

AFRICA RISK CONSULTING**Ethiopia Monthly Briefing March 2025**

Ethiopia Summary 21 March 2025

Political tensions between rival factions within the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) escalate to a crisis level when the faction loyal to disputed TPLF chairperson Debretsion Gebremichael seizes strategic key points in the region. Fears of a possible conflict in the Tigray Region are further compounded by the increasing tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (2018-present) expresses optimism about Ethiopia's economic position and predicts strong economic growth of 8.4% in the current fiscal year. Armed gunmen take 50 people hostages in the Oromia Region after attacking their passenger bus.

Crisis developing in Tigray Region as TPLF faction seizes key points

The political tensions between rival factions between the two dominant factions of the **Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)** came to a head on 12 March when the faction loyal to disputed TPLF chairperson **Debretsion Gebremichael** seized strategic key points in the region.¹

Forces loyal to Debretsion took over the administrative centres of the towns of **Adigrat**, **Adi Gudem**, and the regional capital **Mekelle**.² These forces further secured control of the region's largest radio station, **Mekelle FM 104.4**. Interim Tigray regional leader **Getachew Reda** denounced these aggressive moves as an attempted coup by Debretsion. Getachew has since fled Mekelle and is currently in **Addis Ababa** where he is lobbying the federal government to intervene. The interim regional president has also accused Debretsion of cooperating with external forces, which has widely been interpreted as meaning **Eritrea**.

This developing crisis is rooted in the fallout between Debretsion and Getachew. The erstwhile political allies have split over the control of the TPLF and visions for the future of the **Tigray Region**. This divide was made evident during the disputed party conference in Mekelle on 13 August 2024 - Getachew and his allies boycotted the conference denouncing it as illegitimate while conference delegates re-elected Debretsion as TPLF chairperson and voted to remove Getachew as party vice president.³ The disputed TPLF **Central Committee** that emerged from this conference has also called for the dissolution of the Interim Regional Administration of Tigray denouncing it as weak and under external influence.⁴

Tensions between Debretsion and Getachew and their respective factions have been deteriorating for months. However, this sudden move by the Debretsion faction appears to have been in response to Getachew dismissing three senior **Tigray Defence Force (TDF)** commanders who were allied with Debretsion on 11 March.⁵ Getachew removed these officers accusing them of attempting to push the region into an internal conflict.

There is a real possibility that this ongoing crisis could lead to a conflict within Tigray. The majority of TDF forces are believed to be aligned with Debretsion but there are factions within this regional armed force that support Getachew and the interim administration. These forces may seek to prevent any further takeover by the Debretsion faction, especially if they believe that federal forces will be deployed to support them.

¹ Reuters, 12 Mar 2025

² ACLED, 19 Mar 2025

³ Addis Standard, 13 Aug 2024

⁴ Addis Standard, 23 Jan 2025

⁵ Reuters, 12 Mar 2025

At present, prime minister **Abiy Ahmed** (2018-present) does not seem willing to reignite a civil conflict in Tigray. In an address to Ethiopia's parliament on 20 March, Abiy praised Getachew and the interim administration but largely ignored the ongoing crisis.⁶ It is likely that Abiy is hoping the matter can be resolved without requiring the deployment of federal forces. Tigray is still recovering from the **2020-2022 Tigray War** and anti-federal sentiment remains strong. Furthermore, the return of federal troops would likely solidify the TPLF behind Debretsion and lead to a larger civil conflict. The **Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF)** are also currently overstretched as they are combatting nationalist militia groups in the **Amhara** and **Oromia** regions as well as maintaining a large deployment in **Somalia**. Reigniting hostilities in the Tigray region would place potentially unsustainable pressure on the ENDF.

... as Ethio-Eritrean relations continue to deteriorate

Any conflict the Tigray, particularly one involving federal security forces, would risk drawing neighbouring Eritrea into the conflict, an even more likely situation at present given the elevated tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The two countries have a complex history rooted in an ongoing border dispute following Eritrea's secession in 1993. Eritrea's exit rendered Ethiopia a landlocked country resulting in modern-day Ethiopia's open desire to secure some form of maritime access.

Abiy's rise to power appeared to mark a turning point in Ethio-Eritrean relations; the two countries took steps to normalise relations and Eritrea even fought on the side of the Ethiopian government in the Tigray War. However, tensions between the neighbouring states have increased in the last two years driven by the unresolved border dispute, Eritrea's refusal to fully withdraw its troops from Tigray, and allegations that Eritrea is interfering in Ethiopia's sovereign affairs.⁷

The developing political and security crisis in Tigray has aggravated these tensions, especially given Getachew's repeated allegations that Debretsion's faction is conspiring with the Eritrean government to foment a new conflict in the region.⁸ Although such a possibility cannot be discounted, it would be unexpected given the longstanding animosity between the TPLF and Eritrea's ruling **People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ)** party.

Tensions were further aggravated by former Ethiopian president **Mulatu Teshome Wirtu's** (2013-2018) editorial on 17 February accusing Eritrea of fomenting conflict with Ethiopia.⁹ The Eritrean government has responded forcefully to both Getachew and Mulatu's allegations and instead accused Ethiopia of threatening to destabilise the region in its pursuit of maritime access.¹⁰ Notably, Eritrea's information minister, **Yemane Meskel**, also denied that Eritrean forces remained in Tigray. This is despite, **United Nations (UN)** assistant secretary-general for human rights **Ilze Brands-Kehris** confirming on 27 February that Eritrean forces remained in areas of Tigray and are allegedly continuing to commit human rights violations.¹¹

Abiy has sought to de-escalate matters with Eritrea and on 20 March stated that his government had no interest in a conflict with Eritrea, even in pursuit of access to the **Red Sea**.¹² Furthermore, the foreign affairs ministry has sought to distance itself from Mulatu's editorial claiming those were his personal views and did not reflect the government's position.¹³

Any effort to ease tensions and avoid another conflict with Eritrea should be encouraged. Conflicts between the two states have historically been devastating. At least 100,000 people are believed to have died in the **1998-2000 Eritrean-Ethiopian** war.

⁶ Addis Standard, 20 Mar 2025

⁷ Borkena, 18 Mar 2025

⁸ Addis Standard, 27 Feb 2025

⁹ Al Jazeera, 17 Feb 2025

¹⁰ Addis Standard, 19 Mar 2025

¹¹ Addis Standard, 28 Feb 2025

¹² Reuters, 20 Mar 2025

¹³ The Reporter, 1 Mar 2025

Despite Abiy's most recent efforts, tensions remain elevated between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and it appears as if the two countries are reverting to their pre-2018 diplomatic status quo. Any conflict along or near the border will risk instigating a conflict between the two, especially if Eritrean forces occupying disputed territory in Tigray are attacked.

Abiy optimistic about the economy

In his statements to parliament on 20 March, Abiy expressed confidence about Ethiopia's economy claiming that the country was on track to record 8.4% real GDP growth by the end of the current fiscal year.¹⁴ This contrasts with the 6.5% projected by the **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** and the 6.7% forecast by the **African Development Bank (AfDB)**.¹⁵

According to Abiy, the country has recorded strong activity in the agricultural, manufacturing, and energy sectors. Furthermore, according to the trade and regional integration ministry, Ethiopia achieved 102% of its export revenue target for the five months ending on 31 December, recording \$2.6 billion in export revenue.¹⁶

Ethiopia is unlikely to achieve growth as robust as 8.4%, especially given the loss of aid funding from the **United States (US)** (see *ARC Briefing Ethiopia Briefing Feb 2025*). However, 6.5% of real GDP growth is still commendable, especially given the country's substantial economic challenges including the numerous domestic security issues. Ethiopia is also still recovering from defaulting on its debt in December 2023 which forced the country to approach the IMF for a bailout. In fact, the reform programme instituted under its agreement with the IMF is likely contributing to this strong economic performance, especially the push to open up the state-controlled economy and even list state companies on the new stock exchange. However, Ethiopia remains highly vulnerable to economic shocks and its ongoing recovery could easily be derailed, particularly, by a renewed conflict in Tigray.

Dozens kidnapped in Oromia region

Tigray may have been the most urgent security crisis in the past month, but Ethiopia is still facing major security challenges in other regions. Illustrative of this, armed militants attacked passenger buses in Oromia on 17 March and kidnapped over 50 people.¹⁷

The incident occurred near the town of **Ali Doro** in the region's **North Shoa** zone, approximately 146 kilometres (km) outside of Addis Ababa. Unidentified gunmen opened fire on a convoy of three busses and while two of them managed to escape, one was incapacitated enabling the attackers to take the passengers as hostages. Notably, this incident occurred near the **Gerbe Guracha** area where in July 2024, armed men intercepted a convoy and kidnapped 167 people.

Authorities suspect the **Oromo Liberation Army (OLA)** nationalist militant group of being behind the recent attack as they are believed to have varied out numerous kidnappings in the area over the past year. Kidnapping is a potentially lucrative source of revenue for militant groups. However, it should be noted that the possibility that this attack was conducted by bandit groups, or even Ahmara Fano nationalist militants operating from across the nearby regional border cannot be discounted.

This incident is indicative of the wider deterioration of the security environment across Ethiopia outside of Addis Ababa. Security forces lack the manpower or capacity to effectively police the country's roadways while combatting the numerous conflicts in the country. These operating conditions are expected to worsen over the medium term as these nationalist conflicts intensify.

Planner

16-18 May 2025 Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) Ethiopian Technology Expo 2025 (ETEX 2025)
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¹⁴ FANABC, 20 Mar 2025

¹⁵ AfDB, 20 Mar 2025

¹⁶ Borkena, 2 Jan 2025

¹⁷ Borkena, 19 Mar 2025

2026 (Ethiopia) General election

Chronology

19 Mar 2025 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) FANABC**. The **Fifth Working Party Meeting** on Ethiopia's accession to the **World Trade Organization (WTO)** takes place in Addis Ababa;

19 Mar 2025 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) ENA**. The state-owned **Ethiopian Airlines** and **Emirati** airline, **Etihad Airways**, sign a comprehensive codeshare arrangement and launch a new direct flight between Addis Ababa and **Abu Dhabi**;

19 Mar 2025 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) Borkena**. Foreign affairs minister **Gedion Timothewos** hosts **Saudi Arabian** vice minister for foreign affairs **Waleed Abdulkarim El Khereiji**;

18 Mar 2025 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) FANABC**. The government unveils a new initiative to bolster the country's coffee sector;

16 Mar 2025 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) Borkena**. **Fano Amhara** nationalist militants intensify their offensives in areas surrounding the city of **Dessie** (Amhara Region);

15 Mar 2025 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) Addis Standard**. Ethiopian and **Russian** officials announce that the two countries will explore potential naval cooperation primarily focused on rebuilding and training Ethiopia's navy;

10 Mar 2025 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) Addis Standard**. At least eight people are killed in clashes between government security forces and **Fano** nationalist fighters in the **Debre Medhanit** area, **East Gojjam Zone**, and in **Quarit** district, **West Gojjam Zone** of **Amhara Region**;

9 Mar 2025 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) VOA**. Two people are killed in a militant attack in the **Gorka** district of the **Southern Ethiopian Region**;

8 Mar 2025 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) The Reporter**. The **Ethiopian Statistical Service (ESS)** reveals that the country's population reached 109.4 million people in July 2024;

8 Mar 2025 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) The Reporter**. Defence officials confirm that the **Ethiopian Air Force** carried out airstrikes against the al-Shabaab militant group in **Somalia's Middle Shabelle Region**;

8 Mar 2025 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) The Reporter**. The global human rights organisation, **Amnesty International**, issues a statement criticising the Ethiopian government for forcibly deporting over 600 **Eritrean** refugees since the start of 2025;

3 Mar 2025 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) Addis Standard**. The **Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC)** announces that the **Authority for Civil Society Organisations (ACSO)** lifted the suspension of four civil society organisations following sustained advocacy;

3 Mar 2025 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) Borkena**. The **Ethiopian Transport Employers Federation** announces plans to import 5,000 **Russian**-made trucks into Ethiopia in an effort to modernise transportation service in the country and enhance competitiveness;

2 Mar 2025 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) Borkena**. The **Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF)**, which historically advocated for the secession of the **Ogaden Region** (also known as the **Somali Region**), announces that it will not engage with the federal government accusing it of abandoning the 2018 peace agreement

1 Mar 2025 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) Borkena**. The **Amhara Fano Popular Organization** confirms that one of its senior leaders, **Tadesse Eshete**, was killed in battle in the **Gaynet** area (Amhara Region);

27 Feb 2025 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) Addis Standard**. Amhara regional officials call for at least \$10 billion in support to fund recovery in the region;

27 Feb 2025 **Nairobi (Kenya)** *KBC*. Kenyan President **William Ruto** (2022-present) announces that his government reached an agreement with Ethiopia under which Ethiopia will increase its use of Kenya's **Lamu Port** for maritime trade;

27 Feb 2025 **Mogadishu (Somalia)** *Africa News*. Prime minister **Abiy Ahmed** travels to Somalia to hold talks with his Somali counterpart **President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud** on normalising bilateral relations.

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