



Protesters target Thai royal guards unit in latest rally

## Sydney records hottest November night as heatwave sweeps city

Page 6

Page 7



GEDAREF, Sudan: Ethiopian refugees fill bottles and containers with water at Um Raquba camp on Saturday. — AFP

# Tigray military operation 'over'

## Ethiopia federal forces take over Tigray capital

**ADDIS ABABA:** The Ethiopian government launched a manhunt yesterday for leaders of a rebellious faction in the northern region of Tigray after announcing federal troops had taken over the regional capital and military operations were complete. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed government has been trying to quell a rebellion by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a powerful ethnically-based party that dominated the central government from 1991 until Abiy came to power in 2018.

He said on Saturday evening federal troops had taken control of the Tigrayan capital Mekelle within hours of launching an offensive there, laying to rest fears of protracted fighting in the city of 500,000 people. The prime minister, who refers to the three-week-old conflict as an internal law and order matter and has rebuffed international offers of mediation, said federal police will try to arrest TPLF "criminals" and bring them to court.

However, TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael told Reuters in a text message on Saturday evening that TPLF forces would fight on, raising the prospect that the conflict could drag on. Thousands of people are believed to have been killed and nearly 44,000 have fled to Sudan since the fighting began on Nov. 4. The conflict has been another test for Abiy, who took office two years ago and is trying to hold together a patchwork of ethnic groups that make up Ethiopia's 115 million people.

The flow of refugees and attacks by the TPLF on neighboring Eritrea have also threatened to destabilize the wider Horn of Africa region. Claims from all sides are difficult to verify since phone and internet links to Tigray have been down and access tightly controlled since the fighting began. The police late on Saturday

issued arrest warrants for 17 more military officers charged with crimes in connection with the conflict that include treason and embezzlement of public properties, state-affiliated Fana TV reported. They add to the 117 warrants issued for senior military officers it says are connected to TPLF since the conflict broke out.



### Ethiopia hunts for Tigray leaders

It was not clear if any TPLF leaders had surrendered, their whereabouts or their next plans. "Their brutality can only add (to) our resolve to fight these invaders to the last," the TPLF's Debretsion told Reuters in a text message on Saturday. Asked by Reuters if that meant his forces would continue fighting, he replied: "Certainly. This is about defending our right to self-determination." Debretsion said in another text message that Tigrayan forces were withdrawing from around Mekelle.

### History of resistance

Regional diplomats and experts have warned that a rapid military victory might not signal the end of the conflict. The TPLF has a history of guerrilla resistance. Tigray's mountainous terrain and borders with Sudan and Eritrea helped the TPLF during its long struggle

against Marxist dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam, whom it eventually toppled in 1991. The TPLF and Eritrean forces fought together against Mengistu, but relations later soured after Eritrea became independent in 1993. The two nations fought over a border dispute in 1998-2000 and the TPLF sees Eritrea as a mortal enemy. Eritrea signed a peace deal with Abiy in 2018, and the prime minister won the Nobel Peace Prize last year.

### Explosions in Eritrea's capital

Six explosions were reported in the Eritrean capital, Asmara, on Saturday night, the U.S. State Department said, although it was not immediately clear if they were related to the Tigray conflict. The State Department post did not mention the cause or location of the explosions. Tigrayan forces fired rockets at Eritrea on Nov. 14. Reuters was unable to reach the Eritrean government or Tigrayan forces for comment. The TPLF, which denounces Abiy's warm relations with Eritrea, has accused Eritrea of sending troops to Tigray to join the Ethiopian government's fight.

It has not been possible to contact the Eritrean government for comment on this. The TPLF also accuses Abiy of wanting to centralize control at the expense of Ethiopia's 10 regions. The constitution grants the regions wide-ranging powers over matters like taxation and security. Abiy has denied he wants to centralize power. This year, Abiy postponed elections scheduled for August to next year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Calling this a power grab, the TPLF held its own regional elections in September and announced it no longer recognized federal authority. Abiy's government declared the Tigray election illegal. — Reuters

## Ethiopia PM Abiy: From peace prize to air strikes

**ADDIS ABABA:** Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power promising real democracy, promoting women and feverishly planting trees across his vast country, snapping up the Nobel Peace Prize along the way. But Abiy's image of a modern, peacemaking reformer risks shattering entirely after he sent troops and warplanes into Ethiopia's Tigray region, a move analysts fear could push Africa's second most populous country into a long, devastating civil war. Abiy, 44, announced the campaign on November 4, saying it came in response to an attack by Tigray's ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), on two federal military camps, an accusation the party denies.

A communications blackout in Tigray has made it difficult to verify competing claims on the ground. Yet officials say hundreds of people have been killed, and the UN is warning of a rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation as thousands flee across the border into neighboring Sudan. World leaders are calling for an immediate halt to fighting and for dialogue, but Abiy has repeatedly insisted on the need to preserve the country's "sovereignty and unity" and "reestablish law and order".

It is a remarkable turn of events for a leader who less than a year ago travelled to Oslo to accept the Nobel for ending a two-decade stalemate with neighboring Eritrea after a brutal 1998-2000 conflict that left some 80,000 people dead and achieved little. Abiy declared in his acceptance speech that "war is the epitome of hell for all involved", and his office insists that this remains his position. His press secretary has even suggested he deserves "a second Nobel Prize" for his efforts to resolve the Tigray conflict.

### Meteoric rise

Born in the western town of Beshasha to a Muslim father and Christian mother, Abiy "grew up sleeping on the floor" in a house with no electricity or running water. "We used to fetch water from the river," he told Ethiopian radio station Sheger FM last year, adding that he was 12 or 13 before he first saw an asphalt road or electricity. Abiy progressed quickly through the power structures created by the ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), ever since it took power in 1991.

Fascinated with technology, he joined the military as a radio operator while still a teenager. In his Nobel speech he described his experiences during the brutal border war with Eritrea, saying his entire unit had been wiped out in an Eritrean artillery attack but he had survived after briefly leaving a foxhole to get better antenna reception. He rose to lieutenant-colonel before entering government as the first head of Ethiopia's cyber-spying outfit, the Information Network Security Agency. He entered parliament as a deputy in 2010 and became science and technology minister in 2015.

The circumstances that led to Abiy's ascent to high office can be traced to late 2015. A government plan to expand the capital's administrative boundaries into the surrounding Oromia region was seen as a land grab, sparking protests led by the Oromo, Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, and the Amhara people. — AFP

## Iran assassination could undercut Biden's options

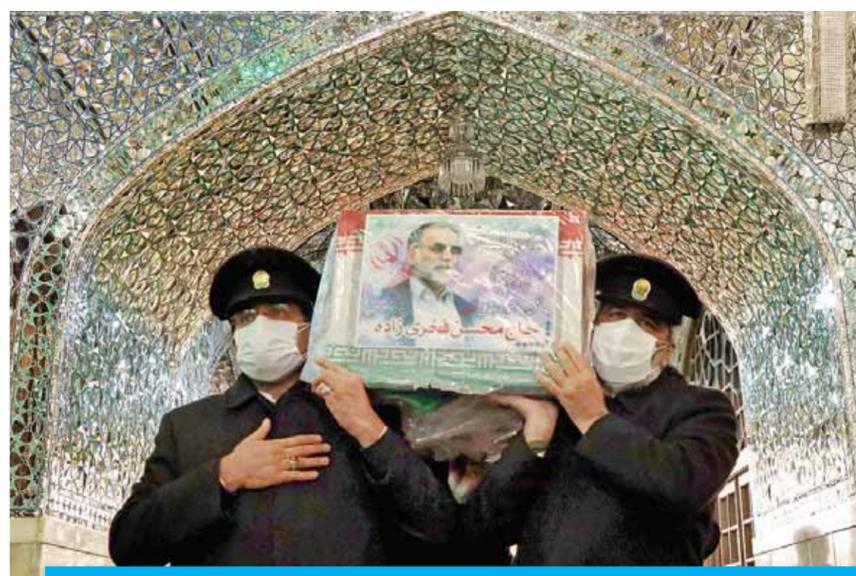
**WASHINGTON:** The assassination of a top Iranian nuclear scientist, which Tehran has blamed on Israel, risks not only sharpening tensions across the region but also severely complicating plans by US President-elect Joe Biden to resume dialogue with the Islamic republic, analysts said Saturday. Iran has accused arch-foe Israel of seeking to sow "chaos" by killing 59-year-old Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh and has strongly implied that the Jewish state was acting with US blessing.

Washington has not officially commented on the operation, in which gunmen targeted Fakhri-zadeh's car on a road outside Tehran, according to Iran's defense ministry. But President Donald Trump has retweeted others' comments on the incident, including at least one that said the scientist had been "wanted for many years by Mossad," the Israeli intelligence agency.

Trump in 2018 withdrew the US from the multination nuclear agreement with Iran, instead launching a "maximum pressure" campaign which he appears determined to pursue until he leaves office in January. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who recently visited Israel, on Friday announced new economic sanctions against some Chinese and Russian firms accused of having supported Iran's missile program.

"This administration... is here until January 20" and will "continue to pursue its policies," a senior US official traveling with Pompeo said during a stop Sunday in Abu Dhabi. "I would hope that this leverage that the administration works so hard to get will be used to good purpose to get the Iranians to, once again, start behaving like a normal state."

But for some American analysts, the killing of Fakhri-zadeh was a dangerous act that undercuts Biden's stated intention of offering Iran "a credible path back to diplomacy" as a step toward the United States rejoining the nuclear accord. Former CIA head John Brennan tweeted Friday that the scientist's killing was a "criminal act & highly reckless," saying it "risks lethal retaliation & a new round of regional conflict."



MASHHAD, Iran: A handout picture shows servants of the Imam Reza shrine carrying the coffin of Iran's assassinated top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh during his funeral procession yesterday. — AFP

Brennan, who led the US intelligence agency from 2013-2017, when Barack Obama was president and Biden was vice president, exhorted Iran to "wait for the return of responsible American leadership on the global stage & to resist the urge to respond against perceived culprits". As the US was moving a carrier group led by the USS Nimitz back to the Gulf - while insisting this had nothing to do with the assassination - Germany warned on Saturday against any new "escalation."

"We call on all parties to avoid taking any action which could lead to a new escalation of the situation" which "we absolutely do not need at this moment," a German foreign ministry spokesman told AFP. "Weeks before a new government takes office in the United States, existing dialogue with Iran must be maintained in order to resolve through negotiation the conflict over Iran's nuclear program."

That view was shared by Ben Friedman, a defense specialist at George Washington University. The killing, he said, was "an act of sabotage against US diplomacy and interests" and would "likely help Iranian hardliners who want nuclear weapons". For Ben Rhodes, a former advisor to Obama, "This is an outrageous action aimed at undermining diplomacy between an incoming US administration and Iran." He added: "It's time for this ceaseless escalation to stop."

Some analysts, however, saw the killing in Iran as providing leverage to the incoming US administration that could be useful in possible negotiations with Tehran. "Still almost two months before Joe Biden takes office," noted Mark Dubowitz, director of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), "Plenty of time for US and Israel to inflict severe damage on the regime in Iran - and build leverage for the Biden administration." — AFP