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Tigray External Affairs Office

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## Statement on alleged warehouse looting in Kombolcha

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Over the past two days, there have been some media reports, citing a brief statement by the World Food Program in Ethiopia (WFP Ethiopia), that Tigray forces have looted food stock that had been stored in the city of Kombolcha. While this baseless claim has received undeserved coverage, the truth of the matter is that at no time during their stay in Kombolcha did Tigrayan forces ever loot aid meant for those in desperate need of emergency assistance. Contrary to the falsehoods being propagated by the Abiy regime, our forces did not loot any food aid; in fact, they protected it, even as their families and compatriots were subject to starvation. This has been communicated to relevant UN agencies and the United States Agency for International Development/Catholic Relief Services (USAID/CRS). As always, the criminal Abiy regime continues to throw one lie after another to whitewash its own complicity in starving millions of Ethiopians.

Given the fact that our forces had controlled the city for about a month, it defies logic that they would protect aid warehouses for that long only to turn around and raid it upon their withdrawal. While the criminal Abiy regime has every incentive to traffic in half-truths, distortions, and outright falsehoods, it is imperative that humanitarian partners convey accurate information so as to preserve their own credibility as well as facilitate smooth humanitarian operations not tainted by the politics of the moment. Given the misleading statements and outright falsehoods circulating with regards to this matter, we feel compelled to set the record straight by providing some pertinent facts.

In the city of Kombolcha, there were 72,000 Metric Tons of food and food-related items when it came under the control of our forces, that is, 50,000 MT of CRS/USAID and 22,000 MT of WFP/UN. On account of CRS's limited operational capacity in the area, it had been decided that the WFP would take the lead in coordinating humanitarian operations. All of the 22,000 MT of food stock belonging to the WFP was allocated to Tigray. Out of the 50,000 MT of food stock belonging to the CRS, 17,400 MT was allocated to Tigray and 36,400 MT was allocated to Amhara region. The allocation decision was made entirely by the humanitarian agencies without any input from our forces or the Government of Tigray writ large, even though the number of people in need of emergency humanitarian aid is far greater in Tigray and that the overall humanitarian landscape is worse than elsewhere.

While our forces were in control of the city, the WFP began distributing food aid to local communities in the Amhara region; we actively supported this decision by providing fuel for 15 WFP trucks to depart Mekelle to Kombolcha, and transport aid from Kombolcha to Dessie. Despite the humanitarian need being greater in Tigray and situation much worse, the WFP was allowed to operate based on its own standard procedures. In subsequent days, the WFP sent a convoy to Tigray consisting of only 7 trucks. Later the WFP sent 25 trucks from Mekelle to Kombolcha to bring food aid to Tigray. While 10 of them were able to load and return to Mekelle only once, 15 trucks did not bring aid as our forces had already begun to withdraw from the area.

As the food allocated to Tigray is still in Kombolcha, it is imperative that the concerned humanitarian agencies correct the record and provide quick assistance to the millions of people in dire need of humanitarian assistance in Tigray. The estimated IPC 5 cases in Tigray exceeded 1 million few months ago and it is easy to imagine how the situation might have gotten worse in the days and weeks ahead.

The Government of Tigray has earlier issued a statement outlining the urgency of food distribution in Kombolcha and the delay in acting especially by some elements within WFP Ethiopia. In fact, the Government of Tigray and high-level UN officials had reached an understanding on the necessity of distributing food aid stored in the city of Kombolcha to those in desperate need of aid, including local communities in which our forces were operating as well as the people of Tigray. To prevent the looting of aid warehouses, the Government of Tigray had agreed to provide around the-clock security. Even so, UN aid agencies, in particular the WFP, had begun to drag their feet and failed to live up to their end of our mutual understanding. This foot-dragging was all the more remarkable in light of the Government of Tigray's unreserved efforts to facilitate timely and smooth humanitarian operations. Furthermore, it had warned that in a press statement dated 19 Nov 2021, continuing failure to provide aid to the needy would be a recipe for inviting locals to raid aid warehouses. Unfortunately, this prescient warning went unheeded. The result of aid agencies failing to adequately live up to their humanitarian ideals was predictable: once our forces began to withdraw from the city, raiding aid warehouses became a fair game for locals whose government has failed them in their hour of need.

The allegations of looting by our forces made by some officials within WFP Ethiopia and amplified by the government of Ethiopia are, therefore, baseless. While the criminal regime has made a habit of smearing our forces and, therefore, its latest noise is par for the course, we expect better of WFP Ethiopia, whose overriding objective is the provision of much-needed aid to those in desperate need. Therefore, it is imperative that WFP Ethiopia set the record straight with regards to the erroneous reports surrounding the role of our forces in the looting of aid warehouses. Doing so will only reaffirm WFP Ethiopia's commitment to living up to its ideals with impartiality.

