



International Concern Over Serious Human Rights Violations and War Crimes Being Committed During the Ongoing Tigray Conflict

Eritrea has agreed to withdraw forces from Tigray amid international concern about serious human rights violations and war crimes being committed during the ongoing conflict there. Scores of local civilians in Ethiopia's Tigray region have accused Eritrean soldiers of indiscriminately killing unarmed civilians, looting, and engaging in other major abuses – with some Ethiopian troops not free from allegations of improper behavior as well. International rights groups have verified the credibility of the accounts and therefore urged for the immediate withdrawal of foreign forces as a first step, in addition to an independent investigation into the matter. Recently, U.S. officials have also expressed increased alarm and echoed the calls for an Eritrean troop withdrawal to help alleviate the dire humanitarian crisis. Over the course of the past several months, civilians in Tigray have suffered the most because of the violence, as thousands of people have died and hundreds of thousands more have been displaced from their homes.

The conflict in Tigray began back in November of last year, after the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) – a local force in the region with historical clout within the Ethiopian political structure – was accused by Prime Minister Ahmed Abiy's central government of attacking an army outpost in the province. The TPLF and Ahmed's regime have been at odds with each other since his ascendancy to power in 2018, when the former lost much of its influence. Prior to that, the TPLF was the dominant party in the country and had de facto control over its politics. This changed however with the installment of Ahmed as prime minister, who disbanded the longstanding Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition, thereby sidelining the TPLF and cutting the group off from its previous sway. Thus, the outbreak of the Tigray conflict did not come as a surprise to many considering that Ahmed's government frequently alleged that the TPLF was attempting to destabilize his regime and bring themselves back into national prominence.

The situation that has emerged in Tigray as a result of the conflict there is extremely critical. According to United Nations officials, access to parts of the region remain limited even nearly 5 months after the initial outbreak of violence. This has made the deliverance of much-needed humanitarian assistance all the more difficult for aid groups who are trying to support the local civilian population. In fact, it is estimated that approximately 2.5 million people, particularly in rural areas, have been deprived of access to essential services for the last several months since the fighting started. Furthermore, ongoing skirmishes in Tigray continue to result in casualties and are also driving mass levels of citizen displacement throughout the province. As such, rights groups have welcomed the recent decision to withdraw foreign troops from Tigray.

While there have been documented accounts of human rights violations being committed by all parties involved in the conflict – Ethiopian, TPLF, and Eritrean forces – the most serious and disturbing appear to involve outside troops from Eritrea. They have been accused of shelling residential areas, taking part in extrajudicial killings, and engaging in sexual violence against local civilians. In a recent February 2021 report by Amnesty International, the group provided detailed evidence of a late November 2020 incident in which Eritrean soldiers randomly shot civilians and systematically searched homes to execute male family members in the Tigrayan town of Axum. In the face of this, international pressure has grown and helped lead to the announcement of foreign troop withdrawal. Over the past month, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has strongly condemned the abuses taking place in Tigray and called for the removal of Eritrean forces. President Biden followed up on this by then dispatching U.S. Senator Chris Coons to meet with Prime Minister Ahmed in Addis Ababa to urge the need for swift action.