Clara Eigenberger, le 6 novembre 2026

Eritrea and Ethiopia: A diplomatic break raises fears of a regional war

Tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia have intensified dramatically in recent weeks, raising fears of a wider conflict in the Horn of Africa. Both countries have moved troops to their shared border. Ethiopia accuses Eritrea of supporting rebels and the presence of troops on its territory.

A conflict rooted in the past

Eritrea, formerly part of Ethiopia, separated in the early 1990s after three decades of war. In 1993, Eritrea then declared its independence. As a result, Ethiopia was cut off from direct access to the Red Sea. However, the apparently peaceful separation and diplomatic relations between both African countries were to remain stable for only five years.

Until today, this has led to conflicts. From 1998 to 2000, a renewed border conflict broke out, in which around 80,000 people lost their lives. It was not until 2018 that the two countries re-established diplomatic relations.

Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for his efforts to improve relations with its northern neighbor.

Surprisingly and unexpectedly for the international community, the relationship between the two countries turned into a military and intelligence alliance against the Tigray leaders. From 2020 to 2022, both countries fought together against the rebels of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The estimated death toll from that conflict stands at about 600'000 and triggered a humanitarian crisis. Prior to that, the TPLF had dominated Ethiopian politics for almost three decades, which led to massive protests. In 2018, this resulted in the TPLF's resignation and withdrawal to its home region.



Abiy Ahmed, via Wikimédia Commons

Recent re-escalation

However, the 2018 peace agreement is fragile, and fighting escalated once again at the end of September this year. One of the triggers for the tensions is that Ethiopia accuses Eritrea of supporting the TPLF rebels in Tigray and providing them with military training and perhaps even arms. The Ethiopian government subsequently sent troops to Tigray to drive back the rebels and took control of Mekelle, the capital of Tigray.

Eritrea severed diplomatic ties with Ethiopia on October 1st, after Ethiopia announced that it was closing its embassy in Eritrea's capital, Asmara. And demanded that 10 Eritrean diplomats, the entire diplomatic core staff of the mission, leave the country within 48 hours.

Current information about the Tigray region is difficult to obtain, as the internet and telephone lines have been cut. According to a doctor in Alamata, which is located in the southern part of Tigray, a minimum of 52 civilians have already been killed in intense fighting.

Experts and the UN are calling for an immediate de-escalation

Witnesses claim that Eritrean armed forces crossed Ethiopia's northern border on October 7. In a letter to the Security Council, Ethiopia alleges that Eritrean troops advanced up to 60 kilometres into its territory and invokes its right to self-defence. Eritrea denies the accusation, which could not be independently verified.

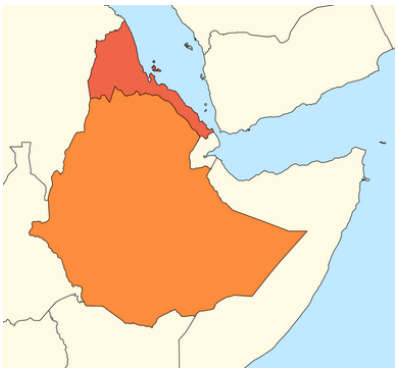
On October 9, a letter addressed to the President of the Security Council by the Permanent Representative of Ethiopia stated that:

"Ethiopia is taking measures in the exercise of its inherent right of self-defence in response to the armed attack and continuing acts of aggression against the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of Ethiopia committed by the State of Eritrea"

These developments intensified fears that Ethiopia might be planning an attack on Eritrea in order to gain direct access to the Red Sea. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed recently stated in a speech: "Ethiopia cannot exist in the long term without access to the sea."

Experts are urging de-escalation, noting that one million people are still displaced from the last conflict and four million require aid. The humanitarian cost of a return to conflict could be far worse.

Most recently, the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, expressed deep concern and called on both countries to respect the border treaty they signed 25 years ago and urged all parties to cease hostilities immediately.



Map of Eritrea and Ethiopia, via Wikimédia Commons

Ethiopia's geopolitical interests

In 2019, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed was seen as a promising figure for peace between the two countries. But today experts argue that Abiy Ahmed is pursuing a more hands-on approach to power politics. His aim is for Ethiopia to become a leading power in Africa. Access to the sea plays a key role in this.

Ethiopia is the world's most populous landlocked country. However, all its trade goes through the port of neighbouring Djibouti. Transit fees make this trade very expensive and risky, as it makes Ethiopia almost entirely dependent on Djibouti. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed therefore has a number of economic and geopolitical motivations.

Is a regional spillover probable?

There are those who claim that, in the event of an escalation, Eritrea would receive support from Egypt and Sudan. Ethiopia is now accusing the two countries of such cooperation, and both Ethiopia and Egypt have each expelled diplomats from the other country.

On the other hand, Ethiopia has been receiving financial and military support from the United Arab Emirates for several years. Through this, the Emirates are indirectly intervening in the neighbouring war in Sudan. Unlike the war between 2020 and 2022, this conflict could now lead to regional spillovers through the involvement of multiple actors across the region.

However, the latest developments indicate that the Ethiopian forces are withdrawing.

One of the reasons given for this is that the US Secretary of State, spoke on October 14, warning of consequences and calling for de-escalation supported by all sides. Furthermore, the Tigrayans, who were driven out of their regional capital Mekelle, have retreated into the mountains and are now attacking Ethiopian supply lines.

How peace can be restored in the region remains unclear. The African Union may face challenges in mediating the conflict. The AU's headquarters are in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, which raised questions of neutrality among some.

Many are now appealing to the Pretoria Agreement, concluded in 2022, which serves as a peace and ceasefire agreement between Ethiopia and the TPLF.

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