

Pertinent Issues on the War in Tigray

By Tsadkan Gebretensae

December 24, 2021

The aims of the leadership of Tigray in the war in Ethiopia are, first, to save the people of Tigray from a genocidal onslaught including forced starvation and, second, to establish an all-inclusive government for Ethiopia as a whole. There is no intention to install a government in Addis Ababa led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Instead, we want the people of Tigray to govern themselves within a multi-national federal system.

Eleven months ago after the first round of fighting in which, the people of Tigray were facing a coordinated campaign of destruction from the governments in Ethiopia and Eritrea, the leadership of Tigray, including the TPLF and others, met together to decide how to respond. The Central Command was established to serve as the highest decision making body with regard to the war effort. The Central Command under the regional government of Tigray is leading the whole war effort including the activities of the TDF (Tigray Defense Forces) up to now. I am a member of the Central Command but the views I am expressing here are my personal views and should not be taken to reflect the views of the Tigray Government and Central Command.

In June, after our forces liberated most of Tigray, the Central Command issued an eight point proposal for talks with the Federal Government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, which we hoped would lead to a ceasefire and a peaceful settlement. Abiy did not respond to those proposals and continually rejected the efforts of international interlocutors. He refused to meet our non-negotiable precondition which is ending the war crime of starvation by permitting humanitarian aid and restoring essential services.

Although the starvation of our people is not on your television screens, it is real. Every day, children and their mothers are perishing of hunger. Our people are dying needlessly from treatable diseases because our hospitals have no medicine. Abiy made it perfectly clear that he intended to crush the spirit of resistance to subjugation in Tigray through a starvation siege. In this context the Central Command took the decision to pursue the war, joining forces with other groups to establish a United Front. This includes organizations from Oromo, Somali, Afar, Agaw and others. The biggest of these groups is the Oromo Liberation Army. There was and still is a desire to include other political forces including Amhara political forces as well.

We are fighting to protect the principles of the Federal Constitution of Ethiopia, starting with the cherished affirmation that sovereign legitimacy resides in the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia. Abiy, on the other hand, is fighting to overturn the constitution. The Amhara elites continually talk about an Ethiopia

that is greater than its people. They are ready to kill for this ideology and they are sending thousands of young people to die for it. These elites claim legitimacy for their group only, looking backwards to the era when Ethiopia was an Amhara-ruled empire. We have experienced this kind of ultra-nationalism in the past and it neither secured national territorial integrity nor protected the central government from collapse. Instead, the project of a centralized Ethiopian empire led to war and destruction in all corners of our country. This was why the 1995 Ethiopian constitution, which remains in place today, defines the country as the voluntary unity of its peoples within a federal system.

The Tigray Central Command pursued the war in order to compel the government to negotiate on equal terms and, failing that, to replace it with an all-inclusive Transitional Government. Foreign and domestic political forces were apprehensive of a “repeat of 1991”, referring to the military victory of the TPLF and its coalition partners in that year. We made it clear that the political landscape both in Tigray and Ethiopia have changed so much so that there is no option for such a scenario. Moreover, Tigray cannot shoulder the responsibility for reconstituting the Ethiopian state, especially so without any agreed domestic political arrangement and clear international support.

Our political discussions within the United Front and other political forces which were yet to be part of the coalition were proceeding more slowly than our military advance, which reached the outskirts of the city of Debre Birhan, just 145 km from Addis Ababa. The prospect that we would march into the capital city caused panic mainly among the internationals and to some extent Ethiopians as well. We understand that fear. We also want those who are dismayed about the safety of the capital to understand the intolerable suffering and the threat of continuing genocide that the Tigrayan people are living under every day.

This was the reason for our decision to march towards Addis Ababa. We hoped the political developments, both international and domestic, would catch up by then as well. This did not happen.

We appreciate that many around the world, including the U.S., the European Union, and the international media, have exposed the grievous violations against our people and demanded that they stop. We were hopeful that the matter would be raised at the UN Security Council which would act on its obligations to uphold fundamental norms about humanity and act energetically to promote a peaceful resolution of the conflict. But China and Russia consistently blocked any efforts. It appears to us that they did so because they saw the war in terms of the balance of geo-strategic power, and sacrificed principles for political point-scoring, abandoning people to die out of their narrow mindedness.

Regrettably, Western nations’ actions did not go beyond rhetoric. They appealed for a cessation of hostilities and for humanitarian access, but in practice these were empty gestures. They did not use the diplomatic and economic tools in their hands. Worse, the rhetoric of western governments and the silence of the African

Union gave Abiy the pretext to adopt slogans of anti-imperialism and pan-Africanism which in turn allowed China and Russia, along with Iran, Turkey and the UAE, to sell arms. Tigray got words, Abiy got weapons.

The best that can be said for those supporting Abiy is that his backers believe they are protecting the Ethiopian state from collapse. They are misinformed. They are saving a government in name only. Our forces encounter this on the battlefield: the Ethiopian National Defense Force is kitted out in uniforms and has modern equipment, ranks and units, but it fights like a rag-tag horde of feudal levies, backed by an air force and drones supplied by foreigners. Administrative structures have collapsed across the country. Salaries are not paid, schoolchildren are sent to harvest the fields. The foreign ministry has been replaced by campaigns on Twitter and Facebook. The peace and security architecture for the Horn, which was painstakingly built by Ethiopia's diplomats and peacekeepers in partnership with the African Union and United Nations, has been summarily demolished.

In fact, Abiy is implementing the blueprint of Isaias Afwerki, dictator of Eritrea. This is to build a trio of autocrats: Isaias, Abiy and the Somali president Mohamed Farmaajo. For Ethiopia this means a dictator in Addis Ababa ruling over a weak and fragmented state, all under the heel of Eritrea.

The Ethiopian state under Abiy Ahmed and his Amhara interlocutors is being used as a Trojan Horse for the unbridled and oversized ambition of Isaias Afewerki, who he himself is serving as an agent of the Middle Eastern countries. I would like to make one thing clear, if the resistance in Tigray is crushed by the combined forces of the Ethiopian federal government, Amhara forces, and their backers in the Middle East (Turkey, UAE, and Iran) the floodgates for Isaias to implement his blueprint will be open. The region of the Horn of Africa will be run as per the dictat of the Eritrean dictator. Is the international community, Africa and the region willing to live with the impending scenario? If the answer to the question posed is no, the time to act is now.

The Ethiopian government has begged and borrowed and sold its assets to get arms from foreign powers who have little knowledge about the country and less goodwill. No amount of jingoistic rhetoric can conceal that Abiy has made Ethiopia into a beggar. Those who are putting coins on his plate today will want him to sing for them tomorrow.

Where Middle Eastern powers have poured in their weapons and money, and the international community has recognized a government in name only, we do not see stability. In Libya, Syria and Yemen we see the reality of state collapse. The government becomes a client of its biggest paymasters and the country becomes locked in unending conflict. We need to save Ethiopia from this fate.

The U.S. government expressed its serious concern over the maintenance and continuity of the Ethiopian state. It stated its intention to bring a rapid resolution to the war through negotiation. Washington DC openly opposed the advance of

the TDF to Addis Ababa, threatening the government of Tigray with sanctions if our forces approached the city. On the other hand, the U.S. expressed no strategy (at least to us) to end the war except appeasing Abiy Ahmed with flattery. The policy of appeasement has not brought any solution before and it will not bring fast resolution of the conflict and save the Ethiopian state either.

In my opinion the fastest way to end the conflict has now evaporated. In this context, the TDF is fighting absolutely alone. It has no international allies and no military or other material assistance from abroad. Tigrayan people do not even receive humanitarian aid. The Tigrayan people are few, impoverished but gallant and with a strong sense of identity. We have a long and proud history of fighting against invaders of our land and we are repeating the heroic feats of our predecessors.

Our forces did not advance on Addis Ababa. In the last two weeks, the effects of swarms of drones on the TDF advanced positions and supply lines has been substantial. Personnel of Eritrean armored divisions are in daily combat within the ranks of the ENDF. Eritrean forces still occupy substantial parts of Tigray. In these circumstances, with long and vulnerable supply lines to our forces, and no effective international political process for a negotiated settlement, the Government of regional state of Tigray through the Central command decided to withdraw to defensive positions to consolidate our forces. A withdrawal under drone fire is a difficult military operation which we have accomplished successfully. We are undefeated.

Over the last few days, the Ethio-Eritrean coalition forces attempted to penetrate our lines, from south, west and east. They were repulsed with heavy losses. After these setbacks the regime in Addis Ababa announced that it had completed “phase one” of its operation and would not be continuing its attacks. This statement, coupled with the previously announced position of the National Regional Government of Tigray for a ceasefire, opens an opportunity for the international community, led by Kenya, to press for a cessation of hostilities and initiate peace talks.

If this does not happen, the war will continue not only in Tigray but in other places in Ethiopia as well. There will be more loss of lives; economic destruction and whatever political and social fabric that might have persisted up to now will be destroyed which means saving the Ethiopian multinational federal state as we know it becomes very difficult.

Now the regime of Abiy Ahmed could be preparing to initiate an “inclusive dialogue” controlled and monitored by itself. He is trying hard to make the world believe him he has “defeated the rebels” and would offer them to be part of this inclusive dialogue, as individuals not as the TPLF. Some in the international community might support his idea as well.

This process will not work. Any inclusive dialogue should be done by neutral

bodies with the participation of the major political forces in Ethiopia sponsored and supported by the international community. The mechanism could be worked out with the assistance of experts on the field. We hope that African countries will rise to the challenge of hosting and facilitating the conference.

There must be a political solution to the war in Ethiopia. Whether this includes Abiy or not is secondary. What is important is that the human crisis facing the Tigrayan people is averted and that the settlement to this war should usher in stability, democracy and development.

My vision for this is as follows.

Tigray must stand on its feet and must have cast iron guarantees that the genocidal assaults of the last year will never, ever happen again. We shall rely on ourselves, as we have shown we can do, but we also rely on Africa and the international community to ensure that we are not alone if we ever again face enemies determined to destroy us.

Ethiopia is a nation of nations, and the only way forward for the country is to recognize this. There can be no return to empire-building or the domination of one group over another Tigray is an ancient civilization, a place where Christianity has deep roots and where the peaceful coexistence and symbiosis between Muslims, Christians and Jews goes back fourteen centuries. Recognizing and preserving this is the foundation stone for stability for Ethiopia, our neighbors in the Horn of Africa, and the countries on the other shore of the Red Sea.

Tigray is an African nation. We have contributed to the birth of African civilization and we have contributed to the vision of an Africa that is stable, secure and independent from external powers, whether they be Europe, America, the Middle East or Asia. Tigrayans are proud of our contribution to Ethiopia's diplomacy and peacekeeping which was a pillar of stability and development in the Horn of Africa region. We are proud of our contribution to regional economic integration including water, electricity and transport infrastructure joining neighboring countries.

The entire international community, including Russia, China, and all the countries in the Middle East, have a responsibility to humanity that should override whatever policy differences they may have with America and Europe. That same common responsibility extends to protecting a cultural heritage, by halting the war against a people who have been the custodian of this unique intersection of faiths and cultures.

The Horn of Africa is a region where the world's great powers all have legitimate interests. The world needs maritime security, seeks to stamp out violent extremism, and wants to avert the specter of massive distress migration driven by conflict, famine and state collapse. We in Tigray recognize this. Given our proximity and history we want to be constructive player by securing our national interest and legitimate national interest of other player in the sub region. The

world should not allow a repeat of Syria, Yemen or Libya in the Horn at the western flank of the Red Sea. This is not a zero-sum game. Ethiopia should be the place where these international and regional interests converge in a multilateral pact.

All Ethiopians need a ceasefire and political negotiations. Our political goals are clear and we have reiterated our proposal for a ceasefire. This may start with a freeze in combat—a cessation of hostilities. It must then develop into a full and permanent ceasefire, which is a complicated military operation requiring professionalism on both sides. An essential component of a ceasefire is third party monitoring and verification. Africa has extensive experience in this and we are confident that our African brothers will be able to provide the necessary expertise and capacity.

Ethiopia is unique but it is also an African country where Africa's principles and wisdom are much needed. Over the last thirty years, beginning when I had the honor of serving as chief of staff of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces, Ethiopia has become an integral part of Africa's peace and security architecture, extending our services in diplomacy and peacekeeping across the continent in a spirit of brotherhood and solidarity. We now call on our African brothers to reach out their hand in that same spirit.

Thank you