



CONFLICT TRENDS ANALYSIS

BENISHANGUL-GUMUZ REGIONAL STATE:

MAY – NOVEMBER 2022

BY TSEGAYE BIRHANU¹

This paper provides an analysis of the six-month conflict trends in Ethiopia's Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State, particularly Metekel zone. As well as providing an overview of the conflict and its main actors, it also examines the political processes that have been put in place to try to resolve the conflict. This is particularly relevant due to the decline in violence in Beninshangul-Gumuz in the second half of 2022.

SUMMARY

- The conflict in Benishangul-Gumuz, involving an array of actors – Gumuz militias, Benishangul People's Liberation Army (BPLA), Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), regional and federal forces and Amhara militias – has stabilized in the second half of 2022.
- In the first half of 2022, fighting between local armed groups and regional and federal forces and allied militias escalated. This included the targeting of civilian populations, including so-called non-indigenous communities – mainly Amhara and Oromo – by the BPLA and Gumuz militias, and indigenous populations (mostly Gumuz, Berta and Shinasha) by OLA and Amhara Fano militias.
- The root causes of the conflict in the region, which has affected all three of its zones (Metekel, Assosa and Kamashi), relates to the threat that indigenous communities – principally Gumuz and Berta – have felt from Amhara and Oromo incomers to the region, particularly regarding their political rights under the ethnic-federal system.

¹ Tsegaye Birhanu is a former lecturer in political science at Assosa University, Ethiopia. He was born in Metekel and worked in Benishangul Gumuz for almost a decade.





- The worst of the violence has been in Metekel zone. There is widespread belief in the Amhara region that Metekel was misallocated to Benishangul-Gumuz when the regional state was created in the 1990s. Metekel is now directly administered by the federal government under a Military Command Post.
- In the last few months, a combination of a government counterinsurgency against the BPLA and Gumuz militias, and efforts to improve inter-regional relations through high-level visits and peace meetings, has improved the security situation across Benishangul-Gumuz's three zones.
- Despite recent improvements in security, there are concerns that little has been done to address the political root causes of the conflict, and Benishangul-Gumuz may be drawn into a proxy-conflict between the more powerful neighbouring regions – Amhara and Oromia – arming and sponsoring militia groups.

INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia's Benishangul-Gumuz region is located on the country's western frontier with Sudan and South Sudan.² It is bordered by Oromia and Amhara regional states and its internal affairs are deeply influenced by these two much larger, more powerful regions. The region is organized into three administrative zones – Assosa, Kamashi and Metekel – and is made up from 23 woredas. While generally sparsely populated, it is the territorial home of several indigenous groups, including Shinasha, Berta, Gumuz, Mao and Komo, as well as the non-indigenous people of Amhara, Agaw and Oromo descent. Given its location and rich ethnic diversity, it has also been referred to as a 'frontier mosaic'.³ The region is well-endowed with

natural resources, including gold, marble and coal and is also the site of the Grand

- 2 John Young, 'Along Ethiopia's western frontier: Gambella and Benishangul in transition', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 37/2 (1999), 321–346.
- 3 Wendy James, 'A "Frontier Mosaic": Ethiopia's western edge', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 40/1-2 (2007), 277–291.

Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).⁴

Violent conflict in Benishangul-Gumuz

In the last four years, all three of Benishangul-Gumuz's administrative zones experienced violent conflict with overlapping causes and armed actors. First, the violence in the **Assosa zone** emerged as a result of conflict among so-called highlanders of Amhara and Oromo origin and the indigenous Berta community living in the zone. This was initially sparked in June 2018 after several Gumuz and Berta officials were kidnapped in West Wollega zone of neighbouring Oromia region, reportedly by the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA).⁵ Later, the Benishangul People's Liberation Army (BPLA) – a mostly Berta armed group which grew out of a political party of the same name – also got involved in the conflict, operating in the peripheral areas of Assosa zone, targeting civilians and government forces along the Sudanese border.⁶

Conflicts in **Kamashi zone** have taken place in an area that is inhabited by a Gumuz majority and is the most economically underdeveloped of the three zones. Due to the relative homogeneity of the people there, the conflict in the area played out mainly between Gumuz militias and federal and regional government (security) forces. It was in Kamashi where the Gumuz militia initially began to organize and operate – a reaction to OLA's kidnapping of Gumuz and Berta officials along the Assosa - Addis Ababa arterial road.

Metekel is a much more ethnically diverse administrative zone. The conflict there started in April 2019 between the Gumuz community and so-called settlers in the Gumuz areas (often referred to as 'non-indigenous' communities).⁷ As the conflict escalated, more armed actors, including some from outside the Region, became embroiled. Though the conflict in Metekel had an ethnic dimension it is hard to draw a clear fault-line between the two main sides: the Gumuz and Amhara communities. The conflict has not only been fought between these so-called indigenous and non-indigenous groups, but there have also been inter-indigenous clashes (for example, between Shinasha and Gumuz), as well as those between non-indigenous groups, including Oromo and Amhara and Agew and Amhara. Metekel has been under the stewardship of a Military Command Post – organized and led by the federal government – since September 2020.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF THE CONFLICT

- 4 The GERD is an ambitious mega-project started during the EPRDF era with the objective of massively expanding Ethiopia's capacity for domestic power generation.
- 5 At the time, this part of Oromia had become generally unsafe for non-Oromo travellers and for cars with regional codes other than Oromia.
- 6 For more on the BPLA see 'Key Actors' section.
- 7 Mistir Sew, 'Marginalization and persecution in Ethiopia's Benishangul-Gumuz', Ethiopia Insight, 10 August 2021, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/08/10/>

The roots of the conflicts in Benishangul-Gumuz relate to an accumulation of unresolved political tensions that built up over three decades of EPRDF rule. These are linked to issues of underdevelopment, ethnic marginalization and the expansionism of non-indigenous communities (primarily Amhara and Oromo) into the region.

The constitution of Benishangul-Gumuz states that the Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao and Komo are the indigenous ethnic groups in the region.⁸ This means these groups have the right to self-administration and fair representation under Ethiopia's federal constitution. This is not unique to Benishangul-Gumuz as all regional states under the Ethiopian federation are organized along ethnic lines. But the situation in Benishangul-Gumuz is different because non-indigenous groups make up around 43 per cent of the total population.⁹ This ratio is even higher in Metekel zone, where more non-indigenous communities live than in Assosa and Kamashi.

In line with the constitutional provisions, indigenous groups dominate political power at different levels in the region where the minority non-indigenous groups felt marginalized.¹⁰ Due to the upsurge of ethno-nationalism in the country in the last few years, this feeling of ethnic marginalization became an organizing political principle where the quest for fairer representation gained momentum.

The indigenous ethnic groups feel that the increasing quest for fairer representation among numerically increasingly dominant but non-indigenous groups in the region may ultimately override their right to self-administration. While indigenous groups want to preserve their status and accordingly their right to self-administration, non-indigenous ethnic groups feel politically marginalized. These contending positions have been the most common cause of mistrust and ethnic rivalry in the region.

Legitimate questions related to fairer representation have been hi-jacked by expansionist political forces from outside Benishangul-Gumuz, particularly from the Amhara region. Until 1991, when most of Ethiopia's existing regional states were formed, present day Metekel Zone was a part of Gojjam province – now largely part of the Amhara region.¹¹ It is on this basis that forces from the Amhara region now

8 'Revised Constitution of the Benishangul Gumuz Regional State', December 2002.

9 'The 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia: Statistical Report for Benshangul Gumz Region', Ethiopia Central Statistical Authority, Population Census Commission, April 2007, https://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Benishangu_Gumuz_Statistical.pdf

10 Tsegaye Birhanu, webinar presentation for a symposium 'Democracy in Myanmar and Ethiopia', 4 November 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zj3h_9-Nhg

11 Temesgesn Gebeyehu, 'Center-periphery relations, local governance and conflicts in Ethiopia: the experience of Metekel province', *Social Identities* 24/6 (2017), 745–763.

lay claim to the zone. A broad collection of actors in the Amhara region – from the regional government, opposition parties and mainstream media (reflecting public opinion) – believe that Metekel was inappropriately included within Benishangul-Gumuz by the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), which dominated the drafting of the federal constitution.¹²

This claim, which was pursued in part through the formation of the Yemetekel Amhara Asmelash Committee ('Metekel for Amhara Committee'), was a powerful driver of Gumuz attacks on Amhara civilians in the region. The federal government in Addis Ababa, including PM Abiy Ahmed, mistakenly ignored the issue of Amhara territorial claims over Metekel, probably for fear of alienating members of the Amhara community whose support he needed for a wider consolidation of political power in Ethiopia.

Escalation from 2018

Conflict first broke out in Assosa town in 2018, and spread to Metekel Zone where it became more widespread in April 2019. Initially, this consisted of tit-for-tat violence between Gumuz and Amhara communities, including the alleged involvement of Amhara Fano militias from outside Benishangul-Gumuz region. In late April, forces reportedly from Amhara region massacred Gumuz residents in Jawi woreda in the Amhara region, and subsequently in Dangur woreda in late June. In December 2019, the Gumuz militia massacred more than 200 people in Metekel zone including children, pregnant women and elders.¹³ The victims came from different ethnic groups – Shinasha, Oromo and Amhara – although Amhara propaganda claimed that they were all the latter.

After several years of relatively low-level insurgency, interspersed with horrific violence as described above, in 2022 the conflict escalated to the a level of near warfare. In April and May 2022, most rural kebeles in Metekel zone were under the control of Gumuz militia or the OLA.¹⁴ The Oromo insurgents also launched attacks into the region from bases in neighbouring Oromia region, including attacks on Gipo, Bachati and Berber kebeles, which are predominantly inhabited by the Shinasha community and are close to the administrative centre of Bullen woreda. The OLA has often targeted the Shinasha and Amhara communities as there is a strong feeling among the Oromo that the deployment of Amhara special forces and Fano militias was supported by the Shinasha elite and politicians in Benishangul-

12 See, for example, Amhara Satellite Radio and Television (ASRAT), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjQojQ_CthY

13 Tsegaye Birhanu 'The Murky politics behind the Metekel massacres', Ethiopia Insight, 29 December 2020, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/12/29/the-murky-politics-behind-the-metekel-massacres/>

14 Kebeles controlled by the OLA were Sinbosire, Qorqa, Albasa, Gallessa, Cheliya and Gongo.



Gumuz.

In June 2022, the Military Command Post in Beninshangul-Gumuz developed strong counter-insurgency measures in the area targeting Gumuz and OLA militias. While fighting has been fierce, the number of casualties in the operation is unknown. In June, 64 deaths were reported with 19 people, including a woreda administrator who was killed in Miziga woreda in Kamashi in a fight between government forces and Gumuz militia.¹⁵ Another 45 conflict-related deaths were reported in Metekel in early June, mainly due to a clash between OLA and government forces.¹⁶ After July 2022, the militias were pushed into the peripheries as the regional and federal government forces regained control of most rural kebeles. Afterwards, the conflict in the region showed signs of de-escalation, and the number of conflict-related deaths and displacements declined.¹⁷

KEY ACTORS

A plethora of armed actors have been drawn into the conflict in Benishangul-Gumuz from indigenous (Gumuz, Berta and Sinasha) and non-indigenous (Oromo, Amhara and Agaw) communities.

Figure 1: Conflict actors in the Benishangul-Gumuz region

ZONE	COMBAT FORCES	ETHNIC GROUPS
Assosa	Benishangul People's Liberation Army (BPLA); Oromo Liberation Army (OLA); Benishangul Gumuz Region Special and Police Forces; Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF).	Berta and Oromo
Kamashi	Gumuz Militia; Oromo Liberation Army (OLA).	Gumuz, Oromo
Metekel	Gumuz Militia; OLA; These include, the Gumuz militias, Benishangul People's Liberation Army (BPLA), Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), the Amhara NPFF, regional special forces, and the federal Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF). The involvement of so many	Gumuz, Sinasha, Oromo, Amhara, Agaw

15 See Abay Media, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBoRoPEMX5s&list=PLcgEGVcsRC4gM1IddIdvCzFsskq-DEQon&index=23>

16 Pana Broadcasting Corporation, Facebook, 7 June 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/123960474361367/posts/pfbido2VxjY2JB7aDEo6Yc3MNPnVYGj94umrEdH5sUfFmyBLaPQH7B6dyfgpsdzbpmbiXhl/>

17 Analysis of decline in deaths and displacement based on the author's monthly monitoring of the conflict for Ethiopia Peace Research Facility.

different actors, from local to national levels, has complicated the situation. Over the course of the conflict, there has also been a continuous shifting of alliances among the different parties.

The Gumuz militia

The Gumuz militia was formed in 2018 by members of the Gumuz community in Benishangul-Gumuz who perceived a gradual erosion of the federal system – particularly the favouring of indigenous communities with political power in regional states – and sought to preserve its constitutional elements in the region.¹⁸ During his visit to the state in December 2021, Gumuz representatives raised their concerns¹⁹ directly to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. They emphasized that the self-administration rights of the indigenous groups in BGRS had lately come under threat, mainly from the Amhara ethno-nationalists.²⁰ The claims made by Amhara nationalists over the Metekel zone, and the equivocal position of the federal government to the Amhara occupation of territories in West Tigray, have helped the Gumuz militia and activists to mobilize support among the Gumuz community. As a result, in the last three years, the Gumuz became well organized, trained, and armed. From December 2020 until July 2022 the militias controlled a number of Gumuz-inhabited rural kebeles in Metekel zone.

Benishangul People's Liberation Army (BPLA)

The mostly Berta BPLA mainly operates in the peripheries of Assosa zone, along the border with Sudan. It is an off-shoot from the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM), which is an ethno-nationalist political party that pre-dated the BPLA and sort to counter the perceived marginalization of indigenous groups in Benishangul-Gumuz. The close cultural, linguistic, and religious ties of the Berta people in Benishangul-Gumuz and the people in the Blue Nile State of Sudan have helped BPLA to establish its base of operations on the Sudanese side of the border from where it reportedly launches attacks on Ethiopian territory. The BPLA's former leader, Abdulwahab Mahadi, who was in prison since the violence in Assosa in June 2018, escaped in March 2022 and is reportedly now living in exile to Sudan where he is allegedly involved recruiting and organizing militias.²¹ Government sources

18 Jan Nyssen, 'The marginalised Gumuz communities in Metekel (Ethiopian western lowlands)', Ghent University, January 2021, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/347983365>

19 Nyssen, 'The marginalised Gumuz communities in Metekel'.

20 Nyssen, 'The marginalised Gumuz communities in Metekel'.

21 Geepa Voice, Facebook, 1 August 2022, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02QH9yZHCrb6bdozEPJFiUjFitCYEth9BS3MdxB5hUwLMAJTZYHi7Lw8fvtseCc3Gl&id=100028416850486

state that during government counter-insurgency measures, two BPLA camps were destroyed and 23 members were killed in Assosa zone in August.²²

Involvement of Amhara Forces and OLA

The crisis in Metekel has involved several external armed groups as well as the Gumuz militias and BPLA. In addition to the ENDF and Special Forces of the regional states, combatants from the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region (SNNPR), and Gambella and Sidama regions have been deployed in the zone since July 2021.²³ From September 2021, Amhara special forces were also present in Metekel.

The deployment of outsiders, particularly the Amhara Special Forces, has appeared to exacerbate the situation. The claims that Amhara ethno-nationalists have made over Metekel have meant that the deployment of Amhara Special Forces was not welcomed by indigenous communities, which doubted their neutrality. In particular, they were accused of organizing Fano militias in the areas where they were deployed.

The deployment of Amhara forces has also faced resistance from the Oromo community in the zone – the presence of a significant number of Oromos in Metekel, notably in the Wenbera, Dibate and Bullen weredas is often overlooked. One outcome of this is the fact that the OLA has been drawn into the conflict. In May and June 2022, OLA increased its presence in the zone as the regional government and the Command Post failed to effectively control the area, with OLA assuming control of a number of kebeles in Metekel.²⁴

Alliance between Gumuz militias and OLA

The OLA's involvement in Metekel has led to a nascent alliance between the group and the Gumuz militia there to counter Amhara influence. Previously, the OLA and Gumuz militias had a hostile relationship in Kamashi and Wollega zones. However, due to their common enemy – the Amhara Fano militias – they are now collaborating in Metekel. Due to the presence of OLA and Amhara forces in Metekel, the region appears to be the location of a proxy-conflict between the Amhara and

22 Fana Broadcasting Corporation, Facebook, 8 August 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/123960474361367/posts/pfbido2edEGKb8oczDyb3uGHnxnkF62YZw41A3Ao3nxActNc8RRqLQp3RbJcsZkwvPKDvnNI/?ISCI=010202>

23 Tsegaye Birhanu, 'Ethiopia: Is Metekel the next battleground after Tigray?' Awash Post, 24 August 2021, <https://www.awashpost.com/2021/08/24/ethiopia-is-metekel-the-next-battleground-after-tigray/>

24 Analysis based on the author's monthly monitoring of the conflict for Ethiopia Peace Research Facility.

Oromo communities, which are engaged in a wider struggle over political and economic power in Ethiopia on the national level.

DE-ESCALATION AT LAST?

In the second half of 2022, the situation in Benishangul-Gumuz started to improve. The number of deaths and displacement caused by the armed conflict declined, and socio-economic interactions and inter-communal relations have improved.²⁵ This has been due to two factors: first, the government's counterinsurgency campaign – directed by the Military Command Post – has reduced the space for armed groups to operate and improved security for civilian communities.

Second, efforts have been made to facilitate local and regional peace processes; between communities living in the region, and also cooperation between regional states. In May, a peace conference was held in Enjibara town in the Amhara region involving representatives from all of Metekel's woredas, and also from Awi zone in the Amhara region.²⁶ The improvement in relations between Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz has contributed to improvements in the security situation. In July, the presidents of Amhara and Oromia regions region visited Benishangul-Gumuz. However, while these efforts to improve bilateral regional relations should be welcomed, there is a risk that Benishangul-Gumuz is drawn in to a wider political tussle between the Amhara and Oromia regions. This may partly play out in the form of a proxy-war in Benishangul-Gumuz involving the OLA, Amhara Fanos and settler populations of Oromos and Amharas living in the state.

What-is-more, the underlying political dynamics that led to the conflicts remain largely unaddressed – specifically, political representation and rights to self-rule. Sporadic conflict continues in some parts of Benishangul-Gumuz, limiting socio-economic activities and making the return of displaced people to their homes more difficult.

25 For example, in June 2022, Gumuz community members were reported to have returned to participate in open markets in the Amhara region, which had been rare since the mob killing of a Gumuz man in such a setting in April 2021.

26 Awi Zone Communication Affairs, Facebook, 16 May 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/AwiZoneCommunicationAffairsOffice>



ABOUT THE PRF

This conflict trends report was produced by the Ethiopia Peace Research Facility (PRF).

The PRF is an independent facility combining timely analysis on peace and conflict from Ethiopian experts with support for conflict sensitive programming in the country. It is managed by the Rift Valley Institute and funded by the UK government.

The Rift Valley Institute works in Eastern and Central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development.

Copyright © Rift Valley Institute 2021. This work is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)