

Having Made Peace Abroad, Ethiopia's Leader Goes to War at Home

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, began a sweeping military operation against one of his own regions.



Police officers in Mekelle, a city in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, in February. Credit...Michael Tewelde/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images
By Declan Walsh and Simon Marks

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NAIROBI, Kenya — Barely a year ago Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of [Ethiopia](#) was globally acclaimed as a peacemaker, a youthful African leader awarded the Nobel Peace Prize after just 18 months in power for introducing democratic reforms after decades of repression, and for signing a peace deal with neighboring Eritrea.

On Wednesday Mr. Abiy presented a radically different face when he announced a sweeping military operation against one of his own regions. He issued a bellicose declaration that sent waves of alarm across the region and stoked fears that Ethiopia

— Africa’s second-most populous country — was suddenly sliding toward a destructive civil war.

Mr. Abiy made his move against the region, Tigray, early Wednesday as the world’s attention was focused on vote-counting in the U.S. presidential election. Soon after Tigray’s internet and phone links went down, Mr. Abiy announced that he was deploying the military and imposing a state of emergency in the region, effectively isolating it from rest of Ethiopia.

Mr. Abiy said his hand had been forced by Tigrayan leaders who brazenly defied his authority for months, accusing them of “crossing the last red line.” He said he had ordered the Ethiopian Army “to carry out their mission to save the country and the region.”

But analysts and diplomats warned that Mr. Abiy’s attempt to consolidate his power constituted a high-stakes gamble that, if it goes wrong, risks plunging Ethiopia — an emerging regional powerhouse and the fulcrum of the Horn of Africa — into a period of uncertainty and violent tumult with potentially catastrophic outcomes

“Abiy has just made the worst strategic blunder of his career,” Rashid Abdi, a Horn of Africa analyst based in Kenya, said on Twitter. A war in Tigray, a region with tens of thousands of men under arms and a long history of battle against Eritrea, could have “devastating consequences across the entire subregion,” he added.

Several other analysts warned that Ethiopia risked being sundered like Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and the concern spread to the United Nations which expressed “alarm” and pleaded for an immediate de-escalation. The American Embassy in Ethiopia made a [similar plea](#).

Mr. Abiy announced the operation on Facebook just before 2 a.m. on Wednesday, an hour after internet and phone links to the region went down, [according to NetBlocks](#), an organization that tracks internet services.

Image

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia, center, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for making peace with Eritrea. Credit...Associated Press

Mr. Abiy accused the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front, which governs the region, of orchestrating a militia assault a few hours earlier on a major Ethiopian Army base, with the goal of seizing artillery and other weapons.

Hours later, Mr. Abiy’s spokeswoman confirmed that the army had started military operations in Tigray, where the government quickly declared a six-month state of emergency that gave it sweeping powers to suspend political and civil rights.

For the rest of the day, it was hard to know what was going on in Tigray, which borders Eritrea and accounts for about six percent of Ethiopia’s estimated 110 million people.

Tigray's regional authorities closed the region's airspace and restricted road movements, local television reported. They also called on Ethiopian Army generals and troops "to repudiate against dictatorship" — an apparent call for a mutiny against Mr. Abiy.

Reports emerged of heavy fighting. A Western official reported exchanges of heavy gunfire at three locations in Tigray, leading to dozens of casualties on both sides.

The official, whose account was confirmed Wednesday night by Mr. Abiy in televised remarks, spoke on the condition of anonymity to disclose militarily sensitive information.

In the capital, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's deputy foreign minister, Redwan Hussein, told reporters that the military operation was intended to target Tigray's political leaders, not its citizens.

"The conflict is with a very small group with narrow vested interests which is hell bent on destabilizing the national order," Mr. Redwan said.

Despite Mr. Abiy's claims that he responded to a surprise attack on the army base, analysts said there had been signs for days of an operation against Tigray, including [unusual troop movements](#) and [disputes over budget transfers](#) and military appointments inside the region.

The tensions escalated from September when Tigray openly [defied Mr. Abiy by holding elections](#) that had been canceled in the rest of Ethiopia because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Image



Tigray defied Mr. Abiy in September by holding elections that had been canceled in the rest of the country because of the pandemic. Credit...Eduardo Soteras/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

On Monday the region's president, Debretsion Gebremichael, warned that Mr. Abiy was planning an attack to punish Tigray for its defiance.

The confrontation is also tied to wider regional rivalries and historical currents.

A senior Western official, who spoke anonymously in deference to diplomatic sensitivities, said Mr. Abiy was believed to have coordinated his assault on Tigray with Isaias Afwerki, the autocratic leader of Eritrea and an implacable enemy of Ethiopia for several decades until he signed the 2018 peace deal with Mr. Abiy.

Now Mr. Abiy and Mr. Afwerki have a shared hostility toward Tigray, albeit for different reasons, analysts said.