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# Ethiopia: In Brief

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## Ethiopia: In Brief

Ethiopia is Africa's oldest independent state and second most populous country. It is the seat of the African Union (AU) and an influential regional actor. Once a subject of Cold War competition, Ethiopia became a partner for the United States—its largest bilateral donor—in the global war on terrorism. The country has pursued parallel partnerships with U.S. strategic competitors, most notably China, its top source of foreign investment and largest trading partner. Ethiopia was the largest contributor of United Nations (U.N.) peacekeeping troops from 2016 until 2020, when civil war erupted, dividing the country and its security forces along ethnic lines and imperiling its relationship with the United States.

Ethiopia's modern history has been marked by authoritarian rule and periods of violent conflict. The 2018 political transition that brought Prime Minister Abiy (AH-bee) Ahmed to power generated optimism. He won the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize for his initial efforts to open political space and rapprochement with neighboring Eritrea. The promise of political and economic reforms, however, overshadowed reports of rising conflict-related displacement, ethno-nationalism, and discontent. Abiy's moves to consolidate power ahead of elections fueled tensions, and heavy-handed responses to bouts of unrest prompted concerns that the state was returning to its repressive past. Disputes between Abiy's government and the ruling party in the northern regional state of Tigray, which dominated Ethiopia's ruling coalition for almost three decades, escalated into armed conflict in late 2020.

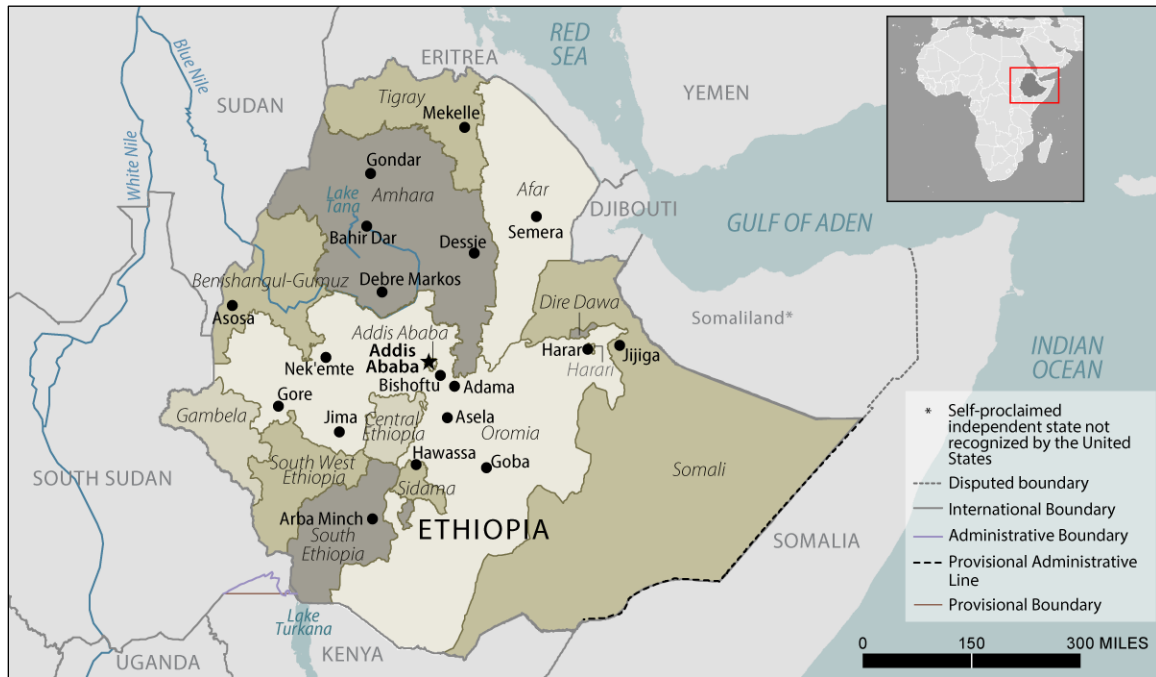
The Tigray conflict led to reports of war crimes and ethnic cleansing, and to allegations of genocide. It spurred a massive humanitarian crisis and starvation deaths. It was reportedly the world's deadliest conflict in 2022. Late that year, the federal government and Tigrayan authorities signed a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) to stop the fighting. While the ceasefire has held, other conflicts continue to threaten Ethiopia's stability and prompt warnings from human rights experts about a high risk of atrocities. The Ethiopian government faces insurgencies in its two most populous regions, Oromia and Amhara, and heightened ethno-political tensions create an unpredictable security situation. Government forces continue to be implicated in abuses against civilians.

Tensions have risen with Eritrea, which was a partner for Abiy's government in the Tigray conflict, and with Somalia over the Ethiopian government's quest for sea access. Ethiopia's reported offer to recognize the self-declared republic of Somaliland in exchange for the lease of some coastline has prompted outrage from Somalia and could spur further conflict in the region. Meanwhile, friction persists with Egypt over Ethiopia's Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Nile.

Amid these strains, Ethiopia—long one of the world's fastest growing economies—faces serious economic troubles, an unsustainable debt burden, and overlapping humanitarian crises driven by conflict and drought. The humanitarian response, estimated by the U.N. to require \$3 billion from donors in 2024, has been constrained by a major funding gap, access challenges, and diversion concerns.

The U.S. relationship with Ethiopia, described by U.S. officials as a long-standing, important partnership, was severely strained by the Tigray conflict. U.S. and Ethiopian officials have since sought to improve relations, but U.S. concerns over other conflicts, human rights violations, and accountability complicate those efforts. Ethiopia remains ineligible for U.S. trade benefits under the African Growth and Opportunities Act, as amended (AGOA; P.L. 106-200, 19 U.S.C. 3703); benefits were suspended in late 2021 based on gross human rights violations by the government. The United States continues to be Ethiopia's largest humanitarian donor, providing over \$3 billion in relief from FY2021 to FY2023. U.S. food assistance, paused for more than half of 2023 over concerns about diversion, resumed in December. The United States provided over \$335 million in nonhumanitarian aid for Ethiopia in FY2023, a majority of it for health programs. Congress periodically reviews U.S. policy toward Ethiopia through hearings, most recently in December 2023, and some Members have expressed concern with governance, human rights, and humanitarian developments there through statements, correspondence, or legislation.

Map of Ethiopia



**Source:** CRS.

**Notes:** Some borders are contested. This map depicts the self-declared Republic of Somaliland, over which the Federal Republic of Somalia claims sovereignty; tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia over a January 2024 agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland are briefly addressed in this report.

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U.S. Administrations viewed Ethiopia as an important security partner and anchor state in the Horn of Africa for much of the past two decades, despite democracy and human rights concerns.<sup>1</sup> The country has increasingly struggled with internal tensions that threaten its stability and test its relations with the United States, however. With an ethnically and religiously diverse population of over 120 million, it is routinely a top recipient of U.S. foreign aid, much of it humanitarian. Ethiopians are the second-largest African immigrant group in the United States.

Political unrest led to a transition in 2018 that prompted optimism about Ethiopia's prospects.<sup>2</sup> The new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, won the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize for initial reforms and for ending a decades-old conflict with Eritrea.<sup>3</sup>

Civil war erupted a year later, pitting Abiy's government, allied militia, and Eritrean troops against forces from Ethiopia's northern state of Tigray. Described as the world's deadliest conflict in 2022, the war fueled a severe humanitarian crisis and wide-ranging atrocities. By some counts, there were at least 100,000 battle-related deaths in 2022 alone, and half a million civilians may have died during the war from killings, starvation, or lack of health care, linked to what some termed a humanitarian siege.<sup>4</sup> U.N. human rights experts concluded that all sides committed war crimes and that the Ethiopian government and its allies committed crimes against humanity and used starvation as a weapon; the State Department reported similar findings in early 2023.<sup>5</sup>

The conflict severely strained Ethiopia's ailing economy and damaged its international reputation and relations with donor countries. The United States restricted aid, threatened sanctions, and suspended trade benefits over human rights violations. The war divided and weakened Ethiopia's military, previously the world's largest peacekeeping troop contributor, and increased the country's vulnerability to threats from the Somalia-based Al Qaeda affiliate, Al Shabaab.

Many Ethiopians and outside observers welcomed a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) signed in late 2022, but challenges remain. Eritrea was not party to the peace talks. Its forces, along with fighters from the neighboring Ethiopian state of Amhara, remain in parts of Tigray, where they have been accused of atrocities. Ethiopia-Eritrea relations appear increasingly tense.

The Tigray deal did not address Ethiopia's other conflicts, and the political and ethnic tensions underlying them still threaten to fragment the country. The government faces ethnic insurgencies in its two most populous states, Oromia and Amhara, where security forces have been implicated in serious abuses. Friction between the two largest ethnic groups, the Oromo and Amhara, has risen, including in the context of a volatile power struggle in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.<sup>6</sup>

Ethiopia faces overlapping humanitarian crises driven by conflict and drought. Some 20 million people needed food aid in 2023, and the food insecurity forecast for parts of Ethiopia in 2024 is dire.<sup>7</sup> The United States, Ethiopia's largest humanitarian donor, and the World Food Program (WFP) paused food assistance nationwide from June until December 2023 due to aid diversion.

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<sup>1</sup> David Shinn, "US-Ethiopia Relations from Roosevelt to Trump," *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Jenni Marsh, "Abiymania: How Abiy Ahmed brought Ethiopia back from the brink," CNN, August 29, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> In Ethiopia, individuals are generally referred to by their first name rather than their last name.

<sup>4</sup> Uppsala Conflict Data Program; Jan Nyssen, "Documenting the civilian victims of the Tigray war," January 2023.

<sup>5</sup> U.N. Human Rights Council (HRC), *Report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia [ICHREE]*, September 19, 2022. State Department, "War Crimes, Crimes Against Humanity, and Ethnic Cleansing in Ethiopia," March 20, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Rift Valley Institute, *Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia: History, Politics and Inter-Religious Relations*, May 29, 2023; *Washington Post*, "Divisions in Ethiopia's ancient church pose new threat to war-weary country," April 12, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Humanitarian figures in this report are drawn from U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reporting unless otherwise noted.

The Biden Administration describes “a united, peaceful, and prosperous Ethiopia” as a shared bilateral goal.<sup>8</sup> U.S. officials assessed in early 2022 that punitive measures over the Tigray war were doing little to change the Ethiopian government’s behavior, and resolved to “restore and revitalize the longstanding partnership.”<sup>9</sup> As a top aid donor and a powerful voice in international financial institutions, the United States has influence in Ethiopia but faces competing influences from China, Russia, and regional actors such as the United Arab Emirates. Ethiopia’s government has demonstrated sensitivity to foreign statements on issues it characterizes as “internal affairs” and has expelled foreign officials for “meddling.”<sup>10</sup> Ethiopian perspectives on U.S. approaches toward the country are wide-ranging, as views from the diverse diaspora reflect.

## Background: Political Change, Hope, and Prologue to Conflict

In 1991, after decades of civil war and related famines, a coalition of rebel groups, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), seized power from a brutal Marxist military regime known as the Derg, which had overthrown long-ruling Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. EPRDF chairman Meles Zenawi then led Ethiopia as prime minister until his death in 2012. His policies drove rapid economic growth, but he was also accused of stifling dissent and ensuring that his minority Tigrayan ethnic group dominated the government and security forces. His Tigray Peoples’ Liberation Front (TPLF) led the EPRDF’s formation and was one of its ethno-regional parties. The TPLF’s perceived preeminence within the EPRDF continued under Meles’ successor, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, though he was from a different party and ethnic group.

The EPRDF increasingly suppressed criticism after a brief democratic opening in the early 2000s, and after the 2015 elections it controlled 100% of seats in parliament. Anti-government protests led by Ethiopia’s largest ethnic group, the Oromo, and fueled by repression, shook the country in 2016-2017. Prime Minister Hailemariam, in response, resigned in early 2018. The EPRDF chose a leader from its Oromo wing, Member of Parliament (MP) Abiy Ahmed, as the coalition’s new chairman, paving the way for his election as prime minister. A former military intelligence officer, Abiy had once led Ethiopia’s signals intelligence and cybersecurity agency.

Abiy pledged to open Ethiopia politically and economically. His government loosened media and civil society restrictions, released political prisoners, and lifted terrorist designations the EPRDF had placed on opposition groups. Abiy invited dissidents to return from exile and brought some into government. He pursued peace deals with rebels and rapprochement with Eritrea. Some Ethiopians accused Abiy of ignoring rising ethnic conflict, however, and his moves to remake the ruling coalition spurred tensions.<sup>11</sup> He led a merger of the EPRDF’s parties into a new Prosperity Party in late 2019. The TPLF refused to join. Some in Abiy’s own party objected, as did others who saw the move as aimed at centralizing power and dismantling ethnic federalism (in which states are roughly defined by ethnicity and language) in favor of a unitary state.<sup>12</sup>

By early 2020, human rights groups were reporting signs that political space was closing: the harassment of the opposition and journalists, renewed restrictions, and arbitrary arrests.<sup>13</sup> A

<sup>8</sup> State Department, “1<sup>st</sup> Anniversary of Ethiopia’s Cessation of Hostilities Agreement,” November 2, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> State Department, *Ethiopia Integrated Country Strategy*, March 24, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Ethiopia Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), “On the U.S. Statement Regarding the Situation in the Tigray Region,” February 28, 2021; Reuters, “Ethiopia expels seven U.N. officials,” October 6, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., International Crisis Group (ICG), *Keeping Ethiopia’s Transition on the Rails*, December 19, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Ethiopia, which adopted ethnic federalism in 1995, was ruled as an imperial monarchy for much of its history and as a unitary Marxist-Leninist state under the Derg. For critiques of the EPRDF merger, see, for example, Awol Allo, “Why Abiy Ahmed’s Prosperity Party could be bad news for Ethiopia,” *Al Jazeera*, December 5, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> See reports from Amnesty International, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), and Human Rights Watch (HRW).

government decision to postpone the 2020 elections, citing COVID-19, sparked controversy. Some Ethiopians decried it as an effort to extend the government's term.<sup>14</sup> Tensions flared midyear when an icon of the Oromo protest movement who had grown critical of Abiy was murdered. Protests ensued, and roughly 200 people were killed, either by security forces or in inter-ethnic unrest. Police detained over 9,000 people in the capital and Oromia and held many for months without charge.<sup>15</sup> Dozens of opposition politicians, including Abiy's leading political rival, were detained; some were released in 2022, others were not. Some observers warned that the country was on a dangerous trajectory, months before the Tigray conflict began.<sup>16</sup>

While the TPLF lost its place in Ethiopia's ruling coalition with the Prosperity Party's formation, it remained the ruling party in Tigray. Abiy's purge of many Tigrayan elites from government, and what the TPLF saw as the selective prosecution of Tigrayans for EPRDF abuses, spurred friction. The TPLF declared the decision to postpone the 2020 elections unconstitutional, and the Tigray government proceeded with state elections in September 2020, elevating tensions. With federal and state authorities challenging each other's legitimacy, a federal decision to change the leadership of troops stationed in Tigray became a flashpoint.<sup>17</sup> After warnings that hostilities could be imminent, including reports of Ethiopian and Eritrean troop movements, in November 2020 Tigrayan forces reportedly attacked military facilities in the state, and Abiy launched military operations.<sup>18</sup> The federal government described the Tigrayan attack as unprovoked and treasonous, while Tigray authorities claimed self-defense against a planned federal assault.

Amid the war in Tigray, Ethiopia held elections in June 2021. Voting did not occur in Tigray or dozens of other constituencies; millions were unable to participate. The main Oromo opposition parties boycotted the polls, citing the harassment and detention of their candidates and supporters. The Prosperity Party won in a landslide, taking 96% of seats for which elections were held.

## The Tigray Conflict

The Tigray conflict divided the country and its security forces along ethnic lines. The war set a coalition of forces allied with the federal government—the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF, the military), Eritrea's military, Amhara state security forces, and ethnic Amhara militia—against an ethnic insurgent force in Tigray known as the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF). The TDF was composed of Tigray state security forces, former soldiers, and civilians, and was led by Tigray state officials and retired military leaders of Tigrayan ethnicity (including a former U.N. peacekeeping force commander and a former head of the military).

The conflict was concentrated within Tigray until mid-2021, when a TDF offensive drove federal forces to withdraw from much of the state and declare a temporary ceasefire. USAID assessed at the time—after months of reports of troops blocking aid, looting, and destroying crops—that up to 900,000 people in Tigray faced famine conditions, while Abiy asserted, “there is no hunger in

<sup>14</sup> Zecharias Zelalem, “Ethiopia’s decision to delay election for COVID will have consequences for its democratic goals,” *Quartz*, June 18, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> HRW, “Ethiopia: Opposition figures held without charge,” August 15, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Gardner and Lule Estifanos, “Political violence could derail Ethiopia’s democratic transition,” *Foreign Policy*, September 20, 2023; ICG, “Defusing Ethiopia’s latest perilous crisis,” July 3, 2020; Chatham House, “Unrest threatens Ethiopia’s transition,” July 24, 2020; and HRW, “Ethiopia’s Other Conflict,” July 4, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> For more on prewar tensions, see ICG, *Steering Ethiopia’s Tigray Crisis Away from Conflict*, October 30, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> *The Economist*, “Ethiopia lurches towards civil war,” November 4, 2020; *New York Times*, “The Nobel Peace Prize that paved the way for war,” December 15, 2023; Harry Verhoeven and Michael Woldemariam, “Who lost Ethiopia? The unmaking of an African anchor state and U.S. foreign policy,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, June 2022.



Tigray.”<sup>19</sup> (U.N. officials reported the first starvation deaths in April 2021.<sup>20</sup>) Federal authorities then cut electricity and banking services to the state and reimposed a telecommunications shutdown.<sup>21</sup> Aid flows into Tigray—already constrained by the fighting—stopped in July 2021 and were then restricted in what U.N. officials described as a de facto humanitarian blockade.<sup>22</sup>

The TDF subsequently launched incursions into Amhara and Afar, in what they termed an effort to break a siege.<sup>23</sup> Their rapid advance and a nominal alliance with Oromo insurgents raised alarm that the capital could be overrun in November 2021, but the military—supported by new drones reportedly acquired from Turkey, Iran, and the UAE—forced a TDF withdrawal in December, and a lull in the fighting followed.<sup>24</sup> The government declared a “humanitarian truce” in March 2022. The truce unraveled in August 2022, and fierce fighting resumed, with military strikes taking an “utterly staggering” toll on civilians in Tigray, per U.N. officials.<sup>25</sup> “The scale of the fighting and deaths rival what we’re seeing in Ukraine,” the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations reported, and the U.N. Secretary-General said Ethiopia’s social fabric was “being ripped apart.”<sup>26</sup> The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum warned of a “heightened risk of genocide”; U.N. officials noted “horrifying levels of hate speech and incitement,” with social media calls for the “killing of every single youth from Tigray” and dehumanizing references to Tigrayans as “weeds” or “cancer.”<sup>27</sup>

**Contested Narratives and Atrocities.** Narratives around the conflict remain heavily contested; disinformation and misinformation were prevalent.<sup>28</sup> The telecommunications/internet shutdown obstructed information, and the government increasingly restricted reporting and blocked access by journalists and human rights monitors to Tigray.<sup>29</sup> Dozens of journalists were arrested; others were threatened, beaten, or expelled. Ethiopia expelled several U.N. officials in 2021, accusing them of “meddling.” The government also expelled four Irish diplomats over positions Ireland articulated on the war, and later threatened to cut ties.<sup>30</sup> A cabinet official who resigned said authorities tried to omit any mention of rape by Ethiopian or Eritrean forces in official reports.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Associated Press (AP), “Up to 900,000 in Ethiopia’s Tigray facing famine, US says,” June 26, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> VOA News, “UN: Hunger, Rape Rising in Ethiopia’s Tigray,” April 15, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> U.N. HRC, *Comprehensive Investigative Findings and Legal Determinations – International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia*, October 13, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> U.N., Statement by Acting Humanitarian Coordinator for Ethiopia Grant Leaity, September 2, 2021; and U.N. Security Council, Remarks by Secretary-General António Guterres, August 26, 2021. On the flow of aid to Tigray, see also OCHA’s Tigray situation reports and ACAPS, *Northern Ethiopia: Two Years into the Crisis*, November 3, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> OCHA, *Tigray Region Humanitarian Update Situation Report*, July 26, 2021, OCHA, *Tigray: Humanitarian Access Snapshot*, August 13, 2021; and WFP Chief David Beasley (@WFPChief), Twitter Post, July 27, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Declan Walsh, “Foreign drones tip the balance in Ethiopia’s civil war,” *New York Times*, December 20, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “Ethiopia: UN Human Rights Chief warns of devastating impact of continued hostilities on civilians,” October 18, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Mission to the United Nations, Remarks at the U.N. Security Council Stakeout on the Situation in Ethiopia, October 21, 2022; U.N., Secretary-General’s Opening Remarks to the Press on Ethiopia, October 17, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Museum warns of heightened risk of genocide, mass atrocities in Ethiopia,” October 5, 2022; U.N., Statement by the U.N. Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, October 19, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Claire Wilmot, Ellen Tveteraas, and Alexi Drew, *Dueling Information Campaigns: The War over the Narrative in Tigray*, The Media Manipulation Casebook, August 20, 2021; Moses Tofa, Alagaw Kifle, and Hubert Kinkoh, *Political and Media Analysis on the Tigray Conflict in Ethiopia*, European Institute of Peace, February 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Reuters, “Six million silenced: A two-year internet outage in Ethiopia,” September 28, 2022, and “Ethiopia restricts information sharing about war,” November 26, 2021; Tom Gardner, “I was a war reporter in Ethiopia. Then I became the enemy,” *1843*, June 2022; CPJ, “Journalists face growing hostility as Ethiopia’s civil war persists,” August 1, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Agence France-Presse (AFP), “Ethiopia warns Ireland over ‘hostile’ stance,” October 14, 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Filsan Abdi, “I resigned over war crimes against women and girls in Ethiopia. I want justice,” *The Guardian*, November 2, 2022.



**Atrocities.** The warring parties were implicated in mass atrocities, including “widespread and systematic” rape and sexual violence, mass killings, and ethnic cleansing.<sup>32</sup> The International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE), mandated by the U.N. Human Rights Council to investigate, concluded in 2022 that all parties had committed war crimes and the federal government and its allies had committed crimes against humanity and used starvation as a weapon of war (a war crime).<sup>33</sup> ICHREE asserted that “further independent investigation is warranted to determine the possible commission of the crime against humanity of extermination and/or the crime of genocide” in Tigray.<sup>34</sup> The U.N. experts described “a disturbing cycle of extreme violence and retribution” and “profound polarization and hatred along ethnic lines.” They verified dozens of large-scale killings by Ethiopian and/or Eritrean troops, all reflecting a pattern of targeting fighting-age male civilians of Tigrayan ethnicity; they also found that Tigray forces committed serious violations, including rape, killings, and looting, in Amhara and Afar.<sup>35</sup> The State Department issued its determination in March 2023, reporting that all parties to the conflict had committed war crimes, Ethiopia’s military and allied forces committed crimes against humanity, and Amhara forces committed ethnic cleansing in western Tigray. The department did not clarify whether it found the denial of humanitarian aid to be among the crimes committed.<sup>36</sup>

Reports suggest Tigrayans faced widespread discrimination, harassment, arbitrary arrest, and property seizures during the conflict.<sup>37</sup> Thousands who were serving in the military or police were detained when the war began; some were reportedly killed in detention.<sup>38</sup> U.N. officials reported in late 2021 that thousands (“tens of thousands,” per U.S. officials) were arbitrarily detained in mass detention centers, where some were tortured or executed by “soldiers and state agents.”<sup>39</sup>

**The Cessation of Hostilities.** A trio of former African leaders, with U.S. support, brought federal and TPLF officials together for talks in South Africa in late 2022 as federal forces threatened to take Tigray’s capital. Abiy, among others, characterized the resulting deal to end the war as a victory for his government.<sup>40</sup> The Permanent Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) is not a comprehensive peace deal—it commits federal authorities and the TPLF to basic principles and confidence-building measures, and provides a foundation for further negotiations. Federal officials pledged to restore basic services, expedite humanitarian aid, and protect civilians in Tigray. They agreed to lift their terrorist designation on the TPLF. The TPLF committed to disarm Tigrayan combatants and cede control of Tigray to an “inclusive” interim government until

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., the ICHREE reports; *Report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC)/Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Joint Investigation*, November 3, 2021; Amnesty International, “*I don’t know if they realized I was a person*”: Rape and sexual violence in the conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia, August 11, 2021; and HRW, “*We will erase you from this land*”: Crimes against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing in Ethiopia’s Western Tigray Zone, April 6, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> September 2022 ICHREE report, op. cit. See also Allard K. Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic at Yale Law School, “*All of us are in constant hunger*”: Ethiopia’s Responsibility for Starvation in Tigray, June 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Statement of the Chairperson of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia at the 78<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly, October 25, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> U.N. HRC, *Report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia*, September 14, 2023.

<sup>36</sup> State Department, “War Crimes, Crimes Against Humanity, and Ethnic Cleansing in Ethiopia,” March 20, 2023.

<sup>37</sup> U.N. HRC Chair on Special Procedures, “Grave human rights situation in Ethiopia,” December 17, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> *Washington Post*, “Ethiopian guards massacred scores of Tigrayan prisoners, witnesses say,” December 4, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> OHCHR, “Grave human rights situation in Ethiopia,” December 17, 2021; and U.S. Mission Geneva, U.S. Statement at the Human Rights Council Special Session on the Situation in Ethiopia, December 17, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Ethiopian News Agency, “Peace agreement consolidates historic victory gained on the ground: PM Abiy,” November 3, 2022; *New York Times*, “Details in Ethiopia’s peace deal reveal winners and losers,” November 3, 2022.

elections. Beyond this, the path forward is unstated: the parties committed to resolve their disputes peacefully, in line with the constitution, but the timeline for doing so is undefined.

While the ceasefire between federal and Tigrayan forces has held, ICHREE assessed in its final September 2023 report that the conflict had not ended.<sup>41</sup> When the CoHA was signed, some observers warned that parties to the conflict that were not part of the peace process could spoil the deal.<sup>42</sup> The CoHA links Tigrayan disarmament to the “concurrent” withdrawal of “foreign and non-ENDF” forces from Tigray—the latter seen as a reference to Amhara forces—but Eritrean troops and Amhara forces reportedly remain in parts of Tigray, where they have been implicated in serious abuses.<sup>43</sup> The United States continues to call for Eritrea’s full withdrawal.<sup>44</sup> U.N. reports indicate that aid access to Tigray has improved substantially, except where Eritrean or Amhara forces remain; telecommunications, electricity, and banking services have been restored in many areas. AU ceasefire monitors report that Tigrayan forces have largely handed over heavy weapons to the military, but Tigray authorities say full disarmament is tied to Eritrean and Amhara withdrawal.<sup>45</sup> Some 270,000 ex-combatants in Tigray reportedly await demobilization, which the federal government says is contingent on donor funding.<sup>46</sup>

Forces from Amhara reportedly continue to control western Tigray, which ethnic Amhara call Welkait and have sought to annex. They assert a historic claim to the fertile area, which has gold deposits and produces sesame, a lucrative cash crop.<sup>47</sup> The United Nations estimated that over a million people were forcibly displaced from the area (roughly the size of Connecticut) in 2021, in what the State Department termed ethnic cleansing.<sup>48</sup> Forced expulsions reportedly continued in 2023, and some reports suggest there have been efforts to destroy evidence of atrocities there.<sup>49</sup> Federal officials say they plan to hold a referendum on the territory; it remains unclear if they will enforce Amhara forces’ withdrawal, which deters civilian returns but could trigger more fighting.

## Ethiopia’s Other Conflicts

While the CoHA stopped the fighting between the military and the TDF, it did not address other conflicts in the country. Ethiopia struggles with multiple insurgencies, communal conflicts, territorial disputes, and proliferating statehood demands. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre recorded over 5 million new displacements from conflict and violence in Ethiopia in 2021; it was the highest annual figure ever recorded for a country.<sup>50</sup> Many displacements were in the

<sup>41</sup> U.N. HRC, *Report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia*, September 14, 2023.

<sup>42</sup> *The Economist*, “Eritrea is the most dangerous player in the Horn of Africa,” November 18, 2022; Jeffrey Feltman, “Ethiopia’s hard road to peace,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 26, 2022; ICG, “What now for the Ethiopia-Tigray peace deal,” December 30, 2022.

<sup>43</sup> *Washington Post*, “Hundreds massacred in Ethiopia even as peace deal was being reached,” February 28, 2023; and Atrocities Watch Africa, *Ethiopia Watch: Civil Society Monitor of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement*, July 2023.

<sup>44</sup> State Department, “1<sup>st</sup> Anniversary of Ethiopia’s Cessation of Hostilities Agreement,” November 2, 2023.

<sup>45</sup> Amani Africa, “Briefing update on situation in the Horn of Africa,” June 2023; Tigray TV, “President Getachew Reda on the 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the Pretoria Peace agreement,” available on YouTube.

<sup>46</sup> Fred Harter, “Unresolved status of western Tigray threatens Ethiopia’s peace deal,” *The New Humanitarian (TNH)*, September 26, 2023 and “Ethiopia’s unfinished peace deal leaves hundreds of thousands of ex-fighters in limbo,” *TNH*, November 2, 2023; Al Jazeera, “Dashed hopes and limited aid a year after Ethiopia truce,” November 2, 2023.

<sup>47</sup> Chatham House, *Fighting over ‘white gold’: Sesame in Ethiopia and Sudan*, April 4, 2023.

<sup>48</sup> State Department, “Reports of Mass Detentions, Killings, and Forced Expulsions in Western Tigray,” December 17, 2021.

<sup>49</sup> HRW, “Ethiopia: Ethnic cleansing persists under Tigray truce,” June 1, 2023; and *The Economist*, “War crimes in Tigray may be covered up or forgotten,” July 9, 2023.

<sup>50</sup> IDMC, *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2022*, May 2022.

north, and a significant number were in other areas. Attacks on civilians by armed actors in Oromia, Benishangul Gumuz, and Amhara states have fueled displacement, and security forces have been criticized for failing to protect civilians.<sup>51</sup> The government, rebels, and members of the Amhara, Oromo, and Gumuz ethnic communities have traded allegations over who is responsible. Some attacks seem to target ethnic Amhara; Amhara militia have also been accused of attacks.<sup>52</sup>

Human rights experts have reported grave violations of human rights in 2023, some involving government security personnel, and they warn that the risk of atrocities remains high.<sup>53</sup> In mid-2023, Ethiopia's national human rights commission (EHRC) reported a rise in forced disappearances by security forces that appeared linked to ethnic conflicts in the country.<sup>54</sup> ICHREE asserts that impunity for past atrocities is "firmly entrenched" and has termed prospects for transitional justice "bleak."<sup>55</sup> Ethiopia's government asserts its commitment to transitional justice and a national dialogue, but ICHREE contends authorities seek to evade international scrutiny and accountability.<sup>56</sup> Ethiopian officials sought to publicly discredit ICHREE and its reports, and pushed for its mandate to end, which it did in September 2023.<sup>57</sup>

**Oromia.** The government has faced a renewed insurgency by the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) in Oromia since 2019. Human rights groups describe a "brutal" counterinsurgency campaign there.<sup>58</sup> Conflict-affected areas face communications blackouts, and access by journalists and human rights monitors is restricted, resulting in limited media coverage and contested narratives. ICHREE reported on extrajudicial killings by government forces there and noted that large areas of the state are administered under military rule. The situation deteriorated in 2022, and dozens of airstrikes reportedly led to civilian casualties.<sup>59</sup> Widespread, arbitrary arrests reportedly continued in 2023.<sup>60</sup> The government, facing pressure from Oromo politicians in the ruling party, launched talks—facilitated by Norway, the United States, and regional officials—with the OLA in 2023.

**Amhara.** A new conflict is underway in Amhara, where local militia known as *Fano* ("volunteer fighters") have launched a rebellion against the government.<sup>61</sup> Tension rose there after the CoHA,

<sup>51</sup> HRW, "Ethiopia: Civilians in Western Oromia left unprotected," August 31, 2022; Robbie Corey-Boulet, "In the shadow of Tigray war, ethnic massacres roil western Ethiopia," AFP, February 11, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> See, e.g., AP, "Ethiopia: more than 200 Amhara people killed in attack blamed on rebels," June 19, 2022; and Tom Gardner, "All is not quiet on Ethiopia's western front," *Foreign Policy*, January 6, 2021.

<sup>53</sup> U.N. Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Press Release on Ethiopia, October 10, 2023; U.N. HRC, *Comprehensive Investigative Findings and Legal Determinations*, op. cit.; OHCHR, "Ethiopia: Violence in Amhara region," November 17, 2023; *Addis Standard*, Rights body reveals extrajudicial killings by gov. forces in Amhara region; 'widespread, arbitrary arrests' in Oromia, Amhara and Addis Abeba," September 13, 2023.

<sup>54</sup> VOA News, "Enforced disappearances rise in Ethiopia, says rights commission," June 13, 2023.

<sup>55</sup> U.N. HRC, *Report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia*, September 14, 2023.

<sup>56</sup> Institute for Security Studies, "Ethiopia's transition depends on both dialogue and transitional justice," September 1, 2023; Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, *A War Forward for Justice and Accountability in Ethiopia*, November 2023.

<sup>57</sup> See, e.g., AFP, "Ethiopia rejects UN report warning of crimes against humanity in Tigray," September 20, 2022.

<sup>58</sup> AP, "As Tigray calms, Ethiopia sees growing conflict in Oromia," December 14, 2022; HRW, "Ethiopia's Other Conflict," op. cit.

<sup>59</sup> Fred Harter, "As violence subsides in Tigray, Ethiopia's Oromia conflict flares," *TNH*, January 12, 2023; Zecharias Zelalem and Bileh Jelan, "Evidence of drone strikes inside civilian areas in Ethiopia," *New Lines*, December 26, 2022.

<sup>60</sup> *Addis Standard*, "Rights body reveals extrajudicial killings by gov. forces in Amhara region; 'widespread, arbitrary arrests' in Oromia, Amhara and Addis Ababa," September 13, 2023.

<sup>61</sup> This section draws from the following: ICG, *Ethiopia's Ominous New War in Amhara*, November 16, 2023; RVI, *Conflict Trends Report: Amhara Region*, October 2023; *TNH*, "Ethiopia shaken by a new and growing rebellion in Amhara," August 15, 2023; *The Economist*, "Ethiopia risks sliding into another civil war," August 15, 2023; and Zelalem Shiferaw Woldemichael, "Dismantling the Regional Special Forces in Ethiopia," Wilson Center, May 2023.

which some Amhara saw as a betrayal by Abiy, and in the context of other community grievances and ethno-nationalist sentiment. Despite differing political visions, Amhara elites joined Oromo politicians in supporting Abiy's rise to power, but Amhara disaffection with the prime minister and Oromo-Amhara tensions have increasingly flared. Under Abiy, some Ethiopians see Oromo as dominating the ruling party and military, and Abiy backing the interests of his ethnic group over others. Some Amhara assert that they have been victims of "genocide," citing ethnically targeted attacks in Oromia and other states, and they accuse Abiy's government of ignoring or even supporting the violence. Abiy's April 2023 decision to disband state forces and integrate them into federal forces sparked violent protests in Amhara. Amhara reportedly feared they would be left vulnerable to attacks and that Abiy would allow Tigrayans to reclaim western Tigray.

Under Ethiopia's constitution, each regional state is authorized to administer a state police force to maintain public order within their state. In the 2000s, state governments used the authority to develop paramilitary forces, which the EPRDF used to help counter insurgencies. Amhara's force and the Fano fought alongside the Ethiopian and Eritrean militaries in the Tigray conflict, while Tigray's force became a core element of the TDF. Federal efforts to demobilize the Amhara force in 2023 spurred Fano mobilization against the government. Sporadic clashes between the military and Fano ensued, and the Fano have briefly overtaken several major cities in Amhara. Some local officials have been assassinated, and state authority in some areas has reportedly collapsed. Insecurity has significantly restricted access to parts of the state, including for aid agencies.

The federal government declared a state of emergency in August 2023, placed Amhara state under military rule, and cut internet access there. The decree gives federal authorities broad powers nationwide. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported weeks later that over 1,000 people, many reportedly ethnic Amhara, had been arrested under the law.<sup>62</sup> EHRC has since reported serious human rights violations, including arbitrary detentions and "widespread" extrajudicial executions by security forces, in Amhara.<sup>63</sup> OHCHR has echoed these concerns and implicated federal forces in shelling and drone strikes on civilian areas.<sup>64</sup>

## The Economy

Ethiopia has had one of the world's fastest growing economies for over two decades. It markedly reduced its poverty rate between 1995 and 2015, but its development indicators and per capita income remained low. The EPRDF aimed to transform the economy with major infrastructure and electrification projects, seeking to become a manufacturing hub, and by leasing agricultural land to foreign investors. Its agenda relied on foreign lending, and the borrowing led to debt distress.

Abiy's pledge to open the largely state-controlled economy and state enterprises courted foreign investors. The government ended one of the world's last telecom monopolies in 2021. Authorities have committed to open the financial sector and issue banking licenses to foreign investors. The country has plans to establish a stock market. The challenges of doing business there, however, "remain daunting," according to the State Department's *2023 Investment Climate Statement*, and persistent instability appears to be deterring some investors.<sup>65</sup>

Ethiopia was facing economic troubles, including COVID-19 pandemic impacts, before the war, and the conflict exacerbated them. It led to massive infrastructure destruction and economic loss,

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<sup>62</sup> OHCHR, "Ethiopia: Deteriorating human rights situation," August 29, 2023.

<sup>63</sup> EHRC, "The human rights impact of the armed conflict on civilians in Amhara Regional State," August 14, 2023, and "Amhara Region: Concerning human rights violations in the context of the armed conflict," September 18, 2023.

<sup>64</sup> OHCHR, "Ethiopia: Violence in Amhara region," November 17, 2023.

<sup>65</sup> Bloomberg, "An investor darling is becoming a hard sell," November 17, 2023.

deterred investment, and resulted in the suspension of some financial support. Military spending reportedly quadrupled, rising to almost 15% of the budget, the second-largest expense after debt servicing.<sup>66</sup> Facing rampant inflation, a severe foreign currency shortage, and war reconstruction costs estimated at over \$20 billion, Ethiopian officials hope to unlock frozen donor funding.<sup>67</sup> They reportedly seek \$3.5 billion in budget support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which says new lending is contingent on commitments from development partners and creditors, including China, on Ethiopia's plan to restructure almost \$30 billion in foreign debt. Ethiopia's credit rating deteriorated in 2023, and it defaulted on its sovereign debt in December.

### Select Foreign Relations Issues

**The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).** Ethiopia's dispute with Egypt and Sudan over Ethiopia's new dam on the Nile remains unresolved. Tensions flared in 2020 when Ethiopia began filling the reservoir without the downstream countries' consent. Ethiopia expects the GERD to significantly expand its domestic power capacity (almost half its population lacks electricity access) and plans to sell excess electricity to neighbors. The GERD began generating electricity in 2022; the reservoir reached capacity in 2023. Abiy and Egypt's president met in 2023 and agreed to work toward a deal, but trilateral talks were reportedly at an impasse as 2023 ended.

**Horn Tensions & Red Sea Access.** Abiy declared in 2023 that Ethiopia—landlocked since Eritrea seceded in 1993—must acquire a port on the Red Sea to break its people out of a “geographic prison,” terming it an “existential” issue.<sup>68</sup> He has pledged to pursue a port peacefully, but some of his government's signals have fueled apprehension in the region.<sup>69</sup> Over 90% of Ethiopia's external trade flows through Djibouti, costing a reported \$1.5 billion in port fees. The status of Abiy's 2019 deal with Eritrea, which reportedly included tax-free access to its ports, is unclear, and tensions with Eritrea have risen, not only in the context of Abiy's Red Sea remarks, but also over the CoHA and rumored Eritrean links with Amhara militants. Ethiopia announced a deal in early 2024 with the self-declared republic of Somaliland, under which the latter, having already offered Ethiopia a share in its port at Berbera, would lease coastline to Ethiopia for military and commercial use in exchange for shares in Ethiopia's airline and, reportedly, diplomatic recognition. Somalia, which rejected Abiy's call for port talks, views Somaliland as its territory. Somalia terms the MoU an act of aggression and has vowed to defend its sovereignty.<sup>70</sup> Broader Ethiopian interests in Somalia are tied to security concerns, domestic considerations regarding its own ethnic Somali population, and other factors, including regional influence. Ethiopia deployed troops to Somalia in 2006, with tacit U.S. backing, to oust a network of Islamist militias that had taken control of Mogadishu, leading to a protracted campaign against Al Shabaab. Ethiopia joined the AU stabilization force in Somalia in 2014; it also maintains troops there bilaterally. In July 2022, an estimated 2,000 Al Shabaab fighters led the group's first major incursion into Ethiopia.<sup>71</sup> The ENDF says it killed over 800, but elements reportedly remain in the country.<sup>72</sup> Unfolding tensions over Somaliland could affect counterterrorism efforts in the region.

**Gulf Countries.** Arab Gulf countries are important trading partners and sources of investment for Ethiopia. Reports that Saudi border guards have killed hundreds of Ethiopian migrants and asylum seekers at the Yemen border complicate that relationship; Abiy's government has said it will work with Saudi authorities to investigate the allegations.<sup>73</sup> Abiy reportedly has a close relationship with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and UAE investments in Ethiopia total \$2.9 billion, per Emirati officials.<sup>74</sup> The UAE, along with Turkey and Iran, reportedly supplied armed drones to Ethiopia during the Tigray conflict.<sup>75</sup> Flight trackers documented an uptick in UAE Air Force cargo flights to Ethiopia in late 2023.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>66</sup> *TNH*, “Boom to bust: fallout of war and drought leaves Ethiopians mired in poverty,” August 1, 2023.

<sup>67</sup> *Financial Times*, “Ethiopia seeks help to find \$20bn for post-conflict reconstruction,” August 19, 2023.

<sup>68</sup> *The Economist*, “Ethiopia's prime minister wants a Red Sea harbour,” November 2, 2023.

<sup>69</sup> *The Africa Report*, “Ethiopia: Abiy stirs up region in his quest for a port,” November 10, 2023.

<sup>70</sup> BBC News, “Ethiopia-Somaliland deal makes waves in the Horn of Africa,” January 8, 2024.

<sup>71</sup> Noe Hochet-Boudin, “Al-Shabab seeks to ‘put down roots’ in Ethiopia,” *Le Monde*, September 14, 2022.

<sup>72</sup> U.N. Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Somalia*, U.N. doc. S/2023/724, September 29, 2023.

<sup>73</sup> HRW, “*They Fired on Us Like Rain*”: *Saudi Arabian Mass Killings*, August 21, 2023; and Reuters, “Ethiopia says it will investigate alleged migrant killings with Saudi Arabia,” August 22, 2023.

<sup>74</sup> Shakhbout bin Nahyan, “UAE and Ethiopia's enduring partnership goes back 30 years,” August 22, 2023.

<sup>75</sup> Declan Walsh, “Foreign drones tip the balance in Ethiopia's civil war,” *New York Times*, December 20, 2021.

<sup>76</sup> Gerjon, “A second UAE airlift to Ethiopia,” Substack, updated November 13, 2023.



**China.** China is Ethiopia's largest trading partner and top source of foreign investment, with loan commitments estimated at over \$13.7 billion.<sup>77</sup> Much of Ethiopia's transportation infrastructure has been built and financed by China, including its \$3 billion railway to Djibouti, a flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. China funded and built the \$200 million AU headquarters building in Addis Ababa (where by some accounts China spied on African officials).<sup>78</sup> Abiy's government seeks to reduce its debt to China, but it has also signed a range of new cooperation agreements. China's foreign minister visited Ethiopia on his first official trip in early 2023, opening a new Chinese-funded AU Centers for Disease Control and Prevention headquarters and suspending debt payments for 2023/2024. China backed Ethiopian positions in the U.N. Security Council during the Tigray war and upgraded its relationship with Ethiopia to a "All Weather Strategic Partnership" (a label Pakistan, Belarus, and Venezuela share) in 2023. Ethiopia was one of six countries invited to join the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) group in 2023. Ethiopia's role as the seat of the AU may have played into the group's decision. On the sidelines of the BRICS summit, China reportedly agreed to another one-year postponement of Ethiopia's debt payments.

**Russia.** Russia cultivated closer ties with Ethiopia during the Tigray war, which overlapped with its 2022 invasion of Ukraine.<sup>79</sup> The Soviet Union supported Ethiopia's military under the Derg, and Russia has remained a source for arms. The countries signed security agreements in 2018 and 2021, and Russian state broadcaster Sputnik signed a cooperation deal with Ethiopian state media in 2022. Sputnik and other Russian outlets amplified anti-Western propaganda around the Tigray conflict. Russia advocated Ethiopia's positions in the U.N. Security Council and blocked statements on the crisis.<sup>80</sup> Ethiopia abstained on a U.N. General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's annexations in Ukraine and voted against resolutions to suspend Russia from the U.N. Human Rights Council and calling on Russia to pay war reparations. Abiy attended the Russia-Africa Summits in 2019 and 2023.

## U.S. Policy and Assistance

U.S. officials welcomed Ethiopia's 2018 transition as an opportunity to support reforms, deepen ties, and make inroads for U.S. trade and investment, and relations warmed in the first years of Abiy's term.<sup>81</sup> President Donald Trump's effort to mediate talks between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) led to tensions in 2020, however.<sup>82</sup>

The onset of fighting in Tigray coincided with the 2020 U.S. elections. The war reoriented U.S. priorities toward seeking a ceasefire and responding to the humanitarian crisis.<sup>83</sup> U.S. statements expressed alarm, including about ethnic cleansing and the potential for state collapse.<sup>84</sup> The Biden Administration named a Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa in April 2021 and imposed defense trade controls and restrictions on economic and security assistance over human rights abuses.<sup>85</sup> It announced visa restrictions and designated Eritrea's military chief for Global Magnitsky sanctions. The Administration established a targeted sanctions regime in September 2021 and sanctioned Eritrean officials and entities, including the military and ruling party.<sup>86</sup> No Ethiopians were designated. In late 2021, President Biden terminated Ethiopia's trade benefits under the African Growth and Opportunities Act, as amended (AGOA; P.L. 106-200, 19 U.S.C. 3703) per

<sup>77</sup> Boston University Global Development Policy Center, Chinese Loans to Africa Database, 2022.

<sup>78</sup> VOA News, "Experts: Report of China hacking African Union HQ fits larger pattern," January 5, 2021.

<sup>79</sup> VOA News, "Russian FM Lavrov heads to Ethiopia, seeking closer ties," July 26, 2022.

<sup>80</sup> See, e.g., *Devex*, "Russia, China foiled UN meetings on Tigray famine, says Lowcock," June 21, 2022.

<sup>81</sup> Jeffrey Feltman, "A Perspective on the Ethiopian-U.S. Relationship After a Year of Conflict," November 2021; Verhoeven and Woldemariam, op. cit.; USIP, *Final Report of the Red Sea Senior Study Group*, October 29, 2020.

<sup>82</sup> AP, "Ethiopia blasts Trump remark that Egypt will 'blow up' dam," October 25, 2020; Robbie Gramer, "U.S. halts some foreign assistance funding to Ethiopia over dam dispute with Egypt, Sudan," *Foreign Policy*, August 27, 2020.

<sup>83</sup> House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC), *The Conflict in Ethiopia*, hearing, June 29, 2021.

<sup>84</sup> HFAC, *The Biden Administration's Priorities for U.S. Foreign Policy*, hearing, March 10, 2021; Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (SFRC), *Ethiopia in Crisis: U.S. Strategy and Policy Response*, hearing, May 27, 2021.

<sup>85</sup> The restrictions were consistent with §116 and §502B of the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of 1961, as amended.

<sup>86</sup> White House, *Fact Sheet: Biden-Harris Administration Actions in Response to the Ongoing Crisis in Northern Ethiopia*, September 17, 2021.

congressionally mandated requirements, citing gross human rights violations.<sup>87</sup> The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation froze plans for large investments in Ethiopia.

The war spurred congressional concern and debate. Some Members opposed punitive measures,<sup>88</sup> others pushed for further action, including through S. 3199 and H.R. 6600 in the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress. Some pressed the Administration for an atrocities determination. State Department officials said this was in an advanced stage in mid-2021 but then postponed its release to provide space for diplomatic efforts to end the war.<sup>89</sup> Some Members called for Temporary Protected Status for Ethiopians, which the Homeland Security Department granted in October 2022.<sup>90</sup>

U.S. and European responses to the war prompted a campaign of anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric from Ethiopian officials and government supporters.<sup>91</sup> In early 2022, with new leadership at the U.S. embassy and in the special envoy post, the Biden Administration adjusted its approach to focus on rebuilding the bilateral relationship while pursuing an end to the war.<sup>92</sup> An updated U.S. strategy noted the conflict's damage to the relationship and the human toll but said "it has not altered the strategic logic of a healthy and vibrant U.S.-Ethiopia partnership."<sup>93</sup> After a call between President Biden and Abiy, the United States discreetly facilitated initial direct federal-Tigray talks. The United States later aided the AU-led talks in South Africa, although Ethiopia reportedly barred U.S. and U.N. participation in some sessions and sidelined European diplomats.

U.S. and Ethiopian officials have sought to improve relations in the wake of the CoHA. Abiy attended the December 2022 U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, and in early 2023 Secretary Blinken went to Ethiopia, meeting with Abiy to reaffirm "the importance of the bilateral partnership."<sup>94</sup> The Biden Administration notified Congress of the State Department's assessment that Ethiopia was no longer engaging in a "pattern of gross violations of human rights" in mid-2023, paving the way for U.S. representatives at the IMF to support a resumption of IMF financing. The assessment appears at odds with reports by human rights groups.<sup>95</sup> Blinken and Abiy spoke several times in 2023, discussing regional security issues, food aid, the Amhara and Oromia conflicts, human rights, and "the importance of political dialogue and transitional justice."<sup>96</sup>

U.S. concerns over ongoing conflicts, rights abuses, and accountability complicate efforts to improve the bilateral relationship. Among issues of contention, the United States did not reinstate Ethiopia's AGOA eligibility for 2024. U.S. officials have pledged support if Ethiopia develops a credible transitional justice process, while acknowledging skepticism about such prospects.<sup>97</sup> The

<sup>87</sup> For more on AGOA, see CRS In Focus IF10149, *African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)*.

<sup>88</sup> See, e.g., Sen. James Inhofe, "Ethiopia," Congressional Record, daily edition, vol. 167 (December 15, 2021).

<sup>89</sup> SFRC, *Ethiopia in Crisis: U.S. Strategy and Policy Response*, hearing, May 27, 2021; HFAC, *The Conflict in Ethiopia*, op. cit.; HFAC Africa Subcommittee, *FY2022 Budget and U.S.-Africa Relations*, hearing, December 1, 2021.

<sup>90</sup> Department of Homeland Security, "DHS Designates Ethiopia for Temporary Protected Status for 18 Months," October 21, 2022. See also CRS Report RS20844, *Temporary Protected Status and Deferred Enforced Departure*.

<sup>91</sup> See, e.g., BBC, "Ethiopia's Tigray conflict: Tens of thousands attend anti-U.S. rally," May 30, 2021; and Jon Lee Anderson, "Did a Nobel peace laureate stoke a civil war," *The New Yorker*, October 3, 2022.

<sup>92</sup> State Department, "Appointment of Ambassador Jacobson as Chargé d'Affaires, a.i. at Embassy Addis Ababa," January 31, 2022.

<sup>93</sup> State Department, *Ethiopia Integrated Country Strategy*, March 24, 2022.

<sup>94</sup> State Department, Secretary Blinken's Call with Ethiopian Prime Minister Ahmed, January 21, 2023; and State Department, Secretary Blinken's Meeting with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, March 15, 2023.

<sup>95</sup> See, e.g., 2023 reports by the ICHREE and EHRC; and Nicole Widdersheim, "Why say who did what? The Ethiopia case and the power of US atrocity determinations," *Just Security*, July 20, 2023.

<sup>96</sup> State Department readouts of Blinken-Abiy calls on August 4, September 28, and November 17, 2023.

<sup>97</sup> Ambassador-at-Large for Global Criminal Justice Beth Van Schaack, "Ethiopia: One Year After the Pretoria (continued...)"



case of a U.S. government contractor accused by the Justice Department of spying for Ethiopia may also strain ties.<sup>98</sup> He reportedly passed classified reports to Ethiopia's intelligence service.

**U.S. Assistance.** The United States is Ethiopia's largest humanitarian donor, providing over half of all reported humanitarian funding in the past five years, including \$3 billion in FY2021-FY2023.<sup>99</sup> Bilateral development aid, meanwhile, has declined since 2020. The Trump Administration paused more than \$270 million in assistance in response to GERD dispute. The Biden Administration delinked the aid pause from the GERD but held security and some development aid based on conflict-related human rights abuses and legal restrictions.<sup>100</sup> U.S. nonhumanitarian aid, mostly for health programs, totaled over \$335 million in FY2023.

### The Suspension of Food Assistance

Ethiopia is one of the world's largest recipients of international food aid, and the United States is its largest donor. USAID paused support for food assistance in Tigray in April 2023 after discovering aid being diverted and sold on the local market, and extended the pause nationwide in June after finding "widespread and coordinated" diversion across the country, reportedly involving Ethiopian federal and state government officials.<sup>101</sup> USAID asserted that it would restart aid "only when strong oversight measures are in place and we are confident that assistance will reach the intended vulnerable populations."<sup>102</sup> WFP, whose commodities were diverted, in some cases reportedly to feed military units and ex-combatants, paused distribution in line with USAID's decision. The results of USAID and WFP investigations are not yet available, but WFP described the scale of diversion as "huge"; one U.S. official said it could be the largest-ever theft of humanitarian food aid.<sup>103</sup>

The aid pause was controversial, given the scale of needs. The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) reported in mid-2023 that millions were still severely food insecure despite the ceasefire and improvements in drought conditions.<sup>104</sup> Officials recorded 1,400 hunger-related deaths in Tigray from April to August; deaths were also reported in refugee camps.<sup>105</sup> Food assistance for nearly 900,000 refugees in Ethiopia was paused until October, when USAID authorized its resumption after, among other reforms, Ethiopia's government transferred responsibility for dispatch, warehousing, and distribution of refugee food aid to USAID's implementing partners. Some observers have urged broader scrutiny of humanitarian operations in Ethiopia, citing, among other concerns, reports that Ethiopia's government has at times restricted aid and allegedly blocked a formal famine declaration in 2021.<sup>106</sup> Some aid workers say manipulation of humanitarian aid in the country is "entrenched" and contend that aid agencies have long tolerated a degree of corruption in the system.<sup>107</sup> The diversion scandal in Ethiopia has prompted USAID to pursue new measures with implementing partners worldwide to reduce diversion risks. In November 2023, USAID announced that negotiations with Ethiopian authorities had led to "widespread and substantial" reforms to the country's food aid system and that aid would resume for a one-year trial period.<sup>108</sup>

Agreement," October 31, 2023; HRW, "Q&A: Justice for Serious International Crimes Committed in Ethiopia," September 4, 2023; Patrick Vinck et al., "Can Justice Bring Peace to Ethiopia?" *Foreign Affairs*, November 15, 2023.

<sup>98</sup> *Washington Post*, "State and Justice Dept. contractor charged with spying for Ethiopia," September 21, 2023.

<sup>99</sup> OCHA Financial Tracking Service; USAID, Ethiopia Assistance Overview 2023 and Disaster Response Archive.

<sup>100</sup> Reuters, "U.S. to delink Ethiopian aid pause from dam policy," February 20, 2021.

<sup>101</sup> AP, "Millions of Ethiopians go hungry again as international aid is paused," June 21, 2023.

<sup>102</sup> USAID, "Pause of U.S. Food Aid in Tigray, Ethiopia," May 3, 2023.

<sup>103</sup> Teresa Welsh, "Cindy McCain speaks on Ethiopia food aid diversion," *Devex*, July 19, 2023; AP, "US says its horrified by conditions in Ethiopia after theft leads to food aid pause and deaths," June 29, 2023.

<sup>104</sup> FEWS NET, "Food security emergency persists across Ethiopia in aftermath of severe shocks," August 2023.

<sup>105</sup> BBC, "Ethiopia's Tigray crisis: Deaths from starvation after aid halted," August 18, 2023; *Addis Standard*, "At least 30 died of hunger in Gambella refugee camps amid 'increasingly concerning food shortage,'" September 21, 2023.

<sup>106</sup> See, e.g., ANLAP, "What happened to principled humanitarian action in conflicts? The case of Tigray," October 12, 2022; ICHREE reports; Refugees International, *The Crisis Below the Headlines: Conflict Displacement in Ethiopia*, November 15, 2018; *The Telegraph*, "Ethiopia blocked famine declaration in Tigray, UN chief suggests," June 8, 2022; and Teresa Welsh, "DevExplains: How is a famine declared," *Devex*, December 21, 2022.

<sup>107</sup> *Devex*, "'Rot is so much deeper'—decades of Ethiopia aid manipulation," August 28, 2023.

<sup>108</sup> USAID, "USAID resumes food assistance for people across Ethiopia," November 14, 2023.

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