



Vates Special Report: PM Abiy Acknowledges Eritrean Forces in Tigray

Regional Security and Political Analysis
Apr 2021

Executive Summary

On March 23, 2021, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed admitted to parliament that Eritrean forces had crossed the border into Ethiopia's Tigray region and were deployed on Ethiopian territory. This admission came after months of official denials, despite overwhelming evidence of Eritrean military presence and contradictory statements from Ethiopian political and military officials based in Tigray.

Following a two-day visit to Asmara on March 25-26, PM Abiy announced that Eritrean forces would withdraw and the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) would take over guarding the



Figure 1 PM Abiy Ahmed – President Isaias Afwerki in Asmara Eritrea Jan 26 2020; Source @PMEthiopia

border areas. However, this report assesses that a full withdrawal is unlikely in the near term, with Eritrean forces likely to remain in Tigray.

This special report provides background on the conflict, analyses the current military and political situation, and assesses likely scenarios following the announced withdrawal.

Background: Outbreak of Conflict

Fighting between the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) and regional forces in Tigray erupted on November 4, 2020. The federal government stated that Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) forces attacked ENDF Northern Command posts in Mekele and Dansha with the intent to seize weapons and materiel. The TPLF disputed this account, alleging that their forces had disrupted a planned federal attack against regional leadership.

The disputed circumstances of the conflict's outbreak reflect the deep political tensions between the federal government and Tigray's regional administration. Following PM Abiy's assumption of power in 2018 and the subsequent formation of the Prosperity Party, the TPLF refused to merge with the new ruling coalition. Tigray proceeded to hold regional elections in September 2020, which the federal government declared illegal after postponing national elections due to COVID-19.

In the days preceding November 4 2020, confirmed reports indicated large-scale ENDF movements, including the recall of bilateral forces from Somalia. On November 3 2020, senior Tigray official Wondimu Asamnew claimed federal forces were mobilising on Tigray's southern border. The federal cabinet declared a six-month state of emergency in Tigray, with telephone and internet services shut down in the region.

Forces Involved

Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF)

The ENDF Northern Command, based in Tigray, comprised more than half of the military's mechanised divisions. However, reports indicated that up to half of five Northern Command divisions may have defected to the TPLF in the

early days of the conflict, potentially 15,000-18,000 troops. On November 8 2020, PM Abiy undertook major changes to security sector leadership, replacing the ENDF Chief of Defence Forces and other key positions, suggesting concerns about loyalty among senior personnel.

Tigray Defence Force (TDF)

The International Crisis Group estimated that Tigray's combined regional forces and local militia may number as many as 250,000 troops. TPLF-TDF forces comprise seasoned commanders who fought in the coalition that defeated the Derg regime in 1991 and in the 1998-2000 war with Eritrea. Since 2018, Tigray had been undertaking conscriptions and expanding its militia forces.

Eritrean Defence Force (EDF)

Despite initial denials, PM Abiy acknowledged on March 23, 2021 that Eritrean forces had crossed into Tigray. According to Abiy, this occurred in response to TPLF rockets fired at Asmara on November 14, 2020, two of which hit Asmara International Airport. Abiy stated that Eritrean forces agreed to guard the border while Ethiopian troops were redeployed for combat operations. Eritrean forces have been accused of some of the most serious human rights violations during the conflict.

Amhara Regional Forces and Fano Militia

Amhara regional forces and local Fano militia have been engaged in fighting near the Tigray border, with Amhara State Security Advisor claiming 'thousands' of militia deployed to the border. Fighting in disputed areas along the Amhara-Tigray border has raised concerns about the targeting of civilians and attempts to reclaim territory historically contested between the two regions.

Current Military Situation (as of April 2021)

Tigray Defence Force fighters remain dispersed across the North Western, Central, Eastern, and Southern Zones, occupying rural areas and small towns away from main roads and major settlements. Heavy fighting has been reported in parts of Southern Zone, resulting in the A2 highway being closed between Alamata and Mekele.

Despite the announced withdrawal, a 37-truck convoy of Eritrean troops was reported crossing into Ethiopia at Adigrat on March 27 2021, with forces staging near Edaga Hamus and Mugulat. TPLF official Getachew Reda confirmed these movements and assessed that fighting would likely intensify in the near term, particularly on the south-eastern front.

On March 22 2021, TDF troops launched a surprise attack against Amhara militia in Tsata town, Wag Himra Zone, in northern Amhara region, with reports claiming a battalion-sized Amhara element was destroyed. Fighting continues across multiple fronts with both sides claiming tactical successes.

PM Abiy's Parliamentary Admission

During his March 23 2021 speech to parliament, PM Abiy provided the first official acknowledgement of Eritrean forces in Tigray and appeared to acknowledge that serious crimes had occurred. He stated: "Reports indicate that atrocities have been committed in Tigray region. Regardless of the TPLF propaganda of exaggeration, any soldier responsible for raping our women and looting communities in the region will be held accountable."

Abiy suggested Eritrean troops bore responsibility for some violations: "However, after the Eritrean army crossed the border and was operating in Ethiopia, any damage it did to our people was unacceptable. We don't accept it because it is the Eritrean army, and we would not accept it if it were our soldiers." He noted discussions with the Eritrean government on these issues had occurred "four or five times."

The admission came after intense pressure from the United States and European Union. Following the announcement, State Department spokeswoman Jalina Porter said Washington was "encouraged" and that "immediate and complete withdrawal of the Eritrean troops from the Tigray region will be an important step in de-escalating the conflict."

Assessment

While PM Abiy has announced Eritrean withdrawal, the circumstances that forced this acknowledgement and the political realities facing the Prime Minister suggest that a full withdrawal remains unlikely in the near term. Most observers assess that the ENDF likely cannot contain, much less defeat, the TDF independently.

Theory 1 - International Blame-Shifting: PM Abiy intends to shift blame for the humanitarian disaster to Eritrea's President Afwerki, shielding himself from accountability as formal investigations into human rights violations are launched. This strategy assumes international partners may be willing to single out Eritrea while overlooking Ethiopia's culpability.

Theory 2 - Prolonging Stalemate (Most Likely): PM Abiy will not take any action that could cost him support from the Amhara elite prior to elections, including negotiating with the TPLF over annexed territories in Western and Southern Tigray. To maintain military pressure, recent events suggest possible re-badging of Eritrean troops as ENDF, either by wearing Ethiopian uniforms or through semi-official integration with salaries paid by Ethiopia.¹

In this scenario, PM Abiy would claim that EDF forces have withdrawn while invoking sovereignty to refuse ceasefire implementation or withdrawal of forces from Tigray. This aligns with his parliamentary statement: "The federal government reserves the right to deploy forces, including Amhara special forces or any other, to any corner of the country where support is needed."

Ethiopia-Eritrea Integration Speculation

On March 30 2021, Ethiopian Foreign Ministry spokesman Dina Mufti generated significant speculation when he stated that Eritreans and Ethiopians longed to return to being a single country, suggesting: "The relationship we had with Eritrea is, we are one people, we are one country...When it comes to wishing, let alone through a federation, why shouldn't this people become one and united?"

These comments came amid speculation that keeping Eritrean troops in Tigray would only be feasible under an ENDF umbrella, potentially catalysing long-rumoured plans for the two countries to rejoin, which would give landlocked Ethiopia access to the sea.²

However, following an outcry from Eritrea, Dina attempted to walk back his comments the next day, clarifying: "Ethiopia is committed to Eritrean sovereignty and I have been also equally committed. Therefore, I would like to bring to the attention of fellow Eritreans and others that there has been an understanding of my presentation out of the context. I humbly apologize for the confusion." The Ethiopian ambassador to Eritrea, Zerihun Megersa Jima, also issued an apology on Twitter.³

Implications

Humanitarian: The conflict has created a severe humanitarian crisis with reports of widespread human rights violations, displacement of civilians, and restricted humanitarian access. The presence of multiple armed actors with varying command structures complicates protection of civilians.

Regional Stability: The involvement of Eritrean forces and the potential for Ethiopia-Eritrea political integration raises concerns about broader regional implications. Speculation about possible federation between the two countries

¹ There are rumours of a similar plan to integrate Amhara militias currently in Tigray into the ENDF by essentially the same process.

² Following a defence cooperation agreement signed with France in 2019 that opened the way for "France to assist in establishing an Ethiopian naval component," speculation about Ethiopia's plans to rebuild a navy (it disbanded its navy in 1991, after Eritrea seceded, leaving it landlocked), has largely centred on how Ethiopia would access the sea and where it might establish a naval base, with Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somaliland, Somalia, and Kenya all considered potential options at different times. The Imperial Ethiopian Navy was founded in 1955, with its primary base – the Haile Selassie I Naval Base, site of the naval headquarters and enlisted training facilities – in the Eritrean port of Massawa. It subsequently established three additional bases: the naval air station and naval academy were at Asmara; Assab was the site of a naval station, enlisted training facilities, and a repair dock; and there was a naval station and communications station on the Dahlak Islands in the Red Sea near Massawa.

³ The U.S Embassy in Asmara even joined in, with a Facebook post on March 31 that appeared to mock Dina's suggestion: "In about two months, Eritreans will celebrate their 30th anniversary of independence. In my experience, Eritreans are very proud of their hard-won struggle for independence, and May 24 is one of the most celebrated and highly respected of the country's national holidays. The U.S. Embassy looks forward to the upcoming birthday of Eritrea!"

emerged following Foreign Ministry spokesman Dina Mufti's comments, though these were subsequently walked back following outcry from Eritrea.

International Response: Given the political capital expended by the U.S. Biden administration and EU on securing Eritrean withdrawal, failure to achieve genuine compliance could potentially generate a strong international response, although it remains to be seen if the international community possess the resolve to act, particularly in light of the credible reports of ongoing human rights abuses and atrocities in Tigray. Close monitoring of troop movements and fighting inside Tigray will continue, with the international community positioned to monitor any attempt to maintain Eritrean presence through re-badging or unofficial means.

Conclusion

PM Abiy's acknowledgement of Eritrean forces in Tigray represents a significant shift in Ethiopia's official position but may not signal a genuine commitment to their withdrawal. The military and political dynamics suggest that maintaining combat power in Tigray remains essential to the federal government's strategy, making a complete Eritrean withdrawal unlikely in the near term.

The conflict in Tigray continues to evolve with no clear path to resolution. The TDF maintains significant territorial presence, fighting persists across multiple fronts, and the humanitarian situation remains critical. International pressure has achieved public acknowledgement but not fundamental change in the military situation on the ground. We assesses that the conflict is likely to remain protracted, with continued international scrutiny of both Ethiopian and Eritrean actions in the region. **End**