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The EU's Entry Point into the Post-Tigray War Context

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Ethiopia's federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) made a rational choice when they ended their two-year civil war through the signing of the Pretoria agreement in November 2022. As the peace deal nears its first anniversary, critical issues remain unresolved. These include the perception by the Tigrayan side that the cessation of hostilities was nothing short of a surrender; the difficulties in effectively demobilising and reintegrating Tigrayan combatants into national forces; and the proliferation of weapons in the country. These are red flags that too often evade public and policymakers' attention. Excluded from the process that led to the Pretoria agreement, the EU could focus on these "red flag" issues to reinsert itself into Ethiopia's post-conflict stabilisation process, in the process rebooting its relations with Addis Ababa.

The belligerents' rational choice

Mutual realisation of the impossibility to achieve total victory via military means, exhaustion from the fighting, and sustained mediation efforts by the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) all played a role in making possible for the Ethiopian federal government and the TPLF to sign the comprehensive "Cessation of Hostilities" agreement on 2 November 2022 at

Pretoria, South Africa.¹

Underlying the belligerents' preference for peace were several factors. The TPLF was in a difficult spot, with Ethiopian and pro-Ethiopian forces having advanced deep into Tigray.² Humanitarian considerations and territorial losses were of increasing concern for the Tigrayans.³ The terms of the agreement “reflect the heavy military pressure [on] Tigray's forces [facing] Eritrean artillery and superior federal logistics, manpower and firepower”.⁴

For its part and despite its military advances, the Ethiopian government led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed was under intense pressure due to the cost of the war and limited access to loans and aid, partly due to accusations by United Nations' investigators concerning the use of starvation and other rights violations as a weapon against Tigray's civilian population. The cost, inconvenience and optics made the continuous prosecution of the war increasingly less favourable for the federal government. These, among other things, set the stage for a successful signing of the Pretoria agreement.

The Pretoria agreement

The Pretoria peace agreement, as a political deal, was soon after (on 12 November) complemented by a military arrangement, the Declaration of the Senior Commanders on the Modalities for the Implementation of the Agreement for Lasting Peace through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities, signed in Nairobi, Kenya.⁵

¹ See the AU's press release: *AU Launches Peace Talks to End the Conflict in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia*, 25 October 2022, <https://au.int/en/node/42301>. Also see IGAD website: *Signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement – Ethiopia*, 4 November 2022, <https://igad.int/?p=13203>.

² See the interview with Ethiopian Defence Minister Yadeta: Seleshi Tessema, “Ethiopian Troops Close in on Tigray's Capital Mekelle”, in *Anadolu Agency*, 26 November 2020, <http://v.aa.com.tr/2056372>.

³ Patrick Wight, “Many Hurdles to Peace in Tigray Remain after Pretoria and Nairobi Deals”, in *Ethiopia Insight*, 25 November 2022, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/?p=392786>.

⁴ International Crisis Group, *Turning the Pretoria Deal into Lasting Peace in Ethiopia*, 23 November 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/19947>.

⁵ *Declaration of the Senior Commanders on the Modalities for the Implementation of the Agreement for Lasting Peace through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities between the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)*, Nairobi, 12 November 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=445754684376367&set=pcb.445755144376321>.

The principles underpinning the cessation of hostilities are well established in the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), the AU Charter, the Africa Governance Architecture (AGA) and the AU Transitional Justice Policy Framework, Humanitarian Policy Framework, and Post Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCRD) policy. All these documents provide for a workable guiding framework for the implementation of the Pretoria agreement.

While addressing the physical dimension of post-war reconstruction in as much detail as possible, the Pretoria agreement also deals with such issues as hostile propaganda and hate speech, including those involving external actors. The agreement also details expectations in terms of civilian protection, humanitarian access, disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR). In addition, the agreement includes certain measures defined in terms of the responsibility of the government of the FDRE and TPLF to aid confidence and trust building. They include the TPLF's commitment to respecting the constitutional authority of the federal government (including the authority to deploy troops across the country and have exclusive right to deal with foreign powers) as well as refraining from engaging in or supporting any armed opposition to the government. The federal government pledged to halt all military activity targeting TPLF combatants, restore essential services to the Tigrayan civilian population, facilitate the lifting of the designation of the TPLF as a terrorist organisation by the federal parliament and allow Tigrayans and other affected areas unfettered access to humanitarian assistance.

The agreement may be considered a diplomatic success for Prime Minister Abiy and the AU. First, as far as FDRE's sovereignty is concerned, this agreement provides a basis to prevent a future recurrence. Secondly, the deal is a foundation upon which FDRE may justify the rejection of external involvement in the peace process; more so, it provides a concrete premise to reiterate the African-led solutions policy of the AU.

The red flags

Politics of exclusion and repression have for long dominated the Ethiopian political landscape, as different groups and factions have vied for control over resources. A context of mutual grievances and high competition has emerged, which remains

problematic even after the signing of the Pretoria peace agreement. Thus, while rational choice may have helped cease hostilities, it is not enough to prevent another outbreak of violence in the future.

Perception can be more of a problem than reality, if left unattended. The agreement is perceived by some Tigrayans as encapsulating their surrender to the FDRE.⁶ At the start of the war, the TPLF was successful in mobilising its members. The war was presented as a defence from “genocidal invaders” and the Tigrayan media, opposition parties and members of the Tigrayan diasporas all supported this narrative.⁷

The agreement states that the DDR process is dependent on the security situation of the Tigray region. Specifically, the Nairobi declaration by the senior commanders conditioned the DDR process on the withdrawal of Eritrean and Amharan forces, both allied to the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF), from Tigray (Article 2.1d, foreign and non-ENDF forces). The DDR process by itself is supposed to integrate part of the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) into the ENDF. However, as is the case with the other regions of Ethiopia, the TPLF expects to retain some of their fighters as regional special forces and militias. Although it is unclear who can verify the security situation of the affected region and how, it can be reasonably argued that the TDF will not lay arms until the actual or perceived security threat to ethnic Tigrayans from the federal government is gone. For instance, while the ceasefire and withdrawal of troops is a work in progress, it was no surprise that after the commander-in-chief of the Tigray rebel forces announced that 65 per cent of the troops disengaged about a month after the agreement was signed, he went on to highlight that troops in the areas “that don’t want peace” are yet to be withdrawn – referring to Eritrean soldiers and other regional Ethiopian militia.⁸ Eritrean forces began withdrawal in December 2022. However, there are still complaints from the Tigray region that Eritrean troops are yet to leave. In the post-war context, therefore,

⁶ Mohamed Kheir Omer, “Who Can Trust the Ethiopian Peace Deal”, in *African Arguments*, 8 November 2022, <https://africanarguments.org/?p=40364>.

⁷ See the construction of the narrative in the Omna Tigray website: *United We Should Stand against Genocidal Forces*, March 2022, <https://omnatigray.org/?p=11088>.

⁸ See AFP, “Ethiopia’s Tigray Forces Withdraw 65% of Fighters from Frontline, Says Commander”, in *France 24*, 4 December 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20221204-ethiopia-s-tigray-forces-have-withdrawn-65-of-fighters-from-frontline-says-commander>.

the full withdrawal and subsequent disarmament by the Tigrayans may largely depend on the exit of Eritrean soldiers and the regional militia. Overall, this impacts the future of demilitarisation in the region, while specifically increasing the risk of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the post-war context.

While the agreement clearly defines the concerned parties' responsibilities in the DDR process, it neglects a key vulnerability that may well imperil post-war reconciliation, namely the ubiquity of weapons across the country. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons has repeatedly proven to be a massive problem in post-conflict societies. During wars and especially civil conflicts, trafficking routes are established as weapons are sold in the black market, and sometimes sourced from national armed forces.⁹

An entry point for the EU

Ethiopia's federal government did not receive well criticisms from external actors – especially the EU – during the conflict.¹⁰ This means that the EU may have to walk on eggshells if it wants to engage in the peace process beyond humanitarian support. The red flags indicated above are an entry point for the EU to strengthen its relationship with Ethiopia.

This EU should therefore support the relevant stakeholders to implement programmatic actions directed at shaping pro-peace perception which may include targeted advocacies and campaigns. The EU should also support the DDR process by providing technical assistance while also helping build capacities to block actual and potential arms trafficking routes.

⁹ See the key takeaways in the UNODC report: UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel. Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment – Sahel*, New York, United Nations, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/node/3933572>.

¹⁰ Benjamin Fox, "EU-Ethiopia Diplomatic Feud Intensifies over Tigray Criticism", in *Euractiv*, 2 March 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1574082>.



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