with military vehicles and heavy weapons, supported by war planes and attack helicopters, and in this case even drones. It is certainly heavily engaged in its mission of death and destruction. There is vast and indeed indiscriminate killing of civilians, and widespread destruction of property, including hospitals and health clinics, schools and factories, as well as places of worship, etc. 80% of health facilities have been closed or destroyed.

But this army is not facing another standing army where it can see and unleash its destructive potential.

It is also an army that, at the beginning of the conflict, lost more than 17,500 experienced members who were expelled because they were Tigrayans. On the other hand, the air cover they had hoped for from their Emirate backers does not seem to be continuing. Reports indicate that, on the ground, the fighting is mostly led by Eritrean soldiers and ill-disciplined Amhara militias on a revenge mission.

PB: What about the rising tensions with Sudan?

PT: This seems to have caught the world by surprise. Although the border dispute in this area is nothing new, we did not anticipate such a heightened armed confrontation between the two in such a short time. They have been attacking each other, insinuating that they are both serving other parties: the Eritrean army supporting Ethiopia in its fight against the Sudan, the Sudan doing the bidding of the Egyptians. It is easy to imagine both Egypt and Eritrea being drawn into the conflict.

At this stage, I do not think there is any question about where Sudan stands in the conflict. It has been the practice in the region for governments to support opposition groups in the other country - a typical case of "my enemy's enemy is my friend". So Ethiopia has sealed the border areas adjacent to Tigray. But it is a matter of time and an issue of balance of forces. If the Tigrayans continue to resist and inflict damage on their enemy, they will be able to get close to the border with Sudan and thereby secure a supply line.

PB: What about the border war?

PT: There is no indication that Ethiopia and Sudan are about to resolve their border issues through negotiations, despite offers from South Sudan and the Saudis to mediate.

All the indications are, so far, that both sides are hardening their positions, with Sudan recalling its ambassador from Ethiopia. According to the top Sudanese leader, Al-Burhan, Chairman of the Sovereign Council, Sudan's move to secure its land on the border with Ethiopia at that particular moment was based on an agreement, with PM Abiy. If the Sudanese prevented the TPLF from accessing and using the border areas, then they could reclaim and secure their land.

PB: Anti-Ethiopian demonstrations are starting to take place in the cities of Tigray ...

PT: Students are blocking streets in Mekelle. Many have been shot - 27 are known to have been killed recently. Collaborators with the occupation are killed. Religious leaders sent by Addis to calm devoted believers, both Christians and Muslims, have basically been shunned and shouted down by those who attended the meetings. It appears that this civil disobedience is growing all over the urban centers, making the region ungovernable and the occupation untenable.

PB: Is this situation likely to shift?

PT: The Tigrayans are now on a diplomatic and political offensive. They have expressed their readiness to enter peace negotiations. They state they had to resort to fighting as all avenues for peace were closed and their very survival was at stake. They have put up preconditions for peaceful resolution of the conflict (see in the box below).

One can be sure that the Tigrayans are working hard to get access to Sudan. On the other hand, they are counting on the fact that the traditional backers of Ethiopia - the EU, the US and even China - are obviously not happy with the way the conflict is going, the way it is portrayed, and the contradictory statements being issued by the government. They are also especially worried about the risk of a huge humanitarian crisis that is already well advanced, and the lack of serious efforts to overcome the looming tragedy on the part of the government.

And, there are already signs in Addis Ababa of a certain war fatigue, especially as it has destabilised the economy with huge price increases (up to 100% on some staple items). A lot of people are now realising that this war is going to be very destructive and very costly, even though they are far away from the main theatres of combat. Comments in private media outlets about how the government is not telling the truth, how the prices of essential commodities are sky-rocketing, how subsidies that

supported the poor have been taken away.

Looking at the recent history of Ethiopia, it is when the Addis population rose in opposition to government anti-people policies and practices that regimes fell.

On the involvement of Eritrea, some Ethiopians see it as a shame that this great Ethiopia needed outside support to contain its own internal conflict. Some question what this means for the cohesiveness of Ethiopia and the implications for peaceful political dialogue.

PB: What about dissent by the Oromos?

PT: Prominent Oromo leaders have been put in jail. They are on hunger strike. That appeared to have dampened the fire. But they are less and less quiet. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) claims to be setting up its own government structures. It has also vowed to boycott the coming elections in May-June. In the meantime, as a precaution to avoid major disturbances, thousands of young Oromos are being detained; many have been killed. The old iron fist has come back with a vengeance. A reign of fear dominates. But for how long? There are disturbances, ethnic based killings and destruction of property in other parts of Ethiopia too. Several thousand are crossing into the Sudan as refugees. The flow seems to be continuing.

PB: What could be the tipping point?

PT: Unless urgent steps are taken, in a couple of weeks we may see bodies piling up from starvation. At least 4.5 million people are food insecure (including 2,2 million children). Humanitarian aid is arriving slowly and not everywhere. It is heart-breaking to see information coming out that Eritrean forces have been and are plundering, killing people, even priests and elders, destroying crops, animals, churches and buildings.

Information is being compiled by international human rights organisations and even by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. It is a nightmare. But can the world watch another massacre without responding, like they did in Rwanda? Famine is politically created. It can only be addressed politically, not simply through humanitarian action, as important as that is.

PB: Is the European Union in a position to intervene?

PT: The EU is very clear. It has halted about 100 million euros of budgetary support. Following the visit by special EU envoy Pekka Haavisto (the foreign minister of Finland), the EU is demanding humanitarian access to assess the damage, the need and the delivery system required. The Ethiopian government has developed this great propaganda claiming it is allowing access and it is ready to support humanitarian measures. In practice it is obstructing independent delivery of life-saving food items, whether from local or international humanitarian sources.

PB: The Tigrayans have now launched a call for negotiations...

It appears timely since the fighting is at a stalemate and public opinion is turning against the policies of Abiy Ahmed Ali. It reflects, I believe, a sort of confidence on their side that they can hold on. It is also a sign of political maturity.

Tigray preconditions for peaceful negotiations

The government of Tigray is ready to engage in peaceful negotiations if, and only if, the following preconditions are fully actualised.

- The alien invading force of Eritrea should leave the land of Tigray immediately. And the fact

that it has left has to be confirmed by independent international body.

- The sovereign territory of Tigray should be secured and those enemies of ours who are engaged in partitioning the land of Tigray to the south, north west, west and east leave the areas and the territorial integrity of Tigray is secured.
- The interim administration set up by Ethiopia should be dismantled and the administration of Tigray, which has been elected by the people, allowed to return to its place.
- An international independent investigative body must be instituted and freely investigate the genocide and war crimes that have been inflicted on the people of Tigray.
- More than 4.5 million people of Tigray, who were displaced and exposed to severe social crisis, as the result of the invading forces should be made to receive emergency humanitarian aid, the international organisations that come to give humanitarian aid should be given unrestricted access.
- The politicians and other children of Tigray who are arrested as the consequence of the present situation should be released without any preconditions.
- The peace negotiation must be mediated by an independent international body.

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PB: Is this call for negotiations likely to be heeded?

PT: Immediately no, because it would be a huge defeat for Ethiopia which started the war and the occupation asserting that it would rapidly get rid of the “TPLF bandits”. But the stalemate continues and if enough pressure is sustained internally and externally, something might happen. Tigray is not demanding secession. They are not calling for the destruction of the Ethiopian state. Which, I think, is wise. But how long can the Federal Government refuse to see the bigger picture? Demonising and harassing Tigrayans everywhere does not help reconciliation and the rebuilding of Tigray and Ethiopia together. All Ethiopians are needed to rebuild the country, to give the colourful land its authentic beauty and strength.

PB: What is Eritrea doing in the meantime?

PT: The Eritrean presence has been significant, perhaps even decisive. Most probably, the Federal Defense Forces would not have been a match for the battle-hardened, well trained, and highly motivated Tigrayans. Eritreans, apparently, are well trained, younger and with a motivation that has come from years of anti-TPLF and anti-Tigray propaganda that has portrayed Tigray as a mortal enemy. Although the Ethiopian PM and official pronouncements have been denying the Eritrean presence, it has come out. In the meantime, the Eritrean President, Isaias Afwerki, appears to be operating behind the scenes but also openly on the Ethiopian matter, even talking about a “future federation” while offering Ethiopia the use of the port of Assab, allowing it direct access to the sea, and, one can imagine, thereby the rebuilding of its naval forces.

Of course, this might be appealing for Ethiopia, but too many political and military leaders are sceptical, considering Isaias’ devious track record. In the meantime, things are getting more and more complicated in the relationship between Isaias and Abiy as well as between Eritrea and Ethiopia. What is new? It is clear there are agreements being concocted by the two leaders. It is also clear the Ethiopian PM is acting as a junior partner. It is even said that the Eritrean leader, not satisfied with ruling a small Eritrea, wants to take Eritrea back into a federal relationship with Ethiopia and to assume a leadership position there. Unless something like a gigantic collapse occurs, this is nonsense.

In any event, we see a future of heightened conflicts, not peace, stability and inclusive development,

taking place in the Horn of Africa region.

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