

International

Ethiopia PM orders final offensive against dissident Tigray's leaders

Deadline for surrender expires

ADDIS ABABA: Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed yesterday ordered Ethiopia's army to launch a final offensive against Tigray's dissident leaders in their regional capital Mekele, saying the deadline for surrender had expired. Abiy, the winner of last year's Nobel Peace Prize, late Sunday gave the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) 72 hours to lay down their arms.

The ultimatum was rejected by the leaders of the region, whose forces have been fighting federal troops in the country's north for three weeks, displacing over 40,000 people and killing hundreds. Ethiopia's army—which in recent days said it was advancing on Mekele with tanks—had been directed “to conclude the third and final phase” against the TPLF, Abiy said.

“In this final phase, great care will be given to protect innocent civilians from harm. All efforts will be made to ensure that the city of Mekele, which was built through the hard work of our people, will not be severely damaged,” Abiy said. He said “thousands” of TPLF militia and special forces had surrendered to federal forces before the deadline lapsed. It was not immediately clear how close the army was to the city. A communications blackout in Tigray and restrictions on reporting have made verifying claims from both sides difficult.

'Carefully devised' strategy

Diplomats briefed on the fighting told AFP

Wednesday that federal forces were at least 30 kilometers (18 miles) from Mekele to the north and the south. The threatened assault and fears for Mekele's half a million inhabitants accelerated diplomatic efforts this week to mediate, with the UN Security Council holding its first meeting on the crisis on Tuesday. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres urged “the leaders of Ethiopia to do everything possible to protect civilians” as the US, EU and other international powers encouraged mediation through the African Union, headquartered in Addis Ababa.

Amnesty International and other rights watchdogs warned bombarding Mekele could constitute a war crime. Abiy stressed that Ethiopia's defense forces had “carefully devised” a strategy to defeat the TPLF in Mekele without harming civilians or public property. “We call on the people of Mekele and its environs to disarm, stay at home and stay away from military targets” and assist by handing over TPLF elements in their midst, Abiy said.

Resistance

Abiy, who ordered troops into Tigray on November 4 following alleged attacks by TPLF forces on federal military camps in the region, has resisted appeals for talks and his government had flatly refused to negotiate. As international pressure mounted this week, Abiy issued a strongly-worded statement rejecting outside “interference”



DANSHA: A member of the Amhara Special Forces sits at the 5th Battalion of the Northern Command of the Ethiopian Army in Dansha, Ethiopia. — AFP

in what he labeled an internal “law enforcement” operation.

“We therefore respectfully urge the international community to refrain from any unwelcome and unlawful acts of interference and respect the fundamental principles of non-intervention under

international law,” he said. Since the fighting began, more than 40,000 people have fled to eastern Sudan and rockets have fallen on the Eritrean capital Asmara and Ethiopian cities outside Tigray, spurring fears the conflict could destabilize the wider Horn of Africa region. — AFP

Tigray - the Ethiopian northern powerhouse

NAIROBI: Ethiopia's northern Tigray, where the federal army launched a military offensive against the regional leadership on November 4, has long had an outsized influence in the Horn of Africa nation.

Rugged north

Tigray is the northernmost of Ethiopia's ten regions, more than 600 kilometers from the capital Addis Ababa and administered under the system of “ethnic federalism” which divides the country according to language and ethnicity. It is a landscape of rugged highlands and agricultural lowlands in which the majority is Tigrayan, a group that accounts for less than six percent of Ethiopia's population of 110 million. Tigray borders Eritrea to the north with which Ethiopia has fought a frontier war in the past. The regional capital, Mekele, lies in the east of Tigray with a population of around 500,000 inhabitants, roughly one-tenth of the region's mostly rural populace.

Cultural and religious heritage

Tigray has played a major role in Ethiopia's cultural and religious history, its heritage making it a major tourist draw for the country. The ancient city of Axum is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and was the centre of a powerful kingdom from the 1st-9th century AD. It was Christianised by the Egyptian Church in the 4th century. The city houses a famous obelisk, 24 metres high, that pre-dates the Christian era and is possibly as old as the 5th century BC.

Axum is also a sacred place for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians because Emperor Menelik I, considered to be the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, is believed to have brought the Ark of the Covenant there from Jerusalem, containing the Ten Commandments. It is believed the Ark remains in Axum today, hidden from sight in the Church of St. Mary of Zion, the most sacred place in the Ethiopian Orthodox religion. Mountainous Tigray is also home to dozens of other churches carved into the faces of rocky spires.

Economic engine

Tigray is an agricultural region producing several crops, including sesame for export, as well as being home to major national industries. Ethiopia's biggest cement company, a major gold producer, and one of the country's largest textile factories are all located in Tigray, and have all had their bank accounts frozen since mid-November. The federal government accuses the companies of providing financial support to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which it is battling.

Political power, military might

The TPLF dominated Ethiopia's political and security structures from 1991-2018, between the collapse of the brutal Marxist Derg regime, that it helped defeat, and the arrival in power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. For much of that period Ethiopia was run by the talismanic Tigrayan leader Meles Zenawi. However, when Abiy—who is from the Oromo ethnic group—took over he began to strip power and influence from the TPLF. In response, its leaders withdrew to their northern stronghold and began to oppose his rule. In September, the TPLF won all seats in an election held in defiance of Addis Ababa, which had ordered a postponement due to the coronavirus pandemic. The vote became one of the triggers of the current conflict. — AFP

Burkina Faso's incumbent Kabore wins presidential election

OUAGADOUGOU: Burkina Faso's President Roch Marc Christian Kabore has won a second term after gaining an outright majority in the first round of elections, the country's electoral board announced yesterday. “Mr Kabore... with 57.87 percent of the vote, is provisionally elected president of (Burkina) Faso in the first round,” said Newton Ahmed Barry, head of the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI).

Eddie Komboigo, the candidate of a once-ruling party, came second in Sunday's vote with 15.48 percent of the ballot, followed by Zephirin Diabre, considered by pundits to be the best-placed opposition hopeful, with 12.46 percent. Kabore, 63, has been under fire for his response to a five-year-old jihadist insurgency that has rolled in from Mali. But he was the favorite and by winning an overall majority in the first round he avoids a runoff vote in which he would have had to stand against a single candidate backed by a united opposition.

The elections on Sunday were for Burkina's legislature as well as its presidency, where executive power in the former French colony is concentrated. The paramount court, the Constitutional Council, has a week in which to confirm the outcome. One of the poorest countries in the world, Burkina Faso is struggling with a jihadist campaign that has claimed at least 1,200 lives since 2015 and forced around a million people to flee their homes. Opposition parties say the vote was marked by fraud and flawed procedures, threatening to reject “results stained by irregularities.” — AFP