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## Europe's re-engagement with Ethiopia

Prioritising the prerequisites for lasting peace over geopolitical concerns



The French and German Foreign Ministers visit a World Food Programme warehouse in Ethiopia, January 2023  
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On January 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup>, the French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna and her German counterpart Annalena Baerbock made a joint visit to Ethiopia. The visit comes in the wake of the peace agreement signed in Pretoria on November 2<sup>nd</sup> by the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The two parties had been engaged in a bloody two-year civil war, which is estimated to have killed between 300,000

and 600,000 civilians<sup>1</sup> and displaced half of Tigray's population of 7 million.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/ukraine-understandably-focus-ethiopia-tigray-conflict-worlds-largest>
- 2 875,000 refugees and 2,750,000 internally displaced persons were registered in September 2022. [UNICEF Ethiopia Humanitarian Situation Report No. 9 - September 2022 - Ethiopia | ReliefWeb](#)

The two ministers' visit points to the willingness of the European Union (EU) and its member states to swiftly resume their cooperation with Ethiopia, which had been suspended due to the war.<sup>3</sup> This eagerness to re-engage is understandable, given the dire humanitarian conditions in the second most populous country on the continent, as well as its major role in the Horn of Africa region and in Africa at large. Yet, a hasty return to a full-fledged partnership with Ethiopia, including large-scale financial support, is problematic for three major reasons.

### The risks of a hasty re-engagement

The first reason is that the Pretoria deal was to a large extent born out the use of brutal military tactics – including the use of starvation as a weapon of war.<sup>4</sup> Rather than coming on the heels of a genuine political dialogue, the deal's signature was a measure of last resort for the Tigrayan forces in order to rescue the region's population from the de facto siege imposed by the federal government and its allies.<sup>5</sup> The siege disconnected Tigray from the outside world for two years, severing its trade links and cutting it off from the country's transport, power, banking, and telecom infrastructure. The deprivation of any basic services was compounded by severe restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian aid, resulting in little to no assistance reaching the region.

While the cessation of hostilities is a welcome development, the EU and its member states should be careful not to blindly reward a deal that was born out of the starvation of an entire region. Doing so would suggest that these tactics are a legitimate way to end political disputes. Moreover, remaining silent on Prime Minister Abiy's use of starvation while condemning

Putin's use of grain as a weapon of war, as Baerbock did during her visit, only undermines the EU's credibility.

The second reason relates to the root causes of the conflict, which the Pretoria deal fails to address. Central to these root causes are the tensions surrounding the distribution of power in Ethiopia's complex ethno-political arrangement. The conflict in Tigray was born out of a power struggle between the TPLF, which dominated the country's political scene for three decades, and the administration of Abiy Ahmed, who rose to power in 2018 on the heels of widespread popular protests against the TPLF.<sup>6</sup> Disputes over portions of Tigray claimed by both Tigrayan and Amhara political elites added further fuel to the fire, and are set to seriously complicate any peace and reconciliation efforts.<sup>7</sup>

The Pretoria deal is remarkably silent on these underlying political issues, limiting itself to calling for "the restoration of constitutional order in the Tigray region".<sup>8</sup> Yet, it is the very implications of this constitutional order that have been driving conflict in Ethiopia – not only in Tigray and Amhara, but also in other regions, most notably Oromia. Unless these disputes are addressed, existing tensions and conflicts are likely to escalate in the coming years. In this context, a renewed EU partnership with Abiy Ahmed, including financial support, will tilt the balance of power even further in favour of a central government that is still to make any meaningful concessions to its regions. The chances are high that without full transparency, independent monitoring and clear conditions and milestones, European programmes and funds, despite all good intentions, will exacerbate existing tensions rather than reduce them.

The third reason relates to the half-heartedness of the deal's implementation to date. There is no doubt that, almost two months after the

3 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-eu-idUSKBN29K1SS>; <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/africa/france-suspends-military-cooperation-deal-with-ethiopia>

4 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1127481>

5 <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/11/16/facing-famine-tigray-concedes-to-ethiopian-government-and-abiy/>; <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2021/04/Starving-Tigray-report-final.pdf>;

6 <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/clash-nationalisms-and-remaking-ethiopian-state>

7 <https://www.reuters.com/article/ethiopia-conflict-displaced-insight-int-idUSKBN2BL1C3>

8 Pretoria deal, preamble and Article 1.

deal's signature, progress has been made. In accordance with the deal's provisions, the delivery of humanitarian assistance has been massively scaled up, and the region has been gradually reconnected to the rest of the country.<sup>9</sup> Roads have been repaired, flights between Addis Ababa and Mekelle have resumed, banks have reopened their offices, and access to the power and telecommunications infrastructure has been restored in urban areas.<sup>10</sup> Equally importantly, a number of Eritrean and Amhara soldiers have reportedly withdrawn from some areas of Tigray,<sup>11</sup> and TPLF soldiers have started handing over heavy weapons.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, serious delays and challenges continue to affect the agreement's implementation. Contrary to the deal's provisions, non-federal troops remain present in the region, especially Eritrean soldiers in the north and Amhara militias in the west and south.<sup>13</sup> In these regions, humanitarian access remains limited, including due to reported disruptions by these forces.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, banks within Tigray struggle to provide cash to their customers,<sup>15</sup> many rural areas remain cut off from power and telecommunications networks,<sup>16</sup> and severe restrictions have been applied on passengers flying between Addis and Mekelle.<sup>17</sup>

A hasty resumption of full cooperation before implementation has made more thorough progress would squander Europe's leverage to press for speedy and full implementation.

While the shortcomings of the Pretoria deal are rather widely acknowledged, European policy makers appear to feel the urge to re-engage with Ethiopia quickly. Such an urge is partly dictated by the fear of losing the country to other international actors, particularly China and Russia. This feeling was reflected in Baerbock's call for Europe to "quickly show its face" in the wake of the deal, and it was likely exacerbated by the recent visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang to Addis, as well as by the warming ties between Russia and Ethiopia over the past two years.<sup>18</sup>

However, when devising its partnership with Ethiopia, Europe should be careful not to prioritize its own geopolitical concerns over the prerequisites for lasting peace in Ethiopia. By unconditionally supporting the Ethiopian government, the EU and its member states may gain the government's favour, and perhaps its support in international forums. However, they also risk actively supporting a political arrangement that keeps Africa's second most populous country mired in conflict and instability – hence undermining Europe's interests. As conflicts across the country continue to escalate – particularly in Oromia, where the federal government has recently announced the beginning of a military operation<sup>19</sup> – considering such risks is more timely than ever. How EU support could be leveraged to prevent a further escalation of conflict in Ethiopia deserves the utmost attention and urgency.

9 <https://www.bbc.com/news/57929853>

10 <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-342-30-December-2022.docx.pdf>

11 <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/eritrean-soldiers-pull-out-major-tigray-towns-eyewitnesses-say-2022-12-30/>; <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-350-13-January-2023.pdf>

12 <https://apnews.com/article/ethiopia-government-africa-2214ccbe43c96047f9f8f9465da9a988>

13 [https://www.eepa.be/?page\\_id=4237](https://www.eepa.be/?page_id=4237)

14 <https://www.bbc.com/news/57929853>; <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-351-16-January-2023.pdf>

15 <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/29524/>

16 <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-346-09-January-2023-1.pdf>

17 <https://addisstandard.com/news-passengers-return-home-as-inexplicable-restriction-on-flights-from-mekelle-to-addis-takes-a-toll/>

18 <https://www.dw.com/de/baerbock-europa-muss-in-%C3%A4thiopien-gesicht-zeigen/a-64363547>; [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/The\\_Russians\\_are\\_coming\\_4eproef.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/The_Russians_are_coming_4eproef.pdf), p. 26-29.

19 <https://www.eepa.be/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Situation-Report-EEPA-Horn-No.-345-05-January-2023.docx.pdf>

## The case for a careful re-engagement

Everything considered, it is natural for the EU and its member states to reconsider their engagement with Ethiopia, a key partner on the African continent, in the wake of the Pretoria deal and the resulting cessation of hostilities. Yet, such engagement should be primarily guided by the prerequisites for lasting peace in Ethiopia, rather than by geopolitical competition. To show their face but not lose it, European policy makers should consider the following recommendations.

First, the EU and its member states should ensure a clear condemnation of human rights violations, push for thorough investigations of committed crimes, including in collaboration with independent experts, and support the implementation of transitional justice mechanisms. Condemning the use of food as a weapon of war is particularly important to counter the real possibility of any repetition.

Second, Europe should condition its re-engagement with the Ethiopian government on the actual implementation of the agreement. European policy makers should define the different components of such engagement, including humanitarian aid, development assistance, and military and security cooperation. The implementation of these different components should be made

conditional upon the independently verified achievement of clearly defined milestones linked to the agreement's implementation, such as humanitarian access, the withdrawal of non-federal troops, and the full resumption of services. Large-scale European support and cooperation on sensitive matters (such as military and security cooperation) should be conditioned on progress on the peace process as a whole, including transitional justice and national dialogue.

Third, the EU and its members should involve alternative stakeholders – including regional governments and civil society organizations – in the implementation of their cooperation programmes in Ethiopia. The federal government is likely to place itself as a gateway for all incoming assistance, as it has done in the past. Yet, an active engagement of other actors, especially in the regions, may mitigate the risk that Europe's support is used by the federal government to strengthen its own position vis-à-vis its political adversaries.

A hasty re-engagement with the Ethiopian government – based on Europe's geopolitical concerns, rather than on the prerequisites for lasting peace in Ethiopia itself – risks feeding into existing conflict dynamics, to the detriment of the people of Ethiopia and at odds with Europe's own interests. By contrast, a careful re-engagement may allow Europe to play a constructive role in one of Africa's most influential countries.

### About the Clingendael Institute

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