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GOVERNMENT OF TIGRAY

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EXTERNAL
AFFAIRS OFFICE

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Statement on the Visit of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia to Addis Ababa

Since the start of the genocidal war on Tigray, the Ethiopian and Eritrean armies as well as allied Amhara regional forces have committed heinous atrocities against the people of Tigray. Understandably, these genocidal forces have strenuously resisted calls for independent investigations into their conduct. By contrast, the Government of Tigray has always called for an independent investigation to be conducted by an impartial international entity. Following a deeply flawed investigation conducted jointly by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, the United Nations Human Rights Council established the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (Henceforth, the Commission) to conduct what was billed as a credible independent investigation into any and all atrocities committed in Tigray and elsewhere.

In contrast to the Abiy regime's contempt for the Commission, the Government of Tigray has repeatedly expressed its acceptance of the Commission's mandate and legitimacy. However, there are signs that the integrity of the Commission's work is in grave danger of being compromised.

To start with, transparency is critical for the success of independent investigations. The timely and adequate transmission of information to the relevant stakeholders is vital for maintaining investigative integrity. Still, some degree of secrecy in investigating war crimes and crimes against humanity is necessary. But maintaining a veil of secrecy only when it comes to the victims while treating the victimizer as an indispensable interlocutor risks undermining the Commission's impartiality and, *ipso facto*, the credibility of the investigative process and associated findings.

Following the conclusion of its visit to Addis Ababa from July 25 to July 30, 2022, the Commission issued a statement on August 2, 2022, indicating that its discussion with Ethiopian authorities was an extension of prior discussions it had with them in Geneva. Keeping open channels of communication with the party—the Abiy regime—implicated in the perpetration of heinous atrocities, while turning a deaf ear to the interests of the victim—the people of Tigray—can only guarantee the entrenchment of impunity. By intentionally eschewing meaningful communications with the Government of Tigray, the Commission is on the verge of sacrificing its impartiality. Generally, any attempt to set up a framework for the investigation that treats Tigray as a marginal stakeholder is a step in the wrong direction and therefore unacceptable.

The Government of Tigray is of the firm belief that a course correction on the part of the Commission is necessary to maintain the perception and reality of its impartiality. Ensuring justice for the countless victims of the invaders' genocidal campaign requires a thorough, credible, and

expeditious investigation. The Commission should not allow the Abiy regime to hijack its work as it seeks to whitewash its atrocities, engage in victim-blaming and present itself as the dispenser of justice and accountability. Since the Ethiopian state is implicated in the perpetration of heinous atrocities against the people of Tigray, the Commission must refrain from establishing any contacts with the Abiy regime in ways that might be prejudicial to the Commission’s work. The Commission should simply demand unrestricted access to various suspected sites of atrocities and be allowed to fulfill its mission without interference.

The proper documentation of key evidence, including the preservation of forensic evidence, is also critical for effective investigations. In this regard, it is profoundly dismaying that the UN Human Rights Council in general and the Commission in particular have turned a blind eye and deaf ears to the illegal and morally repugnant exhumation by the authorities in Amhara region of the remains of Tigrayans mass-murdered by Amhara forces in Western Tigray. Indeed, the Commission’s deafening silence extends to ongoing violations of basic human rights in Tigray. For instance, unable to subdue the people of Tigray by force, the Abiy regime along with its domestic and foreign allies has imposed a deadly blockade on Tigray, engineering a colossal humanitarian crisis. Even though the Human Rights Council has recognized the importance of proactively preventing rights violations, the deafening silence of the Commission in the face of the inhumane siege of Tigray is problematic. Thus, the Commission must call for the immediate lifting of the blockade on Tigray and call for unfettered humanitarian access, thereby preserving the right to life. The Commission’s work should not simply be limited to ensuring retrospective accountability.

Most puzzlingly, the Commission has provided a deadline for citizens to provide evidence of crimes via the Internet. That the Commission appears to be oblivious of the total communications blackout in Tigray indicates a lack of appreciation for the magnitude of the suffering in Tigray. The Abiy regime understandably believes that granting independent investigators and journalists access to Tigray would puncture its self-glorifying, self-absolving and victim-blaming narratives. Furthermore, it is deeply troubling that the Commission also “hopes” for access to crime locations rather than demand that it be granted access. The deliberate obstruction of a duly constituted international investigative body by the Abiy regime should be treated as an admission of guilt. Bending over backwards to accommodate a regime accused of ongoing violations of human rights is, in effect, complicity in the perpetuation of injustice.

All the same, the Government of Tigray remains committed to cooperating with the Commission. But absent necessary course corrections by the Commission and tangible steps to reassure us of its impartiality and independence, cooperation for the sake of cooperation would simply be an unjustifiable expenditure of time and resources. For that reason, the Government of Tigray strongly urges the Commission to treat the people and Government of Tigray as essential interlocutors in its investigative journey.

