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# ETHIOPIA'S CIVIL WAR AND HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

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## Abstract

Ethiopia as a country has a history of internal conflict. This is partly due to the form of government that exists in the country. The country has a history of civil war in 1974, and the Tigrayan conflict is another conflict that hinders the country's stability and disturbs its peace. Ethiopia is facing an internal conflict between the authorities and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front. The conflict is ethnically motivated. Civilians are suffering because of the decisions of the authorities and the geography of the country. Ethiopia is also facing a humanitarian crisis caused by a cyclical weather phenomenon called 'El Niño'. The periodic droughts it brings are taking their toll on all African countries.

## Key words

TPLF, EHRC, OLA, UNHCR, civil war, rebel, conflict, state of emergency

## Introduction

Ethiopia is the second largest country in Africa. It is a federal parliamentary republic. In its early decades, the country was a monarchy with dynastic imperial power. The Ethiopian monarchy finally collapsed in the 1970s under the influence of all-Ethiopian coups. There are currently 80 ethnic groups in Ethiopia, whose representatives speak 88 languages.

On 11 October, the 2019 Nobel Committee announced Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed as the 100th recipient of the Peace Prize. He received the award in recognition of his work for peace in the Horn of Africa, in particular for his landmark reconciliation with neighbouring Eritrea. In his acceptance speech, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali said: *"I sincerely believe that peace is a way of life and war is simply a form of death"*. He is currently Africa's youngest leader. He came to power in April 2018 on a wave of political change. It came after three years of protests by the Oromo and Amhara peoples against the rule of the minority Tigrean military-business elite, in power since 1991. They forced the Ethiopian government to agree to reforms. Ahmed became the driving force behind the process<sup>1</sup>.

In 2019, the Prime Minister decided to form a new party. The Tigray People's Liberation Front did not agree to join the new party, leaving it outside the government. In a country made up

of ten regions with considerable autonomy, a conflict broke out in Tigray. The local authorities in this northern town considered the Prime Minister's policies to be risky. Officials spoke of unfair accusations of corruption and marginalisation.

In September 2020, regional elections were held in Tigray despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and open opposition from the authorities. On 3 November, Addis Ababa declared the elections illegal and the Tigray People's Front Liberation a terrorist organisation<sup>2</sup>. The organisation had been one of the most influential parties in Ethiopia since 1991. The conflict began in November after the government launched a military operation against the region where Tigray is based, and after rebel troops seized a military base in the regional capital and attempted to seize weapons.

Tigrayans are one of the ethnic groups living in Ethiopia. They make up about 7 per cent of the country's 109 million people but are richer and more influential than people in other, larger regions of Ethiopia<sup>3</sup>. The authorities in Addis Ababa were concerned, were trying to create independent military structures. Tigray began to fight against their own country. The conflict prevented farmers from sowing their fields, and the city and its inhabitants' fell victim to famine. A six-month national state of emergency was declared. Public services in Tigray almost ground to a halt.

1 [https://pism.pl/publikacje/Pokojowa\\_Nagroda\\_Nobla\\_dla\\_premiera\\_Etiopii](https://pism.pl/publikacje/Pokojowa_Nagroda_Nobla_dla_premiera_Etiopii) (access: 09.10.2023 r.).

2 Tigray People's Liberation Front – Ethiopian political grouping and formerly a guerrilla movement. Until late 2019, it was the most influential element of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front.

3 <https://tvn24.pl/swiat/etiopia-tigray-premier-abiy-ahmed-zachod-regionu-zdobyty-4748995> (access: 09.10.2023 r.).

Health and education services<sup>4</sup> were disrupted, fuel and electricity were in short supply, and thousands of people faced starvation<sup>5</sup>.

## Methodological and methodical assumptions

The purpose of this article is to present the phenomenon of civil war and humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia. The article also outlines the determinants of ethno-political conflict and the impact of recent situations on citizens' levels of security.

The following implementation methods were used to achieve the adopted objective of the paper:

- A historical method for reconstructing the events that led to such a serious humanitarian crisis,
- A legal method to present the norms of international and national law related to the issue in question,
- An attempt was also made to identify the interests and objectives of the parties.

The hypotheses of the text under discussion were formulated as follows:

- Ethiopia's conflict is driven by deep-rooted ethnic divisions,
- On a number of occasions, the Ethiopian armed forces have violated international law by using armed drones to carry out blind attacks without a specific military target. In particular, Article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,

- At the height of the war, repression also affected many ethnic Tigrayans living in other parts of Ethiopia. Those with links to the administration or the armed forces were arrested, while the rest did not leave their homes for fear of persecution. The scale of the terror was carefully concealed by the authorities, who effectively controlled the flow of information about the war for many months,
- It is not only the civil war in Ethiopia that is a problem, but also the very low rainfall that is not helping the situation in the country. The extreme hunger and destruction caused by the ongoing conflict is not making things any better for anyone living there,
- A joint project between Ethiopia and China called 'The Dam' could cause serious ecological damage. The filling of the reservoir and the operation of the dam represent a major intervention in the ecosystem of the Nile River Basin.
- Because of its location, Ethiopia may in the future have a dispute not only within its own community, but also with the land of the Pharaohs. The Blue Nile rises in Ethiopia, joins the White Nile in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, and then flows through the Nubian Desert into Egypt.

## Conflict and ethnic divides

Ethiopia's conflict is driven by deep-rooted ethnic divisions. In the 1970s and 1980s, guerrillas from the Tigrayan

4 A. Fellner, M. Feltynowski, R. Fellner, *Przygotowanie nawigacyjne bezzałogowych statków powietrznych do operacyjnych działań straży pożarnej*, „Zeszyty Naukowe SGSP” 2021, Volume 3, Issue 79, p. 51-82.

5 See: E. Cieślak, K. Czernichowski, B. Ndiaye, *Afryka Subsaharyjska Potencjał, problemy i możliwości dla Polski*, Warsaw 2020.

People's Liberation Front (TPLF) played a key role in fighting the communist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam. After his overthrow in 1991, they became the dominant faction in the country, nominally in coalition with parties representing ethnic groups: Oromo, Amhara, and the peoples of the southern region<sup>6</sup>.

Non-governmental cyber security watchdog NetBlocks has reported that people in the Tigray region have been cut off from the internet. The people of Tigray were convinced that it was the federal authorities who had cut telephone and internet services. The government in Addis Ababa claimed that the Tigray People's Liberation Front was behind the shutdown<sup>7</sup>.

At least 54 people were murdered in a massacre that took place on Sunday 1 November 2020 in Welega West Zone, Guliso District, in the troubled Oromiyaa region of Ethiopia. The victims were mainly Amharic women, children, and elderly people. The rebel Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) was behind the crime. Three villages were attacked, and the crime took place on the grounds of a school in Gawa Qanqa. According to the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), the perpetrators targeted the Amhar ethnic group. At least 600 civilians were killed. In the months that followed, the conflict spread to other regions of the

country siding with the government or the TLFW (which was supported by the Oromo Liberation Army, among others)<sup>8</sup>.

On 12 November 2020, the UNHCR reported that 14,500 children, women and men had fled to Sudan in search of safety, exceeding its capacity to provide assistance<sup>9</sup>. For its part, UNHCR called on all parties to respect the safety of all civilians in Tigray. In Ethiopia, fighting in Tigray approached the Shimelba refugee camp, home to 6,500 Eritrean refugees, raising fears of mass displacement from the camp. UNHCR is preparing to receive refugees who have already arrived at Hitsats camp, 50 kilometres away, and is considering further relocation options in the region<sup>10</sup>. There have also been air strikes by the government air force on Mekelle, the capital of the rebel held Tigray region. Losses and damage are unknown. Tigray authorities accused the government of bombing a dam and a sugar factory. Despite growing pressure from African and European governments, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is unwilling to accept international mediation in the internal conflict. *"We say give us some time, it will not take forever. It will be a short-term operation,"* said Redwan Hussein, spokesman for the government's Tigray crisis team, adding that Prime Minister Abiy had not asked any country for

6 *PISM, the African Union and the UN towards the crisis in Ethiopia*. [https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/Unia\\_Afrykanska\\_i\\_ONZ\\_wobec\\_kryzysu\\_w\\_Etiopii](https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/Unia_Afrykanska_i_ONZ_wobec_kryzysu_w_Etiopii) (access: 21.09.2023 r.).

7 <https://defence24.pl/sily-zbrojne/etiopia-naloty-w-regionie-tigray> (access: 21.09.2023 r.).

8 <https://tvn24.pl/swiat/etiopia-tigray-premier-abiy-ahmed-zachod-regionu-zdobyty-4748995> (access: 21.09.2023 r.).

9 The UN's main refugee agency was created in the aftermath of the Second World War to assist Europeans displaced by conflict in countries where they sought asylum.

10 <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/humanitarian-crisis-deepens-amid-ongoing-clashes-ethiopia-tigray-region> (access: 27.09.2023 r.).

help in resolving the conflict. More air strikes hit the region the following day. There were 'precise, surgical operations from the air' around the regional capital Makalle, the Ethiopian authorities said. Prime Minister Abiy wrote on Facebook that after the ultimatum expired on Tuesday, 'the final decisive law enforcement action will be taken in the coming days'. The leaders of Tigray, a rebellious region in northern Ethiopia, have yet to comment.

In 2021, a massacre took place at an Ethiopian Orthodox Church temple – information was limited due to the conflict in the region and the ban on journalists. The war, which has been going on for almost three months, is rooted in the separatist ambitions of the local government in Tigray. "A second reason for the clashes is bitterness over the marginalisation of the Tigrayan people, who once dominated Ethiopia's ruling coalition", Vatican News pointed out. On 13 September there was another attack on Mekelle<sup>11</sup>. This time Ethiopian forces used armed drones. The strikes were not aimed at specific military targets and were most likely indiscriminate, which in itself is a violation of international law (Article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court)<sup>12</sup>.

On 22 September 2022, regular Eritrean troops crossed the border into Ethiopia and invaded Tigray. A week earlier, government drones had bombed the residents of Mekelle, the provincial capital. Tigrayan authorities called on residents to prepare for a long and difficult struggle to defend their

hometown. On 23 September, the Desta International Hotel was hit. One person was confirmed dead. The civilian population, left to fend for themselves, needed all kinds of assistance. Thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs) in neighbouring Amhara and Afar states were being assisted. Representatives of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated at the time that 16 million people across Ethiopia were in need of aid. The government in Addis Ababa has imported drones from a number of sources. The main one is the United Arab Emirates, but also (on a much smaller scale) Iran and China. In September 2021, an An-124 carrying Chinese Wing Loong or Yao-Ying drones landed on the tarmac at Harar Meda airport after taking off from Chengdu and stopping in Islamabad. Iranian aircraft have also been spotted. The Boeing 747s and Il-76s carried Mohajer-6 drones, which have also recently been used by Russia in the war in Ukraine.

On 25 October 2022, peace talks were held to agree on the details of a ceasefire between the parties. The talks were held in Pretoria. "The two parties to the conflict in Ethiopia have formally agreed to a cessation of hostilities and to systematic, orderly and coordinated disarmament", former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo told the African Union envoy. This was not the end of the peace process, he said. "The implementation of the agreement signed today is critical to its success", Obasanjo said, adding that the process would be monitored and

11 <https://polskieradio24.pl/5/1223/artykul/2664214> (access: 27.09.2023 r.).

12 <https://www.konflikty.pl/historia/czasy-najnowsze/wojna-w-tigray-erytrea-rozpoczela-inwazje> (access: 28.09.2023 r.).

supervised by the African Union High Level Group<sup>13</sup>.

The Ethiopian Prime Minister added a few words of his own, saying in a statement: *“Our commitment to peace remains unwavering and our commitment to work together to implement the agreement is equally strong”*. The European Union also expressed its approval of the signed agreement in a press release on 22 December, writing that it “congratulates the Government of Ethiopia and the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front on the signing of the Agreement for a lasting peace through a permanent cessation of hostilities and the subsequent statement by the Senior Commanders on the conditions for its implementation. The EU also commends the African Union High Level Panel for its successful mediation leading to these agreements, which represent an important step towards peace and reconciliation in Ethiopia. After the signing of the ceasefire, war crimes began to come to light, including the massacre at the Mirab Abaya camp in southern Ethiopia<sup>14</sup>. Some 2,500 men and women were held in the camp, along with soldiers, including members of the Ministry of Defence. Some of the detainees had previously participated in peacekeeping operations as members of Ethiopian contingents sent to Sudan and elsewhere. The government considered them a particular threat to the state because they were Tigrayan. All were arrested on suspicion of sympathising with the Tigrayan

People’s Liberation Front. At the height of the war, the repression also affected many ethnic Tigrayans living in other parts of Ethiopia. Those associated with the administration, or the armed forces were arrested, while the rest did not leave their homes for fear of persecution. The scale of the terror was carefully concealed by the authorities, who effectively controlled the flow of information about the war for months. Washington Post journalists reached witnesses to the massacre in Mirab Abaya. According to their accounts, guards rounded up 83 prisoners on 21 November and prepared to execute them. About eighteen people, including at least one woman, carried out the crime. Some of the prisoners were executed, while those who tried to escape were murdered by local civilians armed with machetes. According to WaPo, the authorities used cars equipped with loudspeakers to urge the population to kill the refugees, who were allegedly captured on the battlefield and responsible for the deaths of government soldiers. Many bodies were later found near the church of Saint Gabriel, where the refugees had probably hoped to find shelter<sup>15</sup>. The victims included a cross-section of professionals who had previously served in the Ethiopian armed forces. Another crime against Tigrayans took place at the Wondotika camp near Auasa in the south of the country, where guards murdered five detainees. The soldiers there were mostly former members of special units.

13 <https://tvn24.pl/swiat/etiopia-tigray-porozumienie-o-zaprzestaniu-dzialan-wojennych-6190937> (access: 06.10.2023 r.).

14 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/pl/press/press-releases/2022/12/22/etiopia-statement-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu> (access: 05.10.2023 r.).

15 <https://www.konflikty.pl/aktualnosci/wiadomosci/etiopia-masakry-tigracyjkow-obozach-koncentracyjnych> (access: 09.10.2023 r.).

2023 Gun battles and mass protests have erupted in parts of Amhara, Ethiopia's second largest region, following a decision to centralise regional security forces across the country's 11 states. The federal government announced the policy last Thursday with the aim of building a "strong centralised army". Residents of several towns in Amhara responded with protests, and some units of the regional security forces refused to disarm and clashed with the federal army. The US Embassy alert also reported "heavy exchanges of fire involving heavy weapons" in 'several areas of the region', including the towns of Kobo, Woldia and Sekota. Gunfire has also been reported in recent days in the towns of Debre Birhan, Dessie, Debre Tabor and the regional capital, Bahir Dar. Elsewhere, protesters burned tyres and blocked roads, while banks and shops were closed. The Amhara regional government responded by imposing a curfew and blocking mobile internet services in some areas, including the popular tourist city of Gondar. The regional capital was bombed, including the main hospital.

One of the more internationally recognised figures is WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus<sup>16</sup>. Speaking at a WHO briefing, he said he had been informed that his uncle had been killed by Eritrean troops in Ethiopia. *"I spoke to my mother, and she was really devastated because*

*he was the youngest in the family and he was almost the same age as me, a young uncle"*. The WHO director-general added that he was "not in good shape" because of the news and expressed hope for a tentative peace deal between Ethiopia and the warring TPLF.

## Summary

The Council of the European Union, in its conclusions of 23 April 2023, expressed its support for the Agreement for a lasting peace through a permanent cessation of hostilities concluded on 2 November 2022 between the Government of Ethiopia and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front<sup>17</sup>. The importance of Ethiopia as a strategic partner of the European Union in this region of the world was also taken into account.

Human rights experts are concerned that the perpetrators of hundreds of civilian deaths in the latest fighting in Ethiopia's two-year war will not be brought to justice and punished<sup>18</sup>.

It is not only the civil war in Ethiopia that is a problem, but also the very low rainfall that is not helping the situation in the country. The extreme hunger and devastation caused by the ongoing conflict is not helping anyone living there.

Because of its location, Ethiopia may in the future have a conflict not only within its own community, but also with the land of the Pharaohs. The Blue Nile

<sup>16</sup> Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus was elected as WHO Director-General for a five-year term by WHO Member States at the seventieth World Health Assembly in May 2017. In doing so, he was the first WHO Director-General to be selected from a number of candidates by the World Health Assembly and the first person from the WHO African Region to head the world's leading public health agency.

<sup>17</sup> <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8610-2023-INIT/pl/pdf> (access: 21.10.2023 r.).

<sup>18</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/PL/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52022IP0351&from=EN> (access: 21.10.2023 r.)

rises in Ethiopia, joins the White Nile in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, and then flows through the Nubian Desert into Egypt.

Ethiopia is known as 'Africa's water tower' because of its position on the map and the dams built across its territory to harness the abundant rainfall<sup>19</sup>.

In 2011, the authorities announced the project, in collaboration with China, and its name is the 'Great Revival Dam'. The 155m high and 1.8km wide structure will be built 30km from the Sudanese border. Its artificial reservoirs will hold 75 billion m<sup>3</sup> of water. The dam's power plant is expected to have a capacity of 6.45 GW. The project is expected to meet Ethiopia's domestic energy needs (today 66% of the population has no access to electricity, one of the highest rates in the world). It will also enable Ethiopia to earn around \$0.5 billion a year by selling surplus electricity abroad. The dam is also highly symbolic, as a sign of Ethiopia's growing importance in the region<sup>20</sup>.

The project is also likely to cause ecological damage. Filling the reservoir and operating the dam is a major intervention in the ecosystem of the Nile Basin.

Ethiopia has faced drought more than once in its history. This is because the whole of Africa is geographically

vulnerable to drought. There were two such disasters in the early twentieth century. 1913 and between 1990 and 1993<sup>21</sup>. At that time, crops failed due to lack of rainfall because the region's level of education was not the highest. At the time, about 80% of the population was engaged in subsistence farming. Difficult access to health care and education, and animal-borne diseases. These include the tse-tse fly. It transmits African trypanosomiasis, commonly known as African sleeping sickness, to animals and humans. Locusts and red-winged blackbirds also regularly destroyed crops. In 1960, infant mortality in this part of the world was the highest in the world.<sup>22</sup>

No improvement in the 2000s. In 2016, two years of erratic rainfall and drought, exacerbated by the El Niño phenomenon<sup>23</sup>, wreaked havoc. Crops were destroyed and water sources dried up. Over 14 million people lost access to safe drinking water<sup>24</sup>.

The 2023 drought affected the southern and eastern parts of Ethiopia, following five consecutive poor rainy seasons. Pastoralists, who were severely affected by the 2016-2017 drought and the resulting locust invasion, have lost 6.85 million sheep since the end of 2021<sup>25</sup>.

19 T. Marshall, *więźniowie geografii, czyli wszystko co chciałbyś wiedzieć o globalnej polityce i geopolityce*, Poznań 2020.

20 [https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/Tama\\_Wielkiego\\_Odrodzenia\\_w\\_Etiopii\\_konflikt\\_o\\_Nil\\_bliiski\\_rozwiazania](https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/Tama_Wielkiego_Odrodzenia_w_Etiopii_konflikt_o_Nil_bliiski_rozwiazania) (access: 22.10.2023 r.).

21 See: M. Meredith, *A history of modern Africa Half a century of independence*, Warsaw 2014.

22 See: J. Vilmer, *Peace without freedom in Eritrea: causes and consequences of the Ethio-Eritrean rapprochement*, "Journal of Eastern African Studies" 2021, 15(01).

23 The El Niño phenomenon is a periodic disturbance of the Earth's thermal equilibrium that alters the circulation of air masses. It occurs on average every 2 to 7 years. It can last from 6 to 18 months.

24 <https://unicef.pl/co-robimy/aktualnosci/news/kryzys-o-ktorym-sie-nie-mowi-zmiany-klimatyczne-zabijaja-dzieci-w-afryce> (access: 22.10.2023 r.).

25 <https://forsal.pl/swiat/aktualnosci/artykuly/8680549,susza-w-etiopii-11-mln-osob-jest-zagrozonych-glodem.html> (access: 22.10.2023 r.).



According to the latest report from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 811 million people worldwide are hungry. In 2020, hunger will affect more than 418 million people in Asia, more than 280 million in Africa and 60 million in Latin America and the Caribbean. This is an increase from 2019 of 46 million people in Africa, nearly 57 million in Asia and about 14 million in Latin America and the Caribbean<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://pcpm.org.pl/kazdej-nocy-811-milionow-ludzi-zasypia-nie-jedzac-nic.html> (access: 22.10.2023 r.).

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