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The Government of the National State of Tigray  
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Office of the President

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Press Release by the Government of the National State of Tigray

Tigray Defense Forces are committed to protecting civilians, heritage sites, and civilian infrastructures.

The Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) takes all necessary precautions to protect civilians and infrastructure, including heritage sites and worshipping places. The world heritage site of Lalibela is currently safe after TDF took control of the town of Lalibela.

The TDF military advances aim to end the blockade on Tigray and protect civilians from the renewed atrocious attacks. In looking at the anxiety the capture of Lalibela may have generated, it is crucial to examine the track record of the Ethiopian/Eritrean/Amhara forces and the TDF separately in the way each party behaved in areas they captured.

Since the start of the war on Tigray on November 4, 2020, the mission to wipe out Tigrayans and destroying Tigray has been systemically perpetrated by the combined Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), Eritrean defense forces (EDF), and Amhara special forces and militia. Mass displacement, weaponized starvation, and sexual violence, ethnic cleansing, destruction of public and private properties have been documented to degrees rarely, if ever, seen anywhere in the world.

Moreover, the systematic destruction in Tigray of heritage sites and places of worship, the looting of cultural and religious artifacts, antiquities, and manuscripts is ample evidence that these destructive forces intend to eradicate the very essence of being Tigrayan, its millennia-old fabrics and values. Their campaign goes beyond the act of callousness and cruelty. It is a deliberate, systematic, and well-planned project of destruction of a people and their inner self. The following are some prominent examples showcasing how the invaders intentionally targeted iconic heritage sites and worshipping places that symbolize the Tigray people's centuries-old core values, culture, and identity.

Damages done to the much-revered UNESCO inscribed St. Mary of Zion Cathedral in Axum, the Al-Nejashi 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.

The Government of the National State of Tigray assures the international community and all Ethiopians, in the strongest terms, that the churches of Lalibela are currently secure and that the TDF, working with local administrators, will do everything in their capacity to protect Lalibela and all other heritage sites located in areas they control. The government further assures all that the TDF will collaborate with, but not dismantle, existing local civilian administration structures located out of Tigray.

Moreover, the Tigray government underscores that the TDF includes people with decades of experience in the Ethiopian army and government. As such, the TDF is well versed and able to act according to the international rules of engagement and will respect the Geneva Convention as shown by their treatment of thousands of prisoners of war and on civilians and public/private infrastructures TDF controlled. The same applies to the treatment of heritage sites.

The Government of the National State of Tigray also denounces the deliberate dissemination of fake accusations of TDF damaging heritages in Lalibela. The record shows that the Ethiopian and their allied forces are hell bent on fabricating fake news to compensate for their heavy military defeats at the hands of the TDF. The world must know Abiy Ahmed and his appointees in the Amhara regional state would do anything to blame TDF to stay in power.

We call upon the international community, the Amhara people, and all Ethiopians to pressure these destructive forces so that indiscriminate aerial bombardment and artillery shelling, similar to those deployed on churches and mosques in Tigray, are avoided in Lalibela and environs.

Similarly, we call upon the Amhara people living in the adjacent territories controlled by TDF to feel safe, administer themselves, operate their normal daily activities, and at the same time to categorically and unanimously denounce the mobilization and deployment of ill-trained Amhara civilians to the war fronts and be used as cannon fodder to keep Abiy and the Amhara extremist leaders in power.

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“ዝተመሓየሸ መንብር፣ ዝለዓለ ብርኪ ትምህርትን ቲክኖሎጂን ዝወነነ ሕብረተሰብ፣ እብ ተሳትፎ ህዝቢ ዝተመሰረተ ዲሞክራሲ፣ ሰላምን ሰናይ ምምሕዳርን ዝነገሰላ፣ ምዕቡልን ተወዳዳሪይን ዝኾነ ግለሽላይ እቶት ዘለዎን ሃገራት ዘረገገጹ ብርኪ ዕብዮት ኢኮኖሚ ዝበልሉት ትግራይ ምርእይ።”