



An open letter

Lalibela and the Protection of Religious /UNESCO Sites

The Security and Justice for Tigrayans (SJT), an international advocacy group for the people of Tigray, concluded that Mr. Abiy's sole plan is to throw Ethiopia into the abyss of a never-ending civil war and balkanization. He is surrounded by extremist monarchist, fascistic, chauvinistic, and ill-fated individuals and he is leading the country into fragmentation unless some miracles and dramatic changes happen in the eleventh hour.

For over 9 months now, the Federal Government of Ethiopia and the regional government of Tigray (along with the Tigray Defense Force aka TDF) have been at war. For most of this time, the Ethiopian government in coalition with the foreign government of Eritrea, and the Amhara state government have been causing havoc in Tigray. In addition to the horrifying massacre (more than 150,000 killed), rape (more than 30,000 reported cases) and ethnic cleansing (more than 1.5 million people forcefully uprooted from their land), all schools, hospitals, farms, roads and bridges, water supply and industries and heritage sites in Tigray have been looted and destroyed.

Last month, the Abiy Ahmed government and Eritrean armies were soundly defeated by the Tigray defense forces (TDF) and the legal government of Tigray returned to Mekelle, the capital city. Subsequently, the Ethiopian army was soundly defeated and fled south, and the war spilled over to the Amhara state. Humiliated by his defeat, Mr. Abiy Ahmed has continued his genocidal war on the people of Tigray by putting the entire population under complete siege. Frustrated by the defeat at the battle fields, Abiy Ahmed and the Amhara irredentist, expansionist, and extremist elites completely blocked access to humanitarian supplies of food, water, and medicine to Tigray. The government also cut off electricity, communications, transportation, and banking. Transfer payments and regional budget allocation to Tigray has been stopped for the last two years effectively declaring that Tigray is not a member of the national state. The Abiy Ahmed government has refused the international community's repeated requests for unfettered access to humanitarian supplies to save the lives of more than 5.2 million people from man-made starvation and extermination. It is in this context that TDF decided to continue fighting Abiy Ahmed's army and the Amhara special forces, militia and Fano and other militia forcefully recruited from other regions to break the total blockade and prevent the people of Tigray from genocide.

TDF removed Abiy's army from Lalibela, home of the Lalibela churches, a UNESCO site and helped the people to set up their local administration. TDF is a well disciplined and honorable army that values and respects historical sites and civilian lives. Currently the town of Lalibela is protected by Tigray Defense Forces one of the most disciplined and conscious army in the world in our view. The TDF is led by highly skilled and disciplined generals. Judaism, Christianity and Islam were nurtured and blossomed in Tigray before spreading to the rest of Ethiopia. The generals and the entire TDF fighters know this and they are aware they have the obligation to protect the cultural and historic sites. It is therefore essential that the world see the TDF advance



to the Amhara State with this lens. TDF has already started working with the residents of Lalibela and the other towns to protect historic and cultural sites and infrastructures from looting and destruction.

In its latest press release, the Tigray Government issued a statement advising all stakeholders that these sites are in good hands.

It stated:

“Damages done to the much-revered UNESCO inscribed St. Mary of Zion Cathedral in Axum, the AlNejashi mosque, and the sixth-century cliff-top Debre Damo monastery are only a few examples of the wickedness and cruelty of the Abiy led invasion. The massacre perpetrated by the invaders at Mariam Dengelat church and the killing of thousands of priests and deacons throughout Tigray is another example of the systemic and unprecedented atrocities. Even skeletal remains of martyrs now curated at the Tigrayan Martyrs' Monument and Museum in Mekelle, where there was no fighting, have been desecrated during the eight months occupation of the city by Ethiopian forces. Therefore, the record shows that the Ethiopian forces will spare no effort to damage anything that has value for Tigray and symbolizes its rich heritage, culture, and identity. The TDF is now advancing to strategic positions to ensure that the blockade imposed on the people of Tigray has been removed and that the genociders do not get a second chance to perpetuate inhumane atrocities further. To this end, the TDF has controlled areas located in the Amhara and Afar regions. One such location is the town of Lalibela, where the UNESCO inscribed 12th-century rock-hewn churches are located. Consistent with their behavior, Abiy's government and its allies are now spreading fake news regarding the safety of these sites.”

Lalibela is a world heritage site, more importantly, it is heritage of the people of Tigray as well as the rest of Ethiopians. There is no reason to believe TDF will destroy its own heritage. The Tigray government, TDF leaders and fighters and the residents of Lalibela are committed and working together to protect the heritage sites, infrastructures and properties from vandalism, looting and destruction. The Ethiopian government true to its character of lies and news fabrication is spewing false alarm about the potential damage to the historic Lalibela church. These alarms are false and baseless, Lalibela is in good hands.

To those who are truly concerned about the safety of Lalibela world heritage site, we urge you to be vigilant for possible sabotage of the deceitful Abiy Ahmed desperate regime on these and other important sites in Ethiopia, particularly the Amhara region. We also would like to urge you to put maximum pressure on Abiy Ahmed government and the Amhara state government extremists to stop the siege of Tigray, resume life sustaining services and resolve the war on Tigray legally and constitutionally.

The world must demand that:

All occupying Amhara militia and Eritrean forces must withdraw and status quo ante must be restored



Permanent humanitarian access should be open to Tigray without any delay and telecommunication, banking, transportation be immediately re-activated.

All humanitarian and UN agencies should be allowed unfettered access to Tigray

SJT, August 10, 2021