
Ethiopia, Tigray under siege. (AMREF Italy): “The whole area is at risk of a catastrophe”

“Should the situation in Tigray spiral out of control, we risk a catastrophe. Unless the crisis is rapidly stabilized, it could spill over into neighbouring countries: Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia.” **Mario Raffaelli**, Chairman of AMREF Health Italy, voiced to SIR his deep concern over the military operations underway in Ethiopia, in the northern Tigray region, which risks escalating into civil war, destabilizing the entire area of the Horn of Africa. With its 110 million inhabitants, Ethiopia is considered as a superpower that guarantees the stability of the region. Until November 4, when Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed - 2019 Nobel Peace Prize laureate - declared "war" to the party governing the northern region of Tigray, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The government of Addis Ababa accused TPLF of having attacked a federal military base to seize weapons and equipment. The Prime Minister deployed the military in what he described as a "police operation." Bombings have started in Tigray, with a population of 9 million people marked by a strong ethnic identity, while telephone and Internet connections have been cut off and banks closed in Makallé, the capital city. The region is isolated and reliable information is hard to obtain. Some sources report hundreds of deaths and people fleeing to Sudan, including military personnel who allegedly handed over their weapons. No less than 250,000 well trained soldiers, armed with heavy weaponry, are deployed in Tigray, which also borders Eritrea.



Immagine non disponibile

[AMREF Health Africa, a large humanitarian organization offering healthcare services across a number of African countries, including with aircraft and the medical staff of the renowned "Flying doctors", is following the crisis day after day through its Ethiopian branch in Addis Ababa and its headquarters in Nairobi. Should the conflict escalate - albeit hopefully the crisis will be resolved quickly through dialogue - they are ready to help. Pope Francis was the first to voice an appeal for peace in Ethiopia during last Sunday's Angelus prayer, followed by the UN, the EU and the African Union. In a country where 47% of the population is Muslim, Ethiopian Catholic bishops warned: "If brothers kill each other, Ethiopia will only lose, and it will lead the country to bankruptcy without benefiting anyone", pointed out Mario Raffaelli, expert and with a deep knowledge of region, where he served as special envoy of the Italian government for the Horn of Africa.](#)

It could potentially escalate. The Country is facing a challenging transition from a federal system that exerted widespread control - whose leadership governed Ethiopia for 27 years, characterized by the domination of the Tigrinya ethnic group representing only 6% of the Ethiopian population. When Abiy liberalized the political system, enabled exiles to re-enter their homeland and reached agreements with groups that challenged authority in other federal regions, he paved the way for protests that were kept under control during the previous regime. Disputes thus broke out with ethnic clashes and hundreds of deaths among the Amhara, Oromo and other ethnic groups, also recently. **This is an extremely complex scenario** Indeed, it is a complex puzzle. Prime Minister Abiy, born to an Oromo father and an Amhara mother, has been contested within his own ethnic group, neglected for years. After his rise to power, he made a few targeted steps by removing some Tigrayan chiefs from the military intelligence. The turning point was when Abiy created a single party, the Party of Progress: the Tigrayans did not participate and that's when the tensions began. But the last straw was the federal government's decision to postpone nationwide elections scheduled for August 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. Tigray contested this decision, wanting to hold their own vote. The Prime Minister responded by terming them "illegal" as of October 4, and adopting a hard line: for example, he did not transfer the federal budget to the regional government, declaring it illegitimate.

The Tigrayans, who found themselves stripped of their resources, saw this as an act of war.

In the meantime some made threats of secession, provided for in the Federal Constitution, although this instrument was never actually applied. This led to the escalation of the crisis. **Why does the conflict in Tigray pose such a great threat? It is a potentially explosive conflict because Tigray is a region with a strong ethnic identity.** The people felt excluded and persecuted by the ruling power for the errors committed by some. Moreover, it houses heavy artillery deposits and military forces linked to the war with Eritrea. There are approximately 250,000 local Tigrayan militia and police forces. The peace accord between Ethiopia and Eritrea was negatively received by Tigray due to evident animosity between the two Tigrayan factions on both sides of the border, resulting from the fierce war of the late 1990s. The Prime Minister described this military intervention as a police operation. But this is rather risky, since he counts on the fact that the Tigray population agrees to have their government replaced and chosen by the central authority. **Is there any news from Tigray or your Ethiopian offices?** At the moment reliable information is hard to obtain because telephone and internet connections have been cut off, but there have been reports that

Ethiopia bombed heavy artillery storage sites, with hundreds of dead and people fleeing to Sudan.

Banks in Tigray have been closed. It's a heavy siege that could spill over into neighbouring countries, linked to factions supporting or against the Tigrayans or the central government. Should the situation in Tigray spiral out of control, we risk a catastrophe. Unless the crisis is rapidly stabilized, it could spill over into neighbouring countries: Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia. **How did the international community respond?** Both the African Union and the UN issued statements of concern, offering support to the dialogue process, but Abiy rejected it claiming that it is an internal problem. Before the military escalation, the two sides imposed hard-to-accept pre-conditions: the Tigray called for the release of

the prisoners and a transition government leading to elections to be held in May-June 2021. But this is not acceptable to the central Government, as it would imply the ousting of the Prime Minister.

Which avenues of dialogue could be pursued? The warring parties should be brought back to the negotiating table, removing all preconditions and showing mutual trust. The Tigrayans should ask not to be excluded from the electoral process, and the government should suspend the decision not to transfer funds to the Tigray region. Moreover, the issue should be the object of a nationwide dialogue, with a view to consolidating the electoral transition process. The international community should operate with greater cohesion. Key players such as China should also have a major role for the benefit of all.

Is secession a possible scenario? It's unlikely, given that in the past 20 years all self-determination claims have not been well received in the world. Suffice it to mention the Nagorno-Kabarak situation. Even in Africa there is no wish to change colonial borders. In my opinion it's a very unlikely possibility.

What do you think will happen? If the crisis is not resolved quickly and by force,

It could be easier and more dangerous for an all-out implosion to occur with widespread inter-ethnic clashes.

It all depends on whether or not the population will accept the change imposed by the central government. But these are two conflicting visions. **Nobody would have expected a Nobel Peace Prize winner to respond with warlike measures. What is your assessment of Abiy's politics?** At first he raised very high hopes. But when you want to change the rules of a previous authoritarian regime, you have to be careful, because such situations can be problematic. Abiy has lately acted in ways contrary to the slogans that brought him to power. He imprisoned dissidents and shut down newspapers. Over the last few years the Nobel Prize has frequently been awarded somewhat too hastily.

Patrizia Caiffa