



By: Sharmila Devi

# Ethiopia: A humanitarian crisis looms over Tigray amid the threat of rekindled conflict



It is probably a safe bet to say that while Donald Trump was **enjoying** the largesse of his hosts in Saudi Arabia last week, he was not thinking about a rising death toll from lack of food and medical care in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, partly caused by his administration's aid cuts.

Nor is he likely to have urged his Gulf allies to do more to push Ethiopia and Eritrea to back away from the brink of war and ensure that their own jostling for influence in the Horn of Africa ceases to destabilise Sudan and Somalia as well.

More than 58% of Ethiopia's population of around 130 million people faces food insecurity. USAID cuts have triggered severe food and other service disruptions, particularly for the thousands of people living in camps for the internally displaced in Tigray.

Looming over the humanitarian crisis is the threat of renewed conflict in Tigray given the shaky status of the Pretoria **Agreement** that ended two years of hostilities between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in 2022. Around 600,000 people died in the conflict, more than in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine combined, notes the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).

## A dangerous game of chess

The terms of the peace agreement deepened a rift over how to deal with the Tigray rebels between Addis Ababa and Asmara, both of which ordered military mobilisation earlier this year. The two countries last fought in 1998-2000.

With Washington focused on its own economic and cultural battles, Europe is being urged to intervene in a region which "is now a tinderbox for conflict."

**Europe has a strong interest in preventing war between Eritrea and Ethiopia**

"Ethiopia and Eritrea are playing a dangerous game of chess; Tigray lies right in the centre of the board," said an ECFR **commentary**. "Europe has a strong interest in preventing war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. A conflict could further destabilise an already precarious situation in the Horn of Africa, likely sparking a humanitarian crisis which would drive refugee flows toward Europe and increase aid needs."

Any deepened European involvement in the region would pit it against Gulf heavyweights Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, both of which helped to broker the Pretoria Accord and are now riding high on their ties with Trump. It is hard to imagine the US president having the patience to navigate a spider's web of regional alliances and interests that tax even seasoned observers.

## Regional players

Competition among regional players for access to ports and also to fresh water is key to understanding many of the interlocked disputes.

Landlocked Ethiopia lost the ports of Assab and Massawa when Eritrea seceded in 1993, and Addis Ababa reportedly pays about \$1.6 billion a year in port fees to Djibouti. Ethiopia is also in dispute over its Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, the largest hydroelectric power plant in Africa on the Blue Nile.

Egypt views the dam as a threat to its own water supply and could intervene in any conflict on the side of Eritrea, which also has close ties with Saudi Arabia. Turkey and Qatar also have strong interests in the region and have previously intervened in other disputes there.

**Saudi Arabia is planning a billion-dollar investment**

According to Eritrean exile press **reports**, Saudi Arabia is planning a billion-dollar investment in Eritrea's Assab port, perhaps to neutralise Ethiopia's ambitions on the strategic

location.

Saudi Arabia's rival, the UAE, meanwhile, has deepened its relationship with Ethiopia and with Sudan's Rapid Support Forces, which are fighting a brutal conflict with Sudanese government forces, and with Somaliland, which broke away from Somalia in 1991. Last year, Ethiopia signed a maritime deal with Somaliland to build a port there.

Earlier this year, Somaliland rejected an attempt by Somalia to give the US exclusive control of a port and airbase in Berbera, on the northern coast of Somaliland. The port is run by DP World from the UAE.

"The clustering of Ethiopia and the UAE on one side of fault lines in the Horn – and of Eritrea, Egypt and Saudi Arabia on the other – aggravates regional conflict risks and complicates peacemaking," **says** the International Crisis Group.

## Africa's North Korea

Neither Ethiopia nor Eritrea would win any awards for political and press freedom, which anyway is not a priority of their respective allies.

Ethiopia is due to hold elections next year, and "the government still tends to suppress, detain and eliminate the opposition," **wrote** Bizuneh Yimenu of Queen's University Belfast. The Reporters Without Borders' annual press freedom index placed Ethiopia at 145th place out of 180 countries following mass arrests and the detention of media workers.



*Ethiopia had been the biggest beneficiary of US aid in sub-Saharan Africa*

Eritrea is called Africa's North Korea, and President Isaias Afwerki has ruled the country since 1993. "The world is now paying some attention to Eritrea, because of the looming risk of conflict with Ethiopia," Ibrahim Harun, chairman of the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organisation, a political group based in Ethiopia, **wrote** recently. "But even if conflict between the two neighbours is somehow prevented, the misery of Eritreans stuck in Isaias's garrison state will continue."

The risk of conflict hinges on what happens in Tigray and, in particular, whether around 250,000 former fighters are successfully demobilised and political infighting is resolved. Substantial aid funding and debt relief are two ways in which richer countries could help to bring the region back from the brink.

Some 2.4 million people in Tigray depend on humanitarian aid, much of which was provided by USAID. Ethiopia had been the biggest beneficiary of US aid in sub-Saharan Africa, receiving \$1.8 billion in the 2023 financial year.

But like many other countries in Africa, Ethiopia is having to grapple with a future without large inflows of assistance. Meanwhile, it may take a sharp turn to fresh conflict before the region is the focus of focused diplomacy in western and regional capitals.