

“The Unfolding Conflict in Ethiopia”

**Testimony before the
House Subcommittee on Africa, Global
Health, Global Human Rights and Internati
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**Presented by
Ms. Tsedale Lemma,
Editor-in-chief/Founder
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Chairwoman Bass, Ranking Member Smith and Honorable members of the House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations, I am truly honored to be here today to testify about the tragic political trajectory my beloved country Ethiopia is confronted with today. The timing for this hearing could not have come at the right moment provided that the topic to be covered not only deals with the conflict itself, but its complex root cause and recommendations on how to address the crisis in order to help prevent the security in Ethiopia and the wider region of the Horn of Africa from deteriorating further.

As such, I am fully aware of the historical weight I carry with me on behalf of those who have lost their indelible right to life, their way of living and that of its meaning due to the unfolding conflict in Tigray and several other political crises that besieged Ethiopia in recent past. As an editor of a leading publication in Ethiopia that has been intensely covering Ethiopia's transition in the last two and half years and the protests that led to the transition itself, I will do my very best to accurately describe events in my personal capacity as an avid observer and highlight recommendations that I believe would help shape a better tomorrow.

But before that I would like to issue a disclaimer that the views expressed in my presentation are that of mine and do not represent the Addis Standard magazine I am working for.

Overview

In the wee hours of November 04, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed [announced that he has ordered](#) the National Defense Forces (ENDF), led by a command post, is given order to start military offensive against TPLF in Tigray regional state. PM Abiy said the decision was in response to TPLF's attack and acts "to rob the Northern Command." He also said the TPLF "opened a war through Dashlah." In various announcements made in subsequent days, the Ethiopian government said the "operations by federal defense forces underway in Northern Ethiopia have clear, limited & achievable objectives - to restore the rule of law & the constitutional order, and to safeguard the rights of Ethiopians to lead a peaceful life wherever they are in the country."

Nevertheless, it is now one month and the conflict has escalated into a significant military confrontation between the federal defense forces – most likely backed up by foreign forces - and Tigray defense forces, which continued until today. Owing to a communication blackout in the whole of Tigray, the full extent and the impact of this military engagement is hard to assess at this moment.

However, what should be assessed at this point by way of addressing the root causes of this conflict is the background which led to the conflict itself. This is a conflict that has all the ingredients bubbling in the last two and half years and as such one must look back at this period of transition overseen by the leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

The genesis

Three critical and intertwined political trajectories made worse by multiple political assassinations have characterized Ethiopia's transition in the last two and half years; each of these feed into one another and have contributed to the current dangerous impasse between the federal government and Tigray, and an ever increasing and complicated ethnic, political and religious violence, which continued threatening the weakening of the Ethiopian state, and continued tearing the social fabric of the Ethiopian people apart with each passing day.

Three critical and intertwined trajectories are:

1 - Ill-managed opening up of the political space which lacked a compressive and inclusive political dialogue

In the advent of a sweeping reform that started in early 2018, the government opened up the country's borders to exiled political parties, both those who were actively engaged in military combat against the EPRDF government - most notably the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Patriotic Ginbot 7 - as well as those who were unarmed but were the system's fierce critics, including the nature and identity of the federation. Suddenly, everyone was in town but there was no rule dictating what should be the relationship between these political forces and the state and the ruling party. What ensued was a fierce and at times corrosive competition without the presence of a rule of the game and a proper referee. The advent of this scenario has contributed directly and indirectly to these vertical and horizontal violence during this period of transition while the lack of publically available information on the legal terms of agreements government envoys had signed with some of these political parties has added fuel to the fragility of the transition; particularly problematic were the lack of terms [on disarmament and reintegration](#) of formerly exiled rebel groups back in to the society. The lack of political settlement and inclusive dialogue, coupled with the absence of a legal framework on disarmament and reintegration of armed political groups has led to the brake up of a protracted, if low intensity, civil war in Oromia regional state which has significantly weakened the political order and has ripped the society apart.

2 – The collapse of an old system

In what could initially be seen as a justifiable desire to [reconfigure the old political dispensation](#), primarily by undoing the old political order spearheaded by the EPRDF, the newly formed political alliance called Prosperity Party (PP) was born at the expense and the imminent danger thereof of the exclusion of Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), one of the founders of the EPRDF and the party that had an uncontested monopoly for 27 years over the Ethiopian state and its political structure.

The deteriorating relation between TPLF in the north and Prosperity Party in the center that ensued after the dissolution of the EPRDF has cut the last umbilical cord between the two parties, and didn't only deprived both the opportunity of having a common platform where differences could be solved via dialogue between the leaders of both parties, but also has left a permanent

dent in the relations between Tigray as a regional state and the central government, eventually leading to the current military engagement. Since it broke out on Nov 04, this war has caused the death of unknown numbers of both civilians and men and women in uniform and has forced the displacement of tens of thousands. Sudan alone is currently hosting more than 43, 000 displaced civilians, [according to the UNHCR](#).

3 - COVID-19 induced electoral deadlock

But despite the presence of these multiple factors discussed above and which have contributed to the mismanagement of the transition, the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic which was reported in Ethiopia on March 31, 2020 has further complicated the political atmosphere. Subsequently, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) announced that it had [postponed indefinitely](#) the general elections scheduled on August 29/2020. NEBE's decision to postpone the elections, albeit justifiably, had [brought in the elephant in the room](#): Ethiopia's constitution stipulates legislative elections should take place every five years; any ruling party which overstays this electoral mandate is automatically rendered illegal under the rule of the land.

The postponement of the election has set in motion a fierce constitutional debate on how exactly the ruling party and its opponents should navigate through the impasse. Many Ethiopians, including some of the country's top constitutional scholars, have pleaded with the ruling party [to seize the moment and engage](#) in a constitutional based national dialogue with all the opposition parties and other stakeholders. Unfortunately, that didn't happen.

This in turn has led to the unprecedented move by the TPLF which held its own election at the regional level. The outcome of this election meant one thing, a destructive mutual delegitimization between the Tigray and the Federal governments. The speed with which the political fallout deteriorated between the center and Tigray region after it held the election can only be likened with a train wreck at full speed.

Political assassinations

If there is one thing that that can distinctly characterize the last two and half years is the astounding number of high profile assassinations and their resultant political turmoil. In June 2019 the army chief of staff, the president of the Amhara regional state and two other senior officials of the region were assassinated in a span of one hour in Addis Ababa and Bahira Dar, the capital of Amhara regional state, respectively. These assassinations have shaken the foundation of Mr. Abiy's political power and its alignment, but he was able to navigate through it largely unaffected.

But none of these assassinations had left a devastating impact and outright dangerous as that of the June 29 assassination of Hachalu Hundessa, a prominent Oromo artist. For anyone closely following the dangerous political trajectory since the postponement of the elections due to COVID-19, it takes so little to comprehend that Hachalu's assassination would unravel a dark chapter of a sort in Ethiopia's recent history. The assassination was the perfect storm in further agitating the deteriorating political atmosphere. In its wake, the government has waged a massive

crackdown against prominent opposition figures, such as Jawar Mohammed, Bekele Gerba, Lidetu Ayalew, Eskinder Nega and other senior and rank and file members of their respective parties. This unfortunate incident has made the possibilities of a negotiated political settlement impossible.

Recommendations: Three ways to break the spell

Ethiopia is at a dangerous trajectory. The government of Mr. Abiy has so far managed to sail through a vicious cycle of violence in the last two and half years. It may be possible to temporarily persuade a passionate and unquestioning audience in the center to justify the current political trajectory as viable; but that will fix neither Ethiopia's Tigray problem, nor will it help stabilize Oromia, the most agitated member of the federation at the moment.

In light of this, I believe three things need to happen and fast:

1 – Ethiopia needs a UN mandated team to investigate the war on Tigray, the assassinations of senior officials (and artist Hachalu Hundessa) as well as the killings of countless civilians and the displacement of millions since Mr. Abiy came to office and which he pointed his finger at the TPLF. There are repeated recommendations for “independent and transparent” investigations from all coroners around the world. But I believe only a UN mandated team should be empowered and enabled to commence such task. As a result of a deeply polarized society no other institution: from Ethiopia's Human Rights Commission to Amnesty International to Human Rights Watch, earns the trust of Ethiopia's polarized society to conduct such task the same way as a UN mandated, and politically insulated investigation team.

In her global human rights update delivered at the 45th session of the Human Rights Council on 14 September 2020, Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said her office was “[ready to support a thorough, independent, impartial and transparent investigation by the Government into the killing](#) and subsequent violence, and to support the Government's ongoing legislative reforms.” It is time the U.S. and the rest of the world took Ms. Bachelet's offer and acted on it.

What is at stake in post-Tigray's law and order operation cannot be jailed away as the crisis in Post-Hachalu Ethiopia. Nor can the U.S. afford losing Ethiopia, one of its staunch allies and a force of stability in the Horn and beyond, and wishes to get away with it, like it did with Somalia. Ethiopia's political crisis which is haunting the government of Mr. Abiy needs to find its root causes; a UN mandated investigation team is the only place to start looking for it in order to hold to account those behind it and to find a closure.

2 – Ethiopia must commence an all-inclusive political dialogue as soon as possible. This should be preceded by the release of all political prisoners. The crisis rocking this island of 110 million people is fundamentally political; it is a battle anchored in the desire to shape the nature of the state and the share of the diverse political actors in it. This cannot happen through the supremacy of the military, or by rallying a state force and its powerful allies in the media, the business and other non-state actors including religious institutions alone. Mr. Abiy's government cannot continue to

kill, jail, maim, and disappear its adversaries and expect to preside over a democratically stable state. It is doable, but only to usher in an authoritarian state and a dangerously unstable political order, if the country can be governed even by authoritarianism.

Inclusive dialogue, which is aimed at charting the path for a viable and accommodative state and a constitution where all its people feel represented is the only way to ensure that Ethiopia is not riding the same, vicious Hamster Wheel, and expecting a different outcome; it didn't work in 1974 and in 1991, it will not work now. A parallel undertaking of an inclusive dialogue while the UN conducts its investigations into these major crises that consumed Mr. Abiy's two and half years in office will play a paramount role in stabilizing Ethiopia until a proper transition to a stable political order is established notably through free and fair elections agreed upon by all its players.

3 – The government has declared the war in Tigray was over on Saturday 28 November. It is not over! As such an immediate cessation of hostilities should be imposed on all warring parties. With every passing day, an Ethiopian is dying in the hands of another Ethiopian, the scar of which will take generations to heal. No one should be intimidated or mob-criminalized for calling for an end to this tragedy. What should be equally imposed is also a gag on the media, including the state media both at the regional and federal level, which are flaming the rhetoric of war, as well as an immediate end to the rampant and alarming ethnic profiling of Tigrayans for discrimination of all sorts, humiliation and detention. What happened so far will remain a permanent badge of shame for the government and those who aided and abetted it; but an immediate stop to it will help to avert the worst.

The one month blockade on humanitarian supplies, including essential services such as medicine, is ripping the people of Tigray apart. The UN and the Ethiopian government have finally reached at an agreement to “allow “unimpeded, sustained and secure access” for humanitarian supplies to reach those in need across areas now under its control in Tigray.” Although a welcome news, the agreement doesn't extent reaching out to the needy people of Tigray in areas that are not under the control of the federal government. No government that punishes a civilian population collectively to this extent expects to get legitimacy from the same people, least by assigning a caretaker government.

The lifting of communication, mainly the internet and telephone, was effected yesterday, but only partially and in areas where some administrative changes took place; it should be implemented immediately across all parts of the region. There is nothing that can justify the continuous blockade of communication especially after the government has already declared the war was over. Tigrays who are not trapped in the region would like to know if their loved ones are alive or not. It is not too much to ask!

Thank you for your time and for the opportunity!

