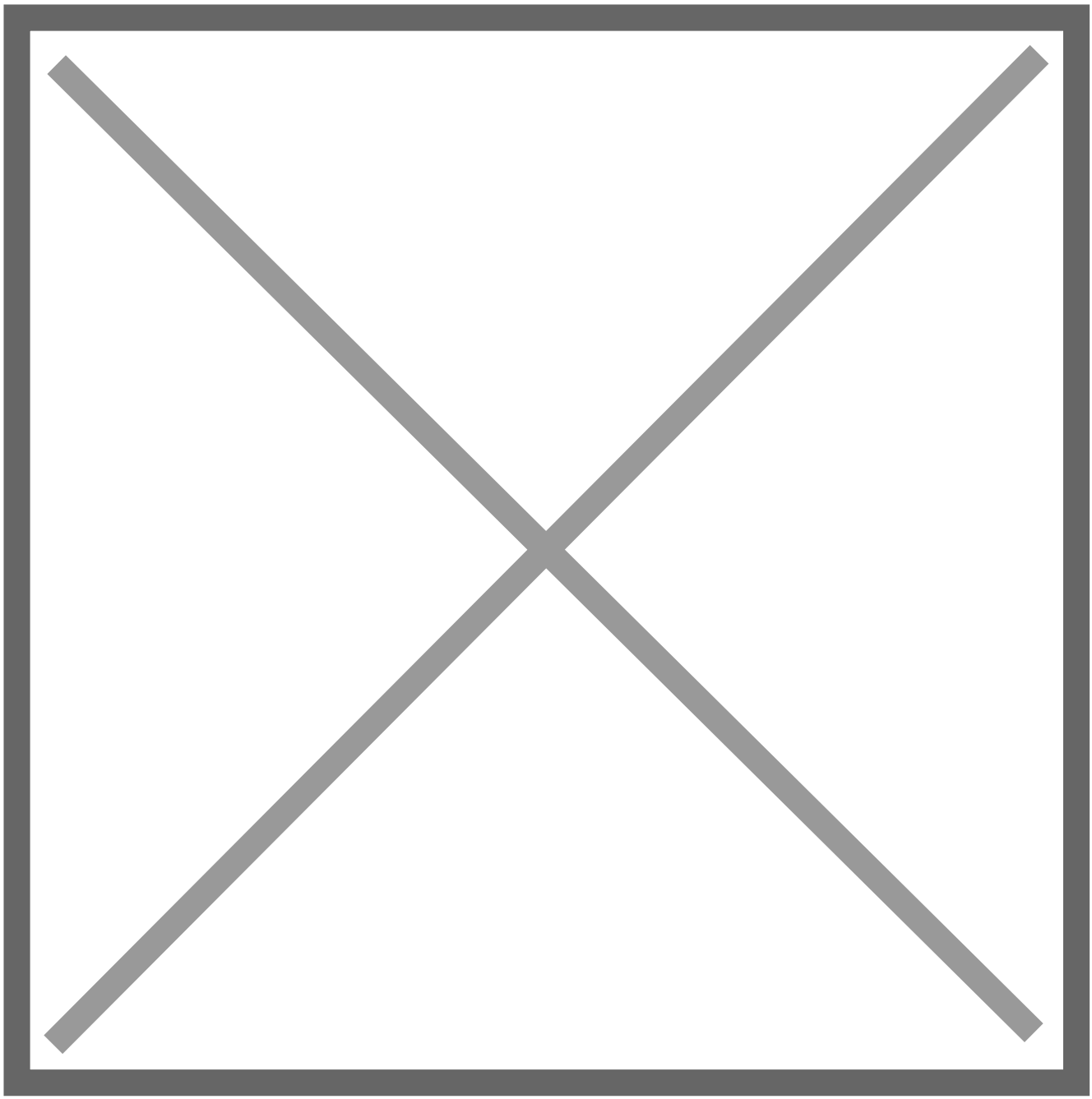
News



A volunteer donates blood for the injured members of Ethiopia's National Defense Forces in Addis Ababa Nov. 12, 2020. (CNS/Reuters/Tiksa Negeri)

Fredrick Nzwili

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NAIROBI, Kenya — November 17, 2020

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A senior official of Jesuit Refugee Service called for a humanitarian corridor in Ethiopia's semi-autonomous region of Tigray as the armed conflict between the Ethiopian army and the region's forces continued to escalate, killing hundreds and forcing thousands out of their homes.

"Whatever happens, they should allow a safe passage of supplies for humanitarian workers and refugees," Andre Atsu, JRS regional director in Eastern Africa, told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview. "The fighting has slowed down the delivery of humanitarian aid, including food and medicines."

The fighting started Nov. 4 after Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize winner, ordered the Ethiopian army into Tigray to fight the regional government after it allegedly attacked an Ethiopian army base in Mekele, the regional capital.

Debretsion Gebremichael, a telecom engineer and leader of the Tigray People's Liberation Front, promised to fight the army. Under Ethiopia's ethnic federalism, the semi-autonomous states keep an army, a parliament and have a right to a referendum on self-rule.

Tensions between the two leaders has been rising since 2018, when Ahmed introduced political reforms that took away power from the liberation front officials. The fighting has intensified despite increased calls by churches and the international community for a deescalation.

Atsu, who oversees the JRS operation in Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan and Ethiopia, said humanitarian workers and refugees are affected by the fighting, which has resulted in the closure of key roads and ignited a fuel shortage. Electricity, internet and telephone services are down, and banking services have also been halted.

"Some of our staff are not from the [Tigray] area, and their security is of great concern should the situation deteriorate into ethnic fighting," said Atsu.

At least 7,000 refugees from Tigray had crossed into Sudan following a week of fighting, according to aid agencies. The refugees sought shelter in transit camps near the border.

Aid officials say they were expecting the numbers to rise sharply as the conflict continues to intensify. Already, more than 100,000 Ethiopians are reportedly displaced inside the country, and 96,000 Eritrean refugees live in four camps in Tigray. Those Eritreans fled the 1998-2000 Ethiopian–Eritrean border war.

Clementine Nkweta–Salami, regional director of the U.N. refugees agency, said UNHCR was encouraging neighboring countries "to keep their borders open for the people forced from their homes."

Meanwhile, Catholic bishops in East Africa feared the conflict could cause more deaths, displacement and destruction unless urgent action is taken.

"Although we believe that there is still hope that this conflict can be resolved peacefully and avoid turning into a civil war, we are aware that this can only happen if there is political will for negotiations," Zambian Bishop Charles Kasonde, chairman of the Association of Member Episcopal Conference in Eastern Africa, said in a letter of solidarity to the Ethiopian church.

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