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Classifying and Regulating Renewed Hostilities in Northern Ethiopia beyond the Pretoria Agreement

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how renewed hostilities in northern Ethiopia should be classified and regulated while the 2022 Pretoria Agreement between the Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) remains formally operative.

Research Methodology: The study adopts a qualitative documentary and doctrinal research design. It analyzes the Pretoria Agreement, African Union (AU) instruments, international humanitarian law, international human rights law, United Nations documentation, and peer reviewed scholarship, interpreted through Legal Pluralism Theory and Conflict Transformation Theory.

Results: A peace agreement cannot by itself determine the legal classification of subsequent violence. Classification must be assessed independently on the facts, particularly the intensity of violence, the organization of armed actors, the continuity or emergence of armed groups, and the involvement of foreign forces. Where the threshold of a noninternational armed conflict is met, Common Article 3, Additional Protocol II, and customary international humanitarian law apply notwithstanding Pretoria, and the participation of foreign states may raise questions of international armed conflict.

Conclusions: Northern Ethiopia requires a dual track framework in which Pretoria governs political cessation and peace implementation while international humanitarian and human rights law regulate conduct during renewed violence, supported by stronger AU monitoring, accountability, and preventive diplomacy.

Limitations: The study relies on documentary sources, cannot verify facts on the ground, and does not reach a definitive classification of specific incidents.

Contributions: The study clarifies the relationship between peace agreements and the law of armed conflict, offers a scenario based classification matrix, and proposes four institutional recommendations.

Keywords: *Armed Conflict Classification, International Humanitarian Law, Northern Ethiopia, Peace Agreements, Pretoria Agreement*

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1. Introduction

The armed conflict that erupted in northern Ethiopia in November 2020 was one of the most consequential crises in the Horn of Africa in recent years. What began as a confrontation between the Federal Government and forces associated with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) expanded geographically and politically, affecting Tigray, Amhara, and Afar and involving multiple state and nonstate actors. The conflict generated extensive allegations of killings, sexual violence, forced

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displacement, destruction of civilian property, and obstruction of humanitarian assistance, and international investigators documented serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law by several parties (United, 2023). Community based research has since documented the scale of sexual and gender based violence (Fisseha et al., 2023), widespread household food insecurity (Weldegiargis et al., 2023), and the collapse of rural livelihoods under war and siege (Meaza et al., 2024).

The mediation efforts of the African Union culminated in the Agreement for Lasting Peace through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities, signed in Pretoria, South Africa, on 2 November 2022 by representatives of the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the TPLF. The Agreement sought to end the armed confrontation, restore constitutional order, facilitate humanitarian access, establish disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration arrangements, promote political dialogue, and create mechanisms for monitoring and compliance (African, 2022). It also incorporated transitional justice commitments, including accountability, truth seeking, victim redress, reconciliation, and healing, and Article 11 established a Monitoring, Verification and Compliance Mechanism that gave the AU a continuing role in observing implementation. Scholars have debated whether the Agreement represented a mere cessation of hostilities or the beginning of a new political era for Ethiopia (Gebresenbet & Tariku, 2023, Dessie et al., 2024).

The Pretoria Agreement significantly altered the conflict environment but did not eliminate the underlying political, territorial, and security questions that had contributed to the crisis. Critics warned early that analyses focused only on the immediate settlement underestimated the long historical roots of conflict in Ethiopia (Abbink, 2023), and reports of continuing sexual violence after the Agreement showed that civilians remained exposed (Mishori et al., 2023). Tensions persisted in contested areas such as Raya Alamata, Zata, and Ofla, and divisions developed within and around the TPLF. In September 2026, the AU Commission expressed concern over a further escalation involving the seizure and occupation of airports in Mekelle, Axum, and Shire, the detention of federal personnel, military developments in South Tigray and the Afar region, and the emergence of new political and military alliances, while reaffirming that the Pretoria Agreement remained the cornerstone of sustainable peace (African, 2026). The wider regional environment, including Red Sea geopolitics, has added further strain to this fragile peace (Gebrihet, 2026).

These developments create an important legal problem. A peace agreement and international humanitarian law (IHL) operate at different normative levels. Pretoria is principally a negotiated political and security instrument governing the cessation of hostilities and the transition toward peace. IHL, by contrast, establishes minimum rules governing the conduct of parties whenever an armed conflict exists. The existence of a peace agreement does not automatically terminate the application of IHL, nor does renewed violence automatically create a legally new conflict. Whether renewed violence constitutes a continuation of a previous noninternational armed conflict, a new noninternational armed conflict, or a conflict with an international dimension depends on the facts and the applicable legal criteria (International, 2024). Ceasefire and peace agreements have diverse legal effects that international law does not yet regulate systematically (Sosnowski, 2020).

Ethiopia is a party to the four Geneva Conventions and both Additional Protocols, including Additional Protocol II, which applies to qualifying noninternational armed conflicts. The legal environment is therefore not limited to the provisions of the Pretoria Agreement. It also encompasses Common Article 3, Additional Protocol II, customary IHL, international human rights law, and the domestic legal framework of Ethiopia. The central issue is consequently not whether Pretoria remains relevant, because it clearly does, but how it interacts with the legal regulation of renewed armed violence.

Four problems follow from this situation. The first is the tendency to treat the Pretoria Agreement as though it exhaustively determines the legal status of all subsequent violence. The second is a problem of classification, because the categories of international armed conflict and noninternational armed conflict determine which treaty and customary rules apply, and the criteria of intensity and

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organization must be applied to facts rather than to political descriptions (Hrnjaz & Simentić Popović, 2020). The third concerns the temporal relationship between peace agreements and IHL, since it is often unclear when a noninternational armed conflict ends and whether renewed violence is a continuation or a new conflict (Derejko, 2021, Farley & Pradhan, 2024). The fourth concerns accountability and civilian protection, because the period after 2022 has not resolved earlier violations and renewed hostilities risk producing new ones (UNHRC, 2023, Getahun, 2025).

This study therefore pursues four objectives. The first is to examine the legal and political significance of the Pretoria Agreement in regulating the security environment after 2022. The second is to assess the legal criteria for classifying renewed hostilities under IHL. The third is to examine the interaction between the Pretoria framework, IHL, human rights law, and accountability mechanisms. The fourth is to propose a strengthened legal and institutional framework for regulating renewed hostilities and preventing further escalation. Correspondingly, the study asks what the continuing significance of Pretoria is, how renewed hostilities should be classified, how the Pretoria framework should interact with other bodies of law, and which measures can strengthen regulation and prevention.

The article makes three contributions. It clarifies the distinct functions of peace agreements and the law of armed conflict in a situation of renewed violence. It offers a scenario based matrix for classifying renewed hostilities in northern Ethiopia. It also proposes a dual track framework and institutional recommendations that connect ceasefire monitoring, legal classification, civilian protection, and transitional justice.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis/es Development

2.1 The Pretoria Agreement and the Scholarly Debate

The Pretoria Agreement refers to the Agreement for Lasting Peace through a Permanent Cessation of Hostilities signed on 2 November 2022. It established a framework for ending hostilities, humanitarian access, disarmament, political dialogue, transitional arrangements, accountability, and monitoring, and it should be understood primarily as a negotiated peace and cessation instrument rather than as a replacement for the wider body of international law applicable to armed conflict (African, 2022). Early assessments disagreed over its significance. Gebresenbet and Tariku (2023) questioned whether it was a mere cessation of hostilities or the start of a new era, while Abbink (2023) cautioned against presentist analysis that ignores the deeper historical drivers of conflict. Dessie et al. (2024) examined the conflict between the TPLF and the federal government with particular emphasis on the Agreement, and Gebreslassie (2026) used Pretoria to illustrate how a return to multipolarity affects the negotiation and durability of peace agreements.

2.2 Peace Agreements, Ceasefires, and International Law

A growing literature examines the legal character of peace agreements and ceasefires. Sosnowski (2020) argues that ceasefire agreements produce diverse effects that international law regulates poorly, while Fox and Jones (2025) explore how international law exerts persuasive authority within peace agreements even when it is not formally binding. Lane (2016) shows that human rights norms and ceasefire agreements can mitigate humanitarian crises during noninternational armed conflicts. Pinaud (2021) highlights the role of civil society in ceasefire monitoring, and Ndiyun (2022) documents how repeated peace agreements in the Central African Republic failed to produce peace when underlying drivers were not addressed. These studies suggest that peace agreements are necessary political instruments but insufficient legal frameworks for regulating renewed violence.

2.3 Renewed Hostilities and the Classification of Armed Conflict

Renewed hostilities refer to a subsequent escalation of organized violence after the 2022 cessation arrangements. The expression is deliberately broader than war, because not every armed incident satisfies the legal threshold of an armed conflict. Legal classification is the process of determining whether a situation constitutes an international armed conflict, a noninternational armed conflict, or

violence below the threshold of armed conflict. For noninternational armed conflicts, the intensity of violence and the organization of nonstate armed groups are the central criteria (International, 2024). Hrnjaz and Simentić (2020) show that the criterion of protracted armed violence has been interpreted differently across international humanitarian law and international criminal law, which underlines the need for careful factual analysis.

The temporal scope of noninternational armed conflict is particularly relevant to northern Ethiopia. Derejko (2021) questions whether such conflicts risk becoming endless when their end point is defined too loosely, and Farley and Pradhan (2024) propose a practical test for determining when a noninternational armed conflict has ended. Their analyses support the argument that a peace agreement does not automatically end an armed conflict in law and that the continuity of armed groups, command structures, and violence must be assessed on the facts.

Foreign involvement adds a further layer of complexity. Musau (2024) analyzes the realignment of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea that shaped the 2020 conflict in Tigray, and Ezugwu and Duruji (2025) examine how external intervention affected conflict resolution and political stability. Territorial disputes also matter, as shown by research on contested narratives in Wolkait after Pretoria (Chanie, 2026), on relations between Amhara and Tigray in North Wollo (Admassu & Mengistu, 2025), and on how territorial claims escalate into military hostilities more generally (Watanabe & Enterline, 2025).

2.4 International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law

IHL is the body of international law governing the conduct of hostilities and protecting persons affected by armed conflict. Its central principles include distinction, proportionality, precautions in attack, humane treatment, and the protection of civilians and persons hors de combat, and it applies on the basis of the existence of an armed conflict rather than on the formal recognition of the parties (International, 2024). Human rights law continues to apply during armed conflict. Fortin (2022) takes stock of the evolving relationship between the two bodies of law and shows that they increasingly operate in a complementary manner. Humanitarian access is a particular concern, because the deliberate starvation of civilians is now recognized as a war crime in noninternational armed conflict (Gillett, 2019) and is prohibited by a broader body of international law (Coco et al., 2019). Research on the effects of siege on disease and health services in Tigray shows how the denial of access translates into civilian harm (Haftu et al., 2025).

2.5 Transitional Justice

Transitional justice refers to measures that address serious violations associated with conflict or repression through accountability, truth seeking, reparations, institutional reform, and reconciliation. Article 10 of the Pretoria Agreement linked the peace process to a comprehensive national transitional justice policy (African, 2022). Getahun (2025) assesses the relevance of the Ethiopian transitional justice policy for peacebuilding, and Seul (2019) emphasizes that transitional justice requires deliberate coordination among institutions and stakeholders if it is to support durable peace.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

Legal Pluralism Theory provides the principal theoretical foundation of the study, because the environment after Pretoria is governed by multiple overlapping normative systems. These include the Pretoria Agreement, Ethiopian constitutional and statutory law, IHL, international human rights law, AU instruments, and customary international law. Studies of statebuilding in situations of irregular warfare show that external actors and states must navigate several coexisting legal orders (Terpstra, 2020), and empirical work on postconflict Sierra Leone shows that plural legal systems shape how disputes are resolved after war (Naso et al., 2020). In northern Ethiopia, the practical challenge is therefore not the absence of law but the coordination of several regimes whose purposes and enforcement mechanisms differ. Pretoria establishes political commitments between parties, while IHL imposes humanitarian obligations that arise independently of political consent once an armed conflict exists.

Conflict Transformation Theory complements legal pluralism by shifting attention from the termination of violence to the transformation of the relationships, institutions, and structural conditions that generate recurring conflict. This perspective is relevant because the persistence of territorial disputes, political contestation, ethnic insecurity, displacement, and institutional mistrust demonstrates that the cessation of large scale fighting does not necessarily resolve the underlying conflict system (Abbink, 2023, Gebresenbet & Tariku, 2023). Together, the two theories provide the analytical basis of the study. Legal classification regulates the immediate conduct of renewed violence, while conflict transformation addresses the political and structural conditions that allow such violence to recur.

Taken together, the literature reveals a gap. Political analyses of Pretoria rarely engage with the classification of renewed violence, while legal analyses of classification and the end of armed conflict rarely examine the Ethiopian case. This study connects these bodies of work.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative documentary and doctrinal research design. It does not claim to have undertaken interviews, questionnaires, field observations, or other primary fieldwork. The approach is interpretive and doctrinal rather than empirical, because the research questions concern the legal meaning of facts and the relationship between legal regimes.

3.2 Data Sources

The analysis is based on documentary evidence including the Pretoria Agreement, AU statements and policy instruments, IHL treaties, legal materials of the ICRC, reports of United Nations human rights mechanisms, Ethiopian human rights materials, transitional justice documents, and peer reviewed scholarship on conflict classification, peace agreements, and the conflict in northern Ethiopia. The core primary sources are the Pretoria Agreement (African, 2022), the most recent AU statement on escalation (African, 2026), the ICRC position on the definition of armed conflict (International, 2024), and the report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (United, 2023).

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The study applies thematic legal analysis to four principal issues, namely the continuing status of the Pretoria framework, the classification of renewed hostilities, the interaction between peace agreements and international law, and accountability and institutional prevention. Particular attention is given to authoritative sources because classification questions require a careful distinction between political descriptions of events and legally relevant facts.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Pretoria Remains the Political Foundation but Not the Entire Legal Framework

The first finding is that the Pretoria Agreement remains indispensable to understanding the political order of northern Ethiopia after 2022. The AU has repeatedly reaffirmed that the Agreement is the cornerstone of peace, stability, and reconciliation, and its provisions cover the permanent cessation of hostilities, protection of civilians, humanitarian access, disarmament, political dialogue, transitional justice, and monitoring (African, 2022; African, 2026). However, its continued political relevance should not be confused with the proposition that it exhausts the legal regulation of renewed violence.

A peace agreement is fundamentally a negotiated instrument between identifiable parties. IHL, by contrast, operates according to objective conditions of armed conflict. If violence resumes at the intensity and level of organization required for an armed conflict, the applicable rules of IHL are triggered by the factual situation regardless of disagreements over whether a party has breached

Pretoria or whether the Agreement has technically collapsed (Sosnowski, 2020). The proper approach is therefore not Pretoria or IHL but Pretoria plus IHL.

4.2 Renewed Hostilities Must Be Classified on the Facts

The second finding is that renewed violence should not be classified primarily through political terminology. Descriptions such as tension, clashes, law enforcement operation, or renewed hostilities cannot determine legal classification. The existence of an armed conflict depends on legally relevant facts, including the intensity of violence, the organization of armed groups, the involvement of states, and the relationships between armed actors (International, 2024). This is particularly important in northern Ethiopia because the environment after Pretoria contains changing alliances, fragmented armed actors, and overlapping political disputes.

If violence between federal forces and an organized armed group reaches the requisite intensity, a noninternational armed conflict may exist regardless of whether the parties describe the confrontation as a security operation, a political dispute, or an isolated rebellion. Conversely, isolated incidents, criminal violence, or sporadic unrest do not automatically constitute such a conflict (Hrnjaz & Simentić Popović, 2020). Classification must therefore be continually reassessed as facts evolve.

Table 1. Classification scenarios for renewed hostilities in northern Ethiopia

Scenario	Key Factual Indicators	Legal Consequence	Main Applicable Law
Violence below the armed conflict threshold	Sporadic clashes, low intensity, limited organization of armed actors	No armed conflict in law	Human rights law and domestic law
Continuation of the 2020 to 2022 noninternational armed conflict	Same or closely connected parties, persistent command structures, short or unstable cessation	Existing conflict continues	Common Article 3, Additional Protocol II if conditions are met, customary IHL, and human rights law
New noninternational armed conflict	Substantially different parties or objectives, new organized group, intense and protracted violence	New conflict begins	Common Article 3, Additional Protocol II if conditions are met, customary IHL, and human rights law
International armed conflict alongside the internal conflict	Direct hostilities between Ethiopia and a foreign state, or foreign forces using force against Ethiopia	Separate international armed conflict	Geneva Conventions, Additional Protocol I, customary IHL, and human rights law

Table 1 presents four possible classification scenarios for renewed hostilities in northern Ethiopia, together with the factual indicators, legal consequences, and applicable law associated with each. The first row shows that sporadic or low intensity violence remains governed by human rights law and domestic law rather than IHL. The second and third rows distinguish between the continuation of the earlier conflict and the emergence of a new one, a distinction that depends on the continuity of parties, command structures, and violence (Farley & Pradhan, 2024). The final row shows that the involvement of foreign states can create a separate international armed conflict that coexists with the internal one, which means that a single label should not be applied to every act of violence.

4.3 The Question of Continuity Requires Particular Attention

A central legal question is whether renewed hostilities constitute a continuation of the noninternational armed conflict of 2020 to 2022 or a new conflict. Determining when such a conflict ends and when another begins can be legally complex, particularly where armed actors remain organized and violence resumes after a period of reduced hostilities (Derejko, 2021, Farley & Pradhan, 2024). The existence of the Pretoria Agreement does not provide an automatic answer.

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If the original conflict legally ended and substantially different parties, objectives, or organizational structures later produce a new armed conflict, a fresh classification may be appropriate. If, however, the same or closely connected organized armed parties resume hostilities after an insufficiently durable cessation, continuity may be more persuasive. The issue should therefore be determined through evidence concerning command structures, organizational continuity, territorial control, weapons, operations, intensity, and the relationship between the earlier and renewed violence. This distinction matters for accountability. A finding of continuity may preserve the analytical continuity of earlier obligations and patterns of conduct, while classification as a new conflict may require fresh examination of parties and applicable rules. Neither approach should be adopted automatically.

4.4 Treaty Commitments Strengthen the Legal Framework

The treaty obligations of Ethiopia provide an important basis for regulating renewed hostilities. Common Article 3 establishes minimum protections for persons taking no active part in hostilities and those placed hors de combat, including protection against violence to life and person, cruel treatment, torture, humiliating or degrading treatment, and executions without due process. Additional Protocol II further develops protections concerning civilians, humane treatment, medical care, judicial guarantees, and the conduct of hostilities. Its applicability depends on the organization of the nonstate party and its ability to exercise sufficient territorial control to undertake sustained and concerted military operations and to implement the Protocol. Once the applicable threshold is satisfied, the regulation of renewed violence cannot depend solely on the terms of Pretoria.

4.5 Foreign State Involvement Can Complicate Classification

The involvement of foreign states creates another layer of legal complexity. The earlier conflict involved findings concerning Eritrean forces, and subsequent regional tensions have again raised concerns about external involvement (Musau, 2024, Ezugwu & Duruji, 2025). The legal consequences of foreign intervention depend on its nature, including whether force is used against another state, whether intervention occurs with consent, and whether foreign forces become integrated into the operations of a party (International, 2024). The appropriate legal response is to disaggregate the conflict rather than assign one label to every act of violence. Violence between a government and an organized armed group may constitute a noninternational armed conflict, while direct hostilities between two states may constitute an international armed conflict, and foreign support that does not make the supporting state a party may raise different questions from direct participation.

4.6 Civilian Protection Must Remain the Central Regulatory Principle

Whatever the classification, civilian protection must remain central. Previous investigations documented serious violations affecting civilians, including killings, sexual violence, displacement, destruction, and humanitarian deprivation (United, 2023), and research has shown that sexual violence continued even after the Agreement (Mishori et al., 2023). Renewed hostilities create the risk that civilian protection will again become secondary to military and political objectives. A legally grounded response must therefore operationalize distinction, proportionality, precautions, humane treatment, and humanitarian access. The fact that a military objective is linked to a political dispute does not remove the obligation to protect civilians, and the presence of armed actors within civilian areas does not eliminate the principle of distinction or the requirement to take feasible precautions.

4.7 Humanitarian Access Is a Legal and Operational Priority

The previous conflict demonstrated how restrictions on humanitarian access can transform military confrontation into a wider humanitarian disaster. Studies have linked war and siege in Tigray to household food insecurity, the collapse of farm livelihoods, and outbreaks of preventable disease (Weldegiargis et al., 2023, Meaza et al., 2024, Haftu et al., 2025). The use of starvation as a method of warfare is prohibited and can constitute a war crime in noninternational armed conflict (Alessandra & Gillett, 2019, Coco et al., 2019). Renewed violence therefore requires rapid humanitarian access mechanisms capable of protecting relief personnel, ensuring safe passage, and preventing interference

with assistance, and the AU and humanitarian organizations should treat deterioration in access as an early warning indicator of wider escalation.

4.8 Pretoria's Monitoring Mechanism Should Be Strengthened Rather than Bypassed

The Pretoria Agreement anticipated the need for monitoring, verification, and compliance through Article 11, and the AU Monitoring, Verification and Compliance Mechanism has played a role in observing implementation and facilitating dialogue (African, 2022). However, monitoring a peace agreement and determining the legal classification of an armed conflict are not identical functions. The mechanism can document breaches of Pretoria and facilitate confidence building, but legal classification requires broader factual and legal analysis. Experience elsewhere shows that ceasefire monitoring is more effective when it involves local and civil society actors as well as official monitors (Pinaud, 2021). A strengthened system should therefore link peace agreement monitoring with IHL expertise, civilian protection monitoring, early warning, and independent documentation, preventing a gap in which a ceasefire violation is recorded politically while its humanitarian and legal consequences are not assessed.

4.9 Transitional Justice Cannot Be Deferred Indefinitely

The transitional justice provisions of Pretoria are an important bridge between peace and accountability. Article 10 requires a comprehensive national policy aimed at accountability, truth, victim redress, reconciliation, and healing (African, 2022). Ethiopia has adopted a transitional justice policy, but its relevance for peacebuilding depends on implementation (Getahun, 2025). Renewed hostilities can create a dangerous accountability cycle. If earlier violations remain unresolved while new violations occur, perpetrators and victims may perceive impunity as permanent (United, 2023). A credible framework must therefore pursue accountability for past violations while establishing mechanisms capable of documenting and responding to new ones, and this requires careful coordination among the many institutions involved (Seul, 2019).

4.10 Domestic Accountability and International Standards Should Be Complementary

Ethiopia has emphasized national accountability, and domestic institutions bear primary responsibility for investigating and prosecuting violations under national law. Domestic processes should nevertheless operate consistently with international standards concerning independence, impartiality, due process, victim participation, and effective remedies. The purpose of international involvement should not be to displace national institutions but to reinforce credibility, technical capacity, and complementarity. This is particularly important where allegations concern senior political or military actors and where victims perceive domestic institutions as insufficiently independent.

4.11 Crimes against Humanity and War Crimes Must Be Distinguished

The legal classification of the conflict should not be confused with the classification of individual crimes. A noninternational armed conflict can generate war crimes where conduct violates applicable IHL rules and satisfies the relevant criminal elements (Gillett, 2019). Separately, widespread or systematic attacks against civilian populations may constitute crimes against humanity under customary international law. Ethiopia is not a State Party to the Rome Statute, so the International Criminal Court does not have automatic jurisdiction over crimes committed in Ethiopia. Jurisdiction could nevertheless arise through an accepted declaration or a referral by the Security Council, and non membership does not make such conduct legally irrelevant, because domestic law, customary international law, and other accountability mechanisms remain applicable.

4.12 Human Rights Law Continues to Matter during Renewed Hostilities

The existence of armed conflict does not generally suspend international human rights obligations. IHL provides the specialized framework for conduct during hostilities, while human rights law continues to regulate state conduct subject to applicable limitations and derogations (Fortin, 2022). This is particularly significant for arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, torture,

nondiscrimination, fair trial guarantees, and remedies. A narrow security approach that treats all problems as military threats risks undermining human rights protections, while an exclusively human rights approach that ignores the realities of armed conflict may fail to address the operational rules governing hostilities. Legal coherence requires both regimes to be applied according to their respective functions.

4.13 Territorial Disputes Require Political Rather than Militarized Resolution

The persistence of contested areas such as Raya and Wolkait illustrates the limits of military solutions. Competing historical narratives and the politics of memory continue to shape claims to contested territory after Pretoria (Chanie, 2026), and relations between communities in border zones remain affected by the legacy of the war (Admassu & Mengistu, 2025). Comparative research shows that territorial claims rooted in particular origins are more likely to escalate into military hostilities (Watanabe & Enterline, 2025). The legal regulation of renewed hostilities should therefore be accompanied by political mechanisms addressing contested administration, the return of displaced populations, property rights, local governance, and security guarantees.

4.14 The AU Needs a More Integrated Architecture after Pretoria

The renewed tensions demonstrate the importance of African institutional ownership but also reveal the need for stronger coordination between political mediation, monitoring, human rights protection, and legal analysis. The AU already possesses relevant instruments through the Peace and Security Council, the Panel of the Wise, the High Level Panel, the monitoring mechanism, and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. The challenge is therefore not the creation of a new institution but the integration of existing capacities. Changes in the global distribution of power also affect the leverage of mediators and guarantors and therefore the durability of agreements such as Pretoria (Gebreslassie, 2026, Gebrihet, 2026).

4.15 Renewed Hostilities Require a Preventive Classification Mechanism

Legal classification should not begin only after a conflict has escalated substantially. A preventive mechanism should continuously monitor indicators relevant to classification, including the organization of armed groups, the frequency and intensity of attacks, territorial control, command structures, the use of heavy weapons, displacement, external military involvement, and patterns of civilian harm (Hrnjaz & Simentić Popović, 2020, Farley & Pradhan, 2024). Such monitoring would not predetermine the legal conclusion but would allow competent institutions to gather the evidence necessary for timely assessment, which is especially important in fragmented conflicts where political terminology may obscure rapid changes in the security environment.

4.16 From a Ceasefire Centered Approach to a Conflict Governance Framework

The central finding of the study is that northern Ethiopia requires a broader conflict governance framework rather than a ceasefire centered approach alone. Pretoria remains indispensable, but the sustainability of peace depends on the interaction of political settlement, legal regulation, accountability, and prevention. Experience from other contexts shows that peace agreements that do not address these interconnected dimensions often fail to produce durable peace (Ndiyun, 2022).

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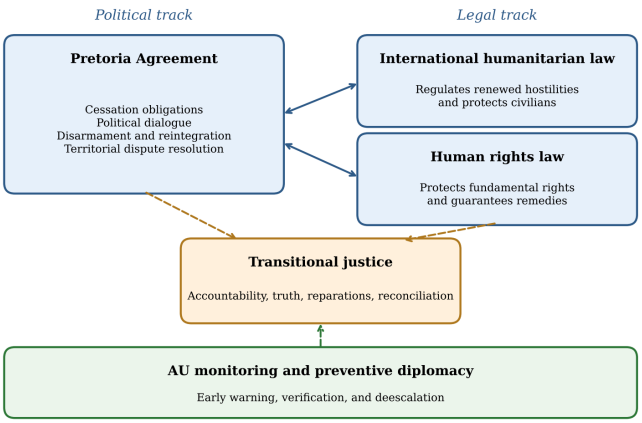


Figure 1. Dual track conflict governance framework for northern Ethiopia after Pretoria

Figure 1 presents the dual track conflict governance framework proposed in this study. The political track, anchored in the Pretoria Agreement, covers cessation obligations, political dialogue, disarmament and reintegration, and the resolution of territorial disputes. The legal track covers IHL, which regulates renewed hostilities and protects civilians, and human rights law, which protects fundamental rights and guarantees remedies. Transitional justice connects both tracks through accountability, truth, reparations, and reconciliation, while AU monitoring and preventive diplomacy support the whole framework through early warning, verification, and deescalation. The figure shows that the political agreement seeks to prevent and resolve conflict, while international law regulates conduct when prevention fails.

Table 2. Components of the dual track framework and their functions

Component	Primary Function	Key Institutions
Pretoria Agreement	Political settlement, cessation obligations, dialogue, and disarmament	Government of Ethiopia, TPLF, and AU mediation
International humanitarian law	Regulation of renewed hostilities and civilian protection	Parties to the conflict and the ICRC
Human rights law	Protection of fundamental rights and effective remedies	Ethiopian institutions, African Commission, and UN mechanisms
Transitional justice	Accountability, truth, reparations, and reconciliation	National justice institutions supported by AU and OHCHR
AU monitoring and preventive diplomacy	Early warning, verification, and deescalation	Peace and Security Council and the monitoring mechanism

Table 2 summarizes the five components of the dual track framework, the primary function of each, and the institutions mainly responsible for it. The first row confirms that Pretoria remains the political anchor, while the second and third rows show that IHL and human rights law perform distinct legal functions that apply regardless of the status of the Agreement. The fourth and fifth rows show that transitional justice and AU monitoring connect the political and legal tracks. Read together, the rows illustrate that no single instrument can address renewed violence alone and that the value of the framework lies in avoiding false legal choices.

5. Conclusions

The Pretoria Agreement remains a major political achievement for peace in northern Ethiopia, but it does not provide the complete legal answer to renewed violence. The reemergence of military confrontations after 2022 shows that peace agreements can reduce organized violence without removing the political, territorial, and institutional conditions that produced the conflict, as the

repeated interventions of the African Union confirm. The appropriate response is not to abandon Pretoria but to move beyond a Pretoria only approach. Renewed violence must be assessed independently under IHL according to intensity, organization, continuity, and the involvement of state and nonstate actors. Where a noninternational armed conflict exists, Common Article 3, Additional Protocol II, and customary IHL apply, and foreign participation may raise questions of international armed conflict. Classification must also remain linked to accountability and civilian protection, given the serious violations documented during the earlier conflict.

The study recommends a standing mechanism for classifying renewed hostilities, a stronger Pretoria monitoring mechanism linked to civilian protection and accountability, an inclusive transitional justice process covering past and new violations, and the political resolution of contested territories through dialogue and preventive diplomacy. The study relies on documentary sources and offers a framework rather than a final legal determination of specific incidents. Future research should incorporate field evidence and comparative cases. Ultimately, durable peace depends on whether institutions can prevent renewed violence, classify hostilities accurately, protect civilians, and ensure accountability. Moving beyond Pretoria means placing the Agreement within a broader and legally coherent framework.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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