THE BALANCE OF INTERESTS BEHIND THE CONFLICT IN TIGRAY

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The clashes that erupted in Shererina, near the Sudanese border, on 1-2 August 2026 represent the most serious military escalation between the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) since the 2022 Pretoria Agreement. Public debate has largely focused on which side fired the first shot. The more critical question, however, is why this uncertainty has remained unresolved for nearly four years and who benefits from it.

The TPLF legitimizes its authoritarian control over Tigray by portraying Addis Ababa as pursuing genocidal intentions. Meanwhile, the government of Abiy Ahmed defends its centralization project by presenting the TPLF and ethnic federalism as major threats. It advances this strategy through direct economic and political measures as well as political rhetoric. The full implementation of the Pretoria Agreement has the potential to substantially weaken the security-based political narratives on which both sides rely.

Beneath these political calculations lies another important layer that receives far less attention, namely a tangible network of material interests built around land revenues and gold smuggling in western Tigray.



What Happened in Shererina

The fighting began on the morning of 1 August in the Shererina area of western Tigray near the Sudanese border and continued into a second day with the use of heavy artillery, armored units, and unmanned aerial vehicles. A senior TPLF official claimed that federal forces had launched an attack on the area. The Tigray administration described the offensive as an open war added to an already extensive blockade and drone campaign.

Speaking on behalf of the federal government, Minister Abraham Belay confirmed that clashes had taken place, blamed the TPLF for the violence, and called on both sides to engage in dialogue. Hundreds of civilians and wounded soldiers crossed into Sudan through Hamdayet and El-Hashaba. Sudan's Commissioner for Refugees reported that shells from the fighting landed in refugee camps in eastern Sudan, causing civilian casualties.

Shererina is part of western Tigray, a territory that has remained disputed between Tigray and Amhara since 2020. The referendum intended to determine its final status has yet to be held. The latest clashes represent the western phase of the TPLF's nationwide rearmament campaign, which began in January 2026 with the capture of Alamata and Korem in southern Tigray and the contested, Amhara-administered woreda of Tselemt in the northwest.

In June 2026, the Debretsion faction institutionalized this process by transforming the Sudan-based Army 70 unit into an official command structure. Federal and Tigrayan forces have been reinforcing their positions along the border for months, with each side accusing the other of preparing to launch a new war.

The Role of Land and Subsoil Resources

In many assessments, the repeated emergence of western Tigray as a conflict zone is reduced to a dispute over identity and sovereignty. Yet the region also has a direct material dimension. Humera and its surrounding areas account for a significant share of Ethiopia's sesame exports and generated an estimated annual revenue of between USD 150 million and USD 350 million before the war.

Welkait is home to one of the country's largest sugar plantations as well as a major irrigation dam. During the 2020 war, Amhara forces captured the area, displaced much of its Tigrayan population, and settled Amhara populations in their place, effectively transferring control over land ownership and sesame revenues. The nearly four-year delay in holding the promised referendum has created conditions for this transfer of control to become permanent.

Gold represents another important material dimension. The Rahwa mine, located in Indabaguna on the banks of the Tekeze River in northwestern Tigray, is controlled by senior Tigrayan military commanders. A substantial

portion of the gold extracted there is reportedly smuggled through Adiabo and Badme, across the Mereb River into Eritrea, and from there onward to Dubai. Eritrean and Tigrayan commanders are reported to cooperate within this smuggling network. This suggests that some military networks on the ground have been able to align their economic interests despite the hostilities of the 2020-2022 war.

Disputes over control of the gold trade are also cited as one of the factors behind the split between Debretsion Gebremichael and Getachew Reda within the TPLF. The status of western Tigray therefore extends beyond questions of identity and sovereignty. It also represents a concrete dispute over property rights and control of land revenues and the profits generated by gold smuggling.

The Need for an Internal Enemy

The TPLF's current hardline stance is often interpreted primarily through an ideological lens. In reality, it is rooted in a tangible struggle for power driven by the movement's declining internal legitimacy. In August 2024, the party leadership expelled Getachew Reda, the head of the Tigray Interim Administration, through an unauthorized party congress. In March 2025, commanders of the Tigray Defense Forces aligned with Debretsion Gebremichael seized government buildings in Mekelle by force and removed Getachew from office.

Getachew, together with General Tsadkan Gebretinsae and General Guesh Gebre, sought refuge in Addis Ababa, where he established a new political party called Simret. Tigray's political landscape has consequently become divided into three competing centers of power.

- The TPLF under the military control of Debretsion
- The Addis-backed interim administration led by Tadesse Worede following Getachew's departure
- Getachew's newly established Simret party

In May 2026, Debretsion reconstituted the pre-war Tigray Regional Council and declared himself regional president. This three-way fragmentation has made the Debretsion faction increasingly dependent on maintaining a confrontational narrative toward external actors. As a result, it has reinforced its legitimacy largely through the claim that Addis Ababa is attempting to destroy the people of Tigray. A July 2026 report by Human Rights Watch documented the forced recruitment of young people by the TPLF administration, indicating that the group's authority relies increasingly on coercion rather than public consent.

For the Abiy Ahmed government, the image of an internal enemy has evolved beyond political rhetoric into a direct instrument of governance. Reported fuel

shortages and cash restrictions within the banking system in Tigray function as elements of an economic siege that weakens the region without requiring direct military intervention. In the June 2026 elections, the Prosperity Party secured an overwhelming victory. At the same time, 143 polling stations in Oromia and Amhara were closed for security reasons, while voting in Tigray was suspended entirely.

The post-election acceleration of the National Dialogue Commission has been criticized by opposition groups, which argue that it is laying the groundwork for replacing ethnic federalism with an administrative regional system. No official and verified government decision has been taken in this direction. Even so, the allegation itself helps sustain the perception of the TPLF as a tangible security threat at a time when the government is simultaneously dealing with Fano militias in Amhara and the remaining elements of the OLA in Oromia. Had tensions in Tigray been fully resolved, the government's ability to justify its centralization agenda on security grounds would have been considerably weaker.

This mutual dependence helps explain why the most critical provisions of the Pretoria Agreement remain unimplemented. The disarmament of Tigrayan forces, the referendum on western Tigray, and the return of displaced populations have all been delayed for nearly four years. The implementation of these provisions would simultaneously undermine the TPLF's armed role and the federal government's narrative of an ongoing TPLF threat. Rather than openly abandoning the agreement, both sides have chosen to avoid implementing it in full.



The Convergence of Regional Interests

Regional assessments often focus exclusively on Eritrea. In reality, the range of actors benefiting from continued uncertainty is much broader. Eritrea fought alongside Addis Ababa against the TPLF during the 2020-2022 war. Contacts between the Debretsion faction and Asmara began in Dubai in March 2024 and reached a more concrete stage in June 2026 with the construction of a road linking the town of Ahse'a near Adwa to Eritrea. The current rapprochement is therefore the visible outcome of a process that has been developing for more than two years.

Federal officials present these contacts as evidence that the TPLF is seeking support from Eritrea. Beneath this diplomatic visibility lies a material partnership built around gold smuggling in western Tigray, bringing together commanders from both militaries. From Eritrea's perspective, a weak and fragmented Ethiopia represents a more favorable strategic environment than a strong and unified neighbor.

For this reason, Asmara's growing engagement with the TPLF remains strategically consistent even though it reverses the alignments of the 2020-2022 war. Abiy Ahmed's pursuit of access to the Red Sea and his statements regarding the port of Assab have created a separate line of tension along the Eritrean border. As Addis Ababa's attention becomes increasingly absorbed by developments in Tigray, Eritrea's bargaining position over Red Sea issues correspondingly improves.



Egypt is another actor that is frequently overlooked in assessments of the conflict. In the context of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), allegations periodically emerge that Cairo has maintained contacts with Eritrea and certain Ethiopian opposition actors or has provided indirect

support to them. Although these claims remain unverified, their persistence illustrates how the Tigray front can also function as a source of leverage in negotiations over the GERD.

Relations with Sudan are characterized by a similar cycle of mutual accusations. Addis Ababa accuses Khartoum of financing mercenaries affiliated with the TPLF, while Sudan claims that drone attacks coordinated with the United Arab Emirates have been launched from Ethiopian territory. The Tigray administration has alleged that Sudan's Rapid Support Forces participated in the Shererina attack, although this has not been verified. Sudan's own civil war therefore risks turning the Tigray front into a fourth arena of proxy competition.

Conclusion

Although the Shererina clashes represent the latest episode in a cycle of recurring confrontations that has continued for nearly four years, the parties do not benefit from these tensions in the same way. For the TPLF and the Debretsion faction, the conflict serves primarily as a source of defensive political legitimacy. This faction now operates within a fragmented political landscape divided among the Debretsion-led TPLF, Getachew Reda's Simret party, and the Addis-backed interim administration.

For the Abiy Ahmed government, the conflict supports a more proactive strategy of containment. By combining economic pressure with political fragmentation, the government seeks to weaken the TPLF without engaging in direct large-scale confrontation. Eritrea, Sudan, and Egypt each add their own strategic calculations to this equation. At the same time, a material economy based on sesame revenues and gold smuggling further reinforces the existing dynamics.

This arrangement appears unlikely to remain sustainable indefinitely. The Debretsion faction is experiencing a gradual erosion of its internal legitimacy, while the forced recruitment of young people continues to weaken the TPLF's social support. The Abiy government, however, is likely to continue using tensions in Tigray as a security rationale for its centralization agenda.

The most likely trigger for a large-scale war will probably not be another border incident similar to Shererina. Greater risks could emerge if Eritrea changes its strategic calculations regarding Assab or if one faction within the divided TPLF is driven into an irreversible military confrontation. Until the referendum on western Tigray is held, disarmament is completed, and displaced populations are able to return to their homes, Shererina-type clashes are likely to recur at regular intervals. Shererina should therefore be understood not simply as an unresolved border dispute but as the latest manifestation of a structural cycle of conflict that continues to reproduce the domestic political needs of the parties involved.