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Ethiopia's Tigray region has seen famine before: why it could happen again

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A new situation of conflict is sadly unfolding in the Horn of Africa. On November 4th, 2020, a [military conflict erupted](#) between the forces of the federal government of Ethiopia and the regional government of Tigray, in the country's Northeast.

The conflict is intensifying at an alarming speed. It has now become a regional conflict with reports that Eritrean forces are supporting the central government against Tigray, and [forces](#) from the Tigray region fired rockets at Eritrea's capital, Asmara.

All communication with the conflict area [has been interrupted](#). Virtually no information is coming through on the development of the conflict and its consequences on the civilian population.

However, as scholars who have examined issues related to food security in the region [since 1985](#), we are very concerned that the situation could result in a famine.

Food security in Tigray was [becoming critical](#) before the current armed conflict. Large areas were on a path towards hunger and crisis for a number of reasons. These included a desert locust invasion which has affected harvests.

The conflict will affect the harvest season which has just begun. It will also mean that the region is cut off from potential aid and government funding.

These developments ran counter to immense strides made over the past three decades since the end of a devastating civil war which saw great famine between 1984 and 1985. A [dangerous cocktail](#) of the war combined with fragile soils, population pressure and poverty and climatic adversity led to a famine of biblical proportions in the Ethiopian Highlands of northern Ethiopia, including Tigray. An [estimated](#) 1 million people died of starvation.

Since then, Ethiopia [has become](#) one of the fastest-growing large economy in Africa. There have also been marked improvements on a number of social fronts. [Almost all](#) children were going to school, health services improved vastly and women's rights were upheld. In Tigray, this growth was largely driven by efforts at [grass-roots level](#) in rural areas.

But the fear is that Tigray is now heading for a humanitarian disaster at levels that will rival the great famine.

Along with 12 international professionals who have worked in the area, we have launched [an appeal](#) to national and international authorities to enhance negotiations and a ceasefire in northern Ethiopia. We have also called for the rapid delivery of food and other humanitarian aid to Tigray, particularly through the World Food Programme and international aid organisations.

Locusts and empty stores

Most of Tigray is [part of](#) the Tekezze River basin. It has a very rugged landscape characterised by river networks and frequent steep cliffs. About [half](#) of Tigray is covered by cropland, followed by shrubland. Forests are rare.

The [main livelihood](#) is crop production and modest livestock rearing on small-scale family farms. Cereals [are the](#) most important field crops and the staple diet. Desert locusts also feed on these.



Threshing of crops in Dogu'a Tembien in Tigray in better times (2019). Photo Miro Jacob

Desert locusts, a [recurrent problem](#), have become a real plague in many parts of Ethiopia. This year, the eastern African region [has had](#) one of the worst desert locust outbreaks in about

70 years. These have destroyed vast areas of cropped land and [numerous swarms](#) remain active in northeastern Ethiopia, where Tigray is.

Eighty percent of the people in Tigray [are](#) subsistence farmers. Even without war, the large locust damage might lead to famine if no food aid reaches food-insecure places.

To make matters worse, the 2020 harvesting season should start soon. But little remains to harvest because of the desert locusts. As people always have harvests that are hardly sufficient to feed a family, last year's stores have already been consumed. These months of the year correspond to the annual hunger gap for many farmers in North Ethiopia, after food supplies are exhausted and before the next crops can be harvested.

We fear that the grain baskets will remain empty because of the conflict.

No funds

The transfer of budgets from the Federal Government to Tigray was stopped in September. This [followed](#) a decision by the Tigray People's Liberation Front to hold regional elections following the central government's decision to postpone the nationwide elections because of COVID-19. In an act of defiance, Tigrayan leaders held their own elections.

The lack of funds [has impeded](#) the proper functioning of civil society. Regional offices continue to work but staff are uncertain about salary payments and investments needed to be delayed. These offices play a key-role in the 'early-warning system' of identifying households that are in need of food aid.

The regional offices also organise the [Productive Safety Net Programme](#), a massive multi-donor-funded programme. The idea was to monitor food crops all over Ethiopia and predict food deficits long in advance. Food-insecure households are identified and receive a daily share of food for a day's community work. About 1 million people in Tigray depend on this for food aid.

[Supply chains](#) are also being affected. The central government has [declared](#) a state of emergency in the region. Electricity, internet and telephone networks have been cut off and all banks were [ordered](#) to close.

In addition, as the military now surround the region, the few roads that were still connecting Tigray to the rest of the country have been cut off. And Eritrea, Djibouti and Sudan have closed their borders to Tigray. The strongly needed food aid, related to locusts and war situation [can only be](#) brought in over roads.

Many have already died in this escalated conflict, but we fear that even many more will die because of hunger if no humanitarian assistance is allowed to enter Tigray.

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