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Joint Statement

The Movement for Eritrean People's Sovereignty (EPS) and One Nation Eritrea Resolving the Conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray Region

War, like all man-made disasters, is avoidable. It is not inevitable that political contest for power within a state escalates into violent conflict. War is the outcome of the “failure of human wisdom” and the triumph of one-upmanship. As a general rule, it is preferable and much less costly, measured in terms of loss of human life, destruction of property and lost opportunity for development, to resolve issues of political contestation by peaceful means. It is only after the exhaustion of all peaceful means in obedience of the rule of law that war becomes justifiable as a measure of last resort in self-defence and in the defence of liberty. Viewed in a historical context and assessed against this criterion, it is difficult to justify triggering the war in the Tigray Regional State of Ethiopia, with its devastating consequences, including the immense suffering of the people of Tigray.

Keenly aware of the death and destruction that war causes, the Movement for Eritrean People's Sovereignty (EPS) has, right at the outset, issued a Statement ([link](#)) calling on the federal government of Ethiopia and the regional government of Tigray to give primacy to the interest of the people and resolve their differences by peaceful means. The Statement urged the international community, regional organisations and neighbouring states to use their good offices to help bring about a cessation of hostilities and contribute to a durable resolution of the outstanding issues in accordance with the rule of law.

The EPS Statement also urged the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Movement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IMRCRC) to exert all possible effort to ensure the compliance of the belligerent forces with the international law of war in order to protect the safety and wellbeing of the people of Tigray. Furthermore, it reminded the international community, in general, and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), in particular, of its responsibility to ensure the safety, legitimate refugee status and wellbeing of Eritrean refugees in Tigray and elsewhere in Ethiopia in accordance with international humanitarian law under the Geneva Convention.

On the weight of the evidence regarding the situation prior to the eruption of hostilities, the Movement for Eritrean People's Sovereignty (EPS) and One Nation strongly believe that there existed a peaceful option; that the war in Tigray, with all its domestic, regional and international ramifications, was avoidable. What was apparently lacking was earnest political will to address the issues arising from the process of transition and reconcile with the new realignment of forces in Ethiopia and the immediate neighbourhood. As the EPS Statement had warned, the war has disrupted peace, security and stability in Ethiopia; aggravated Ethiopia's structural problems; and caused detrimental spillover effects in the region, including Eritrea's involvement and the border conflict with Sudan.

Truly, war is no "cultural game" for any people. It is starkly self-evident that the Tigray People's Liberation Front's (TPLF) fateful "lightning attack" on the Ethiopian army's Northern Command in "anticipatory defence" that triggered the war was a colossal miscalculation. The TPLF regime's continued two-decade occupation of sovereign Eritrean territory represented another strategic mistake that exacerbated the situation. No matter of how much one may tout, romanticise or provoke it, war constitutes a legally sanctioned project of mass murder and enormous destruction inflicted by and, first and foremost, on the rank and file of the belligerent forces. Wherever and whenever waged, it also entails varying extents of loss of civilian life and property, euphemistically referred to as collateral damage.

As regards the accounts of collateral damage, it is extremely difficult to sift fact from fiction in the stream of contentious reports of alleged acts of genocide, atrocities, massacres, rapes, pillage, etc. Unsubstantiated accusations, like the "Axum massacre", have been fabricated on purpose and spread by TPLF leaders and operatives of Digital Weyane (DW) or Tigray Media House (TMH). Despite being refuted by subsequent eyewitness accounts, such allegations are reproduced, embellished and shared by a well-oiled machinery of TPLF hirelings, lobbyists, supporters and apologists *ad infinitum* in the conventional and social media while credible reports of atrocities perpetrated against Eritrean refugees by Tigrayan forces are ignored or downplayed. The systematic propaganda campaign is conducted without any attempt at due diligence as to the veracity of the alleged atrocities or credible identification of the alleged perpetrators from among the multiple actors operating in Tigray.

The problem of verification is compounded by the prevalence of a communication blackout, lack of access to reliable sources of information and the multiplicity of actors involved in this tragic conflict. The belligerent armies include the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) and the Amhara Special Force, militia and irregular forces (*Fano*), supported by the Eritrean

Defence Forces (EDF) whose involvement is formally denied by both the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments, on one side, and the Tigray Special Force, militia and irregular forces (*Sabri*), on the other. A reported 10,000-13,000 strong armed criminals released from jail as the TPLF abandoned the cities make up another category of actors.

The war in Tigray is an internal Ethiopian affair that primarily concerns Ethiopia and the Ethiopian people. Apart from the fact that the fighting started inside occupied Eritrean territory in the Badme and Zalambessa areas, the recovery of the hitherto occupied Eritrean territories north of the colonial boundary as delimited by the treaties of 1900, 1902 and 1908 constituted a strategic imperative for Eritrea's involvement in the war. **With the liberation of its occupied territories, the restitution of its sovereignty over these territories and the formalisation of its international border with Ethiopia, Eritrea must withdraw its forces, secure its international boundary and disengage from Ethiopia's internal conflict.** The EDF's primary duty is to safeguard the security and wellbeing of the Eritrean people and defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State of Eritrea.

As such, the Eritrean People's Sovereignty (EPS) and One Nation strongly urge the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) to withdraw from Ethiopia, deploy along Eritrea's borders in self-defence, and desist from any further involvement in the internal affairs of Ethiopia. We Eritreans need to focus on the effort for change and democratic transition in our country and the political and economic development of our society. Apart from considerations of regional peace, security and stability, Eritrea has no further specific national interest in interfering in Ethiopia's internal affairs.

Equally importantly, Eritrea should avoid getting mired in Ethiopia's domestic conflict. It is wrong, meddlesome and lamentable to involve the EDF and squander Eritrea's meagre resources in a war waged as an extension of a bitter domestic power struggle between rival factions of Ethiopia's former ruling coalition. Furthermore, it is neither in its national interest nor affordable for small and impoverished Eritrea to get bogged down in a drawn out intra-Ethiopian conflict. The EDF should, instead, focus its attention on doing away with the authoritarian regime that is destroying the country and oppressing the people.

The war in Tigray has divided and polarised Eritrean diasporic opposition politics, already burdened by historical grudges, consumed by internal bickering and weakened by constant splintering. Instead of coalescing in resistance to the predatory regime and providing concerted support to the domestic struggle to crystallise change and democratic transition, Eritrean

diasporic politics has, apart from the consistent advocates of the interest of the people and the State of Eritrea, degenerated into mutually reproaching pro-TPLF, pro-Abiy or pro-Isaias factions. As such, it has rendered itself even more ineffective and irrelevant to the aspirations of the Eritrean people for a constitutional government that restores sovereignty to the people. It is high time that Eritreans adopt a non-aligned position and pursue a balanced approach that prioritises the interests of the people and the State of Eritrea.

Violent conflict in parts of Ethiopia's Tigray region continues for the fifth month. Despite Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's earlier declaration that the "Law Enforcement Operation" has been triumphantly concluded, reports indicate incidents of sporadic fighting. The protraction of the conflict, its attendant population displacement, reports of an evolving humanitarian crisis, and allegations of atrocities and violations of human rights have raised growing concern and attracted widespread international attention.

Under these circumstances, EPS and One Nation call for:

1. The withdrawal of Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) from Ethiopia to the international boundary between Eritrea and Ethiopia.
2. The demarcation of the boundary between Eritrea and Ethiopia in accordance with the colonial treaties of 1900, 1902 and 1908 with the help of the UN cartographer as a foundation for durable peace and sustainable rules-based cooperative relations between the two countries.
3. The establishment of an independent commission of inquiry to investigate allegations of atrocities, violations and abuses of human rights in Tigray and to bring the perpetrators of any such crimes and/or such false accusations to account.
4. The independent commission of inquiry to investigate allegations of atrocities, violations and abuses of human rights of Eritrean refugees in Tigray and the UNHCR to ensure the protection and safety of Eritrean refugees in accordance with the Geneva Convention.
5. The urgent delivery of emergency humanitarian relief aid to the people of Tigray in need and Eritrean refugees trapped in the conflict.
6. The appointment, with the consent of the Government of Ethiopia, of a special envoy of the UN Secretary General and the President of the AU Commission to explore the feasibility of resolving the conflict, stabilising the situation and building national consensus on the future of Ethiopia with a viable federal structure that restores the State's exclusive possession and use of armed forces.

7. The appointment, with the consent of the governments of Ethiopia and Sudan, of a special envoy of the President of the AU Commission to facilitate the resolution of the border conflict between the two countries in accordance with the 1902 Tripartite Treaty between Ethiopia, Great Britain (Sudan) and Italy (Eritrea), as per the African principle and practice, and applicable international law.