According to state media, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed vowed to “bury the enemy” in his first message from the battlefront, according to state media, as the UN warned the yearlong conflict has left millions short of food. As Tigrayan rebels report major territorial gains, claiming to have seized a town 220 kilometers from Addis Ababa, international alarm over the escalating conflict has deepened, with foreign countries urging their citizens to leave.

State media reported that Abiy, a former lieutenant colonel in the military, had arrived at the front line to lead a counteroffensive against the rebels, handing regular duties to his deputy. In an interview shown on the state-affiliated Oromia Broadcasting Corporation channel, the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize winner said he was certain of achieving victory against the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) rebel group. He added that the military had secured control of Kassagita and planned to recapture Chifra district and Burka town in Afar region, which neighbors Tigray, the TPLF’s stronghold. The interview was broadcast hours after the government announced new rules Thursday against sharing information on battlefield outcomes that was not published by official channels, a move that could bring sanctions against journalists.

The war has exacted a huge humanitarian toll, with the UN’s World Food Program saying that the number of people requiring food aid in the country’s north had surged to more than 9 million. Hundreds of thousands are on the brink of famine as aid workers struggle to deliver urgently needed supplies to desperate populations in Tigray, Amhara and Afar. The WFP said the situation had sharply deteriorated in recent months, with an estimated 9.4 million people facing hunger “as a direct result of ongoing conflict,” compared with around 7 million in September. “Amhara region - the front lines of the conflict in Ethiopia — has seen the largest jump in numbers with 3.7 million people now in urgent need of humanitarian aid,” WFP said. “Of the people across northern Ethiopia in need of
assistance, more than 80% (7.8 million) of them are behind battle lines.” The report said that the risk of malnutrition has also increased across the three regions, with WFP screening data showing rates between 16% and 28% for children. Even more alarmingly, up to 50% of pregnant and breastfeeding women screened in Amhara and Tigray were also found to be malnourished. Fighting has also damaged more than 500 health facilities in Amhara, the UN’s humanitarian agency OCHA said.

As the war has dragged on, the government has stepped up its use of air power against the TPLF — one of the areas where it enjoys a military advantage. Much of the conflict-affected zone is under a communications blackout and access for journalists is restricted, making battlefield claims difficult to verify. Abiy’s spokeswoman, Billene Seyoum, said she had no information about any drone strikes in Mekelle, which was recaptured by the rebels in June before they expanded into Amhara and Afar.

The war erupted in early November 2020 when Abiy deployed troops into Tigray, bringing to a head a long-simmering row with the TPLF, the region’s ruling party. Tens of thousands have been killed in the war between Ethiopian federal troops, allied forces, and militants from the Tigray region. The prospect of the ancient nation’s disintegration has alarmed Ethiopians and observers alike, who fear what might happen to the often turbulent Horn of Africa as a whole. Many nations around the world have ordered their citizens to leave the country immediately.

Abiy was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize just two years ago for his radical political reforms and bringing peace to neighboring Eritrea. His trajectory from winning the Nobel Prize to potentially joining the fray shocked many. But the move to the front would follow the tradition of Ethiopian leaders, including Haile Selassie I and Yohannes IV of Ethiopia, who was also killed in battle in 1889, said Christopher Clapham, a retired professor associated with the University of Cambridge. “It strikes me as a very traditional Ethiopian exertion of leadership,” Clapham said. “It might be necessary to rescue what looks like a very faltering Ethiopian military response.”

The Tigray forces, who had long dominated the national government before Abiy came to power, appear to have the momentum. They have approached the capital of Addis Ababa in recent weeks with the aim of strengthening their negotiating position or simply forcing the prime minister to step down. “The situation is extremely dangerous,” said Adem Abebe, researcher with the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. “If (Abiy) gets hurt or killed, it’s not just the federal government that will collapse, the army will as well.” Abiy also invited Ethiopians to join him — the latest call for every able citizen in the country of more than 110 million people to fight. There have been reports of hurried military trainings and allegations of forced conscription in recent months, while analysts have warned that, with the military apparently weakened, ethnic-based militias are stepping up. “He may be seriously considering becoming a martyr,” said the man who nominated Abiy for the Nobel, Awol Allo, a senior lecturer in law at Keele University in Britain. Allo said the move fits with the prime minister’s view of himself and his sense that he was destined to lead. But he also did not rule out the possibility that Abiy may have simply left the capital for a safer location — not the front — and was directing the war from there.

The Tigray forces have said they want Abiy out, among other demands. For its part, the Ethiopian government wants the Tigray forces, which it has designated as a terrorist group, to withdraw to their region as part of Addis Ababa’s conditions. “Unless there is some kind of divine intervention, I don’t see any chance for a peaceful resolution through dialogue because the positions are highly polarized,” said Kassahun Berhanu, professor of political science at Addis Ababa University, who added he believed Abiy’s announcement about going to the front is “aimed at boosting popular morale.”

Many political analysts worldwide wonder how the charismatic Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed went from being a 2019 Nobel Peace Prize Winner to a combative authoritarian leader in the blink of an eye. With its accelerating demographic growth and strong macroeconomic stability, Ethiopia looked set to take off, aiming to become the beacon of East African renaissance for the next generation. To put it mildly, all those hopes are now entirely dashed by the hot African wind and buried in the desert. In a desperate attempt to save his government, the embattled prime minister abruptly announced that he was leaving for the front lines of the country’s brutal civil war to personally lead a campaign against the victorious rebels advancing towards the capital from their stronghold in northern Tigray.

The whole unfortunate mess started when Abiy disastrously ordered national troops to enter Tigray province in November 2020 in retaliation for the TPLF allegedly ordering an attack on the federal army base there. Political tensions between the TPLF and Abiy have been growing since he came to power, as he has worked to marginalize the previously dominant Tigrayans at the national level of government. However, abruptly joining the battle-hardened TPLF, Abiy struck a match that set both his country and his many dreams of it on fire. The fighting quickly
spread to other parts of the country, already becoming a powder keg of long-standing ethnic and tribal tensions. The TPLF, after bloodily regaining power over Tigray, has advanced deep into the troubled Amhara province, seeking complete control of the main road linking the capital to the port of Djibouti, through which 90% of the country’s trade flows. The human cost of this avoidable civil war is enormous. War crimes abound on both sides, horrific mass rapes are used as weapons of war, and tens of thousands have died.

Perhaps worst of all, the dazzling brilliance of the charismatic Abiy has turned into something of the opposite. The former Democrat favorite declared a state of emergency, giving police unlimited power to search homes and arrest anyone accused of supporting the insurgency. This has resulted in thousands of people being in the hands of security forces. Much of this terrible outcome can be laid at the feet of one man is a personal tragedy for Abiy. But this is more the tragedy of Ethiopia, which depends on the misguided whims of one leader rather than sustainable institutions, which the country does not yet have, unfortunately.

_Viktor Mikhin, corresponding member of RANS, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”._