

Pursuing Peace in Ethiopia: Issues for Congress

December 19, 2022

On November 2, 2022, authorities from Ethiopia’s Tigray region and its federal government signed a [permanent cessation of hostilities agreement](#), announcing their intent to end the [war in northern Ethiopia](#) on the eve of its second anniversary. Peace talks had begun the week prior, under African Union (AU) auspices in Pretoria, South Africa, and the deal took many [by surprise](#). The Biden Administration says it waged “a [very intense diplomatic effort](#)” to stop the fighting, and Members of Congress [engaged Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed](#) to urge a ceasefire. U.S. officials called the agreement “[an important step toward peace](#),” in what has been called the [world’s deadliest war](#). The Pretoria deal is not a comprehensive peace agreement—it commits the parties to a series of basic principles and confidence-building measures, and provides a foundation for further negotiations. Congress may monitor its implementation and further negotiations as it considers humanitarian needs, accountability concerns, and requests for reconstruction aid.

A [communications blackout](#) in Tigray and [access restrictions](#) have obscured the war’s toll, but as many as [600,000 civilians](#) may have died from war-related violence, starvation, and [lack of health care](#)—the result of what some term a [humanitarian siege](#). By some accounts, over [300,000](#) combatants died in the [recent round of fighting](#), which began in August when a U.S.-facilitated [humanitarian truce](#) unraveled. “The scale of the fighting and deaths rival what we’re seeing in Ukraine,” one U.S. official [reported](#) in October. The UN Secretary-General warned at the time that the situation was “[spiraling out of control](#),” amid [fears of fresh atrocities](#).

The conflict has displaced over 2.5 million people and fueled a humanitarian crisis in which [over 13 million](#) people in northern Ethiopia need food aid, amidst a [regional drought crisis](#) that is [competing for donor resources](#). The Pretoria agreement commits the signatories to unfettered humanitarian access in Tigray, where [almost 90%](#) of households are estimated to be food insecure. Access has [improved](#) since mid-November, but some parts of Tigray reportedly [occupied by Eritrean forces and Amhara militia](#) remain [inaccessible](#). Some observers have urged greater donor [scrutiny of the humanitarian response](#), citing, among [other concerns](#), reports that the Ethiopian government [blocked a famine declaration](#) in 2021. The UN-mandated [International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia](#) assesses that the parties to the conflict have committed war crimes and the Ethiopian government and its allies have used starvation of civilians as a method of warfare and committed crimes against humanity. [Its recent](#)

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report follows another UN investigation that documented serious abuses, including “widespread and systematic” rape.

Ethiopian officials, who claimed victory after the Pretoria deal, have committed to restoring basic services and protecting civilians in Tigray. They have also committed to lifting the terrorist designation they placed on the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF)—Tigray’s ruling party and once the dominant faction in Ethiopia’s ruling coalition—in 2021. The TPLF has committed to disarm Tigrayan combatants, and to cede control of the state to an “inclusive” interim regional government until elections are held. Disarmament talks continue after a follow-on agreement in mid-November. Sensitive political negotiations remain outstanding, but the parties have agreed to resolve their differences peacefully and in line with the constitution.

As of mid-December, the ceasefire appeared to be holding, but observers warn that parties to the conflict not involved in the peace process could become spoilers. Eritrea has a long-running feud with the TPLF and bolstered the recent joint Ethiopian-Eritrean offensive in Tigray through mass mobilization and forced conscription. The ceasefire deal links Tigrayan disarmament to the withdrawal of “foreign” forces, but U.S. officials say Eritrean forces remain in Tigray and multiple reports implicate them in looting, destroying property, and killing civilians. Fresh abuses attributed to forces from the neighboring Amhara region underscore questions about the federal government’s plans for western Tigray, which Amhara regional officials have sought to annex. An estimated 700,000 ethnic Tigrayans were forcibly displaced from the contested area, in what U.S. officials term ethnic cleansing.

Issues and Possible Options for Congress

The Tigray conflict has spurred congressional concern and debates over the U.S. response. Some Members have opposed punitive measures, while others have pressed for further action, including through legislation (e.g., H.R. 6600 and S. 3199). The Ethiopian government opposes sanctions and aid restrictions, and has sought restoration of U.S. trade preferences under the African Growth and Opportunities Act, as amended (AGOA; P.L. 106-200), which were terminated due to gross human rights violations, per congressionally-mandated eligibility requirements. The Biden Administration established a targeted sanctions regime in 2021 and has designated Eritreans but no Ethiopians under it.

Oversight and consideration of U.S. foreign assistance may provide opportunities for congressional engagement. The United States is Ethiopia’s top humanitarian donor, providing over \$2 billion in emergency aid—much of it for northern Ethiopia—in FY2021-FY2022. The United Nations estimates that \$3.5 billion will be required to help almost 29 million Ethiopians in need of assistance in 2023.

Ethiopian officials say reconstruction in the Tigray, Amhara, and Afar regions could cost \$28 billion. Meanwhile, Ethiopia seeks International Monetary Fund (IMF) support to restructure about \$30 billion in foreign debt and IMF emergency financing to address its hunger crisis. The World Bank has committed \$2.9 billion to Ethiopia in 2022-2023, including a \$300 million grant to support reconstruction, which some donors described at the time as premature.

Some Members may continue to press the Administration to issue a determination on whether some of the reported war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ethiopia might constitute genocide. Members may examine U.S. efforts to promote accountability in Syria and Ukraine as they review options for justice, amid concerns about impunity and prospects for sustainable peace. Congress may explore avenues to support the parties’ implementation of the agreement or ceasefire monitoring.

Members may weigh these issues alongside other U.S. priorities, including countering terrorism and expanding U.S. business opportunities. Ethiopia’s ties with Russia, its UN voting record on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and its acquisition of Iranian drones could influence deliberations. Congress may

also consider the [implications](#) of [rising violence](#) and [abuses](#) in Ethiopia's most populous region, Oromia, for the country's stability.

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