

International

Tigray clamors for aid as war leaves starvation in its wake

Conflict, chaos force people to abandon this year's crop of teff

AYASU GEBRIEL, Ethiopia: Tesfaye Berhe looked on with worry as his farmhands stripped leaves from sorghum stalks dried brown by the blaring sun, wondering how he could salvage a harvest disrupted by heavy fighting in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region. The portly, grey-bearded 60-year-old ran for cover when shells started flying around him a month ago—launched from the east by the military and from the west by forces loyal to the dissident regional ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

The chaos forced Tesfaye to abandon this year's crop of teff—a staple grain used to make injera flatbread—mid-harvest. Now he fears it could happen again with the sorghum, despite claims from Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed that the fighting is all but over. "We are still hearing that there are combatants in both directions. We are concerned about whether or not we can eat what we're harvesting now, if they come back," he said at his farm near the village of Ayasu Gebriel.

Tigray, an impoverished region of about six million people, faced formidable food security challenges before the conflict began, compounded this year by the coronavirus pandemic and the worst desert locust infestation in decades. Now aid agencies fear the fighting—which has reportedly killed thousands and displaced many thousands more—could tip the region into catastrophe.



Jano Admasi, whose son was reportedly killed by the Ethiopian Defense Forces during the fighting that broke out in Ethiopia's Tigray region, poses with her husband at her house in the village of Bisober.—AFP

The UN says it does not have humanitarian access to Tigray, making it difficult to assess how badly the hostilities have upended the lives of civilians. But AFP recently obtained exclusive access to southern Tigray, where some residents said they were growing desperate, begging from neighbors and serving their children boiled water just to get something warm in their stomachs. The hardship could last long after the guns are silenced, especially if farmers like Tesfaye see an entire season's worth of grains wiped out. "The potential loss of the harvest inside Tigray, which was about to start when the conflict began, could have major implications for food insecurity in the region," said Saviano Abreu, spokesman for the UN's humanitarian coordination office.

Region 'not stable'

Tensions over aid access have been mounting in recent weeks between Abiy, last year's Nobel Peace Prize winner, and humanitarian officials. Abiy's government has stressed its commitment to getting aid to "vulnerable communities," saying it will take the lead while coordinating access for outsiders, partly because of persistent insecurity.

But that process has not gone smoothly. A week after the UN inked a deal ostensibly allowing some access, security forces fired on a UN assessment team trying to visit a camp for Eritrean refugees, claiming

they had ignored instructions and driven through checkpoints.

On Monday UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric complained anew about lack of access, saying "we have not been able to reach people that we know are in need." Negotiations continued Tuesday in Addis Ababa between UN officials and Demekle Mekonnen, Ethiopia's deputy prime minister and foreign minister. The government, meanwhile, has been touting its own efforts to provide assistance.

In the Tigray town of Alamata on Friday, officials distributed 50-kilogramme (110-pound) sacks of wheat—branded with the Ethiopian flag—to hundreds of residents who queued outside a warehouse, some using umbrellas to block the sun. But Alamata has not seen much combat, nor is it home to many displaced Ethiopians. An official with the federal disaster commission, Solomon Admasu, acknowledged he and his colleagues were struggling to reach areas hit harder by the fighting.

"The resources are there, but there are places that are not stable and places that have security problems," Solomon said. Another issue is that many local officials in Tigray are feared to have fled their posts, potentially complicating food distribution once federal officials make it deeper into the region, said Assefa Mulugeta, a peace ministry official coordinating the government aid effort in Alamata. "The government needs help, it is obvious," he said, "because the demands are very high."

Some international aid is getting into Tigray. Over the weekend the International Committee of the Red Cross announced that seven trucks of medicines and medical equipment had reached the regional capital Mekele—the first foreign aid convoy to make it there. Catholic Relief Services has worked with local church partners to get food aid into western Tigray and to thousands of displaced people along Tigray's border with the Amhara region, said Ethiopia country representative John Shumlansky.—AFP

EU court rules that Hungary broke asylum law

BRUSSELS: The European Union's top court ruled yesterday that Hungary had broken the law by preventing some immigrants from seeking asylum and moving many to transit camps. "Hungary has failed to fulfil its obligations under EU law in the area of procedures for granting international protection," the European Court of Justice said. In 2015, at the peak of a crisis which saw thousands of would-be migrants and refugees arriving in southeast Europe and heading north and west, Hungary stood in their way.

Prime Minister Viktor Orban's nationalist anti-immigration government corralled migrants into transit zones and limited their ability to apply for asylum. The court found Hungary did not allow asylum seekers to leave detention while their cases were considered and offered no special protection to children and the vulnerable. Where asylum claims were rejected, in some cases "those nationals are forcibly escorted, by the police, from the other side of a fence erected a few meters from the border with Serbia, to a strip of land devoid of any infrastructure". This was deemed a breach of an EU directive establishing safeguards for the removal of illegal immigrants.—AFP



BERLIN: Shops are deserted in Berlin yesterday on the second day of a partial lockdown in Germany to curb the number of infections with the new coronavirus COVID-19.—AFP

Germany to raise 471bn euros in pandemic debt

FRANKFURT: Germany said yesterday it will issue up to 471 billion euros (\$576 billion) worth of bonds in 2021, a record high, taking on massive debt to help Europe's biggest economy get through the coronavirus pandemic. "The comparatively high issuance volume is primarily a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has a considerable impact on the income and expenditures of the federal budget and its special funds," the federal agency managing German debt said.

Germany issued 406.5 billion euros in bonds this year, twice the amount of last year, to help fund efforts to combat the crisis.

Germany has a constitutional "debt brake" in place that limits net new borrowing a year to 0.35 percent of total economic output but Chancellor Angela Merkel's cabinet has suspended the rule to help the country cope through the pandemic. It expects to return to its traditional budgetary rigor in 2022.

More than a trillion euros have been released or pledged in help companies and employees, be it through worker salary top-ups, loans or direct handouts. The huge spending commitment means Germany is having to take on 300 billion euros in net new debt in 2020 and 2021. Some 222 billion euros of the new bond issuance would have a maturity period of between two and 30 years; 241 billion euros can be redeemed in 12 months or less, and another 6-8 billion euros will be indexed to inflation.

German government bonds or "Bunds" act as a benchmark on the international debt markets and are regarded as one of the safest investments meaning the government should be able to raise the money at very low rates. Germany yesterday reported a daily record of new coronavirus infections of more than 30,000, as it struggles to cope with the outbreak with a fresh partial lockdown. The Robert Koch Institute for infectious diseases, which is managing reporting for the country in the pandemic, revised its initial total of 26,923 for the previous 24-hour period saying around 3,500 more cases had come to light. "For technical reasons some 3,500 cases from (the southwestern state of) Baden-Wuerttemberg were not reported.—AFP