FLASH UPDATE (2 Jul 2021)

Situation in Tigray (1 July 2021)

The political dynamics have changed dramatically in Ethiopia's Tigray Region following the unilateral ceasefire declaration by the Ethiopian Government on 28 June 2021. Reportedly, the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) have taken control over most parts of Tigray following the withdrawal of the Ethiopian and Eritrean defense forces from the capital, Mekelle, and other parts of the region, while Western Tigray remains under the control of the Amhara Region. The consequences of the unfolding situation on humanitarian operations in Tigray remain fluid. The breakdown of essential services such as the blackout of electricity, telecommunications, and internet throughout Tigray region will only exacerbate the already dire humanitarian situation. Reported shortages of cash and fuel in the region can compromise the duty of care of aid workers on the ground. Despite the dynamic and uncertain situation, partners report that the security situation in Tigray has been generally calm over the past few days, with limited humanitarian activities being implemented around Mekelle and Shire.

Key developments

- On 28 June, the Federal Government agreed to the request from the Interim Regional Administration in Tigray for a "unilateral ceasefire, until the farming season ends." Subsequently, Ethiopia National Defense Forces (ENDF) withdrew from Mekelle and other main towns in the region, including Shire, Axum, Adwa, and Adigrat. Currently, former Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) are in control of the main cities and roads in Tigray. There were no reports of fighting in Mekelle and other towns.

- On 29 June, Eritrean Defense Forces (ErDF) retreated from Tigray, reportedly to boundary areas close to Eritrea. Reportedly, ENDF and ErDF vacated their positions around Shire and areas South and West of Shire towards Mai-Tsebri and Korarit (Western Tigray). Unverified reports indicate some sporadic clashes and ambushes involving TDF and ENDF/ErDF near Adi Daero, North of Shire (North Western), between Adwa and Adigrat (Eastern zone), and in Southern Tigray.

- On 1 July, two bridges over Tekeze river connecting Western Zone and the rest of Tigray were destroyed and rendered inoperative. The destruction and vandalization of vital infrastructure are seriously threatening provision of humanitarian assistance to people in need and access of civilians to essential services, goods and livelihoods. All parties to the conflict must protect civilians and civilian infrastructure in compliance with international humanitarian law.

- Throughout Tigray, electricity and mobile networks are cut, and communications are only possible via satellite phones and VSAT connections in a few agencies' compounds in Mekelle, Shire and May Tsebri. Flights from Addis - Mekelle remain suspended since last week. Road access to Tigray remains blocked, including from Addis - Mekelle (through Afar) and Amhara, i.e., Gondar - Shire and Gondar - Humera - Sheraro. Reportedly, outbound movements from Mekelle - Semera (Afar) and Sheraro - Humera were allowed. In addition, partners report severe shortages of cash and fuel, potentially compromising the relief operations and duty of care of aid workers on the ground.

- For the past two weeks, humanitarian operations in Mekelle, and towards Adigrat (Eastern), Abi Adi (Central), and to Southern parts of Tigray were curtailed by denials of movement and interference by armed elements. In Central zone, following the killing of three aid workers from MSF-Spain near Abi Adi town on 25 June, humanitarian agencies evacuated their personnel and suspended operations, impacting the population's access to healthcare and life-saving assistance. Partners had relocated staff from Axum as well as from Samre (South-Eastern). Armed elements hindered partners' access to Samre, while medical and nutrition supplies were taken from relief convoys. On 28 June, partners, including UN Agencies, reported several incidents related to ENDF elements entering their offices and confiscated telecommunications/internet equipment in Mekelle, Dansha, and Abdurafi. VSATs and other communications equipment were also taken from an INGO compound in the South-Eastern zone.

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- Despite the fluid and uncertain situation, partners report that the security situation in Tigray is calm. No significant security incidents have thus far been reported. Aid partners have implemented 'alternative working arrangements and worked from home/hotels as a precautionary measure, while field missions have been suspended. Partners have reportedly relocated teams out of field locations, for instance, to Mekelle, Shire, or Dansha in Western Tigray. Some activities such as water trucking in IDP sites in Shire or refugee camps in Mae-Tsebri, and mobile health clinic in Samre reportedly continued.

- Humanitarian partners in Tigray have expressed their commitment to "stay and deliver," maintaining the protection of affected populations at the centre of their intervention. Partners are currently assessing the implications of recent events with the view of resuming relief operations as soon as possible, particularly in hard-to-reach areas that would have become more accessible. On 30 June, relief partners conducted several road security assessment missions from Shire - Selekleka, Axum – Adwa, Mekelle – Adigrat, and Mekelle – Samre (South-Eastern zone). Further missions are planned today to Adigrat, Abi Adi, and Samre and Maichew (Southern) tomorrow. As per International Humanitarian Law (IHL), all parties to the conflict are obligated to protect civilians and refrain from obstructing the free movement of humanitarian actors and operations in Tigray.

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