

Ethiopia on the brink as crisis threatens ‘peace and stability’ of region – but what has fueled the conflict and criticism of Biden’s response?

<p>

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [is warning](#) that the [worsening situation in Ethiopia](#) puts at risk the “peace and stability” of the Horn of Africa.

<p>

The comments were made on Nov. 17, 2021, as Blinken began [a five-day trip to Africa](#) during which [he will speak with regional leaders](#) about concerns of an all-out civil war in the continent’s second most populous nation. The diplomatic mission follows criticism of the [U.S. and the international community over its reaction](#) to a conflict that has seen numerous accusations of war crimes.

<p>

The Conversation asked [Gloria Emeagwali, professor of African history at Central Connecticut State University](#), to explain how the crisis in Ethiopia developed, and what hope there is for a path away from catastrophe.

<p>

What is the current situation in Ethiopia?

The conflict in the Tigray region in northern Ethiopia has now been [going on for more than a year](#). While major fighting has been between the [Tigray People’s Liberation Front and Ethiopian government forces](#), [armed groups from neighboring Eritrea](#) have also been involved.

<p>

The fighting has been particularly intense. Both the TPLF and federal government forces have been [accused by the United Nations of human rights violations](#), including systematic ethnically based rape and massacres. Concern has recently turned to the [risk of starvation for hundreds of thousands of people](#) cut off from supplies.

<p>

And things could get worse. There is a risk of an all-out civil war engulfing Ethiopia’s population of 110 million.

<p>

Fighting has spread from the Tigray region, which was the focus of the early part of the conflict. The TPLF and its allies [continue to move south](#) from their base in Mekelle in the north, and have seized

strategically important towns such as Lalibela and Dessie. The Ethiopian government has expressed fears that the fighting [may soon engulf the capital Addis Ababa](#).

<p>

What is the immediate cause of the conflict in Ethiopia?

There is a long history to the fighting, but the spark to the current phase was an [attack on federal troops based](#) in Mekelle, by the TPLF, on Nov. 4, 2020. At least [1,000 troops were kidnapped](#) and an undefined number were killed by TPLF insurgents. This sparked a retaliatory strike by government forces and a [declaration of a state of emergency](#) by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

<p>

What is the broader context of the crisis?

For almost three decades, the TPLF controlled the government and military. During this period it gained [enormous control over the country's economy and land](#) as well as over billions of dollars in aid received each year. The TPLF ruled in such a way that it redefined Ethiopia largely by ethnicity, with [Tigrayans reaping most of the power](#).

<p>

Opposition to the TPLF-dominated government contributed in April 2018 to [Abiy Ahmed's election](#). As prime minister, Abiy began limiting the economic dominance of the TPLF and [instituting more centralized federal policies](#).

<p>

The Abiy administration promised a new level of transparency, freed thousands of prisoners and brokered peace with neighboring Eritrea – leading to [his winning the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize](#).

But even before then, political resentment was brewing. An [assassination attempt on Abiy in June 2018](#) was followed by a deepening power struggle between the TPLF and the new administration.

<p>

How could all-out civil war affect the region?

A lengthy and bloody conflagration in Ethiopia would likely have ripple effects in neighboring Eritrea, Sudan and Kenya, with a [steady flow of refugees](#), weapons and displaced population groups.

Any further instability is likely to [embolden terrorist organizations such as Al-Shabab](#), which could spread westward into Ethiopia and even Sudan from its base in Somalia. This would shatter the effective containment model put in place by the previous and current Ethiopian governments.

More peaceful regions of the Horn – such as Djibouti and Somaliland – could attract terrorists seeking prisoners of war or forced recruits. A civil war could also worsen instability in Sudan, which itself is [currently embroiled in a standoff](#) between pro-democracy activists and the military.

As for Ethiopia itself, all-out civil war could be catastrophic, igniting tensions in a country that consists of [more than 80 ethnic groups, and potentially leading to the breakup](#) of the country into unviable political entities and enclaves.

<p>

Why has there been criticism of the US response?

While the Biden administration [has called for](#) all “belligerents in the Tigray region” to agree to a cease-fire, [Ethiopia and Eritrea](#) have accused the U.S. of supporting the insurgents.

In a letter to the United Nations, Eritrean foreign minister Osman Saleh [blamed the Biden administration](#) for “stoking further conflict and destabilization” in Tigray in a bid to “resuscitate the remnants of the TPLF regime.”

The Ethiopian government similarly [accused the U.S. of meddling](#) in the region and of “treating on equal footing” the democratically elected government and the TPLF – which the Ethiopian government declared a terrorist group in May 2021.

After Washington [announced sanctions against all sides in the conflict](#) in September, Abiy responded with an online letter to Biden accusing the U.S. administration of failing to “openly and sternly reprimand the terrorist group in the same manner it has been chastising my Government.”

A decision in early November to [remove Ethiopia from a U.S. trade program](#) over what Biden described as “gross violations” has only worsened relations with Abiy’s government.

Ethiopians suspect that U.S. foreign policy is being influenced in part by [Washington’s support](#) for Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi in a dispute over the [Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam](#), an enormous hydroelectric power project on the Blue Nile that Ethiopia says it needs for a reliable electrical grid and economic development.

Ethiopia began filling the dam reservoir, which will take [about five years](#), in July 2020. Yet Egypt, which sees the dam as a threat to its freshwater supplies, has said the dam reservoir should not be filled without a legal agreement about allocation of the Blue Nile’s water. Former U.S. President Donald Trump [cut aid to Ethiopia in September 2020, with officials in his administration saying the country had not abided](#) by its promise to resolve the dispute. It is important to note that the dam was pioneered by the TPLF-led government under Meles Zenawi. Critics argue that any disintegration of Ethiopia would strengthen Egypt’s position in negotiations over the dam.

What can be done to avoid an all-out civil war?

It may be almost too late to avert an all-out civil war in Ethiopia. But pressure from the African Union and member states that border Ethiopia, along with engagement with civil organizations within the country, may push the warring parties toward peace talks.

[*More than 140,000 readers get one of The Conversation’s informative newsletters. [Join the list today.](#)*]

Meanwhile, there are some actions that the main protagonists can take to bring down tensions. Declaring the [TPLF a terrorist organization](#) was likely a misguided policy by Abiy, and this could be rescinded as a gesture of goodwill. In return, the TPLF should recognize Abiy Ahmed as the democratically elected prime minister of Ethiopia – something it has refused to do so far.

As for the role of the U.S., the visit to the region by Secretary of State Blinken is long overdue. Rising anti-Americanism in Ethiopia resulting from the Biden administration’s stance on the Tigray conflict has helped push Ethiopia toward [closer military and trade ties with Russia and Turkey](#).

