

In the news this past week (5-12 November 2020):

## CONFLICT ESCALATES IN ETHIOPIA'S RESTIVE TIGRAY REGION



On Wednesday 4 November, Ethiopia's federal government cut off communications in the heavily armed northern Tigray region and ordered troops to respond to an alleged deadly attack on a military base there. Clashes have escalated and there have been casualties reported on both sides. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has since issued several statements seeking to defend what he calls a "law enforcement action" against the restive Tigray region. However, many international observers, and diplomats in

Addis Ababa, expressed a growing concern that the escalating conflict could spread to other parts of the country, where there have been moves towards greater autonomy, or that already fragile neighbouring states could get dragged into a war. The federal and Tigray governments were once allies, but now they consider each other illegal. The once-dominant Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) felt marginalised and targeted by Mr Abiy's reforms and withdrew from the ruling coalition last year. During the COVID-19 crisis, the TPLF objected to the general election being delayed and called the federal government, and Mr Abiy's extended tenure, illegal. They then defied the federal government's ban on elections and conducted their regional elections, which the federal government declared illegal. The federal government later moved to divert funding from the TPLF executive to local governments, angering the regional leadership. Neither side has demonstrated much interest in dialogue thus far. There is now a very real danger that the region where Mr Abiy has been a high-profile peacemaker, could descend into a civil or regional war.

From a Christian perspective, Tigray is a strong base of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Evangelicals (and other Christian denominations) can operate in the region; however, they face systematic and widespread opposition from the representatives of the regional ruling party. Tigrayan society is closely monitored by the regional government and any deviation from the "revolutionary democracy" – an ideology of the ruling party of regional government – places one at an economic disadvantage and can result in administrative problems and opposition. In the political sphere, this form of control ensures that the ruling party wins all seats during elections. A similar apparatus is used to discourage the evangelical Christian movement in Tigray. Equally, becoming an evangelical is considered a great shame by Tigrayan society. Tigray activists and officials have labelled Mr Abiy – a devout Pentecostal – "the pastor" to ridicule his intensive peace, forgiveness and unity speeches and initiatives. The current conflict between the TPLF and the federal government is directly affecting church life in Tigray. As one church leader explained (a week before violence broke out): "Though we are free to run church services, we face strong resistance from Tigray security forces and cadres. The increasing political and ideological tensions between the federal government and our regional government is affecting our ministry considerably. Nowadays, it has become very difficult to conduct our ministry activity. We are denied permits to conduct

church conferences. They automatically think that we are supporters of the Prosperity Party—the national ruling party formed by Mr Abiy last year.” The Church in Ethiopia is praying for the situation to end peacefully. The newly formed Ethiopian Gospel Believer Churches Council – an umbrella organisation for all Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal and independent churches in Ethiopia – an initiative of the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, has declared a fast for 10 days since all previous attempts at mediation have failed.

Pray with us for the following:

- For Mr Abiy and his government to respond effectively to this current challenge, and that a peaceful resolution can be established, for the good of the nation and region
- For church leaders in Tigray to remain steadfast, and to lead their flocks with courage and wisdom during these very difficult times
- For Ethiopian believers to seek and do the Lord’s will – that they may be His ambassadors of peace and reconciliation, across ethnic and denominational lines

Image: REUTERS/Tiksa Negeri