

Ethiopia-Tigray Crisis: International Relations This Week

International relations is a very important segment of the [UPSC syllabus](#). In this series, we present an analysis of the most important international issues and developments that occurred over the past week relevant for the IAS exam. In this article, you can learn more about the Ethiopia-Tigray crisis and related developments.

Ethiopia-Tigray Crisis

Context

A conflict between the government of Ethiopia and forces in its northern Tigray region has thrown the country into turmoil which also has global implications.

Background: Crisis in Ethiopia

- Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed authorised a military attack against regional troops in Tigray in November, which sparked the crisis.
- After months of squabbling between Mr Abiy's administration and leaders of Tigray's leading political party, the conflict escalated.
- The party was at the heart of power for over three decades until being marginalised by Mr Abiy, who took office in 2018 following anti-government rallies.
- Mr. Abiy sought changes, but when Tigray opposed it, the political turmoil devolved into war.

Global Context of Ethiopia's Crisis

- Ethiopia has progressively developed close ties with China during the 1990s when Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was in power.
- Ethiopia has been moving away from the west and closer to China and India.
- The western world's assistance is always conditional. They want rapid gratification, even if the rewards are little in comparison to what they provide.
- Ethiopia's inclination toward China and Russia was perceived by western powers as a purposeful marginalization of the west, which was unacceptable.

Ethiopia's political set-up

- Ethiopia's political framework is organised as a federal parliamentary republic, with the prime minister serving as the head of state.
- Eritrea, one of Ethiopia's provinces, gained independence in the early 1990s with full western assistance, namely American assistance.
- From a domestic standpoint, Abiy has focused on the political changes at the heart of the dispute.

- The Tigrayans have been the dominating ethnic group in Ethiopian politics for about 30 years. That changed when Prime Minister Abiy began reforming and democratising the country.
- The Tigrayans desired to keep their rule. They didn't want the government to end; they wanted the prime minister to be removed and the federal government to be set up in such a way that their monopoly would be restored.
- But the politics grew more difficult when Prime Minister Abiy began portraying the conflict as a cessationist war in which a regional unit was pitted against the federal authority and army.

Sahel region

- **Sahel Region:** The Sahel region of Africa is a biogeographic transition zone between the Sahara to the north and the Sudanian savanna to the south.

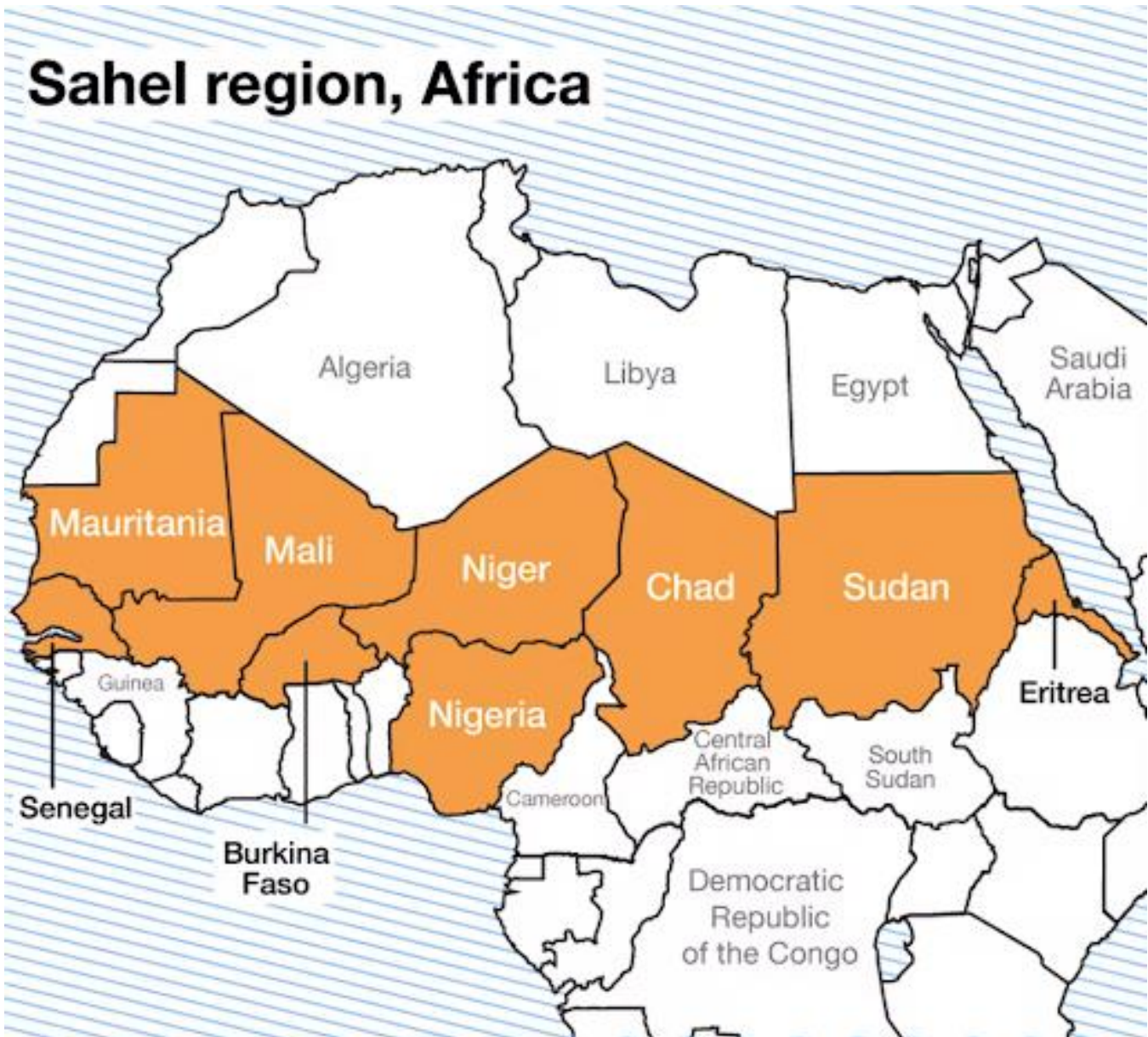


Image Source: <https://theconversation.com>

- **Is Sahel Hotbed of Terrorism**

- a. Inequality inside and across nations "is all too frequently the product of identity-based exclusion" that is entrenched in governments and economic interactions.
- b. And it presents itself in stereotyping and discrimination resulting in a lack of jobs for billions of people, among other things.
- c. Terrorist organisations utilise differences to stir up enmity amongst populations in the Sahel area, which stretches across northern Africa between the Atlantic Ocean and the Red Sea.

- d. In the Middle East, particularly Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, ethnic and religious conflict is also common.
- e. Terrorism, insurgencies, the increase of xenophobia, hate speech, divided tribalism, and racism thrive on it.

Developments in East Africa: Sudan and Ethiopia

- **Sudan-Ethiopia Border Dispute**

- Ethiopia and Sudan are at odds over al-Fashaga, a rich borderland from which Khartoum (capital of Sudan) expelled hundreds of Ethiopian farmers in December 2020.
- Hundreds of combatants and civilians have died in clashes between the two countries' militaries.
- If the conflict escalates, both nations' fragile political transitions would be jeopardised.
- Although neither side wants to go to war, hostilities might flare up due to an accident or a miscalculation.
- A larger fight might enlist regional allies and destabilise the [Horn of Africa](#) even more.

- **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)**

- The Millennium Dam was once known as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).
- It is being built in Ethiopia's Benishangul-Gumuz area, on the Blue Nile River, some 40 kilometres east of Sudan.

- **The controversy over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam**

- Recently, tensions between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile have risen, particularly after Ethiopia announced that it had begun filling the GERD's reservoir.
- This move contradicts Egypt's mandate that the dam not be filled until a legally binding agreement on the equitable allocation of the Nile's waters is reached.
- Egypt has also increased its appeal to the international community to intervene.
- The US has already threatened to suspend development money to Ethiopia if the crisis is not addressed and a solution is not reached.
- The GERD conflict is part of a long-running battle between Egypt and Sudan on the one hand, and Ethiopia and the upstream riparians on the other, over access to the Nile's waters, which are considered a lifeline for millions of Egyptians and Sudanese.

Ethiopia and Tigray Crisis

- **What is the Conflict?**

- Ethiopia's northernmost region is Tigray.
- It is home to the majority of Eritrea's estimated 7 million ethnic Tigrayans, who have disproportionate power in national affairs.

- The provincial administration, commanded by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a Marxist political organisation, mounted a full-scale siege of a vital Ethiopian military post at Sero in early November, employing tanks, heavy artillery, and mortars.
- Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed declared the TPLF assault a "treason that will never be forgotten," and authorised a federal onslaught against the area, sparking the conflict.



Source: United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)

AP

Image source: UNHCR

What is the Tigray People's Liberation Front?

- The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was founded in the 1970s to promote Tigrayan self-determination.

- It became the leading participant in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, or EPRDF, a coalition of ethnic political groups that ruled Ethiopia for over three decades.
- As the EPRDF's leader, Abiy came to power in 2018. However, he disbanded the party a year later, claiming that he intended to put the party's history of ethnic division behind it.
- Abiy instead tried to unite the EPRDF's supporters into a new political party.
- The TPLF, on the other hand, refused to go through with the plan, instead fleeing to Tigray, where it enjoyed considerable support.
- **What led up to the current conflict?**
 - The TPLF was accused by Abiy's government of attempting to destabilise Ethiopia by organising ethnic violence around the country after it was marginalised at the national level.
 - Abiy vowed to organise the country's first fully democratic elections. However, he postponed them because of the COVID-19 epidemic.
 - Delaying the referendum amounted to an unlawful prolongation of Abiy's presidency.
 - Regardless, the gang organised its own regional elections, claiming a landslide victory. The Tigray elections were later deemed unconstitutional by Abiy's administration.
 - In the run-up to the TPLF raid on the Sero base, both sides dubbed each other illegitimate.
 - The Ethiopian National Defense Forces were dispatched in response, reinforced by soldiers from the Amhara region, which borders Tigray.

What role has Eritrea played?

- Eritrea, which was originally a part of Ethiopia, fought and won a violent, decades-long independence war in 1991.
- The two nations went to war again in 1998, this time in a territorial struggle that lasted until 2000 and claimed an estimated 100,000 deaths.
- However, soon after assuming office, Abiy went out to Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, and the two signed a historic peace treaty aimed at putting the nations' mutual animosity behind them.
- Abiy was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for his efforts to end the long-running conflict.
- The Eritrean military is said to be fighting alongside Ethiopia in Tigray.
- In the early days of the conflict, Eritrean soldiers were involved in a massacre of civilians in the town of Axum, according to the Associated Press.
- Eritrea has also been implicated by Amnesty International for the horrific killings in Axum. Eritrean military are also said to have carried out a similar attack on civilians at a church in Dengelat, Tigray.
- Both administrations have denied the presence of Eritrean forces in Ethiopia.

What are the implications for the Horn of Africa?

Horn of Africa: The Somali Peninsula, often known as the Horn of Africa, is a huge East African peninsula. It is the world's fourth biggest peninsula, located on the easternmost tip of the African continent. Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia make up the Horn of Africa. Kenya, Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda might all be included in the broadest sense.



Image Source: FAO

- **Implications on the Horn of Africa**

- Ethiopia has long been a security supplier in the area, assisting in the stabilisation of Somalia and South Sudan, as well as providing crucial diplomatic support during Sudan's transition.
- A border issue between Ethiopia and Sudan has flared up and threatens to worsen, as Sudan's transitional government continues to teeter between military and civilian forces.
- Meanwhile, Somalia is mired in a constitutional crisis that threatens to erase recent accomplishments.
- Ethiopia's stability, as well as Eritrea's ability to disobey international law with impunity, will have an impact on the future of both of these governments.
- If Ethiopia fails to forge a new political system that accommodates its varied people while still ensuring basic levels of security and justice, it risks being riven by fresh war, resulting in a vast and destabilizing refugee catastrophe.

- External players that see the strategically vital area as a theatre for proxy warfare would gain strength as a result of the loss of an important voice for African interests on the world stage.

What Is The International Response?

- **US Response:** The US has placed sanctions on Ethiopia, a key US partner in the volatile Horn of Africa, as well as Eritrea. The United States has ruled that Ethiopia is ineligible for the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) due to "severe abuses of internationally recognised human rights." The US government is also prepared to impose penalties on warring parties.
- **Response of the African Union:** The [African Union](#) has been ineffective. The United States' calls for Eritrean and Amhara soldiers to leave Tigray fell on deaf ears.
- **Response of EU:** The EU has postponed about €90 million in financial support payments to Ethiopia, stating that it would not continue unless unrestricted humanitarian access and an impartial inquiry into rights violations committed during the conflict are granted.
- **Response of U.N.:** Following claims of extrajudicial murders and sexual abuse, the [United Nations](#) has requested entry to Tigray in order to investigate alleged war crimes.

India's Interests in Ethiopia

- The relevance of India's diplomatic and economic connections with Ethiopia may be greater than it appears on the surface.
- India is one of Ethiopia's most significant non-hydrocarbon investors.
- Domestic instability will have an impact, but it will also rely on how India manages its cards throughout the fight.
- India enjoys a lot of goodwill in Ethiopia and other African nations, regardless of who is in office.
- There will be no opposition to India from the west or Russia.
- In Ethiopia, India stands on its own two feet, and we should keep it that way.

Way Forward

- Humanitarian organizations should have quick access to Ethiopia's government.
- The Eritrean military should leave Ethiopian territory because their presence is disruptive and violates international and regional standards.
- Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia need to be identified and safeguarded.
- To assist combat disinformation, the Ethiopian government should lift the communications restriction and support a genuine and impartial inquiry into accusations of crimes.
- The international community should step up its diplomatic efforts to assist Sudan in resolving its border dispute via rule-based discussions.

- It should also push Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan to reach an agreement on the Nile's waters and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

