

# Was the Ethiopia-Tigray peace deal a prelude to phase two of the war?

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As the renowned African proverb suggests, "when the elephants fight, the grass gets trampled." The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has pinned its survival on the peace deal negotiated in Pretoria. Conversely, the Prosperity Party (PP) is steadfast in its determination to consign the TPLF to history. However, this power struggle between the two factions starkly contradicts the wishes of the people of Tigray, who yearn for the peace deal to be realized, enabling a return to normalcy in their daily lives. The Ceasefire of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) signed in Pretoria two years ago has served as a lifeline for civilians in Tigray and its environs. Yet, it has transformed into a metaphorical battlefield for the signatory parties, marking a preparatory phase for a potential escalation into further conflict.

The Pretoria agreement has undeniably halted active warfare between the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) and the coalition forces of Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF), Eritrean Defence Force (EDF), and Amhara forces. This cessation has prevented further mass displacement and spared neighborhoods and infrastructure from destruction. However, both sides have continuously hinted at the potential resurgence of hostilities. In recent discussions, Abiy Ahmed has openly accused certain TPLF leaders of actively seeking and promoting conflict. Ahmed has even gone as far as warning community representatives that renewed warfare would result in even greater devastation than before. Conversely, the "retired" TPLF leader, Sibhat Nega, has asserted that the CoHA serves merely [as a tactic to buy time for reconsideration and preparation for future conflict.](#)

The G7 and EU have shifted their focus away from their usual insistence on the withdrawal of foreign forces, now prioritizing the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) part of the process only. In a joint press release on March 13, 2024, they expressed contentment with the progress made in implementing the CoHA signed on November 2, 2022. This statement followed a CoHA implementation reflection meeting held in Addis Ababa on March 11, 2024, facilitated by the AU High-Level Panel for the Ethiopian Peace Process. However, despite 16 months passing since the CoHA's signing, IDPs still suffer in camps, wounded TDF members lack proper medical treatment, approximately 40% of Tigray's territory remains under the control of EDF and Amhara forces, and access to humanitarian aid continues to be restricted. If the US and EU continue to favor Abiy Ahmed despite his inadequate performance in fulfilling governmental responsibilities outlined in the agreement and the constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the CoHA will not lead to enduring peace.

## Withdrawal of foreign forces

The signatories hesitated to demand the withdrawal of foreign forces, including Amhara and Eritrean troops, who persist in committing atrocities and impeding the CoHA's implementation. When the Tigray Interim Regional Administration established following the CoHA highlighted the presence of these forces in Tigray as a significant threat and a major obstacle to full DDR implementation, the PP government of Abiy Ahmed shockingly defended itself by proposing to

cede Ethiopian territory in northeastern, northern, and western Tigray to Eritrea. This move was in favor of a foreign nation. The Ethiopian government's flawed argument not only resurrects the failed Algiers Agreement signed on December 12, 2000, but also disregards Article 2a of the CoHA.

The Algiers Agreement failed due to [Eritrea's rejection of the established border commission](#), its invasion of Tigray in violation of the agreement's [prohibition against threatening or using force \(Art.1.1\)](#), and its occupation of Tigray's territories against Art. 2.2, which mandated all parties to repatriate or return to their last place of residence. Eritrea's undermining of the Algiers Peace Agreements, signed by Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2000, began as early as 2008 when it [pushed out the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea \(UNMEE\), obstructing the mission's capacity to monitor the agreement](#). Eritrea's actions included imposing crippling restrictions on UNMEE and cutting off fuel supplies, rendering it impossible for the operation to continue its mandated task. Assistant Secretary-General Ilze Brands-Kehris [informed the UN Human Rights Council](#) during its 55th Session on February 28, 2024, that Eritrean forces occupying Tigray were encroaching on Ethiopian territory, thereby contravening the international border commission.

Abiy Ahmed disregarded these realities and chose to invoke the Algiers deal, even extending its application to areas not originally contested but currently occupied by Eritrean forces. Furthermore, according to Article 6g of the Pretoria agreement, the demobilization and reintegration plan should consider Tigray's law and order to ensure the safety of civilians, a responsibility Abiy Ahmed has failed to fulfill adequately.

Abiy Ahmed's rationale strongly suggests that his government has no intention of allowing IDPs from these areas to return to their neighborhoods. What's even more ironic is that neither the US nor the EU, nor even the AU, have demanded that the Government of Ethiopia fulfill its governmental duties by acting to withdraw invading forces and restore constitutional order in Tigray.

I believe Abiy Ahmed's defense of Eritrea's denial of its presence in Ethiopia through its embassy in the UK is aimed at renewing its alliance for another potential round of conflict. It's widely known that the alliance between Abiy Ahmed and Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea soured following the signing of the CoHA. The PP administration has long fallen out of favor with the Ethiopian people, and war has become the only means to cling to power.

Abiy Ahmed consistently portrays Tigray as a more significant threat to his power than external forces, treating it as an adversary. As a result, his persistent retention of Tigray territories is aimed at weakening the region through annexation. This intention has been subtly suggested on multiple occasions, such as advocating for an extra-constitutional referendum on Western Tigray before permitting displaced Tigrayan residents to return, thereby enabling demographic shifts that undermine Tigray's interests. Additionally, Abiy Ahmed has invoked the Algiers Agreement as justification for Eritrea's permanent presence on Tigray's soil.

In contrast TPLF's arrogance to adapt to the ongoing nation-state competition that's defining the political array in the region, and its naive belief as the only savior of Ethiopia with the same faded and hated political tricks appears to continue impeding Tigray's overall political evolution costing the lives of millions of Tigrayans.

## **Unfettered Humanitarian access**

The OCHA humanitarian snapshot from February 2024 highlighted alarming levels of food insecurity resulting from the interruption in food assistance. It stated that “[Those most affected are already reeling from the impact of the northern Ethiopia conflict \(2020-2022\)](#)”. The UN further described the intricate humanitarian access restrictions in the occupied territories of Tigray saying, “In Tigray, the presence of foreign forces in the north exacerbates challenges, leading to unmet needs and population displacement”.

Despite being well aware of the famine crisis in Tigray, reminiscent of the 1985 famine, the US and EU have by omission allowed and even assisted the Government of Ethiopia in repeatedly politicizing the famine. They have done so by inaccurately portraying significant progress in unfettered humanitarian access, contrary to the findings of the UN's report. Article 5, sub-article 1 of the CoHA clearly assigns responsibility to the GoE to expedite the provision of humanitarian aid in collaboration with humanitarian agencies.

In spite of the peace agreement successfully serving as a diversionary tactic for the international community away from the crisis in Tigray, Tigrayans continue to perish under the oppression of Amhara forces and the Eritrean military. Abiy persists in employing starvation as a silent weapon, exacerbating the suffering from malnutrition and diseases stemming from the conflict. The dire plight faced by Tigrayans demands urgent attention and resolution. However, the implementation of the Pretoria agreement over the past 16 months has been disturbingly sluggish and worrisome.

While most aspects of the DDR process have been addressed, the focus and priority have been on this rather than on crucial life-saving actions such as ensuring humanitarian aid access and the withdrawal of foreign forces committing atrocities.

Despite the Pretoria agreement stating that DDR should be carried out concurrently with the withdrawal of foreign forces, it appears that the G7, EU, and AU are swayed by the Prosperity Party's political agenda, solely emphasizing DDR without pushing for the swift removal of Eritrean and Amhara forces. The failure to address this issue has hindered IDPs from returning to their homes, as these adversaries still occupy their lands.

The Ethiopian government has frequently manipulated the Tigray agenda for its own political benefit elsewhere in the country, consistently treating Tigray as a foe. Furthermore, the international community consistently overlooks the legitimate aspirations of independent Tigrayans, viewing Tigray solely through the lens of the TPLF. It is crucial for the international community to recognize the importance of upholding the CoHA to ensure lasting peace; this requires the restoration of constitutional order. Failure to do so risks escalating tensions and transforming the current political standoff into full-scale warfare.