



Official Correspondence GSTS-O.C-2021-080
The Global Society of Tigray Scholars
and Professionals (GSTS)

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Country of Origin Information (COI) on Ethiopia and Request to UNHCR and the States Parties to The UN Convention to Recognize Tigrayans a Prima Facie Refugees Deserving Protection as a Group of Persecuted People

Excellencies,

1. The Global Society of Tigray Scholars and Professionals (GSTS) appreciates the leadership of Your Excellencies in the global effort to mitigate the suffering and plight of the Tigrayan and Ethiopian refugees and asylum seekers including troops of Tigrayan origin serving in various United Nations Peacekeeping missions.

2. GSTS kindly requests the UNHCR and the State Parties to the UN and the OAU/AU conventions on refugees to recognize Tigrayans a prima facie refugees deserving protection as a group of persecuted people.

3. the 2nd of April 2018, Dr Abiy Ahmed's premiership was confirmed by the Ethiopian House of People's Representatives, after being elected as the Chairperson of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)—a coalition of four regional political parties with the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the vanguard, and he was welcomed, by and large, across the country, as a reformist. This was also clearly the case in Tigray, as demonstrated during his early official visit.^[1] Since PM Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018, Tigray's leaders have been removed from top positions, explicitly prosecuted for political reasons and broadly scapegoated for the country's woes.^[2] No similar actions were taken against individuals from the other parties whose official positions would equally implicate them in human rights abuses, among other misconducts.

4. In November 2019, the Prosperity Party—a new party consisting of all the parties that made up the now-defunct EPRDF *except* the TPLF—was established with the sponsorship of PM Abiy Ahmed.^[3] The TPLF consistently opposed the replacement of the EPRDF by the new party as a violation of the internal rules of the EPDRF.^[4]

5. One of Abiy Ahmed's first actions as Prime Minister was to initiate a rapprochement with Eritrea's President Isaias Afewerki, following a rift in relations

between the two countries for two decades. Not long after, the two leaders signed a 'peace deal' in July 2018, ending hostilities. Telecommunication services and flights were reinstated and ports of entry reopened between the two countries, albeit for only a few months, rekindling hope for the future.^[5] However, the warm relationship between the countries was never institutionalized and was quickly reduced to an arrangement between Ahmed and Afewerki, and this did not bring the much-needed and durable peace. And the actual agreement that was the basis of the peace deal between the two countries has never been presented to the Parliament, as required under Ethiopian law, much less to the public.^[6] To this day, no one has publicly confirmed of the contents of the deal and the agreement remains a secrete.

6. Most significantly, Eritrea's Afewerki continued to take a hostile attitude towards the Tigrayan leadership, even at the height of the renewed relationship, and stated on record that the only way to continue the reform in Ethiopia was to annihilate the TPLF and politically cleanse Ethiopia of the 'Woyane'—using a popular Tigrayan term for resistance against tyranny.^[7] He further asserted that Eritrea considers Ethiopia's political development as directly affecting its own national interests and that he would not stand by idly if the reform were threatened.^[8] Such apparent hostility towards the regional leadership and interference in Ethiopia's internal affairs was met with complete silence from the Ethiopian federal government. It was indicative of the offensive against the people of Tigray that would be carried out by both Afewerki and Ahmed. Another important event was the sudden and indefinite postponement of the anticipated 2020 national election due to the COVID-19 pandemic.^[9] Despite calls from many opposition parties and academics to try for an all-inclusive national dialogue regarding this election, the incumbent government opted to postpone it without discussion.^[10] The legality and legitimacy of this postponement were fiercely contested. And this divisive decision, in effect, instigated the ensuing civil wars in Ethiopia.^[11]

7. While the federal government postponed elections, Tigray conducted its regional elections on the 4th of September 2020 with strict COVID-19 precautionary measures in place. The National Electoral Board rejected the regional election, and the federal government declared the election illegal.^[12] Tigray's newly formed government declared the federal government's extension of term unconstitutional and thus the federal government itself illegal. The federal government cut ties with the regional government and slashed the regional budget.^[13] In October, the federal government also cancelled funding for the SafetyNet Programme, a key social security in Ethiopia, that allocated money to one million vulnerable Tigrayans. In a region that had already been devastated by a locust invasion,^[14] the COVID-19 pandemic and economic pressures since Abiy Ahmed took power, the budget cut was considered all but a declaration of war.^[15] Furthermore, the Ethiopian House of Federation empowered the Prime Minister to take all necessary measures to ensure control of the region.

8. On the 2nd of November, Dr. Debretsion Gebremichael, the President of Tigray, explained to reporters that the federal government was priming itself to launch a military attack against Tigray. Debretsion Gebremichael also made repeated public calls and



dispatched letters to the international community pleading for intervention.^[16] This was the last in a series of calls for dialogue and international intervention that Tigray made before the war.^[17] The Tigrayan state continued to call for dialogue even after war was declared, while the federal government consistently rebuffed these efforts.^[18] This was a harbinger of the inevitability of the war.

9. What caused the war and its immediate triggers are subject to fierce debate. The narrative that dominates the media is Abiy Ahmed's claim that war was declared in response to Tigrayan forces attacking a military post in Tigray on the 4th of November 2020.^[19] Tigrayan authorities, on the other hand, assert that the federal government sent commandos to arrest regional leaders and control the regional government and that they acted in self-defense.^[20] And before the relevant date, one can see that preparations were indeed underway for a military attack on Tigray, which was considered unruly by the federal government. For instance, days before PM Abiy Ahmed's November 4th declaration, significant troop movement towards the region was reported.^[21] Ahmed had also been threatening to take military actions against Tigray on various occasions.^[22] As a UN diplomat on the ground was quoted in *Foreign Affairs* early in the conflict as saying, Abiy's government "will have difficulty convincing anyone worth their salt that this [war] wasn't pre-planned."^[23] In fact, Ahmed's own 30th November 2020 briefing to the Parliament regarding the war detailed the preparations that his government had taken for the war on Tigray during the previous two years.^[24] Further, Abere Adamu, the Chief of Amhara Special Forces which invaded western and southern Tigray in concert with the federal army and Eritrean military, detailed and confirmed Amhara Regional State's joint battle plans with the federal army before the war.^[25] Therefore, these and other events and preparatory activities made it abundantly clear that the war was planned ahead of the 4th of November.

10. On the 4th of November 2020, war was declared on Tigray by Prime Minister Ahmed. Immediately following the declaration of war, the federal government announced that the regional government of Tigray was illegal and moved to establish an interim administration.^[27] All Tigrayans who opposed the war and the postponement of the elections at federal level, and those who supported the elections in Tigray were considered enemies of the state. Many were hunted down, jailed or summarily executed. Testifying before the US Congress on the 10th of March 2021, Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, unambiguously confirmed that the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments have committed "acts of ethnic cleansing" in Tigray.^[28] Several international organizations, including the UN,^[29] Human Rights Watch^[30] and Amnesty International,^[31] have established evidence that ethnic-based war crimes and crimes against humanity have been committed in Tigray by the combined armies of Ethiopia and Eritrea, and by Amhara forces and militia.

11. As part of collective punishment of the people of Tigray, atrocities and extrajudicial executions of tens of thousands of civilians were carried out, particularly of prominent Tigrayans. As part of what may constitute state-led ethnic cleansing, tens of thousands of Tigrayans serving in the armed forces, the police and security forces, and



in the intelligence sphere have been harassed and detained in undisclosed locations.^[32] Many have been dismissed from their jobs in banking, foreign affairs, civil aviation, and other Ethiopian public services, and even from positions at the African Union Commission. A report by *Foreign Policy* also indicates that peacekeepers of Tigrayan origin in UN and African Union peacekeeping missions are being purged, arrested, and transported to Ethiopia. Repatriated peacekeepers are now facing torture and execution. Reports also show the brutal execution of Tigrayan civilians and politicians such as Ethiopia's former Foreign Minister, Seyoum Mesfin.^[33]

12. In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital city, police have been going door to door conducting arbitrary searches of Tigrayans' houses and detaining Tigrayans with no warrant or probable cause whatsoever; thousands of ethnic Tigrayans have already been incarcerated based on their ethnicity alone, and in most cases their whereabouts are unknown to their families.^[38] Employees of Ethiopian Airlines who are ethnic Tigrayans, from executives down to janitors, have been indefinitely suspended from their jobs.^[39] A formal government policy—enforced by the intelligence and security forces of the state—has been adopted to prohibit ethnic Tigrayans from boarding international flights. Even ethnic Tigrayans who are permanent residents or naturalized citizens of the US and Europe have been stopped from leaving the country. Ethnic Tigrayans who work in all of the Ethiopian diplomatic missions worldwide have also been dismissed from their jobs because of their ethnicity.^[40] The systemic ethnic profiling that the government has perpetrated against ethnic Tigrayans has also spilled over into the public sphere. Private companies and businesses, and landlords have followed the government's example and begun to expel or suspend ethnic Tigrayans from their jobs, and evicting them from their homes, plunging them and their families into more profound financial hardship.^[41]

13. Throughout the civil war in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian National Defense Force, the Eritrean troops and the local Amhara militias have been accused of “gang raping women,”^[42] using sexual violence as a method of warfare. Tigrayan women's bodies have been turned into battlegrounds. A young Tigrayan gang-rape survivor told the Amnesty International and the *New York Times* that “[s]oldiers [were] targeting Tigrayan women to stop them giving birth to more Tigrayans.”^[43] Pramila Patten, the UN's special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in conflict, in her April 2021 press release described that there are also disturbing reports of individuals allegedly forced to rape members of their own family, under threats of imminent violence. Some women have also reportedly been forced by military elements to have sex in exchange for basic commodities, while medical centers have indicated an increase in the demand for emergency contraception and testing for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) which is often an indicator of sexual violence in conflict. Every country bears the inherent responsibility of protecting its citizens from harm. “The responsibility to protect embodies a political commitment to end the worst forms of violence and persecution. It seeks to narrow the gap between Member States' pre-existing obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law.”^[44] The Ethiopian government is deliberately contravening this principle, perpetrating the extrajudicial killing of tens of thousands of Tigrayan civilian citizens, subjecting women and girls to rape and sexual slavery, and



inviting Eritrean forces to do the same on its territory.^[45] Moreover, as a result of the conflict and the crimes perpetrated against the population in Tigray, millions of Ethiopians are now at risk of starvation.

14. In a nutshell, the Major crimes committed since the declaration of war on Tigray on November 4th, 2020 include:

- a. Collective punishment;
- b. Grave atrocities and heavy indiscriminate shelling and aerial bombing of populated areas including using Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (drones);
- c. Extrajudicial executions of tens of thousands of civilians;
- d. Denying people to collect corpses of their loved ones and let the hyenas eat corpses;
- e. Widespread rape and sexual violence against women including underage girls-used as a weapon of war;
- f. Systematic starvation of people by looting and deliberately destroying food and livelihood sources critical for survival;
- g. Deliberate and long interruption of basic services: water, electricity, phone, internet, banking services and medical emergencies to deny fundamental needs and disrupt communication and support from families, relatives and friends
- h. Prohibition of humanitarian access and looting and diversion of aid deliberately to cause mass starvation and famine employed as a weapon of war
- i. Ethnic profiling, firing from jobs, eviction from rental houses, detention and imprisonment in internment camps of tens of thousands of Tigrayan soldiers in the Ethiopian defense forces including those in UN peace keeping missions, wealthy private business owners, those that have been working in Ethiopian Airlines, banks and other public and private companies;
- j. Forcible return and attacks on refugee camps;
- k. Forced disappearance of close to 20,000 Eritrean refugees from Shimlba and Histats and the repeated and pre-planned destruction of the refugee camps;
- l. Annexure of a large swath of Tigray by the Amhara militias & systematic demographic change;
- m. Forcing people to acquire Eritrean ID and barring humanitarian assistant from reaching particularly to the Irob communities in Tigray by the Eritrean forces;
- n. Massive displacement of people, including over 70,000 refugees in the Sudan from Tigray and more than 2.3 million internally displaced persons within Tigray;
- o. Systematic destruction of industries such as Almeda Textile Factory, Addis Pharmaceuticals, Sheba Leather, and Tsemayat Marble Stones;
- p. Systematic destruction and pillage of UNESCO registered and other heritage sites, places of worship, religious and cultural buildings including in Aksum, Negash, and Debre Damo;
- q. Systematic destruction and looting of public and private service institutions and properties such as universities, hospitals, pharmacies, health centers, schools, hotels, and bakery;
- r. Organised looting and unlawful confiscation of properties of Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT) - a multi-million- dollar public endowment that belonged to the people and government of Tigray.

15. These egregious acts have fueled a massive flight from Ethiopia to Sudan, Djibouti, and other countries. More than 70,000 refugees from Tigray are currently hosted in Sudan, and the number may soon grow to 200,000.^[34] With some over 2.3 million internally displaced persons, Tigray now represents a significant global humanitarian challenge at a time when "humanitarian needs have never been higher."^[35]

16. Sudan has officially declared *prima facie* recognition of refugee status for Tigrayans from Ethiopia.^[36] The European Union fears increased migration to Europe due to the war.^[37] Peacekeepers of Tigrayan origin in The Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia have and continue to request asylum protection in various countries.

17. Recognizing the clear danger of persecution Tigrayans facing in Ethiopia, they are fleeing the country when a window of opportunity of leaving the country opens. The circumstances in Ethiopia justifies a presumption that Tigrayans meet the criteria applicable for *prima facie* recognition as refugees.

18. GSTS requests the UNHCR and the State Parties to the UN and the OAU/AU conventions on refugees to recognize Tigrayans a *prima facie* refugees deserving protection as a group of persecuted people.



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