Ethiopia Enjoys a Temporary Lull

Ethiopian troops under the command of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed won a military victory last December when they stopped a group of Tigray rebels from advancing on the country’s capital, which could have led to the overthrow of his government. The Prime Minister wholly appreciated the bravery of his troops. “Ethiopia is proud of your incredible heroism. You made us feel certain when we said Ethiopia would never lose,” the triumphant leader told the troops at the front of a battle for control of Kombolcha.

In fact, the improvement in the seemingly wobbly and near-collapse leader's fortune has been determined by the results of widespread use of combat drones recently acquired from allies in the Gulf region and elsewhere who are determined to help Abiy Ahmed stay in power. Over the past four months, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Iran have quietly supplied the Ethiopian army with the latest drones.

It is apparent to any unbiased observer that the supply of modern drones on a large scale will not facilitate negotiations but are aimed at their use in combat. Simultaneously, the USA, which demagogically call wherever possible for a ceasefire and peace negotiations, has pretended that it didn’t notice anything and did not interfere with the supply of modern weapons to Addis Ababa. Concurrently, Washington has perfectly armed the rebels using third countries, giving them a new incentive to unleash a civil war in Ethiopia for the Tigray Region to be separated into an independent region of the country.
The motives of the suppliers varied: to make money, gain an advantage in a strategic region, and back the winner in the escalating conflict afflicting the second-largest African country by population. But the impact of the drones was astounding, repeatedly beating against the Tigray rebels and their supply convoys as they moved along the main road towards Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. Since then, the rebels have retreated some 270 miles on their way north, ingloriously losing month-long achievements on the battlefield. In this new situation, Debretsion Gebremichael, the leader of Ethiopia's Tigray region, told the United Nations that he had ordered all forces to be withdrawn immediately to the provincial borders, invoking amongst others “unmanned combat aerial vehicles provided by foreign powers.” In a letter to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, Debretsion called for a ceasefire and subsequent peace negotiations. "We believe that our courageous withdrawal will be a decisive step towards peace," he wrote, and his spokesman said that 18 civilians were killed and 11 injured as a result of a wave of Ethiopian airstrikes in Tigray. An Ethiopian government spokesperson did not respond to questions about using drones during the brutal assault on peaceful cities in the Tigray Province.

The demonstration of the power of drones shows that the long-running conflict in Ethiopia, which used to be primarily local, is now global. This adds the country to a growing list of conflicts, such as the fighting in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, where drones have become an essential factor in the fight or even the dominant weapon. "Unmanned combat aerial vehicles are increasingly changing the game," says Peter Warren Singer, a strategist and senior fellow at New America, Washington DC. He is a specialist in 21st-century warfare.

The drones for Abiy arrived just in time. He launched a military campaign in Tigray in November 2020, a year after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, along with the leader of neighboring Eritrea. But his forces suffered a humiliating defeat last summer when the rebels not only ousted them from the province but started to advance south swiftly. By the end of November, the Tigray rebels went near Debre Birhan, about 85 miles north of Addis Ababa, and it seemed like the capital would be captured in a matter of days. But the drones changed everything, inflicting heavy losses in manpower and supply convoys. General Tsadkan Gebretensae, the commander of the Tigrayan rebel forces, said in an interview with The New York Times: “At one time, there were 10 drones in the sky. You can imagine the effect. We were an easy target.”

Abiy built his large drone arsenal, drawing on the backing from foreign allies and the rapidly growing segment of the global arms trade. Even when he talked about negotiations, the Prime Minister turned to other countries to strengthen his armed forces and combat capability. Cargo flights arrived from a military base in the United Arab Emirates, one of its closest allies, almost every day. UAE specialists trained the Republican Guard and provided critical military backup at the beginning of the war, using drone strikes that destroyed artillery and weapons depots in Tigray, reported Arab News, a well-informed Saudi-based newspaper.

Abiy’s relations with Turkey have proven to be highly beneficial to him. In August, he signed a military pact with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whose Bayraktar TB2 UCAV played a decisive role in Azerbaijan’s victory over Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkish unmanned combat aerial vehicles are attractive to many African countries looking for battle-tested, relatively cheap equipment with few requirements. “Everywhere I go in Africa, everyone asks about UAVs,” Erdoğan boasted after a visit to Angola, Nigeria and Togo in October. After the Bayraktar UAVs appeared in Ethiopia, Turkish officials insisted the sale to be allegedly a commercial activity, defense and aviation product export to Ethiopia rose to $95 million in 2021, compared to only $235,000 in 2020.

In response to reports that civilians were killed, detained, or expelled, the United Nations Human Rights Council agreed only to set up a commission to investigate abuses and find out who did them. This is just the latest in a long line of international efforts that haven’t worked in any country. UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights Nada al-Nashif told an emergency meeting of this Council that Ethiopia’s 13-month long conflict in the northern Tigray region could turn into “widespread violence,” which could have “serious consequences not only for millions of people in Ethiopia but for the whole region.” Many diplomats expressed dismay at reports of atrocities during the conflict, which, according to the UN, killed thousands, displaced more than two million people, and left hundreds of thousands on the brink of starvation. Al-Nashif said that since then, the Human Rights Office has continued to “receive credible reports of grave human rights violations and abuses by all parties.” She expressed particular concern about the increased human rights violations following the declaration of a state of emergency in the country, accompanied by mass arrests of ethnic Tigray citizens first of all. “While some of those arrested have been released in the last six weeks, an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 people have been held, including nine UN staff members,” she said.

The draft resolution calls on the Council to establish an “international commission of human rights experts on Ethiopia” to investigate a wide range of alleged violations and abuses by all sides. Ethiopia rejected the idea,
indicating that it had collaborated with a joint investigation and began its own investigation. Ambassador Zenebe Kebede accused the Council of being "used as an instrument of political pressure" and aimed at undermining a democratically elected government. Several countries stood up for Ethiopia, and Cameroon's Ambassador Salomon Eheth, on behalf of African countries, insisted that the requested investigation would be "counterproductive and could exacerbate tensions."

Meanwhile, the Ethiopian prime minister focuses on his military campaign and its foreign sponsors. In late December, he flew to Istanbul for the Turkey-Africa Partnership Summit, a two-day meeting of leaders from 39 African countries, which is also a forum for Turkish arms sales, identified by analysts. But his latest infatuation with Iranian drones, albeit far less powerful than Chinese or Turkish-made models, has somewhat strained relations with Washington, which seeks to impose sanctions on Tehran and its trading partners wherever possible. Since August, several cargo flights of Iranian airlines have arrived in Ethiopia. The United States accused them of covering the Quds force, an elite clandestine wing of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

It's worth noting that the current temporary victory of the Ethiopian government in no way means the end of this war. The Tigray rebels have a well-staffed army equipped by the United States, and the terrain makes it difficult for government forces to penetrate their province. Therefore, they could continue their operations, re-enter the war, and repeat their march to Addis Ababa. In this case, the goal of the USA, demonstrating unprecedented activity in the recent events in the Horn of Africa, is not the change of government in Ethiopia, but the destruction of the Ethiopian state, its dismemberment. At the moment, Washington supports the Tigray rebels. Still, the USA is reluctant for their victory, willing only for the continuation of hostilities and the deterioration of the condition of the Ethiopian people.

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