

The Return of War in Tigray: Why the Pretoria Agreement Collapsed and What Can Be Salvaged

By Bravin Onditi

Nearly four years after the Pretoria Agreement ended the war in northern Ethiopia's Tigray region, large-scale fighting has resumed between federal forces and the TPLF and its allies. On 23 September 2026, forces of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) took control of the airports in Mekelle, Axum and Shire and, together with allied armed groups, [engaged federal forces in the Afar and Amhara regions](#). Three days earlier, the TPLF and six other armed movements had announced an alliance, the Ethiopian Peoples' Forces Alliance for Survival, committed to removing Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government. Within a fortnight the tide had turned: on 3 October, [federal forces and the allied Tigray Peace Force entered Mekelle](#) after the TPLF withdrew, and the army has since pushed north towards the Eritrean border and west into central Tigray.

The current escalations are in part born of the weaknesses of the Pretoria Agreement, which [deferred rather than resolved the conflict's root causes and hardened them into drivers of the current conflict](#). The Pretoria deal stopped the shooting but parked every hard question: land, guns, legitimacy and who governs Mekelle. Those questions have now returned, and neither the TPLF's offensive nor the federal recapture of Mekelle has settled them; a deal struck between only two of the many armed actors cannot answer them.

How Pretoria unravelled

The Pretoria Agreement silenced the guns in November 2022, but it was always a narrow bargain. It was signed by the federal government and the TPLF only, leaving out Eritrea and the Amhara forces that had fought alongside the federal army. Under it, the TPLF committed to disarm, and the parties agreed that Tigray would be governed by an interim administration with the approval of both sides. Implementation began well with Tigrayan forces handing heavy weapons to the federal army, and Eritrean troops largely withdrawing from Tigray's heartland, though they remained in the contested border areas. However, four core disputes were left unresolved. The first was territorial, as Amhara forces did not relinquish Western Tigray, leaving tens of thousands of displaced Tigrayans unable to return home. The second was disarmament; the demobilisation process stalled, and the government accused the TPLF of failing to honour its pledge. The third concerned the TPLF's political status, after the National Election Board of Ethiopia cancelled its registration in May 2025 and no voting took place in Tigray during the June 2026 general election. The fourth was governance, with the interim administration

undermined by rivalry between TPLF factions until, in late April and early May 2026, the TPLF removed it, reinstated Debrezion Gebremichael as regional president and launched a major conscription drive. As each side accused the other of violating the agreement, Addis Ababa cut funds and fuel to Tigray and began drone strikes, while shuttle diplomacy by African Union (AU) envoy Olusegun Obasanjo made little progress.

Anatomy of the escalation

The airports were among the few sites in Tigray still under federal control, and Tigrayan forces replaced the federal police there without a fight. Ethiopian Airlines, the only carrier operating scheduled flights to Tigray, then suspended services to all three airports, [resuming flights to Mekelle only on 11 October](#) after a three-week suspension.

Explaining the seizure of the airports on 23 September, Tigray's regional government said its forces were responding to air and artillery attacks on 22 September, while Getachew Reda, an adviser to the Prime Minister, accused the TPLF of launching an "all-out offensive" in Afar and Amhara. Primary responsibility for the escalation lies with the TPLF, although its ground assaults followed the government's largest drone strikes since August.

The alliance [brings together](#) the TPLF, the Amhara Fano National Movement, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and four smaller movements from the Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz and Somali regions, the last represented by [a faction of the Ogaden National Liberation Front](#). Its founding statement names no joint command and does not mention Western Tigray.

Federal forces have since counterattacked. On 28 September, the Tigray Peace Force, a Tigrayan armed group aligned with the federal government, said it had captured Alamata together with the national army, and the town's fall has since been independently confirmed. Alamata, about 120 kilometres south of Mekelle, is a supply hub for troops, fuel and food. In Afar, meanwhile, Tigrayan forces took the town of Erebti over the weekend of 26–27 September, a loss the Tigray Peace Force has acknowledged, although [federal forces later reversed those early gains](#).

The counteroffensive then gathered pace. On 3 October, the Tigray Peace Force entered Mekelle, followed by the national army, [after the TPLF withdrew, saying it wanted to spare the city](#) and would keep fighting. Federal forces have since [pushed north through Wukro and entered Adigrat](#) around 10 October, and west into central Tigray, where they [took Abiy Addi on 6 October and are reported to have captured Shire](#). Getachew Reda and other senior officials flew into Mekelle on 11 October, and a government-aligned Tigrayan official has said [a new interim administration is being](#)

[set up](#), with regional elections promised “within a few months”. Yet the city is far from normal: [banks and government offices remain shut, and the Tigray Peace Force has imposed an overnight curfew](#). Debretsion has vowed to “[confront the enemy on our terms and where we choose](#)”, and the TPLF leadership is reported to have [relocated towards Adwa](#). The fall of Mekelle may end the conventional phase of the war rather than the war itself. In November 2020, federal forces also took Mekelle and declared victory, [only for Tigrayan forces to retake it in June 2021](#).

Coalitions of convenience

The wartime coalitions of 2020 to 2022 rested mainly on a shared adversary. Eritrea [felt inadequately consulted](#) on the agreement and would have preferred a complete military victory. After Prime Minister Abiy began pressing for access to the Red Sea, which Asmara interpreted as a claim on its coast, [Eritrea reconciled with the TPLF](#). Government spokesperson Billene Seyoum [has said](#) the alliance’s members received financial backing from Asmara; Eritrea has repeatedly denied supporting Ethiopian armed groups. Relations have since collapsed: on 1 October, [Ethiopia closed its embassy in Asmara and expelled Eritrean diplomats](#), and Eritrea responded by severing ties. [Eritrean troops have been reported in Adigrat and Idaga Hamus](#) as federal forces advanced, though Asmara has neither confirmed nor denied the movements.

Amhara forces, which also fought on the federal side, were not party to the agreement, and Fano took up arms in 2023 after the government ordered regional special forces into the federal army. Western Tigray still divides the movement, and Fano commanders nearer the disputed territory are unlikely to contemplate an alliance with Tigray. Even so, [Fano attacks on supply lines between Amhara and Tigray](#), and friction between federally backed Amhara militias and the Tigray Peace Force in newly captured areas, could make it harder for the government to hold its gains.

The TPLF has also split. The agreement [divided leaders](#) such as Getachew Reda, who defended it and now advises the Prime Minister, from the faction led by Debretsion Gebremichael, which rejected it. The Tigray Peace Force, a government-backed group of Tigrayans opposed to the TPLF, [has been fighting TPLF forces](#) along the boundary between Tigray and Afar and joined the federal advance on Alamata. [It was first into Mekelle on 3 October](#) and now polices the city.

Smaller armed groups are setting conditions of their own. The OLA describes its membership as a “procedural consensus” and [has demanded](#) that Fano disown a Wollega faction the OLA says the government armed.

Humanitarian and regional stakes

Tigray has not yet recovered from the last war. The [African Union mediation team led by Obasanjo has estimated](#) that about 600,000 people died in the 2020 to 2022 conflict, although estimates vary, and around three-quarters of a million people remain internally displaced in Tigray, according to UN migration data. In Afar, local humanitarian workers estimate that about 150,000 people have been displaced since the fighting began, and hospitals in Korem and Alamata saw patient numbers rise from about 180 to more than 420 within 48 hours. The fighting has also choked off relief: [a UN agency warehouse and several aid depots have been looted](#), [airstrikes have hit sites hosting displaced people in Sheraro](#) and a food aid convoy in the north-west, and [the first aid convoy since the fighting began reached Mekelle only on 9 October](#). Phone and internet services in Tigray have been disrupted since 25 September.

Further escalation carries two regional risks. The federal push towards Adigrat [has already brought fighting close to the Eritrean border](#), raising the risk of a direct clash between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and the war could merge with Sudan's civil war, because the federal government and the TPLF have ties to opposing sides there. On 27 September, Ethiopia's army chief, Field Marshal Birhanu Jula, accused Egypt, Eritrea and Sudan of backing the armed groups, allegations that Eritrea and Sudan have denied. Afar's regional governor has separately alleged that Eritrean forces are taking part in the fighting in Afar; Eritrea has not responded, and the claim has not been independently verified. On 4 October, [the leaders of Egypt, Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan met in New Alamein](#), Egypt. The summit fell short of a military alliance, but it signalled a loose regional bloc wary of Ethiopia's ambitions on the Nile and the Red Sea, which Abiy again put at the centre of his address after being [sworn in for a new term on 5 October](#).

The economic stakes centre on the Djibouti corridor, which carries almost all of Ethiopia's international trade, including fuel. The corridor remained open as of 28 September, and [federal forces have since reversed the TPLF's early gains in Afar](#). Even so, a renewed Tigrayan push towards the Semera to Djibouti route would put the TPLF within reach of Ethiopia's economic lifeline, and the same corridor through Afar is [the main route for aid into Tigray](#).

What can still be salvaged

The AU has called for the utmost restraint and the immediate resumption of talks within the Pretoria framework, and has asked Obasanjo to engage the parties, while [the UN special envoy, Guang Cong, is working with the AU and IGAD](#) to restart dialogue under the 2022 accord. That is necessary but not enough: returning to the same two-party table would simply reproduce the agreement's flaws. Nor should the recapture of Mekelle tempt Addis Ababa to believe it can impose a settlement,

whether on the battlefield or by installing a new interim administration in Mekelle without those who still hold guns. The first priority should be a humanitarian pause that protects civilians and restores telecommunications, banking and fuel across the region and keeps the aid corridor through Afar open. Beyond that, any new deal must bring in those left out in 2022, starting with Amhara representatives, alongside a parallel track involving Eritrea. Disarmament, the withdrawal of non-federal forces and the return of displaced people should then proceed together under AU monitoring.

Outsiders with real influence now need to step in. Saudi Arabia is well placed to lean on Asmara, Khartoum and Cairo, while the UAE can push Addis Ababa towards talks. Obasanjo, Kenya's President William Ruto and former President Uhuru Kenyatta have the standing to press both sides back to the table. This matters more now because Washington has less leverage than it did in 2021: the US national emergency that underpinned Ethiopia-related sanctions expired on 17 September 2026, and Eritrea's military and ruling party were removed from the US sanctions list.

Pretoria was a two-party deal for a war that was never a two-party affair. Today the fighting involves armed groups from half of Ethiopia's regional states and several neighbouring countries, and recapturing Mekelle has not changed that. The next deal must bring more of them to the table and tie security, land and political commitments together, so that no side is asked to give up its guns before it knows what it gets in return.