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"Voices From Tigray - Brutalities against Religious leaders, Holy Places
and Heritage in Tigray"**

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The war on Tigray is essentially the revenge of President Afewerki. It is the outworking of a grudge against the Tigrayan leadership dating back to the 1998-2000 border war and differences in orientation during the liberation struggle. It displays openly the true character of his regime, exposing the severe violations Eritreans have suffered for 30 years under a shroud of enforced secrecy.

Tigrayan civilians are being subjected to collective punishment, having been deemed guilty by association due to their shared ethnicity with TPLF leaders. Civilians and civilian structures are being attacked in a manner indicating an intentional effort to dismantle a people group, its history and its land.

As we have heard, Heritage sites and artefacts which are of significance to the three Abrahamic faiths in particular, have not been spared. The renowned 6th century Debre Damo monastery was shelled and stormed; the al Nejashi mosque, one of the oldest in Africa, was shelled and looted of manuscripts dating back to the 7th century. The Cherkos Church in Zalambesa was bombed and looted; a museum of artefacts from the pre-Christian era has been damaged and looted, and medieval manuscripts have reportedly been burnt. The premises of the Catholic Church in Adigrat diocese was used as a military command centre despite the presence of clergy and nuns, and the Adigrat minor seminary was damaged.

Clergy and worshipers have been killed in large numbers.

According to a 17 February statement from the employees of Mekelle Diocese and the administrators of 45 monasteries and churches, almost every monastery and religious school in Tigray has been bombed by drones or heavy weapons, and "a lot of clergymen, deacons, congregation members of Sunday schools, religious students, and children, especially those clergymen who were on religious service, were massacred like animals." Attacks on churches appear timed to coincide with religious festivals, seemingly to inflict maximum casualties. In one district 78 priests were reportedly killed; nuns are among the victims of a brutal campaign of mass rape as a weapon of war.

The indiscriminate bombing and destruction of ancient churches, mosques and other religious institutions, and the extensive looting of irreplaceable historical artefacts and manuscripts appear to be part of a multifaceted campaign that includes cultural cleansing. Not only does this violate

international humanitarian law; according to the ICC Statute, intentionally directing attacks against religious buildings and historic monuments can also constitute a war crime.

This wanton disregard for sites of religious and historical significance reflects the Eritrean government's treatment of religious and belief communities in its own country.

For example, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, ostensibly one of three denominations sanctioned to operate, has seen its legitimate patriarch removed uncanonically, placed under house arrest officially, and illegally replaced for the second time. Church assets and artefacts have been seized, monasteries forcibly closed, and monks and priest imprisoned, conscripted, or forced to flee.

Similarly in Ethiopia, the Orthodox patriarch, who was previously lauded for speaking out against injustice, was immediately deemed guilty by association due to being Tigrayan and officially placed under house arrest once a video emerged in which he described events in Tigray as genocide, and called for urgent international intervention.

The war on Tigray threatens regional peace and security. To prosecute the war, Ethiopia withdrew and reassigned troops who were combatting Somalia's al Shabaab terrorist insurgency, and peacekeepers who were in South Sudan. Somalia reportedly suffered significant casualties in Tigray occasioning unprecedented protests, and was thrown into further crisis by its own president's subsequent efforts to hold power indefinitely.

Tensions are at dangerous levels along Ethiopia's border with Sudan. There is ongoing friction involving Sudan and Egypt on the one hand and Ethiopia on the other arising from the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Meanwhile ethnic insurgencies elsewhere in Ethiopia and the human and economic costs of the war threaten its stability and prosperity.

The violence in Tigray is systematic and intentional. A genocide may be unfolding before the eyes of an international community that is responding far too tentatively. Eritrea and Ethiopia appear to react to each piecemeal international appeal by intensifying their destruction of infrastructure and violence against civilians.

The violence in Tigray is now on its 217th day. We must ensure "Never Again" comes to mean "Never Again for Anybody."

Since action at the Security Council is blocked by China and Russia, and the African Union is unable to proffer an African solution to this urgent African problem, an international coalition of the willing must come together to take coordinated action, including:

Imposing an arms embargo on all identified warring parties.

Mandating and equipping a peacekeeping force.

Enforcing a no-fly zone over Tigray, in view of ongoing bombings of civilian targets and the suspected use of chemical substances.

Taking forward the 2016 UN Commission of inquiry recommendations, in particular by determining Eritrea's human rights situation a threat to international peace and security, referring it to the ICC Prosecutor, and imposing targeted sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes, on persons deemed responsible for crimes against humanity or other gross violations.

Countries with human rights sanctions regimes should also impose similar sanctions on persons or entities deemed complicit in gross rights violations in Tigray, including the leaders of both Ethiopia and Eritrea, who are ultimately responsible for their soldiers' actions.

Finally, a truly independent international human rights inquiry must be mandated which can also assist in cataloguing and registering looted artefacts with Interpol in coordination with UNESCO.