



Tigray Crisis: A Conversation With General Tsadkan Gebretensae, Tigray Defense Force Central Command

By The Elephant



Editor's note: Gen Tsadkan Gebretensae is a key member of the Tigrayan Defence Forces Command and widely regarded as one of Africa's [best military thinkers and strategists](#). He was a former top Ethiopian army general. He is widely-regarded as one of the masterminds of Operation Alula which in late June 2021 led to major reversals for the Ethiopian army in Tigray. In this interview, conducted in Tigray on 6 July by The Elephant, Gen Tsadkan spells out his views on peace and the way forward for Ethiopia.

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The Elephant: What is the context of what is happening in Tigray?

Gen Tsadkan: I don't need to go back to the horrendous atrocities that have been committed against the people of Tigray by invading forces of Isaias and Abiy, but after the offensive, after what has happened recently, the Ethiopian government is in my opinion living in an illusion. It is an illusion that has been created by themselves. They tried to deny the reality on the ground. They tried to cheat the world by saying they have declared a unilateral ceasefire while they have been

defeated. We decimated two brigades of their forces which were running away from Mekelle, so this nonsense of unilateral ceasefire is a drama that has been created by themselves. Instead, they should recognize the realities on the ground and come with a realistic solution. You cannot have a ceasefire at a time when you have already blocked every movement of goods and services. Ethiopian Airlines is not flying to Mekelle, there is no telephone, there is no internet, there is no power, there is no road transport, humanitarian aid has been blocked. He cannot talk about any unilateral ceasefire while trying to strangle the whole people of Tigray.

So, I think I would like the international community to understand the situation we are in. We have been very much restrained because we don't want to be seen as if we are not accepting a political solution. The whole problem is not only in Tigray but in the whole of Ethiopia. We know the Government forces are almost finished but at the same time we are restraining ourselves for a realistic political solution to the whole problem. I would like the international community to understand this situation, that is the message I have now.

The Elephant: *You were a part of the group that mediated between the PM and the TPLF before war broke out, what led you to break off that role?*

Gen Tsadkan: You are right, myself and a group of prominent political individuals in Ethiopia have been trying to mediate. The basis of the interaction we had was to accept the existing Constitution of Multinational Federalism and resolve any other issue apart from it. In my interaction with the PM, it was very clear that he was looking for; (A) dismantling the Multinational Federalism, which brought Ethiopia together and (B) he was looking for a solution that is not a political peaceful solution but preparing himself for war. That was very clear for me in our last meetings. So I had to make a choice. I knew that the political solution to Tigray would not come, in my interactions with him. I was interacting with the President of Tigray, Debretsion Gebremichael. On the part of Tigray, I saw willingness to resolve the issue, as long as the Multinational Federal Constitutional Arrangement is respected. That was not the case with Dr Abiy Ahmed, so I had to take a position. And at the same time, there was no other choice. The Ethiopian Government invited foreign forces to invade our country, so the choice was either to surrender to foreign forces or Abiy's forces, or join the resistance. I chose the latter.

The Elephant: *Those final meetings you had with the PM, when was that, 2019 or 2020?*

Gen Tsadkan: I think it was 2020. It was not 2019. We had several, we had some meetings earlier, precisely around three major meetings, but the last one was in 2020.

The Elephant: *When did you specifically join the armed resistance?*

Gen Tsadkan :It was after November.

The Elephant: *Could you explain the relationship btw the TPLF, the TDF, the Government of Tigray and your position now?*

Gen Tsadkan: The TPLF is the ruling party, the TDF is a word that has been coined, not in a negative sense but in a positive sense, during the resistance. The whole resistance is led by the Government of Tigray, not the TPLF, as a ruling party it might have its say but the resistance is led by the Government, the duly elected Government of Tigray. The Government of Tigray has established a Central Command which decides on all issues related to war and peace, all issues: political, diplomatic, military, economic issues, this body is chaired by the President of Tigray, Dr. Debretsion, and the military effort is one aspect of the resistance. I serve as a member of the Central Command in the structure that I have described, so the TPLF is the ruling party, the Government of

Tigray is the one leading the resistance, through a structure called the Central Command that decides on all issues related to peace and war. The TDF, the Tigrayan Defense Forces, is an element in the whole structure that is being commanded by the Central Command. Below the Central Command there is a structure called the Military Command, the Military Command specifically directs and commands operations in the army. This is the arrangement.

The Elephant: *Were you expecting to win control of Tigray so soon or even at all, did it come as a surprise to you?*

Gen Tsadkan: No, it didn't come as a surprise to me. In fact, I am on public record even before the war started telling people, you know, of all regions, the Region of Tigray is a region which shall not head for war but at same time is not scared of war. I know the history, I know the potential, when this thing started it was very clear that the most senior, most highly experienced commanders are from Tigray, which has been the backbone of the Ethiopian armed forces for the last thirty years, highly experienced because most of them have gone through two major wars, I very much know the military tradition of Tigray, so when you combine those two elements, highly experienced and skillful commanders and a society with a very deep military tradition, it only takes a short period of time to reorganize and regain control. That's exactly what happened.

At the same time, this has been facilitated by the atrocities committed by the enemies of Tigray, that created a widespread opposition and dedicated of the youngsters to finish all this within a short period of time. When all those things came together, given the experience we had, we had to organize the fighting units, train the fighting units, and it was clear for us that when we get some time, we will create a very formidable fighting machine, and that's what has happened.

The Elephant: *how many POWs do you currently have?*

Gen Tsadkan: I might miss some of the information, the latest information I have before five days is around more than 8000, the prisoners of war kept increasing, they might have increased a little bit. But that is the figure I know.

The Elephant: *Do you want to say about plans for treatment of these POWs?*

Gen Tsadkan: No, I don't think there is anything in particular, I know my colleagues are in touch with the ICRC, and will handle them according to international law.

The Elephant: *What is the current humanitarian situation? What actions are you hoping the International Community will take?*

Gen Tsadkan: As has been described by the international media several times and by UN Agencies, the humanitarian situation is extremely dire. The Ethiopian Government is trying to aggravate this by blocking any connection with Sudan and any other corridor. Even they have blocked air communications. So the Government of Tigray and the Central Command have decided, I think it has been communicated, we are ready to accept any humanitarian assistance, ready to facilitate anything that the U.N. or any humanitarian assistance agencies would like to have, security, we will provide security to the areas we control, more than 90 percent of Tigray, we will comply with their requirements, so my message is, there is a huge need for humanitarian assistance and we are ready to accept any assistance, if the international community means business, let them come and do what is required to save lives in Tigray.

The Elephant: *what will happen if the PM continues to refuse humanitarian access to your region?*

Gen Tsadkan: Not only resisting humanitarian assistance to our region, but if he continues to do

the way they are acting, that is, strangling Tigray, blocking power, electricity, internet, air transport, land transport, not only humanitarian assistance but to civilians as well, I think the Government of Tigray and the resistance in Tigray will be required to break its restraint, restraint from military activities, we know we have the capacity, we have increased our capacity, we know we can do what it takes to pressurize the government so if they continue behaving like the way they are doing, playing games, and trying to deceive the world with their illusions, the first consequence will be continuation of operations. We will be left with no other alternative except to resolve it militarily. We would like it to be resolved peacefully but if there is no other choice, then the next choice will be, try to resolve it militarily, and we know we are capable of doing that.

The Elephant: *What is your timeline for that option?*

Gen Tsadkan: No, I'm afraid to comment on this. We are watching the situation seriously.

The Elephant: *are you prepared to negotiate peace with Abiy and with the Eritrean leader Isaias?*

Gen Tsadkan: I think that's an issue that we have to deal with when it comes. We have made our points clear on the last declaration of what we mean by a negotiated ceasefire, we have clearly indicated that we are for a negotiated ceasefire. In a negotiated ceasefire, issues are raised and we discuss to resolve them, but the process has to start.

The Elephant: *Do you have anything to add to the conditions for the negotiated ceasefire that TPLF released on Sunday?*

Gen Tsadkan: No, I was part of the Central Command that drafted that list and I'm happy with it.

The Elephant: *Do you have any message for Ethiopians as a whole?*

Gen Tsadkan: I would like to say it's very sad that our country Ethiopia is in such a situation. We were forced to act the way we did, because of the Central Government in Ethiopia, is in our opinion directed by Asmara, by Isaias, Isaias' security forces, intelligence forces are operating in Ethiopia day and night. I hate this kind of situation to prevail in Ethiopia, but at the same time, it is sad to see that Ethiopians are just accepting the behavior of the Central Government, but I would like to say that even though so many atrocities have been committed, it's not led to resolve our issue peacefully and politically. So, when Ethiopians come out of the illusion that the Prime Minister has created, the reality on the ground is completely different, let Eritreans get out, not only from Tigray, but from all of Ethiopia. Let Ethiopians set their own trajectory themselves.

Eritrea has a heavy hand, heavy presence not only in Tigray but in Addis Ababa and all over Ethiopia as well.

The Elephant: *What are the battlefield developments, status of Western Tigray?*

Gen Tsadkan: It's very clear that Amhara forces are in Western Tigray, it's obvious that they are preparing to face us. So, we'll handle it the way they would like to handle it.

The Elephant: *Does that mean you are waiting for them to act, you're not going to push it?*

Gen Tsadkan: No, I didn't say anything, it is a military situation and we will see the situation and act according to what is warranted militarily for us

The Elephant: *have the ENDF and Amhara forces retreated to other side of Tekeze River?*

Gen Tsadkan: They have already blown up bridges, it is very clear that it's a continuation of the policy of Abiy Ahmed to strangle Tigray and take away a Constitutionally recognized geographic region of Tigray to another area. So, they are preparing themselves across the river. That, we know.

The Elephant: *Do you see the capture of Mekelle as a turning point that will lead to a speedy end to conflict or is it opening up a new front in the war, in the north and west?*

Gen Tsadkan: It all depends upon the central government of Ethiopia and its partner Isaias, it could be, it's very clear that they cannot win the war. The capture of Mekelle and the defeat of the Ethiopian army clearly shows if there was any doubt, that they cannot win this war. On the other hand, the people of Tigray have been under huge atrocities of all kinds, have stood and resisted. The war will continue growing. Even the military experience and the political nature of the just cause of the war, it will keep on growing. So the capture of Mekelle would signal a huge political message to Abiy, to come to his senses and then resolve the political situation not only in Tigray but in all of Ethiopia peacefully, sooner. It has signaled that he cannot get his way by force, that is what he wanted, he could not, he mobilized not only his forces but other forces as well, he mobilized all of the army of Eritrea, he mobilized the technological capacity of the UAE, that did not work. So, for us, we were not craving for war. We wanted a peaceful solution from the very beginning. And it is now after the defeat of Abiy's forces we are saying, let's have a negotiated ceasefire. But Abiy and the Amhara elites can resist this, can say no, we'll have our way by military means, if that is their choice, we'll see. So it all depends on how they will react. The sooner they come out of their illusion that they have created, that they are riding victory after victory, it will be better for all of Ethiopia and Tigray as well. As long as they live with that illusion, and trying to mobilize innocent peasants and bringing them as cannon fodder to the new fronts that have been created in southern and western Tigray, then the war will continue.

The Elephant: *Are there any splits within TPLF, on any topics such as engaging the government, or are you pretty united?*

Gen Tsadkan: Pretty united. Obviously, there are different opinions on how the political situation should be resolved, and resolved once and for a durable period of time. But that is for Tigrayans to discuss among themselves and resolve. That is the situation. On the issue of you know defeating the invaders, and coming to a lasting political situation, there is complete unity.

The Elephant: *is there anything you would like to share about journey of your life, as someone who fought against Dergue and toppled it?*

Gen Tsadkan: I would like to say that I am a product of the people of Tigray. The struggle and the pain that the people of Tigray have went through have created people like me, not only me, several like me. So, when all these things are done, I hope some people will have a lot of time, I will have time as well, to go through all this. But for the time being, as I said, I am the product of the struggle and the pain of the people of Tigray.

Thank you very much.

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