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TIGRAY EXTERNAL AFFAIRS OFFICE



**BRIEFING NO. 21**

**FEBRUARY 26, 2022**

**BRINGING TIGRAY CLOSER TO THE WORLD**



## 1 THE TIGHTENING CHOKEHOLD ON TIGRAY

### 1.1. Abiy Ahmed's Shameless Revisionism

This week, Abiy Ahmed, who has an unparalleled gift for exploiting other people's suffering to burnish his own image and weaponizing it against his perceived adversaries or those who challenge his ideas, was heard expressing apparent outrage in Parliament about the suffering of the people of Tigray. Bereft of the capacity for self-reflection, Abiy excoriated members of the House of People's Representatives for their apparent failure to raise concerns about the fact that the people of Tigray are dying of hunger, lack of medications and inability to access their own savings.

Anyone that has been living in a cave or a visitor from some other planet would be forgiven for thinking that Abiy was a compassionate leader with considerable concern for the wellbeing of his people. Such a portrayal could not, of course, be farther from the truth, for Abiy Ahmed is the principal architect of Tigray's ongoing humanitarian tragedy. And no amount of peroration or rhetorical contortions can hide the ugly truth that he is responsible for the systematic destruction of Tigray, and the siege starvation of millions of Tigrayans.

What is strikingly baffling about Abiy's occasional outburst of self-righteous indignation over the suffering of the people of Tigray is that he has the ability to ease their suffering by refraining from obstructing humanitarian aid delivery. However, insofar as Abiy refers to the suffering of Tigrayans, it is not in terms of a genuine call to arms to alleviate their suffering; rather, he uses their suffering as a cudgel by which to hammer his perceived adversaries for their apparent lack of moral clarity as opposed to Abiy's superior moral compass. Put

differently, the suffering of Tigrayans has no significance for Abiy Ahmed beyond its value as a weapon against those whose ideas he finds disagreeable. Indeed, the accumulated body of evidence regarding his actions on Tigray are radically at odds with his occasional public statements of concern.

It is now a matter of public record that since November 2020, the Abiy Ahmed regime, in close collaboration with the criminal Eritrean army and an assortment of forces belonging to the expansionist Amhara elite, has been waging a genocidal campaign on Tigray. However, facing a campaign of annihilation, the people of Tigray had rallied and fought back ferociously, driving the invading forces from most parts of Tigray, including the capital city, Mekelle, at the end of June 2021. Since then, Abiy has imposed a devastating siege on Tigray, persistently denying the entry of food, fuel, and life-saving medical supplies into Tigray.

If Abiy Ahmed sincerely believes that other actors, not he, are responsible for Tigray's suffering, he should say so in public. For far too long, Abiy Ahmed has resorted to doublespeak to evade accountability for adverse developments of his own making. Given his aggressive enforcement of the blockade on Tigray and the resulting imposition of collective punishment on the people of Tigray, the international community should not fall for Abiy's rhetorical contortions and mendacities. One cannot be responsible for the slow-motion asphyxiation of Tigray and still seek to get credit for appearing to commiserate with the people of Tigray over their suffering. So long as he continues to cause the deaths of thousands of Tigrayans by starvation and lack of critical medical supplies, his public lamentation over the suffering of Tigrayans will be nothing more than the usual crocodile tears that people have come to expect from Abiy Ahmed.



## 1.2 The Persistent Weaponization of Hunger

The international community has repeatedly noted that Tigray is experiencing a humanitarian catastrophe the likes of which have not been seen in decades. To make matters worse, the Abiy regime, having engineered a colossal humanitarian crisis in collaboration with a foreign power, has refused to allow adequate international assistance into Tigray.

Consequently, the humanitarian situation is catastrophically bleak. Humanitarian agencies estimate that about 100 trucks carrying food, non-food items and fuel must enter Tigray daily to meet the needs of over 5 million people. Accordingly, from July 12 to February 24 of this year, at least 22,700 trucks should have entered Tigray. However, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), only 1339 trucks have entered Tigray, representing a measly 6 percent of the total trucks required to address the vast scale of humanitarian needs in Tigray. Put differently, on average, only 6 trucks out of the 100 expected on a daily basis have trickled into Tigray since July—a shocking display of inhumanity in the face of a devastating humanitarian calamity.

Dwindling supplies along with the severe lack of fuel across Tigray means that food partners have been forced to “suspend food dispatch and distribute reduced rations of food.” Additionally, school feeding by partners will cease this week due to cash and fuel shortage. Over 345,000 children across Tigray are targeted for school feeding; however, only 1,800 children were reached from February 8 to 14. In total, partners have assisted about 884,000 people between mid-October and February 9. To put this dismal figure in perspective, at least 887,000 people need to be assisted on average per week so as to reach the over 5 million people in dire need of emergency assistance within a five-week distribution cycle.

Taken together, the above set of facts establish the Abiy regime’s deliberate use of starvation and civilian suffering as a tool of war—a war crime under international law and, more importantly, an affront to humanity and basic decency.

## 1.3 Devastating Impact on Children and Pregnant and Lactating Women

Due to the persistent obstruction of humanitarian aid, partners have run out of food stock. Therapeutic nutrition for malnourished children and pregnant and nursing women have been depleted. Consequently, the nutrition landscape in Tigray is extremely bleak. Between February 1 and 8, 60,00 children under five were screened for malnutrition. Of those screened, more than 12,000 children (20 percent) were identified as suffering from global acute malnutrition (GAM). 1400 children (2.3 percent) were diagnosed with severe acute malnutrition (SAM), a figure far higher than the global emergency threshold of 2 percent. In addition, over 11,000 pregnant women were screened for malnutrition, of which 6000 or more than 55 percent were diagnosed with acute malnutrition, a shocking proportion certain to compound the humanitarian catastrophe in the weeks and months to come as pregnant women give birth to severely malnourished children.

The long-term picture of the nutrition landscape in Tigray is, however, increasingly more alarming than the above figures suggest. According to a report by Tigray’s Bureau of Health, 70 percent of pregnant and lactating women in Tigray are suffering from acute malnutrition. What is more, 23,000 severely malnourished children are no longer receiving treatment, exposing them to an elevated risk of death.



### 1.4 The Delivery of Medical Supplies: One Small Step Forward, Countless Steps Backwards

One of the distinguishing features of the inhumane blockade on Tigray is the Abiy regime’s persistent denial of medical supplies into Tigray. Over the past few weeks, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have transported limited medical supplies to Mekelle via United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) flights. On February 11, the WHO airlifted 10 metric tons (MT) of medical supplies into Mekelle, for the first time since July 2021, as part of a planned 33.5 MT to be shipped to Tigray. However, while this is a welcome development, the quantity brought in is so vanishingly small that it won’t make a dent in Tigray’s catastrophic medical emergency. As the UN notes, the supplies “are very limited and are far from meeting the health and nutrition requirements in the region.” Compounding this supply crisis is the fact that, at present, no more than 5 tons of supplies can be transported via UNHAS flights due to limited cargo capacity.

What is more, partners are not able to dispatch and distribute the limited medical supplies available due to a severe shortage of fuel. According to OCHA, since July, no fuel tankers for aid agencies, except for 2 WFP tankers, have been allowed into Tigray, placing severe constraints on humanitarian operations. The lack of fuel in Tigray is now wreaking havoc on humanitarian operations, especially in the North-Western Zone, where over 800,000 displaced people are living—44 percent of the total number of displaced people across Tigray.

Due to overcrowding in camps for displaced people in the North-Western Zone, scabies and malaria cases have significantly increased, with 1,100 scabies cases registered in 22 sites, and more than 1,800 malaria cases recorded in the Zone since the beginning of the year. Given the severe shortage of medical supplies, health partners have been forced

to treat scabies with expired medications. According to OCHA, “lack of supplies, medications and fuel are restricting health partners from mitigating the spread of the disease.”

### 1.5 What Can/Should the International Community Do?

One of the major obstacles to addressing the humanitarian crisis in Tigray is the international community’s persistent belief that the Abiy regime can be prevailed on to facilitate humanitarian aid delivery into Tigray. However, such an optimistic perspective is at odds with the reality of the humanitarian crisis in Tigray being the result of Abiy’s well-considered policy of starving the people of Tigray into submission. Indeed, what makes Tigray’s humanitarian crisis virtually unprecedented is that it is not merely incidental to the conflict. Rather, it is the result of a series of actions taken by Abiy and his domestic and foreign partners: the systematic decimation of Tigray’s economy, the destruction of citizens’ livelihoods, and the plundering of private and public wealth across Tigray. For this reason, repeated exhortations for Abiy to allow humanitarian aid into Tigray or perennial statements of concern about the unfolding calamity cannot dissuade the Abiy regime from its inhumane path, for it is driven by a strategic choice the regime has made. Any action that falls short of altering the regime’s strategic calculus is going to be futile vis-à-vis addressing Tigray’s humanitarian crisis.

It is, therefore, high time the international community reoriented its thinking away from the naïve belief that the Abiy regime can play a constructive role to the more realistic option of deploying a robust package of punitive actions or the credible threat of such actions to compel the regime to alter course, thereby alleviating the suffering of the people of Tigray.



The Government of Tigray, thus, calls on the UN Security Council to enforce Resolution 2417 (2018), in which the Council strongly condemned the weaponization of starvation and the unlawful denial of humanitarian access to civilian populations. The unanimous adoption of the resolution had signaled the Council's seriousness in severing the link between armed conflicts and conflict-induced starvation and food insecurity. Now, the Council's deafening silence in the face of the brazen weaponization of hunger by the Abiy regime risks irreparably undermining its credibility. The Council should follow through on its threat to levy sanctions on individuals or entities responsible for the obstruction of humanitarian assistance to civilians in the context of armed conflict by implementing such sanctions against the Abiy regime to force it to comply with its obligations under international law.

Similarly, in 2019, 123 State Parties to the International Criminal Court (ICC) approved a statutory amendment incorporating the crime of using hunger as a tool of war into its jurisdiction. That the Security Council had already adopted a unanimous resolution condemning the weaponization of hunger and the ICC followed that up with this statutory amendment criminalizing the use of hunger and civilian suffering as a tool of war suggest a significant normative shift consistent with the prevalence of civilian deprivation across conflicts in ways that are directly traceable to the deliberate choices made by belligerents.

It is high time the international community issued a formal declaration about the presence of widespread famine in Tigray and follow such a declaration with robust actions to compel Abiy Ahmed to desist from unleashing a silent killer on the people of Tigray and allow unrestricted humanitarian access to the region. The international community must make it clear that starving one's citizens into submission is not an acceptable state conduct in this day and age.

## 2 OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

### 2.1 President Debretsion Writes to WFP Executive Director

On February 14, 2022, Tigray President Debretsion Gebremichael wrote to the Executive Director of the World Food Program (WFP), David Beasley, on the suspension of humanitarian aid delivery into Tigray. In his letter, President Debretsion explained to the WFP chief that the UN's attribution of the suspension of aid delivery into Tigray since mid-December to "ongoing fighting" in and around Abala was mistaken. To begin with, there has been no active fighting in the area, as alleged by the UN. Insofar as there was fighting, it was one in which Tigray forces were compelled to take defensive measures against Afar forces and Eritrean mercenaries that had been launching cross-border attacks inside Tigray. Since this operation lasted mere days, the suspension of aid delivery appears to have been the climax of Abiy's persistent obstruction of humanitarian aid delivery into Tigray. Furthermore, given the fact that only a measly 6 percent of the required aid had already arrived in Tigray prior to the suspension of aid delivery in mid-December, the argument that fighting in Afar region was responsible for the suspension of humanitarian aid delivery is a far-fetched one.

The President noted that "unless promptly corrected, the latest misattribution of culpability for the persistent obstruction of humanitarian operations in Tigray will allow the Abiy regime to continue siege-starving the people of Tigray while disavowing responsibility for it. Only this time, the regime's baseless disavowal would have international imprimatur."

Postscript: The Government of Tigray has learned that the UN, apparently with the cooperation of the



Abiy regime and Afar authorities, has decided to resume humanitarian aid delivery into Tigray. The first batch of humanitarian aid trucks are expected to hit the road any time soon. While the expected aid is vanishingly small in relation to what is required to meet the large scale of humanitarian needs in Tigray, the Government of Tigray welcomes this development as the beginning of what we hope to be unobstructed operations in the days and weeks ahead.

The Government Tigray reiterates its readiness to extend a cooperative hand as the international community works hard to address the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe in Tigray.



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