


Forum: The Advisory Panel

Topic: Question of Addressing Escalating Cross-Border Disputes Between Sudan and Ethiopia

President

# Introduction

The ongoing border dispute between Ethiopia and Sudan goes back to 1902, starting with the Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty, making it a long-lasting source of tension in the African region. The conflict revolves around control over the Al-Fashaga region, a fertile piece of land along a portion of a border claimed by Ethiopia and Sudan. Not only is it an agricultural dispute, as both countries want to benefit from the land, but it is also a dispute over different interpretations of border agreements. To take advantage of the Al-Fashaga area being productive farmland, an informal cooperation came to be, under which Ethiopian farmers could live and farm in the disputed territory while Sudanese sovereignty was respected.

In November of 2020, a civil war between the Ethiopian Federal Government (FDRE) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) erupted, which served as an opportunity for the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) to advance into Al-Fashaga, claiming control of "Sudanese land" in the region (Reuters). An Interim Regional Administration was subsequently established in Tigray. However, occasional skirmishes still occur (*Conflict in Ethiopia*…). Consequently, the war has resulted in humanitarian issues, struggling communities, and hardship.

# Definition of Key Terms

## Al-Fashaga:

A piece of fertile land claimed across the border of Sudan and Ethiopia.

## Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty:

The Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1902 was made as an agreement between the British and Ethiopian Empires to define borders between Ethiopia and Sudan.

## Gwynn Line:

The border drawn during Major Charles Gwynn's1903 demarcation work between Ethiopia and Sudan that was created because of the Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty. Sudan accepts the demarcation, while Ethiopia has disputed its legitimacy.

### Pretoria Peace Agreement:

The November 2022 Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, or the Pretoria Peace Agreement, is an agreement between Ethiopia and the TPLF, which ended the two-year civil war in Ethiopia's Tigray region.

## General Overview:

### Subtopic 1: Addressing the Economic Effects of the Cross-Border Disputes Between Sudan and Ethiopia.

Al-Fashaga contains fertile agricultural land that has generated profitable trade through crops such as cereals, sunflowers, cotton, sesame, and gum Arabic, with oilseeds alone providing between $250 million and $500 million in export earnings per year over the last decade. Most of Ethiopia's sesame production takes place in Welkait, Metema, and Kafta Humera woredas (names of Ethiopian administrative districts). However, the sector has been significantly affected by the war in northern Ethiopia, where much of the country's sesame is produced, with an estimated 500,000 acres of sesame fields taken out of cultivation during the 2021 growing season. However, Amhara forces invaded Humera and Welkait in late 2020, and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) claimed to gain control of up to 95% of the disputed border territory of Al-Fashaga. This conflict disrupted the previously established agricultural supply chains between Ethiopia and Sudan, as control over farmland changed who was able to produce, transport, and benefit from sesame exports. This caused the economic value of Al-Fashaga to become increasingly connected to political and military control rather than only agricultural production.

As a result, the production of sesame and its trade revenue have fluctuated in both countries. As seen in Figure 1, Ethiopia's exports were equal to $282 million in 2018; however, in 2022, this number dropped by $100 million to $182 million. Meanwhile, Sudan's export earnings rose from $576 million in 2018, then reached a peak of $789 million in 2020, before dropping to $488 million in 2022, as seen in Figure 2. The economic effects of the dispute also extended to international trade relationships, as disruptions to sesame production

and supply chains affected trade with major export markets. For Ethiopia, this is highly evident with China, which had the highest number of exports until 2018 and reached roughly $350 million in the value of exports in 2014, then began decreasing until reaching roughly $5 million in 2021. This decline occurred alongside increasing instability and disruptions affecting Ethiopia's sesame sector. In regard to Sudan, the trade increased in 2020 when the incursions first began; however, it began to drop. This is also evident in Sudan's exports to China, as they reached a high of roughly $300 million in 2020 before dropping by half two years later to approximately $150 million.

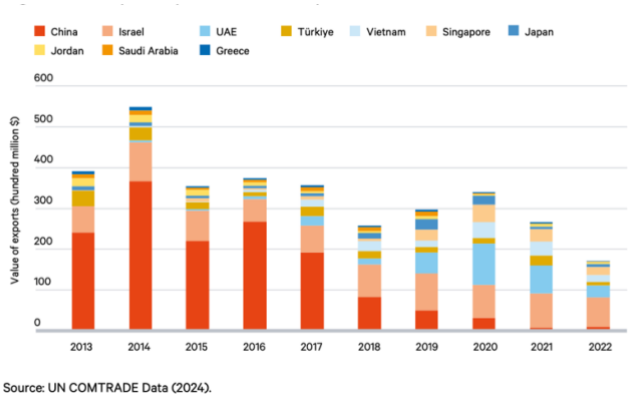



*Figure 1: Ethiopia's top sesame export markets (Chatham House)*

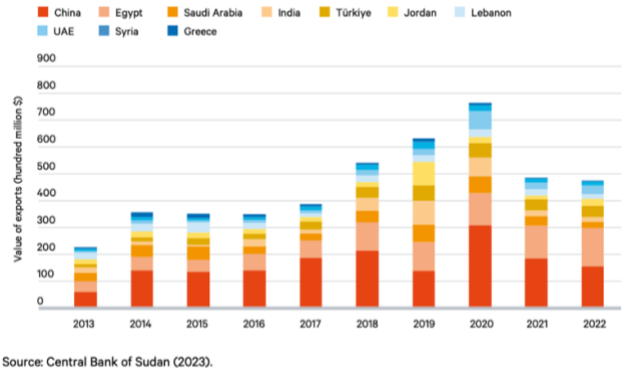



*Figure 2: Sudan's top sesame export markets (Chatham House)*

By taking control of Al-Fashaga's fertile lands, Sudan was able to gain control over much of the trade in this region and direct the profitable trade from crops away from Ethiopian markets. The economic resources in Al-Fashaga have played a vital role in sustaining Sudan's war economy during its civil conflict. Moreover, the expansion of the SAF into Al-Fashaga also affected existing agricultural and trade networks that had

developed between Ethiopian and Sudanese communities. Some local Sudanese investors had their lands removed or became unable to access their agricultural areas due to the conflict, negatively influencing wider working relations between Ethiopian and Sudanese farmers and investors in Al-Fashaga and across the border. Furthermore, the SAF incursions affected important trade and transportation routes used to move goods and people between Ethiopia and Sudan. By disrupting these routes, the SAF was able to increase its control over agricultural activities in Al-Fashaga and limit Ethiopian access to settlements and farming areas in the region. A study found that many Sudanese farmers started to abandon their farming activities in Al-Fashaga, especially along the border with Ethiopia, due to insecurity and instability in the region(Sulieman). These actions changed land ownership and agricultural activity, as the conflict displaced Ethiopian farmers, landowners, and investors who had previously operated in the region.

Additionally, according to Chatham House, the occupation of Al-Fashaga allowed companies connected to Sudan's Military Industrial Corporation, a network of business subsidiaries controlled by SAF, to become more involved in the sesame sector after Sudan gained control over Al-Fashaga, redirecting parts of the agricultural supply chain that previously flowed through Ethiopian markets into Sudanese Markets(Soliman, "Fighting over 'White Gold': Sesame in Ethiopia and Sudan"). This increased role of Trade has also been significantly affected, leading to increased costs and greater risks in transporting goods.

Transport routes have also become increasingly militarised in Ethiopia, as insecurity has grown since the start of the Tigray war, with numerous new checkpoints being established; according to Chatham House, there is one checkpoint every 15-20 kilometres. A mixture of official and unofficial forces, including the Ethiopian Federal Police, the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF), and the Amhara Region Special Forces (ASF), operate these checkpoints. Informal checkpoints set up by militia groups are usually in more remote areas such as feeder roads, informal pathways, or places with difficult geographic terrain, which provide cover for smuggling and criminal activities. This resulted in an increase in the cost and risk of transporting goods. Furthermore, the increase in informal trade and smuggling weakened formal economic systems by causing agricultural goods, including sesame, to move outside official markets. This reduced government control over trade revenues and made it more difficult for businesses and governments to manage the movement of agricultural goods across the border.

Moreover, as a result of the constant violence, for most of 2021 and during 2022, the Ethiopia-Sudan border was sporadically opened and closed, creating the biggest obstacle for formal trade, further hurting the economy of both countries, and resulting in informal trade and smuggling occurring in parts of the border. The disruption of formal trade routes also affected agricultural trade in the region, as goods such as sesame increasingly move through informal channels rather than official markets. According to Chatham House, this informalization of trade affected cross-border supply chains, with sesame and other agricultural goods progressively connected to illicit trade activities between Ethiopia and Sudan. Since agriculture, transportation, and trade are major economic activities along the border, disruptions to sesame production and cross-border trade reduced earnings for farmers, labourers, and traders involved in these sectors, decreasing economic activity, disrupting supply chains, and limiting revenue generation.

## Subtopic 2: Addressing the Humanitarian Effect on the Escalating Cross-Border Disputes Between Sudan and Ethiopia

The humanitarian consequences of the cross-border disputes between Sudan and Ethiopia are significant. The populations lack protection and attention and are exposed to displacement from farmlands and eruptions of violence over territorial disputes. In the case of Tigray, the displacement caused by the war restricted safe exit pathways and complicated tracking internal displacement along the border. Additionally, the Humera corridor became a targeted spot for attacks in Tigray, which resulted in many deaths and separated families (Müller). Moreover, the displacement caused by the conflict puts further strain on the humanitarian support systems. Tensions have also been rising between Sudan and Ethiopia as a whole. Ethiopia is also faced with accusations about using brutal methods of war such as rape, attacking schools and hospitals, and blocking humanitarian aid from reaching its citizens during its civil war (Human Rights Watch). Sudan has also accused Ethiopia of being behind drone attacks targeting Sudan's capital of Khartoum, making cooperation more difficult. These accusations damage Ethiopia's reputation and guide the government's attention to proving these accusations wrong rather than focusing on its humanitarian support systems. Further strain was placed on humanitarian systems on April 15, 2023, when the armed conflict between the SAF and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) resulted in the forced displacement of over 8.6 million people by 2024, 6.8 million of whom were initially displaced, adding strain to existing humanitarian systems (UNHCR). As many Ethiopian

refugees had already fled to Sudan beforehand, both Ethiopian and Sudanese refugees were obliged to find refuge. Al-Fashaga experienced increased strain on its aid systems, which led to people living in overcrowded camps with limited access to basic needs such as clean water, nutrition, and medical care. They also face shortages of medical supplies and understaffing, resulting in increased spread of disease in overcrowded areas.

As militias and farmers have repeatedly clashed, farmers have lost access to farms, and these clashes have caused disruptions in existing land arrangements, leading to fewer opportunities for efficient agriculture in the Al-Fashaga region. Al-Fashaga contains 243,000 hectares of fertile agricultural land, while the SAF gained control of up to 95% of the land (Soliman and Demissie). Moreover, as of October 2025, more than 43% of people in Al-Fashaga are facing acute hunger (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification). As a result of malnutrition, people are more prone to illness, which can be fatal. Many farmers have lost their farms and cannot provide for their families. Furthermore, starvation is not just an issue that arose because of the loss of productive land, as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has issued reports that the FDRE has in the past used methods such as starvation, gang rape, and arbitrary execution, which violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia). Al-Fashaga remains faced with extreme food insecurity and acute hunger; farmers also face being blocked from accessing their farmland, which prevents them from being able to use the land to farm.

On the other hand, Ethiopia claims that many refugees from Sudan have crossed the border and are now displaced in Ethiopia. Besides the influx of refugees, Ethiopia is faced with border violence issues. As most refugees lack adequate protection, they are increasingly exposed to threats such as abduction, ransom, and violence associated with border skirmishes.

## Subtopic 3: Addressing the Social Effect on the Escalating Cross-Border Disputes Between Sudan and Ethiopia

Before the 2020 escalation between Sudan and Ethiopia, both countries had a mutually beneficial relationship. Both Ethiopian and Sudanese farmers were permitted to live, farm, and trade in the Al-Fashaga region (Soliman and Lannaud). This way, both countries were able to benefit from the region without compromising ownership. However,

for farmers to continue working and living in Al-Fashaga, an informal compromise was established and agreed on in 2008, in practice, limiting harassment towards the farmers. However, due to some violations of the undocumented agreement, the relationship between Sudanese and Ethiopian communities was strained, and border tensions increased. As a result, issues such as the militarisation of local trade routes fundamentally disrupted trade for both Ethiopian and Sudanese traders.

As for trade, many farmers were the main producers of traded commodities. However, as the civil war escalated, more farmers were displaced from their jobs and homes. As of March 2021, nearly 2,000 civilians had been displaced by the fighting in Al-Fashaga, with later research describing thousands of farmers as having been displaced (Soliman and Demissie). Not only were they disconnected from each other, but also from the Sudanese community that would work together. Additionally, the dispute caused community distrust and instability for civilians living in the Al-Fashaga region. The issue of gender-based violence worsened and developed into a secondary crisis. The exposure of women and children to rape, harassment, and sexual assault at armed checkpoints increased (UNHCR). Moreover, to secure basic needs and resources, many women were forced to marry at very young ages and/or became victims of human trafficking. Because healthcare infrastructure was destroyed, shelters for these victims, as well as the specific care and rehabilitation they would need, are also inadequate. In addition, the dispute has impacted education, resulting in many schools closing, which disrupts the community's education. Prior to the conflict, Eastern Sudan, including Al-Fashaga, already faced issues of low enrollment in schools and high dropout rates, especially for girls (United Nations in Sudan). Many young women and girls are obliged to marry at a young age; prior to the escalation, this was already a risk: 2014 data found that approximately 48% of women aged 20-24 in Gedaref state, the region Al-Fashaga is in, had been married before the age of 18 As a long-term impact, due to disruptions in their education may limit future economic opportunities, exacerbating gender inequality for future generations (Child Marriage Data Portal).

## Major Parties Involved

### Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF):

The national military of Sudan, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, who seized control of significant parts of Al-Fashaga.

### Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF):

A political party and former rebel movement from Tigray that was the dominant force within the Ethiopian government, which governed Ethiopia from 1991 until 2018, and a principal belligerent in the Tigray war.

### Amhara Militias

Armed groups consisting of volunteers from the Amhara region in Ethiopia, with interests in farming and grazing around Al-Fashaga.

### Ethiopian Federal Government (FDRE)

The FDRE stands for the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, established in 1995 and led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali.

### Egypt

Egypt has used the Al-Fashaga dispute as an opportunity to strengthen its alliance with Sudan, specifically the SAF. Additionally, a military cooperation agreement was established in 2021, which stated that Egypt would support Sudan by providing air force drills directly placed at the border and gave Sudan access to its airbase, while strengthening their joint military force (Egypt State Information Service).

## Timeline of Events

| Date | Event |
|---|---|
| 1902/ May/ 15 | The Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty was signed by Ethiopia and Britain, and it delineates the border between Sudan and Ethiopia. |
| 1903 | Attempting to apply what the treaty previously said in tighter terms, the British surveyor Major Gwynn demarcated the land again and created what is known as the Gwynn line. However, Ethiopia was not consulted during this process and rejected this demarcation. |
| 1972 | Following Sudan's independence, Ethiopia and Sudan attempted to resolve the conflict with an Exchange of Notes that would establish the framework for demarcation. |

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|---|---|
| 1974 | Ethiopia's 1974 revolution severely disrupted all efforts made in 1972, leading to all formal agreements being stalled and the conflict remaining unresolved. |
| 2007 | Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi came to an informal cooperation agreement where both Sudanese and Ethiopian farmers could cultivate the land, while mutually agreeing to a formal demarcation and a later unspecified date. |
| 2020/ November | The civil war in northern Ethiopia between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) began, forcing Ethiopian military units to redeploy away from the western border. |
| 2020/ December | While Ethiopia was preoccupied with the civil war, the SAF began invading Al-Fashaga, displacing thousands of Ethiopian farmers. However, the SAF claims to be reclaiming its own territory. Tensions increased as Sudan invaded Khor Yabis, which Ethiopia had controlled for 25 years, on the 2nd of September. On the 15th of December, clashes occurred between Ethiopian militiamen and SAF, and two days later, Sudanese senior military leaders announced that Sudan controlled most of Al-Fashaga and that they intended to seize the entire territory. In response, Ethiopia sent reinforcements along with Amhara militias into the disputed territory. In the largest escalation in decades, Ethiopian and Sudanese troops engaged in direct combat. Ethiopia accused Sudan of taking advantage of the Ethiopian military being engaged elsewhere and hence starting this confrontation. |
| 2021/ June/ 20 | Both parties agreed to refrain from supporting hostilities during a Sudanese-Ethiopian military |

| | |
|---|---|
| | meeting in Gallabat, Sudan. However, the conflict soon resumed as the agreement failed. |
| 2022 | Local armed confrontations between ENDF and SAF took place near the border. |
| 2023/ April | The civil war between SAF and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) broke out, forcing SAF to move its forces, leaving its eastern borders poorly defended. |
| 2025/ July | Sudanese officials allege that Ethiopian militias known as Shifta took advantage of the poorly defended border and began incursions into the disputed territories, displacing Sudanese farmers. |
| 2025/ July/ 4 | Sudanese officials released a statement accusing Ethiopia of taking advantage of the ongoing conflict in Sudan and alleged that the Shifta militias were backed up and protected by the ENDF. |
| 2025/ July/ 7 | The Ethiopian government released a statement rejecting the accusations made by the SAF and denying any military movement in the area, reaffirming their commitment to a peaceful resolution. |

## Attempts to solve the issue

### Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1902

The Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty is a colonial-era document that sought to determine the border between Ethiopia and Sudan. The treaty was signed between Emperor Menelik II and the British government, which was representing Sudan, and it assigned the territory which is now the border of Benishangul-Gumuz to Ethiopia and addressed the flow of Blue Nile waters from Ethiopia's Lake Tana. Ethiopia claimed territories of Al-Fashaga which at some points extend 40- 50 km west of a line delineating the border between Sudan and Ethiopia. The treaty

was defined only in general terms and was loosely demarcated by the British (International Crisis Group).

### 1972 Exchange of Notes

The 1972 Exchange of Notes was an agreement between Ethiopia and Sudan that aimed to peacefully re-demarcate the shared border. Under the agreement, both countries accepted Major Gwynn's 1903 demarcation as the basis for future negotiations while agreeing to make adjustments. The agreement also established a Joint Special Committee to conduct field studies and propose an amicable solution for the disputed areas. At the same time, both countries agreed to consider the issue of settlements and cultivation before the border was officially re-demarcated (Embassy of Ethiopia).

### 2007 Cooperation Agreement

The 2007 Cooperation Agreement was an informal agreement between Sudan and Ethiopia that aimed to allow citizens from both countries to continue cultivating land in the disputed border area through a soft border approach. The agreement was reached between Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who agreed that Ethiopian and Sudanese citizens could both cultivate the land. At the same time, formal border demarcation would be conducted at a later date.

### 2021 Sudan-Ethiopia Military Meeting

The Military Meeting held by Sudanese and Ethiopian military officials in Gallabat aimed to reduce severe tensions along the disputed border, with both countries agreeing to refrain from supporting hostilities.

### 2022 African Union Commission Appeal for Restraint

The chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, issued an official appeal following the June 2022 border clashes in Al-Fashaga to prevent a full-scale regional military escalation. It urged both Sudan and Ethiopia to abstain from any military action and called for dialogue between the two countries to resolve any disputes.

## Possible Solutions

### Freeze Military Deployment and Bilateral Demilitarisation

The border territory of Al-Fashaga has faced intense militarisation by state forces since late 2020. In order to avoid repeated border conflicts, the SAF and the ENDF must

freeze all military deployments to Al-Fashaga and should bilaterally demilitarise the troops in that area. Freezing deployments and bilateral demilitarisation will encourage de-escalation and stop the cross-border violence.

### Restore a Soft Border Agreement

Since neither Sudan nor Ethiopia can reach an agreement on the official border demarcation, the dispute remains unresolved, causing local farmers to face constant instability and fear. By restoring the soft border agreement (a system allowing the fluid movement of people and goods with minimal checkpoint restrictions), which was an attempted solution in 2007 and was broken by SAF when they began their incursions into Al-Fashaga, displacing thousands of farmers, farmers can cultivate the land without constant instability. This should be done by establishing formal frameworks and ensuring constant communication between Ethiopia and Sudan, with a neutral third party present. The soft border offers a compromise to the two states, and both nations can reduce tension in border communities and secure trade revenue.

### Protect Displaced Populations

The ongoing conflict has left thousands of farmers internally displaced within Al-Fashaga and externally displaced into Ethiopia. As a result, thousands of people are left without a source of income or a home, making it critical to protect such populations. Establishing weapon-free IDP sites should provide displaced populations with a safe place to stay, access to food, medical care, and legal aid. These camps should be secure and should have security patrolling the area to ensure the safety of the affected communities.

### Creating Open Dialogue Between Sudan and Ethiopia

The lack of communication between Ethiopia and Sudan is further escalating the conflict. To combat this, the two states must establish an open dialogue channel focused on the Al-Fashaga region. Communication should occur frequently, with monthly meetings to address any concerns before any military action is taken. A neutral third party, such as the UN, should also be present during such meetings to ensure diplomacy and peace. This dialogue will allow both nations to discuss border issues and can allow both governments to rebuild trust and work towards a peaceful, negotiated settlement.

## Guiding Questions

1. What are the main causes of the Sudan-Ethiopia Border Dispute?

2. What are the 1902 Anglo-Ethiopian treaty and the Gwynn line?
3. How did the Gwynn Line influence this conflict?
4. How did the dispute affect humanitarian life in both countries?
5. How did this dispute affect the economy in Ethiopia and Sudan?
6. What were the social impacts that communities faced because of this conflict?
7. How has the dispute affected the financial stability and livelihoods of farmers and local communities?
8. How did economic interests influence this conflict?
9. What role did local militias play in this conflict, and why is it significant?
10. How did the civil wars in Sudan and Ethiopia influence the conflict?
11. What is the delegates' stance on the Sudan-Ethiopia cross-border dispute?

# Appendix

- https://www.crisisgroup.org/brf/africa/ethiopia/b173-containing-volatile-sudan-ethiopia-border-dispute
- https://www.cmi.no/publications/8191-the-sudan-ethiopia-border-needs-a-soft-border-solution
- https://ethiopianembassy.org/facts-on-ethio-sudan-boundary-issue-february-16-2021/
- https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/political-solution-needed-for-the-ethiopia-sudan-border-dispute
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