

# Abiy Ahmed's Dilemma – Prioritizing Justice over Reconciliation, Tigray

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## Introduction

The people of Tigray, residing in the northernmost region of Ethiopia, are among the world's oldest inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> They are pivotal in Ethiopia's religious and political foundation and the global community. Tigray is often revered as the cradle of Ethiopian civilization, being the first region to embrace both Christianity and Islam on the African continent<sup>2</sup> Consequently, it is home to crucial ancient monasteries, churches, mosques, and heritage sites that contribute to studying human origins. Beyond its religious, political, and cultural significance, Tigray is celebrated for its resilience and historical resistance against oppression. Throughout history, the people of Tigray have bravely repelled invading forces, making Ethiopia the sole African nation never to be colonized.

## The Tigray War, how it started!

The people of Tigray have struggled not only against foreign invaders who have come to Ethiopia as colonizers but also against the unjust absolute monarchy and the former communist military government. Notably, their armed resistance against the “Derg regime” spanned from 1974 to 1991. Despite comprising less than 10% of Ethiopia's total population, they successfully waged a 17-year battle against the Derg regime – a force that possessed the largest military power in Africa.<sup>3</sup> Under the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) leadership, the Tigray Army seized control of Addis Ababa on May 28, 1991,<sup>4</sup> alongside other Ethiopian forces. This pivotal moment led to the drafting a constitution in 1994,<sup>5</sup> agreed upon by most Ethiopians, and establishing a civilian government led by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Over the next three decades, Ethiopia enjoyed relative stability and witnessed three peaceful transitions of political power. In 2010, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali [Dr] took office, promising equality, freedom, respect for human rights, and democratic culture. However, Abiy Ahmed's subsequent actions diverged from his promises. His popularity in Tigray declined as he resorted to hate speech, arbitrary arrests, and violence against dissenting voices, including prominent professionals, military leaders, musicians, journalists, and politicians.

## Reconciliation with the Government of Eritrea

Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia in 1991, aided significantly by Tigrayans and the TPLF, culminated in independence. However, the Eritrean army invaded the towns of Badme, Sheraro, Zalambessa, Alitena, and Bure, causing massive looting, killings, violence, and destruction of infrastructure against Ethiopians, especially Tigrayans, in 1998.

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1. <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/05/973624991/9-things-to-know-about-the-unfolding-crisis-in-ethiopia-tigray-region>

2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tigray\\_Region#:~:text=Tigray%20is%20often%20regarded%20as,Red%20Sea%20and%20then%20Tigray.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tigray_Region#:~:text=Tigray%20is%20often%20regarded%20as,Red%20Sea%20and%20then%20Tigray.)

3. The New York Times, May 28, 1991, ETHIOPIAN REBELS STORM THE CAPITAL AND SEIZE CONTROL

4. Washington Post, May 29, 1991, ETHIOPIAN REBELS TAKE OVER CAPITAL

5. [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Ethiopia\\_1994](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Ethiopia_1994)

6. The Eritrean-Ethiopian War (1998-2000), Sean D. Murphy, George Washington University Law School

The failure to diplomatically resolve border disputes led to a brutal war between Ethiopia and Eritrea from 1998 to 2000, resulting in substantial loss of life.<sup>7</sup> The Eritrean government waged bloody wars with Ethiopia and neighboring Sudan, Yemen, and Djibouti for various reasons.

What makes the war with Ethiopia special, however, is that no one ever expected Eritrea to invade the people of Tigray, who had supported the independence of the Eritrean people. Though they had endured significant losses, Tigrayans had no choice but to defend their rights.

After extensive military preparations, the Ethiopian government launched a well-organized counterattack against the invading Eritrean army, liberating the Ethiopian territories and taking control of large areas of Eritrea.<sup>8</sup> The Ethiopian army decided to return to its borders in the hopes of resolving the border dispute peacefully. However, no common agreement was reached between the two governments; as a result, the two countries remained in a 'No war, No peace' state for over two decades. After Abiy Ahmed was appointed as Ethiopia's prime minister in April 2018, he announced that the border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia would be resolved peacefully.<sup>9</sup> However, without approval from the Ethiopian House of People's Representatives and without fulfilling Ethiopian foreign affairs and diplomatic protocols, it was officially announced that relations between the two countries had returned to normal following the peace agreement signed between Isaias Afewerki and Abiy Ahmed. The border between Ethiopia and Eritrea was also officially opened. Following this, Abiy Ahmed won great admiration from international organizations and the community and became the 2019 International Nobel Peace Prize winner. However, this award-winning leader later betrayed expectations by launching a war against Tigray, marked by war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing.

However, in November 2020, he formed a joint front with the Eritrean army, Somalia, and Amhara Regional forces against the Tigrayan people. This is one of the deadliest wars in the world, with the highest human and material destruction, displacing millions of people and killing hundreds of thousands. Massacres, sexual violence, and starvation were used as weapons of war.<sup>10</sup>

### **Justice and Reconciliation**

The Ethiopian government has repeatedly rejected offers from the European Union, the United States, and other international organizations for a peaceful war settlement.<sup>11</sup> Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has committed war crimes, crimes against humanity, massacres, and genocide against Tigrayans for over three years. After more than three years of rejecting the process of resolving political differences through peaceful negotiations offered by various international organizations at various times, a peace deal in Pretoria was signed in November 2022 after millions of innocent civilians were displaced, hundreds of thousands were killed, and massive infrastructure was destroyed. He was mainly forced to sign this treaty because Ethiopian Defense Forces were already severely weakened due to the unjust war he launched against Tigray. The country's economy was severely damaged as a result. In addition, the United States and the European Union imposed economic sanctions on the Ethiopian government, which resulted in its inability to obtain foreign exchange to purchase military weapons.

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7. Ibid.

8. The Guardian, Ethiopia gains upper hand in war with Eritrea, May 18, 2000.

9. CNN, Ethiopia's parliament swears in new prime minister, April 2, 2018.

10. Think Thank, European Parliament, War in Tigray - Background and state of play.

11. Ibid.

Despite offers from the European Union, the United States, and other international bodies for a peaceful resolution, the Ethiopian government under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has repeatedly rejected such overtures. Over a span of more than two years, Abiy Ahmed's actions included committing war crimes, massacres, and genocide against Tigrayans. The Pretoria peace agreement, signed in November 2022 after massive displacement, death tolls, and infrastructure destruction, was largely a result of Ethiopia's weakened defense forces and struggling economy. Economic sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union contributed to its inability to obtain foreign exchange to purchase military weapons. The road to true reconciliation must begin with justice.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Road to Reconciliation Begins with Justice!**

Abiy Ahmed has consistently and openly lied about his true intentions regarding Tigray.<sup>13</sup> One cannot wholeheartedly assert that the Prime Minister has entered a credible reconciliation with the leaders of Tigray. On June 1, 2023, Human Rights Watch reported that local authorities and Amhara forces in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region have persisted in forcibly expelling Tigrayans as part of an ethnic cleansing campaign in the Western Tigray Zone, despite the November 2, 2022, truce agreement.<sup>14</sup> Laetitia Bader, deputy African director at Human Rights Watch, stated, "The November truce in northern Ethiopia has not put an end to the ethnic cleansing of Tigrayans in the Western Tigray Zone."<sup>15</sup> This situation makes it evident that Abiy and his allies cannot be trusted and must be held accountable for the harm they inflicted upon the Tigray people. Therefore, for a successful reconciliation process, it is imperative that all international governments and human rights organizations ensure the continuation of independent investigations into the abuses within the Ethiopian conflict, as ratified by the United Nations.<sup>16</sup> This ongoing investigation is crucial for bringing the perpetrators of the Tigray genocide to justice.

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12. Human Rights Watch, Crimes against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing in Ethiopia's Western Tigray Zone, "We Will Erase You from This Land," April 6, 2022.

13. Professor Tony Magana, Time for the world to recognize that Abiy Ahmed cannot be trusted, November 21, 2021.

14. Human Rights Watch, Ethnic Cleansing Ongoing in Ethiopia, June 1, 2023.

15. Ibid.

16. UN, International Commission of Human Rights, September 22, 2022.