

Research Briefing

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Ethiopia: Situation in Tigray

Prospects for an end to the conflict in Ethiopia's northern region of Tigray remain dim. Reports of horrific human rights abuses, mass internal displacement, and significant humanitarian needs have prompted ever stronger calls by the UK, the US and the EU for parties to cease hostilities and allow unfettered humanitarian access. An estimated 350,000 people are at risk of famine. The conflict has raised questions about the leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 only a year after taking office. He faces his first electoral test in national elections on 21 June 2021.¹

The [conflict began](#) in November 2020, when tensions between the new government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, in power since 2018, and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), who had dominated Ethiopian politics since 1991, came to a head.

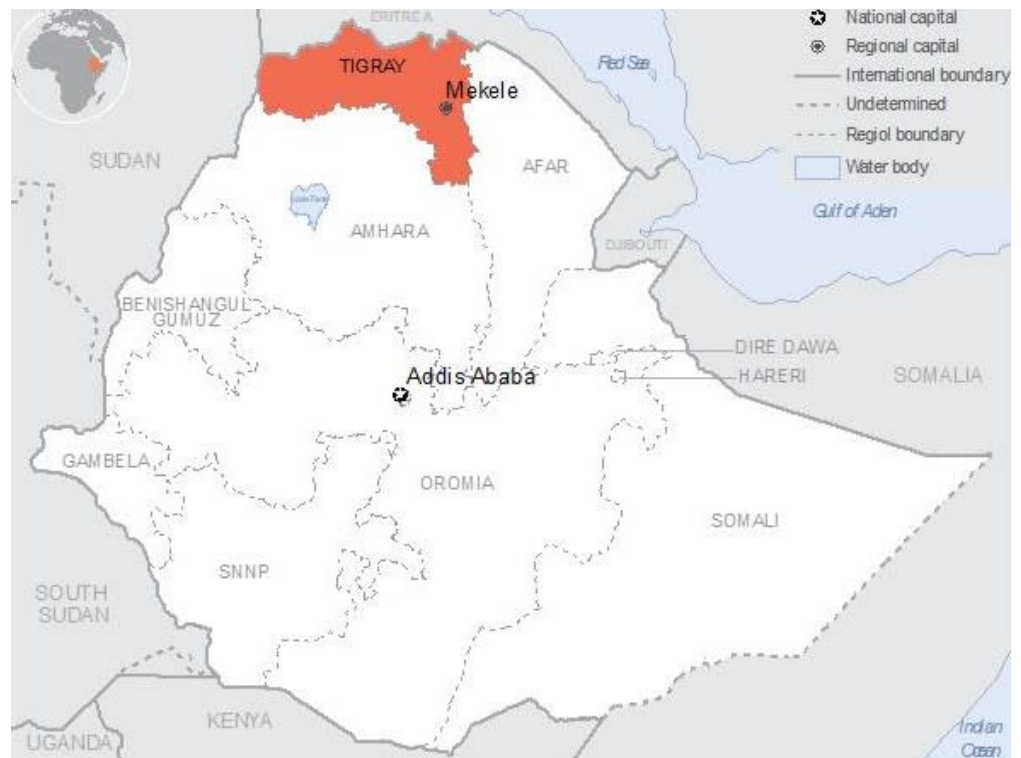
The fighting unseated the TPLF from their powerbase in Tigray and a federally appointed interim Tigray government is nominally in charge. The Ethiopian Government has since designated the TPLF a terror group, and Tigrayan fighters have unified under the banner of the Tigrayan Defence Forces.² James Duddridge, the Minister for Africa, has described the situation in Tigray as a "man-made crisis."³

¹ This Commons Library paper was first published on 25 February 2021.

² "Tigray conflict: Ethiopia lists TPLF as a terrorist group", Africa News, 6 May 2021

³ [HC Deb 14 June 2021 \[Ethiopia\]](#).

1.1 Situation in Tigray



Source: UN OCHA situation report, 17 June 2021⁴

Risk of region-wide famine

“Several areas of Tigray are on the brink of famine.”

UN Secretary General António Guterres

8 June 2021

Serious food shortages have raised fears of famine (see box 2) in the northern region and humanitarian agencies face difficulties accessing people in need.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has reported visible signs of starvation amongst people in the central zone and warns of an impending famine:

Levels of food insecurity and malnutrition, which are already at catastrophic levels in some areas, will deteriorate further to the risk of substantial famine, if not addressed immediately.⁵

Nick Dyer, the UK Special Envoy for Famine Prevention and Humanitarian Affairs, described hearing “harrowing stories” during his visit to Tigray in late

⁴ [Source for map, UN OCHA Ethiopia-Tigray region humanitarian update](#), 10 June 2021. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. © OCHA

⁵ [UN OCHA situation report](#), 17 June 2021

May 2021, including of systemic killing of men and boys, destruction of infrastructure and widespread sexual violence.⁶

James Duddridge told MPs a region-wide famine is “now likely” if conflict intensifies and impediments to the delivery of humanitarian aid continue.⁷ The head of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (who is Ethiopian) said rape is “rampant” and estimated 5 million people in the region require humanitarian aid.⁸ Over [1.7 million people have been internally displaced](#) by the fighting, while thousands more have fled into neighbouring Sudan when the conflict began.⁹

The International Crisis Group says the situation is at a “[deadly, dangerous stalemate](#)” and warns the conflict could evolve into a protracted war.

The UN and other NGOs provide regular updates on the situation in Tigray. These are collated on [Relief Web: Ethiopia](#).

2 A potential famine?

The [Famine Early Warning Systems](#) network has a standardised metric for measuring food insecurity. Its classification system (the IPC) has five levels, ranging from (1) minimal through to stressed (2), crisis (3), emergency (4) and catastrophe (5).

In January 2021 the FEWS network placed Tigray at crisis level (phase 3) but warned that, given limited access for humanitarian actors and traders, coupled with dwindling or depleted food stocks, [emergency \(4\) outcomes are expected to emerge](#) across more extensive areas of central and eastern Tigray. Refugees crossing into Sudan say [harvests have been looted](#).

In June 2021 the IPC declared that over [350,000 people are now assessed to be in phase 5](#), catastrophe, meaning they are at risk of famine. Altogether, over 5.5 million people face acute food insecurity.

Africa specialist Alex de Waal, writing for BBC News, notes the IPC system is dependent on data; the UN can only declare famine when it has certain very specific data. De Waal suggests governments may “conceal or manipulate data” to avoid getting a famine designation, and argues “[there is a history of Ethiopian governments hiding their famines](#)”.¹⁰

⁶ [Social media post from Nick Dyer](#), 26 May 2021

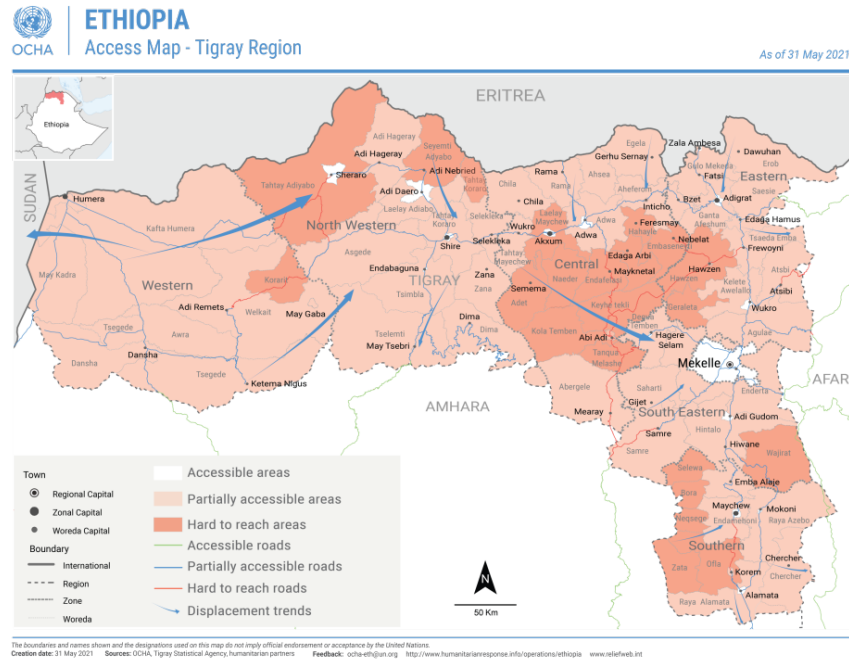
⁷ [HC Deb 14 June 2021 \[Ethiopia\]](#).

⁸ “[People face ‘horrific’ situation in Ethiopia’s Tigray: WHO chief](#)”, Al Jazeera, 17 May 2021

⁹ The Tigray Regional Interim Administration estimates more than 2 million people are displaced, “[Ethiopia-Tigray region humanitarian update situation report](#)”, UN OCHA, 3 June 2021

¹⁰ “[Viewpoint: From Ethiopia’s Tigray region to Yemen, the dilemma of declaring a famine](#)”, BBC News, 7 February 2021

Humanitarian access



Source: UN OCHA situation report, 10 June 2021¹¹

Much of Tigray region remains hard to reach or partially accessible. For months it has been **largely inaccessible** to humanitarian aid workers due to restrictions by the Ethiopian Government.

Despite an agreement on lifting some restrictions in early February and some clearances given for international staff, the UN continues to report that assistance remains limited because of the fluid security situation and bureaucratic constraints.¹² The UN says humanitarian workers are subject to temporary arrests and intimidation at military checkpoints, while humanitarian assets and supplies are looted or confiscated.¹³

The EU and US also accuse military forces of impeding humanitarian access to parts of Tigray.¹⁴

In a joint statement in June, they condemned the use of starvation as a weapon of war and noted restrictions on humanitarian access are increasing rather than decreasing:

¹¹ [Source for map, UN OCHA Ethiopia-Tigray region humanitarian update](#), 10 June 2021. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. © OCHA

¹² [“Statement on humanitarian assistance and food and nutrition security in Ethiopia’s Tigray region”](#), World Food Programme, 6 February 2021

¹³ [UN OCHA situation update](#), 10 June 2021

¹⁴ [Ethiopia: Statement by High Representative Josep Borrell and Commissioner for Crisis Management Janez Lenarčič on restricted humanitarian access to Tigray](#), EU, 14 May 2021

Deliberate and repeated hindrances by the military and armed groups, the regular looting of humanitarian assistance, are driving the population towards mass starvation.¹⁵

The Ethiopian Government says it is undertaking all efforts to address the humanitarian needs of Ethiopians in the Tigray region.¹⁶

Atrocities and sexual violence

Reports of atrocities and the use of sexual violence and rape began filtering out of Tigray shortly after the conflict began, but media restrictions imposed early in the conflict have also hampered the flow of information out of Tigray.

Senior UN officials began raising concerns about ethnic-based and sexual violence across the region in early 2021. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Pramila Patten, said in January she was greatly concerned about the high number of reported rapes in Mekelle (the capital of Tigray region) and disturbing allegations of “individuals allegedly forced to rape members of their own family”.¹⁷

The Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, Alice Wairimu Nderitu, said she is alarmed at the “continued escalation of ethnic violence” amid reports of civilians being targeted based on their ethnicity and region.¹⁸ Both called for an independent and impartial investigation into these allegations.

The conflict has drawn in militias from neighbouring Amhara region, which lies between Tigray and the capital, Addis Ababa. Antony Blinken, the US Secretary of State, has called on Amhara regional forces to withdraw from Tigray.¹⁹

Amhara militias have been accused of atrocities against Tigrayans, taking crops and cattle and preventing them from leaving.²⁰ They are said to patrol western and parts of southern Tigray and Amhara regional leaders say they have reclaimed territory they say was taken by the TPLF in the early 1990s. International Crisis Group sustained Amhara control or formal inclusion of territory into Amhara region could trigger years of instability.²¹

¹⁵ [“U.S.-EU Joint Statement On The Humanitarian Emergency In Tigray”](#), USAID, 10 June 2021

¹⁶ [“Prime Minister’s Office press briefing”](#), Embassy of Ethiopia in London, 15 January 2021

¹⁷ [United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Ms. Pramila Patten, urges all parties to prohibit the use of sexual violence and cease hostilities in the Tigray region of Ethiopia](#), UN, 21 January 2021

¹⁸ [“Statement by the Special Advisor of the Secretary-General on the prevention of Genocide, Alice Wairimu Nderitu, on the situation in Ethiopia”](#), UN, 20 February 2021

¹⁹ [“Continuing atrocities and denial of humanitarian access in Ethiopia’s Tigray region”](#), US State Department, 15 May 2021

²⁰ [“You don’t belong’: land dispute drives new exodus in Ethiopia’s Tigray”](#), Reuters, 29 March 2021

²¹ [“Ethiopia’s Tigray war: a deadly, dangerous stalemate”](#), International Crisis Group, 2 April 2021

Restricted telecommunications and media access

When the offensive began in November 2020, the Government imposed a communications blackout, restricting access to the internet and telecommunications.

BBC News examined [misinformation about the situation](#) on social media during the early stages of the conflict. A Washington Post study of social media posts between November and January concluded that “by blocking communications and access to Tigray, the government helped create conditions where disinformation and misinformation can thrive”.²²

Journalists have also been targeted.²³ An Al Jazeera report on the battle to control information chronicles the ways in which press freedom, initially championed by Abiy, is being curtailed in Ethiopia.²⁴ In March, Channel 4 News documented allegations of atrocities in Tigray in a special report by Africa correspondent Jamal Osman.²⁵

Eritrean forces accused of atrocities

Both Ethiopian and Eritrean governments have now confirmed the presence of Eritrean forces in Tigray.²⁶ This comes after months of denials, despite early assertions in December from the US of “credible reports” of Eritrea’s military presence.²⁷ In February the EU said that Eritrean forces were “committing atrocities and exacerbating ethnic violence”.²⁸

The head of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Mark Lowcock, says Eritrean soldiers “are using starvation as a weapon of war.”²⁹

Eritrean forces have been accused of committing atrocities. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have chronicled the killing of scores of civilians in the historic town of Axum in November 2020, allegations corroborated by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission.³⁰ The UK

²² [“In Ethiopia’s digital battle over the Tigray region, facts are casualties”](#), Washington Post, 5 February 2021

²³ [“Journalist attacked, threatened in her Addis Ababa home”](#), Reporters without Borders, 10 February 2021

²⁴ [“Ethiopia’s Tigray conflict and the battle to control information”](#), Al Jazeera, 16 February 2021

²⁵ [“Tigray: the horrors of the hidden war”](#), Channel 4 News, March 2021

²⁶ “Ethiopian PM confirms Eritrean troops entered Tigray during conflict”, Reuters, 23 March 2021;

[“Eritrea confirms its troops are fighting in Ethiopia’s Tigray”](#), Al Jazeera, 17 April 2021

²⁷ [“Exclusive: US says reports of Eritrean troops in Ethiopia’s Tigray are ‘credible’”](#), Reuters, 11 December 2020

²⁸ [“Ethiopia: Joint-Statement by High-Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell, Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen and Commissioner Janez Lenarčič”](#), EU, 8 February 2021

²⁹ [“Ethiopia UN envoy says Eritrea troops to leave Tigray ‘soon’”](#), Reuters, 16 June 2021

³⁰ [“Ethiopia: Eritrean troops’ massacre of hundreds of Axum civilians may amount to crime against humanity”](#), Amnesty, 26 February 2021; [“Ethiopia: Eritrean forces massacre Tigray civilians”](#), HRW, 5 March 2021; [“Eritrean troops killed more than 100 civilians in Tigray: Rights group”](#), Al Jazeera, 24 March 2021

Government has described Amnesty's allegations as credible.³¹ A [University of Ghent study](#), published in March 2021, attributes nearly half of the fully documented civilian casualties to Eritrean forces.

Eritrean forces are also believed to have forcibly returned Eritreans from camps in Tigray to Eritrea.³²

Before the conflict there were [four Eritrean refugee camps](#) in Tigray: two in the north Hitsats and Shimelba, and two in the South of the region, Mai Aini and Adi Harush. Hitsats and Shimelba had been "completely destroyed" by then time UN OCHA and UNHCR visited in March.³³

Following a visit to Tigray in Ethiopia, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said he met refugees who "spoke of infiltration of armed actors in the camps, of killings, abductions and also some forced return to Eritrea at the hands of Eritrean forces present in the areas".³⁴ UNHCR said the whereabouts of over half the 20,000 refugees who lived in the camps are unknown.³⁵

The UK has repeatedly called for the [immediate withdrawal of Eritrean forces](#) from Tigray and Ethiopia, most recently on 14 June 2021.³⁶

Eritrea has rejected allegations of sexual violence and starvation and says it will withdraw troops from Tigray.³⁷

Background: Ethiopian and Eritrean relations

Relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea are complex and deep rooted. Eritrea was an Italian colony for the first half of the 20th century. After the Second World War the UN established Eritrea as an autonomous region within Ethiopia. Ethiopia's annexation of Eritrea in 1962 sparked a thirty-year struggle for independence. The TPLF and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) fought together against the Derg (the military government) in the 1970 and 1980s, although relations between the two "were not easy".³⁸ The removal of the Derg and the new leadership of Meles Zenawi (the leader of the TPLF) paved the way to Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia in 1993.

However, a bloody border war in 1998 to 2000 resulted in a long stalemate, until 2018 when Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister and reached out to

³¹ [HL Deb 9 March 2021 \[Tigray Conflict: Axum\]](#).

³² ["Remarks by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi at the press conference in Addis Ababa."](#), UNHCR, 1 February 2021

³³ ["UNHCR reaches destroyed camps in northern Tigray"](#), UNHCR, 26 March 2021

³⁴ [Remarks by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi at the press conference in Addis Ababa."](#), UNHCR, 1 February 2021

³⁵ ["UNHCR reaches destroyed camps in northern Tigray"](#), UNHCR, 26 March 2021

³⁶ [HC Deb 14 June 2021 \[Ethiopia\]](#).

³⁷ ["Ethiopia UN envoy says Eritrea troops to leave Tigray 'soon'"](#), Reuters, 16 June 2021

³⁸ Richard Dowden "Africa: Altered states, ordinary miracles", 2019, p514

Asmara (Eritrea's capital). Shortly after the two countries declared the war to be over.³⁹

Regional fighting beyond Tigray

When the conflict in Tigray broke out in late 2020, analysts warned of the potential for unrest to [spread within](#) Ethiopia, with old disputes over land and regional borders resurrected by the fighting.

There have been clashes between Oromo and Amhara communities, the two largest ethnic groups in Ethiopia. Attacks across the Oromo and Amhara regional border have, according to Reuters, been increasing in recent months. At least [18 people are reported to have been killed](#) in mid-April in Ataye town, which lies in Amhara region but whose residents are predominantly Oromos.

At least [100 people were reportedly killed](#) by fighting between the [Afar and Somali](#) regions in early April, an official from Afar region told Reuters. Clashes between regional forces are not new and [focus on three contested municipalities](#), or kebeles, that are predominantly inhabited by ethnic Somali Issa communities but lie within Afar region. They hold [strategic importance](#) because they are located along the highway linking Addis Ababa, Djibouti and the Assab port in Eritrea. UNOCHA notes the route is [important for access](#) and the movement of humanitarian supplies.⁴⁰

Discontent is also reportedly high in Oromia, the largest of Ethiopia's nine regions, and Abiy's home region. The killing of a popular Oromo singer in June 2020 triggered [deadly unrest](#) in the region and the capital. Tensions remain high. Some Oromo opposition parties are planning on [boycotting the June 2021](#) national elections, citing state repression.

The Ethiopian Peace Observatory collates and [maps incidents of violence](#) across Ethiopia and currently produces weekly and monthly reports. The Observatory is part of the [ACLED](#), the armed conflict location and event data project, which collects data on political violence around the world.

1.2

National elections on 21 June 2021

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed faces his first electoral test on 21 June, since he was appointed in 2018. Elections were originally scheduled for August 2020 but delayed because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the years since his appointment, Abiy has resolved the long-running conflict with neighbouring Eritrea, for which he was awarded the [Nobel Peace](#)

³⁹ ["Ethiopia and Eritrean relations"](#) (timeline), Reuters, 14 July 2018

⁴⁰ [UNOCHA Ethiopia: Afar-Issa land dispute](#), flash update, 27 January 2021

[Prize](#) in 2019, and ushered in a period of rapid change, including wider political freedoms.⁴¹

However, the situation has changed considerably since then.

Politically, Abiy dissolved the ruling Ethiopia People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), an alliance of ethnically based parties dominated by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and replaced it with the new Prosperity Party.

More than 9,000 candidates are running in federal and regional races. However, many are standing for regional parties. Some of the larger parties, including one of the oldest, the Oromo Liberation Front, are [boycotting the election](#), citing government interference and repression.

Voting will not take place in three regions. Tigray remains largely inaccessible and lack of security prohibits voting. The National Election Board of Ethiopia has also [delayed voting in Harar and Somali regions](#) until September, because of irregularities and problems with the printing of ballot papers.⁴²

James Duddridge, the Minister for Africa, discussing the situation in Ethiopia in the Commons on 14 June, said he hopes the elections will be a "pivot", saying it is "difficult to see big changes" happening before the elections.⁴³

The Library will produce a paper on the election after the result is confirmed.

1.3

UK Government response and parliamentary activity

The Government has repeatedly called for all parties to bring an end to the fighting, prioritise the protection of civilians, respect human rights, avoid civilian loss of life, and allow unfettered humanitarian access. It is also calling for an independent investigation into allegations of human rights abuses and emphasised the importance of media freedom.⁴⁴

In the past, the UK Government has said it: "relies on a stable Ethiopia that is supportive of our foreign policy priorities in the Horn of Africa."⁴⁵

⁴¹ ["Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed: The Nobel Prize winner who went to war"](#), BBC News, 14 June 2021

⁴² ["Ethiopia postpones vote in two regions citing irregularities"](#), Reuters, 11 June 2021

⁴³ [HC Deb 14 June 2021 \[Ethiopia\]](#).

⁴⁴ See ["Foreign Secretary statement following a meeting with the Ethiopian Deputy Prime Minister"](#) 25 November 2020; ["Humanitarian access to Tigray: Minister for Africa statement"](#), 17 December 2020; [HL12399](#), 4 February 2021; [HL12329](#), 3 February 2021; [HL12328](#), 3 February 2021; [HL 12300](#), 2 February 2021

⁴⁵ [Ethiopia country profile](#), Department for International Development, July 2018

James Duddridge [visited Ethiopia](#) in late July 2020. At the time, the country was recovering from [days of unrest](#) following the killing of popular singer, Hachalu Hundessa, and the Minister called for “more peaceful dialogue between ethnic groups and for space to be given for political debate.”⁴⁶

Responding to the declaration of the state of emergency on 4 November 2020, the UK Government called for an [immediate de-escalation in Tigray](#) and a halt to violence. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab also emphasised the need to protect civilians and allow humanitarian access in a [phone call with Prime Minister Abiy](#) on 10 November. On 17 November the Government said it was “working closely with humanitarian agencies to ensure that aid reaches civilians affected by the fighting.”⁴⁷

Dominic Raab raised the UK’s concerns directly with Abiy again, during a visit to Ethiopia on 22 January 2021. The Foreign Secretary also signed a climate change partnership agreement with the Ethiopian Government.⁴⁸

Sir Keir Starmer, leader of the Opposition, [wrote to the Foreign Secretary](#) on 9 February 2021 voicing his concerns about human rights abuses and the potential impact on wider regional stability.⁴⁹ Several MPs and peers have questioned the Government on the situation in oral and written questions.

In an urgent question on 14 June 2021 Stephen Doughty, the shadow Minister for Africa, asked if the Government will consider targeted sanctions against individuals found to have committed human rights abuses. James Duddridge reiterated the Government’s concern about the [situation in Ethiopia](#) in response to an urgent question on 14 June 2021.

One of the UK’s largest bilateral aid programmes

The International Development Committee, in a report published in April 2021, urged the Government redouble its efforts to seek an end to the conflict.

In both 2018 and 2019, Ethiopia received the second largest amount in UK bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA) globally, receiving £301 million (2018) and £300 million (2019).⁵⁰ ODA is the official term for “aid”, and [must meet common international criteria](#).

Within Africa, from 2009 to 2019 Ethiopia consistently received the largest proportion of UK country-specific bilateral aid in the region (the exception

⁴⁶ [PQ111500](#), 4 November 2020

⁴⁷ [FCDO, Press release, 17 November 2020](#).

⁴⁸ “[Foreign Secretary sets out UK’s unique offer to East African nations on visit to region](#)”, FCDO, 23 January 2021

⁴⁹ [Letter from Sir Keir Starmer to Dominic Raab](#), 9 February 2021

⁵⁰ FCDO, [Statistics on International Development: Final UK Aid Spend 2019](#), updated 9 March 2021; DFID, [Statistics on International Development: Final UK aid spend 2018](#), updated 7 April 2020

being 2017, when Ethiopia and Nigeria both received 10.9 percent of bilateral ODA to African states).⁵¹

Over this period, bilateral ODA to the country averaged £304 million per year, or 12.2 percent of UK bilateral ODA to Africa each year. The peak year was 2011, when the UK provided £344 million in bilateral ODA. The lowest was in 2009, when £219.7 million was provided.⁵²

The Foreign Secretary announced £11.4 million of humanitarian funding to support those affected by the conflict during his visit to Ethiopia in January 2021.⁵³ The Government has resisted suggestions to suspend aid, arguing “withholding finance is not an effective lever”, but has said it continually reviews its support.⁵⁴

In mid-January the EU suspended budget support for Ethiopia until humanitarian agencies are granted access to Tigray.⁵⁵

1.4 UN Security Council

So far, [all discussions at the UN Security Council](#) on the situation in Tigray have taken place under “any other business”. The website, [Security Council Report](#), a body separate to the UN, noted that the Council had failed to agree an outcome on four occasions, and only agreed a [press statement](#) following its meeting on 15 April 2021. Security Council Report suggests members are divided on the situation in Tigray, with some believing it to be an internal situation for Ethiopia to resolve.⁵⁶

Senior UN officials have spoken out about allegations of abuses in Tigray. In March, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights agreed to [jointly investigate human rights violations](#) and abuses with the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission.

Invoking Resolution 2417?

In 2018, the UN Security Council adopted [Resolution 2417](#) which explicitly condemns starvation as a method of warfare and the denial of humanitarian access to civilian populations.

⁵¹ FCDO, [Table 4a. Total UK Bilateral ODA by country-Africa](#), updated 9 March 2021

⁵² FCDO, [Table 4a. Total UK Bilateral ODA by country-Africa](#), updated 9 March 2021

⁵³ [PQ15080](#), 11 February 2021

⁵⁴ [HL11061](#), 21 December 2021

⁵⁵ “[EU suspends Ethiopian budget support over Tigray crisis](#)”, Reuters, 15 January 2021

⁵⁶ “[Ethiopia \(Tigray\) meeting under “Any Other Business”](#)”, Security Council Report, 14 April 2021

The resolution has since been cited in reference to Tigray. Africa analyst Alex De Waal says the UN could reference resolution 2417 to apply pressure to Ethiopia.⁵⁷

The International Development Committee [cited the resolution](#) in its report on Tigray, when discussing the application of sanctions:

We recommend that, in accordance with UN resolution 2417 (2018), the UK Government should explore whether to use the mechanisms of the UN Security Council to press for penalties such as sanctions against actors found to be obstructing the delivery of essential humanitarian supplies and using starvation as a weapon of war.⁵⁸

The EU and US cited UN Security Council Resolution 2417 (2018) in their [joint statement](#) in June 2021:

Using starvation of civilians as a weapon of war is putting at risk the lives of millions. In Resolution 2417 (2018), the UN Security Council strongly condemned the use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare and urged action against those responsible. The Security Council requested that the Secretary-General report swiftly to the Council when the risk of conflict-induced famine occurs.⁵⁹

1.5

African Union

When the conflict began, the African Union [appointed three former heads of state](#): Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and Kgalema Motlanthe of South Africa, as special envoys to seek a ceasefire and mediation talks. Their efforts in November were rebuffed by Abiy, who described the military operation as a law enforcement one which would not last long.⁶⁰

On 17 June, the African Union launched a [Commission of Inquiry](#) into allegations of violations of human rights in Tigray.⁶¹ It will sit initially for three months and will be based in The Gambia. The Ethiopian Foreign Ministry described the inquiry as “misguided” and lacking legal basis.⁶²

⁵⁷ “[The Horn](#)” podcast, Crisis Group, season 2, episode 12. The World Food Programme [discussed the resolution and the impetus behind it](#) in an article on 23 May 2020.

⁵⁸ “[The humanitarian situation in Tigray](#)”, International Development Committee, 30 April 2021, HC1289 2019-21

⁵⁹ [U.S.-EU Joint Statement On The Humanitarian Emergency In Tigray](#)”, USAID, 10 June 2021

⁶⁰ “[The Presidency on visit of the African Union Envoys to Ethiopia](#)”, South African Government, 30 November 2020

⁶¹ “[Press Statement on the official launch of the Commission of Inquiry on the Tigray Region in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia](#)”, African Union, 16 June 2021

⁶² “[Ethiopia urges Tigray rights inquiry to ‘immediately cease’](#)”, Reuters, 17 June 2021

1.6 US Government restricts visas for Ethiopian officials

In May 2021, the US Government announced it was [restricting visas for government and military officials](#) of Ethiopia and Eritrea responsible for, or complicit in, undermining resolution of the crises in Tigray. Immediate family members of these people may also be subject to the restrictions. On the same day, 23 May, the US also imposed restrictions on economic and security assistance to Ethiopia, whilst continuing humanitarian assistance and other critical aid.

1.7 G7

The G7 said in April that it supported an [independent, transparent and impartial investigation](#) into crimes reported.

In May, G7 Foreign and Development Ministers called on all parties to cease hostilities, protect civilians and provide immediate, unhindered humanitarian access. They also expressed concern that the withdrawal of Eritrean forces had not begun.⁶³

1.8 What led to the crisis?

The [appointment of Abiy Ahmed](#) as Prime Minister in early 2018 ushered in a [period of rapid change in Ethiopia](#), introducing wider political freedoms.

Regionally, Abiy moved quickly to resolve the years of frozen conflict with neighbouring Eritrea and helped mediate in neighbouring Sudan after President Bashir was deposed. These initiatives earned him the [Nobel Peace Prize](#) in 2019.

However, his appointment has led to a “[realignment in Ethiopian politics](#)”, according to academics Jonathan Fisher and Meressa Tsehaye Gebrewahd.⁶⁴

Ethiopia’s [largest ethnic groups](#) are the Omoros, Amharas and Tigrayans.

⁶³ [G7 Foreign and Development Ministers’ Comunique](#), 5 May 2021

⁶⁴ Jonathan Fisher, Meressa Tsehaye Gebrewahd, “[‘Game over’? Abiy Ahmed, the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front and Ethiopia’s political crisis](#)”, *African Affairs*, Volume 118, Issue 470, January 2019, Pages 194–206

Ethiopia had been ruled for much of the 20th century by either the Imperial Family under Haile Selassie or the military rule of the Derg under Mengistu Haile Mariam. Both reflected the dominance of the Amhara community.

The TPLF emerges..

It was during the period of the communist Derg military government (1974-1991) that the Tigray People's Liberation Front was formed. The TPLF sought greater autonomy for the region of Tigray. Civil war ensued and only came to an end in 1991 when the TPLF, and their allies in the opposition umbrella movement the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), forced Mengistu and the Derg from power.

...and creates a new federal system

The TPLF was instrumental in creating the EPRDF. Richard Dowden, author and former Director of the Royal African Society, explains the Tigrayans needed the support of Ethiopia's other ethnic groups if it was to claim legitimacy to rule the whole country.⁶⁵

Under Meles Zenawi (then leader of the TPLF), a system of ethnic federalism was established under which key ethnic groups were granted their own [regional states](#).⁶⁶ Ethiopia was governed by Meles Zenawi for over two decades until his death in 2012, when he was replaced by Haile Mariam Dessalegn.

Abiy comes to power

However, anti-government protests, repression and discord prompted Dessalegn to resign in 2018. The EPRDF [selected Abiy Ahmed](#), a leading figure in the Oromo wing of the ruling party, as the country's new Prime Minister.⁶⁷

Hailing from the Oromo-wing of the EPRDF, and with support from the Amharas, Abiy moved quickly to remove Tigrayans and the TPLF from positions of power.⁶⁸ In 2019 he dissolved, reformed, and renamed the governing coalition. The TPLF opted not to join the new ruling Prosperity Party, leaving them [outside national government for the first time in three decades](#).

The TPLF remained the ruling party in Tigray region but relations between Mekelle (the regional capital) and the federal government in Addis Ababa,

⁶⁵ Richard Dowden "Africa: Altered states, ordinary miracles", 2019, p514

⁶⁶ As set out in the 1994 constitution. Richard Dowden "Africa: Altered states, ordinary miracles", 2019, p521; Commons Library Insight "[Ethiopia charts a new course under Abiy Ahmed – but challenges remain](#)", 26 September 2018

⁶⁷ See Commons Library Insight "[Ethiopia charts a new course under Abiy Ahmed – but challenges remain](#)", 26 September 2018

⁶⁸ Jason Burke "[Rise and fall of Ethiopia's TPLF – from rebels to rulers and back](#)", The Guardian, 25 November 2020

soured. The TPLF's decision to proceed with a regional election in September 2020, against the ruling of the federal government (which postponed elections scheduled for August 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic), reflected the wider battle between the regional and federal governments for control.⁶⁹

The [widening rift between Abiy and the TPLF](#) came to a head in November 2020. On 4 November, Abiy [declared a state of emergency](#) in Tigray region. He accused TPLF forces of [attacking a federal armed forces base](#), and launched a military offensive, supported by Amhara militias.⁷⁰ On 28 November, Abiy [declared victory](#) shortly after federal forces entered Mekelle. An interim administration has since been established. As discussed above, the situation in Tigray remains volatile amid concerns of a serious humanitarian crisis.

Ethiopia's federal system... a cause of unrest?

Even before the Tigray conflict began, there were concerns about rising ethnic tensions that might threaten the unity of the country.

Academics such as Yohannes Gedamu, a [Georgia Gwinnett College](#) lecturer specialising in the Horn of Africa, , argue the federal structure has caused problems precisely because it is constituted along ethnic lines. Gedamu believes the system "created more animosity and competition for power and influence".⁷¹

Fergal Keane, the BBC's Africa correspondent, noted in 2019 that the opening of the political space under Abiy "[has lifted a lid on ethnic tensions](#)" that had been kept in check under the EPRDF. And when the conflict in Tigray began, Emmanuel Igunza, a BBC Africa reporter, also spoke of a [growth of ethnic divisions](#) within the country since Abiy took office.

Africa expert, Alex de Waal, says Abiy's power base is among a mostly Amhara political elite that [wants to abolish the federal system](#) in favour of a unity government system.⁷² In November 2020, the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry described the years of TPLF rule as having "reduced (Ethiopia) to a clannish, fake federalism which has left nothing but a deeply divided society".⁷³

Mohammed Girma, a visiting lecturer at the University of Roehampton, discusses how Ethiopia has long been split between those who favour, what

⁶⁹ "[Finding a path to peace in Ethiopia's Tigray region](#)", Crisis Group, 11 February 2021

⁷⁰ Martin Plaut "[Tigray: One hundred days of war](#)", African Arguments, 12 February 2021; "[Finding a path to peace in Ethiopia's Tigray region](#)", Crisis Group, 11 February 2021

⁷¹ Yohannes Gedamu "[Why Ethiopia's federal system is dangerously flawed](#)", Democracy in Africa, 1 July 2019

⁷² Alex De Waal, "[Tigray crisis viewpoint: why Ethiopia is spiralling out of control](#)", BBC News, 15 November 2020

⁷³ Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement via "[Finding a path to peace in Ethiopia's Tigray region](#)", Crisis Group, 11 February 2021

he describes as a unionist approach, exemplified by Hailemariam's Dessalegn's regime, and the ethno-federalist approach adopted by the TPLF-led EPRDF.⁷⁴

He observes that when Abiy came to power, some were disenchanted with the ethno-nationalist system, but others were demanding enhanced federal states. Girma says that on this, Abiy has remained an enigma: "at times he personified rhetorical unionism, at others practical ethno-federalism."⁷⁵

The Ethiopian constitution stipulates that every region has the right to self-determination and peaceful secession ([Article 39](#)). Crisis Group warns the conflict could unleash stronger ethno-nationalist feelings, including broadening popular support for elements of the Tigrayan elite that demand secession. This could spread beyond Tigray:

The conflict has poisoned relations between Tigrayan and other Ethiopian elites and inflamed public opinion in Tigray against the federal authorities, who may well struggle to administer a restive region. If Addis Ababa's energies are drained by enforcing its rule on Tigray, other Ethiopian ethno-nationalist forces may be emboldened.⁷⁶

Crisis Group's February 2021 report, [finding a path to peace in Ethiopia's Tigray region](#), tracks the evolution of long-standing tensions within Ethiopia under the TPLF and Abiy.

⁷⁴ "[Ethiopia's election: the stakes are high amid fear, mistrust and violence](#)", The Conversation, 17 June 2021

⁷⁵ "[Ethiopia's election: the stakes are high amid fear, mistrust and violence](#)", The Conversation, 17 June 2021

⁷⁶ "[Finding a path to peace in Ethiopia's Tigray region](#)", Crisis Group, 11 February 2021

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