

RENEWED WAR IN NORTHERN ETHIOPIA



INTRO

Ethiopia has entered its most serious security crisis since the 2020–2022 Tigray War. Open fighting resumed in the north on 22–23 September 2026 between the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and forces aligned with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), after months of political confrontation, military build-up and the steady erosion of the November 2022 Pretoria peace agreement, which the TPLF declared “effectively dead” in July.

The crisis is centred on Tigray but is no longer confined to it. Tigrayan forces have pushed into Afar and Amhara, and on 20 September the TPLF joined six other armed movements in the Ethiopian Peoples' Forces Alliance for Survival, which aims to remove Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government. The alliance includes the Amhara Fano movement, which fought against the TPLF in the last war, underlining how far Ethiopia's political map has shifted.

Who fired first remains disputed. Addis Ababa says the TPLF launched an “all-out offensive”; Tigrayan authorities say they were responding to an “open invasion” by drones, airstrikes and artillery. Neither account can be independently verified. What is clear is that the September escalation was the culmination of a deteriorating situation rather than a sudden outbreak.

KEY JUDGEMENTS

- **This is not “Tigray War 2.0”.** Fano, a federal ally in 2020–2022, now fights alongside the TPLF, and Eritrea, a federal ally then, is accused by Addis Ababa of backing the rebels.
- **The new alliance is politically significant but militarily fragmented.** It has no joint command, and its members hold conflicting territorial claims, above all over Western Tigray.
- **The most likely outcome over the next one to three months is a protracted war of attrition** along the Tigray–Afar and Tigray–Amhara boundaries, with federal air power offsetting Tigrayan ground gains.
- **The key escalation triggers** are direct Eritrean involvement and fighting reaching the Addis Ababa–Djibouti corridor, which carries more than 95% of Ethiopia's trade by volume.
- **Short-term mediation prospects are weak.** The TPLF publicly rejected the African Union envoy, Olusegun Obasanjo, on 6 September.

BACKGROUND: HOW THE PRETORIA PEACE UNRAVELLED

The Pretoria agreement stopped the war but left its underlying disputes unresolved. It provided for a permanent cessation of hostilities, TPLF disarmament, humanitarian access and a transitional administration in Tigray. Implementation was partial. Tigrayan leaders say Addis Ababa failed to restore services, withdraw non-federal forces, return displaced people and reintegrate

Tigray politically; critics also cite federal restrictions on fuel and cash entering the region. The federal government says the TPLF never fully disarmed and sought to restore its pre-war authority.

The breaking point came in May 2026, when the TPLF reinstated the pre-war regional council and named Debretsion Gebremichael regional president, creating a rival to the federally backed interim administration. From then on Tigray effectively had two competing governments. In July the TPLF declared the agreement dead. On 1 August a battle lasting several hours took place near the Sudan border, the most serious clash since 2022, and federal drone strikes hit Mekelle and other parts of Tigray through August. Human Rights Watch described one strike on a teachers' residential compound on 20 August as unlawfully indiscriminate.

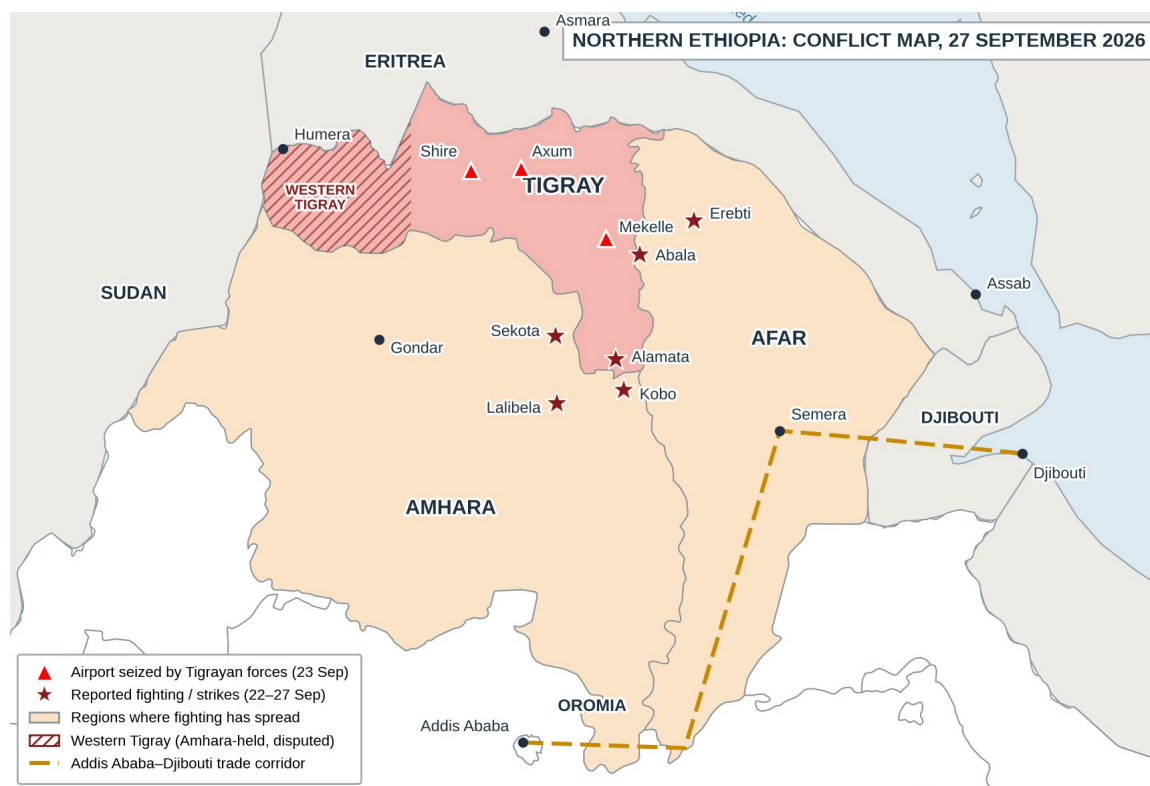
The mediation track was failing in parallel. On 6 September the TPLF rejected Obasanjo as lacking neutrality. On 18–19 September the United States allowed its Ethiopia-related national emergency to lapse, ending sanctions on Eritrea's ruling party and military. Two days later the Alliance for Survival was announced, turning a bilateral dispute into a potential national struggle over who governs Ethiopia.

ESCALATION: 22 SEPTEMBER ONWARDS

The observable turning point came on 23 September, when Tigrayan forces seized the airports at Mekelle, Axum and Shire and detained federal personnel. It

followed a wave of federal drone and airstrikes on 22 September, including strikes on schools in Alamata that reportedly killed at least 14 civilians. Ethiopian Airlines suspended flights to the three cities and the TPLF declared a “defensive war”.

The airport seizures marked a shift from reaction to offensive posture. Within 48 hours Tigrayan forces had opened fronts in Afar, with claimed advances around Abala, Erebti and the Danakil area, and in Amhara, around Sekota, Kobo and Lalibela, where Fano is active. The army claimed 272 Tigrayan fighters killed in Amhara; Fano claimed the capture of two army colonels in North Wollo. Lalibela airport was closed, and phone and internet networks were cut across Tigray and much of the north. On 27 September army chief Field Marshal Berhanu Jula pledged “wisdom and restraint”, while the TPLF described the situation as “full war”.



Map: ThreatRate, based on open-source reporting to 27 September 2026

Western Tigray, while the TPLF, which lost most of its heavy weapons in 2022, now finds itself inside a national coalition with its former enemies.

THE ALLIANCE FOR SURVIVAL

Announced on 20 September and chaired by Fano commander Zemene Kassie, the alliance brings together the TPLF, the Amhara Fano National Movement, the Oromo Liberation Army, the Ogaden National Liberation Front, the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front, the Benishangul Peoples' Liberation Movement and the Gumuz Peoples' Democratic Movement. It pledges to remove Abiy and establish a transitional administration.

Its significance is political: for the first time, armed opposition spanning five of Ethiopia's major regions has a common declared objective. Militarily it is far weaker than it looks. There is no joint commander, its members are geographically separated, several have fought one another, and the OLA has already demanded that Fano disown certain factions. The alliance is best understood as a coordination platform rather than an opposition army.

WHY THEY ARE FIGHTING

Western Tigray. This is the most dangerous unresolved territorial question.

Amhara forces seized it during the last war and still control it; hundreds of thousands of Tigrayans were displaced. Tigrayan leaders demand its return and the return of the displaced, while most Amhara actors, including many within Fano, regard the land as Amhara. The TPLF-Fano partnership suspends this

WHO IS FIGHTING WHOM: A REVERSAL OF ALLIANCES

The principal combatants are the ENDF and the Tigray Defence Forces. The TPLF dominated Ethiopian politics for nearly three decades until Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018; the resulting confrontation produced the 2020–2022 war, which is estimated to have killed around 600,000 people through violence, famine and the collapse of health services.

The strategic map has since been turned upside down. In the last war the federal government fought alongside Eritrean troops and Amhara forces, including Fano. Today Addis Ababa is fighting Fano in Amhara, and it accuses Eritrea of arming the rebels and occupying Ethiopian territory. Amhara regional forces still hold

dispute; it does not resolve it, and it is the fault line most likely to break the alliance.

Federalism versus centralisation. Beneath the Tigray question lies a wider struggle over Ethiopia's ethnic federal system. Regional movements in Tigray, Amhara, Oromia and elsewhere accuse Abiy's government of concentrating power and interfering in regional affairs; Addis Ababa argues that stronger central control is needed to hold the state together. The alliance matters because it turns several separate regional grievances into a single national challenge.

ERITREA: THE CRITICAL EXTERNAL VARIABLE

Eritrea is the single most important external factor, and its position is the reverse of 2020–2022. In February 2026 Ethiopia formally accused Eritrea of occupying Ethiopian territory and supporting armed groups, and demanded the withdrawal of Eritrean troops; Asmara rejected the accusations as “false and fabricated”. Relations have been poisoned by Abiy's repeated calls for Ethiopian access to the Red Sea, which Asmara reads as a threat to the port of Assab. Addis Ababa now accuses Eritrea of backing the alliance; Eritrea denies it.

If Eritrea stays out, the conflict remains primarily an internal Ethiopian war. Indirect support in the form of arms, logistics or safe havens would give the rebels staying power and create a proxy confrontation. Direct Eritrean entry would risk an interstate war on the Red Sea coast. The recent lapse of US

sanctions improves Asmara's diplomatic position at precisely the moment Addis Ababa is accusing it of backing the rebels.

OUTLOOK: THREE SCENARIOS

Short war and renewed ceasefire (low likelihood). Neither side breaks through, and mounting losses and international pressure bring both back to AU-led talks under the Pretoria framework. A second ceasefire would freeze the lines but leave Western Tigray, the displaced and Tigray's political status for later negotiation. It requires a mediator the TPLF accepts, which currently does not exist.

Protracted war of attrition (most likely). Fighting concentrates along the Tigray–Afar and Tigray–Amhara boundaries. Federal drones and air superiority blunt Tigrayan advances in open ground, while Tigray's mountainous terrain prevents a federal knockout. Fano and the OLA intensify existing insurgencies but coordination stays loose, and humanitarian conditions deteriorate sharply under a communications blackout.

Multi-front national war (low to moderate likelihood). Eritrea moves to open backing or direct deployment, the alliance achieves real coordination, and fighting in Afar threatens the Djibouti corridor. Ethiopia would face simultaneous pressure across several regions, raising the risk of state fragmentation and a regional war.

The federal government retains decisive advantages in manpower, air power and external supply, so a rebel march on Addis Ababa of the kind threatened in 2021 is unlikely. A rapid federal victory is equally unlikely. The central risk is not a quick decision but a long war that slowly spreads.

REGIONAL AND GLOBAL IMPACT

Djibouti. The Addis Ababa–Djibouti corridor runs through Afar. Current fighting is in northern Afar and the corridor has not been cut, but any southward spread would threaten fuel, food and other imports and Djibouti’s port revenues.

Sudan. Already in civil war, Sudan borders Western Tigray. Renewed fighting could drive refugee flows and open space for armed groups and cross-border supply along the frontier.

Somalia and the Red Sea. A long war would divert Ethiopian troops from Somalia, and the ONLF’s membership of the alliance extends instability to the Somali Region. Instability in northern Ethiopia adds another crisis to a Red Sea zone already strained by Houthi activity and Gulf competition for ports.

Humanitarian. Before this escalation roughly 750,000 people remained internally displaced in Tigray. New displacement in Afar and Amhara cannot yet be quantified, and the blackout, flight suspensions and a reported drone strike on a Catholic Relief Services convoy will severely limit access.

International. The UN Secretary-General has warned of a “broader and more devastating conflict” and backed AU mediation; the AU has called for direct talks

without delay; IGAD and the EU have urged de-escalation. Washington has taken a comparatively hard line against the TPLF, with Ambassador Ervin Massinga calling its offensive an “unwinnable fight” and warning of further sanctions.



Illustrative image (AI-generated)

OPERATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

- **Travel.** Avoid all travel to Tigray and Afar and to the Amhara zones of North Wollo, Wag Hemra and Lasta, including Lalibela. The US prohibits its government personnel from travelling to Tigray and Afar.
- **Air access.** Mekelle, Axum, Shire and Lalibela airports are closed or under rebel control. Expect further flight suspensions in the north at short notice.

- **Communications.** Networks are down across Tigray and parts of the north. Staff in affected areas need satellite communications and pre-agreed check-in procedures.
- **Supply chains.** Review contingency plans for the Djibouti corridor, including fuel stocks and alternative routing via Berbera, in case fighting moves south in Afar.
- **Kidnap and crime.** Kidnap for ransom is already a recurring risk in Amhara and Oromia; a wider war and the diversion of security forces are likely to increase it, including on major roads out of Addis Ababa.
- **Addis Ababa.** The capital is not currently threatened militarily, but expect heightened security, checkpoints, possible emergency measures and arrests of people perceived as Tigrayan or opposition-aligned.

INDICATORS TO MONITOR

- **Eritrea:** troop movements on the border, confirmed arms flows or Ethiopian strikes on Eritrean territory.
- **Afar and the Djibouti corridor:** fighting south of Semera, disruption on the Awash–Galafi road or fuel shortages in Addis Ababa.
- **Alliance cohesion:** joint operations beyond TPLF–Fano, or public disputes over Western Tigray.
- **Western Tigray:** a Tigrayan offensive across the Tekeze toward Humera.

- **Federal response:** mass mobilisation, a nationwide state of emergency or a large-scale drone campaign on Mekelle.
- **Mediation:** emergence of a mediator acceptable to both sides, or restoration of flights and telecoms as a de-escalation signal.

CONCLUSION

The renewed fighting is not a replay of 2020. The previous war pitted the federal government, supported by Eritrea and Amhara forces, against a largely isolated TPLF. Today the government faces Tigrayan forces, Fano and several regional insurgencies at once, while its former Eritrean ally has become a suspected adversary.

The decisive question is not whether the TPLF can take more territory, but whether the Alliance for Survival can turn separate regional insurgencies into coordinated pressure on Addis Ababa. At present it cannot: the alliance is politically meaningful but militarily fragmented, with the Western Tigray question unresolved at its core. The most likely trajectory is a protracted northern war that slowly draws in more of the country. The most dangerous would be direct Eritrean involvement or disruption of the Djibouti corridor, either of which would turn an Ethiopian crisis into a Horn of Africa crisis. Any durable settlement will have to address the questions Pretoria left open rather than simply freezing the front lines.

An aerial night view of a city skyline, likely New York City, with numerous illuminated skyscrapers. Overlaid on the city are several white, glowing arcs that intersect at various points, creating a network-like pattern. The text "Risk Intelligence that Keeps You Safe" is centered over the image in a large, white, sans-serif font.

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