

## **What is going on in Ethiopia?**

Ethiopia, the second populous country in Africa is a living place for around 85 different nations and nationalities. The country is organized in a federal system where all these different ethnic groups are administered by 10 regions. Starting from 4 November 2020, a war between the federal government and Regional forces in Tigray is undergoing. Tigray region is one of the 10 regional administrations located in the Northern part of Ethiopia. Since then, the war continues to be a serious problem for the stability of the country and the Horn of Africa in general. Even though different international mass-media including BBC are broadcasting the issue to the international community, it seems that the situation is not yet clearly informed among the Lithuanian people. Thus, in this short message, we try to present the situation in the country along with its root and immediate causes.

Before directly embarking on explaining the war, it is worth understanding its root cause. For many people, the current war between the central government and the regional forces seems an abrupt happening. But it is not. It is the outcome of the over decades accumulated problems in the country. This is the thing. After the demise of the Marxist regime in 1991: a military government led by Mengistu Haile Mariam who govern the country since the 1970s, the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) came to power as a dominant party by forming the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in collation with the other three parties. One from the Oromia region (the first largest region), another from the Amhara region (the second largest region), and one from the Southern Nation nationalities People region. TPLF ruled the country for 27 years until the current prime minister, Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018. During the decades of TPLF's governance, the country's politics and the economy were also predominantly occupied by TPLF alone. Two simple facts prove this claim. In the economy wing, in 1992 TPLF established a conglomerate of different companies called the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT) initially as a PLC with a capital of 100\$ million and later converted into an endowment in 1995. EFFORT, a monopoly merger of 66 companies appear the most influential and giant company in Ethiopia. Its board members and management were top officials of the TPLF and the establishment's main operation and the bulk of the employment opportunity was in the Tigray region. Recent data shows that the capital of this company was US\$3 billion in paid-up capital and employs more than 47,000 people. These companies are not vertically and horizontally integrated but also, they have a strong favor from the then government. Most of the country's big projects were given to these companies. A simple example is the Ethiopian military armed forces and police force uniform were all supplied by Almeda Textile. Sur construction is also handed big government construction projects like Gebba dam project, Zarema River May Day Dam Project, Tekeze Hydro plant, and Tis Abay II hydro project. Electromechanical projects were handled by Mesfin Industrial Engineering. Messebo cement which is also a subsidiary of EFFORT was the sole supplier of cement for the Great Renaissance Dam (GRD). Gunna Trading, also another subsidiary, is the import-export business and exports mainly coffee. With the backing of the EFFORT group, Gunna has disrupted the coffee export market in Ethiopia.

In terms of politics, it is enough to understand how the TPLF led EPRDF was politically dominant by looking at the election results in the last four elections Ethiopia had. In the 2000's general election, EPRDF won 481 seats out of the total 547 seats which amount to 88 %. Later, in 2005 again EPRDF won 327 of the 547 seats and continue its governance. Particularly, this election was the most hopeful election that was expected to introduce democracy in Ethiopia. The ruling party has lost almost 100% in the capital city Addis Ababa. But the ruling party was fraudulent, non-democratic and EPRDF choose weapons to stop the challenges and instabilities arisen due to the unacceptable election results. Many died, tortured and countless opposition party leaders and members were detained. Following this, in the last Two elections held in 2010 and 2015 EPRDF won all seats, but one in the former election and all the seats in 2015. Nonetheless, all this happens in a country where 79 registered political parties are on the playing field.

Corruption, prisoning of journalists, human rights activists, and murder, as well as torturing of civilians, has been continuously increasing in the country. A handful of private prisons and underground torturing places were found built. Democracy becomes a nightmare for Ethiopians. Aside from this, some improvements in the overall economic performance of the country have been observed, though the improvement was initially designed to benefit some group of individuals.

Since November 2015, a nation-wide protest grew up. Specifically, the protest originates from the two dominant regions of the country; Oromia and Amhara. Instead of acknowledging the problems that cause the protests, the government repressed protestors with brutal force. This continuous until 2018 when the then Prime Minister Haile Mariam Dessalegn resign from his power. In April 2018, Abiy Ahmed Ali (PhD) become the Prime minister of Ethiopia. The Prime minister brought a number of reforms including the release of thousands of prisoners, allowed exiled dissidents to return home, and unblocked hundreds of websites and TV channels. He also ended the state of war with Eritrea by agreeing to give up disputed border territory, all rewarded him the Nobel peace prize of 2019.

He accused the former leaders of the country mainly TPLF people as corrupted and violent and started bringing in into jail. Since then, all the TPLF leaders flew to Mekele, the capital of the Tigray region and started ruling the region. A new political party called the prosperity party was formed as a collation of parties from each regional state except Tigray. But TPLF denies the collation and resisted to continue as an independent party. Now things are escalating. The prime minister postponed the 2020's election due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which TPLF considered illegal and unacceptable. Due to this, TPLF undertakes a regional election by referring to the constitutional privilege of self-determination, though the central government doesn't consider the election legitimate. After all these happenings, the immediate cause of the current war marks when regional forces in Tigray attacked the federal defense force base in Tigray aiming to steal weapons. In response, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2020, the Prime minister said that "*the last red line has been crossed and the federal government is therefore forced into a military confrontation*". Following this, the war continued for the last 3 weeks. Hundreds of people died and not less than 33,000

refugees fled to Sudan. According to the central government, the military operation underway in the Tigray region is in its final stage and will be completed soon. While regional force leaders are boasting that the lands of Tigray will be the cemeteries of our enemies claiming that they are defeating the military forces of the central government, reports show that Mekelle, where all the TPLF leaders are living and commanding this war fall under the ring of the Military defense force. Even though a continuous effort has been put by different international organizations including the UN and EU to resolve the crisis through negotiation, the prime minister and his comrades get determined until justice has prevailed. The government gave a 72-hour ultimatum for regional forces and TPLF leaders to surrender for the last time on 23<sup>rd</sup> of November. But they did not accept and the war continued. The TPLF spokesperson recently announced that there is no way Abiy Ahmed's administrator governs the Tigray region, emphasizing their determination to continue fighting till death. This increases the fear that this war might lead to the death of civilians, particularly in and around Mekele. But the central government is repeatedly announcing that civilians living in Mekele have to refrain from communicating with TPLF leaders and not collaborate with them in this operation. It has also noted that maximum care is given by the military forces to specifically attack criminals and warriors only.

In one or another way, the country is under turmoil. Even though bringing criminals into the court and prevailing justice is the responsibility of the government, war should be the last resort. On top of that, returning refugees to their own place and supporting them with necessities should be given due attention.