



March 3, 2021

To: U.N. Security Council Permanent Members:

Re: The U.N. Security Council meeting-Humanitarian situation in Ethiopia's Tigray region

Bayto Yiakl USA, a grassroots organization representing Eritrean-Americans from over 40 cities in the United States, are advocating for democracy, human rights, and rule of law in our native country, Eritrea. As a grassroots mass movement, Bayto Yiakl USA has no affiliation to any political opposition, group, or party. Its main goal is to bring peace, justice, democracy, and rule of law to Eritrea. Since its establishment in 2019, worldwide, our movement has inspired tens of thousands of Eritreans and succeeded in both breaking the pervasive silence and overcoming the fear of criticizing the existing dictatorial regime in Eritrea.

It is now 4 months since the outbreak of the conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region. This entirely avoidable war continues to cause the death, maiming and suffering of thousands, possibly tens of thousands, of civilians, many of them women and children. The enormous physical and psychological devastation and humiliation they are enduring, in addition to the extensive destruction and looting of public and private property as well as the region's priceless historical heritage, is incomprehensible.

It is time to stop this murderous conflict without delay. It is the responsibility of the Security Council to act without further delay. Beyond the continuing massive death and destruction inside Ethiopia, the threat to the stability of the entire Horn region is growing by the day. The Security Council must step in and must step in now.

The media and communication blackout imposed by Ethiopia has, to a large extent, achieved its intended purpose, namely keeping reports of massacres, rapes and other outrages as well as the horrific scenes of destruction and looting at a massive scale away from the eyes and ears of the rest of the country and the world. It is also intended to cover up the identity of those prosecuting the war and carrying out the atrocities, in particular the participation, and indeed the central role, of the tens of thousands of troops deployed by President Isaias Afewerki of Eritrea, most of them against their will.

But, despite frantic efforts to cover up the horrors being inflicted upon a whole population and to obscure the identity of the perpetrators, the bloody truth of this war is slowly coming to light. Reports by human rights organizations and the few international media representatives who have gained limited access to parts of Tigray paint a gruesome picture of deliberate and wide-spread acts that could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity being committed, particularly by Mr. Isaias' forces.

The presence and direct involvement of the Eritrean army in the war and its role in a brutal and organized campaign targeting civilians is abundantly clear. And yet officially, both the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments deny Eritrean involvement in the war. Prime Minister Abiy unequivocally said as much when asked by Secretary-General Guterres. At the same time, Ethiopian military and civilian officials admit not only that Eritrea is involved, but also controls large parts of Tigray. They even go to the extent of describing the crimes they are committing, while all the while insisting, incredibly, that the Eritreans were never invited by the Ethiopian government. If Eritrea is waging war and committing crimes inside Ethiopia uninvited then we are looking at a case of aggression, pure and simple. The Security Council should, therefore, declare Eritrea an aggressor. It should act without delay to stop the slaughter of more civilians, to ensure the delivery of urgently needed humanitarian assistance and prevent a wider conflagration in the Horn.

To us Eritreans, it was clear from the outset that this is a war largely planned, instigated and being carried out by President Isaias. Since Eritrea's devastating defeat in its 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia, President Isaias, who bears primary responsibility for dragging his country into that conflict in the first place, had been biding his time to carry out his revenge

against the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), the dominant party in the coalition that was in power in Ethiopia from 1991 to 2018. In the past two decades, he has been laser-focused on two things: 1) settling scores with the TPLF, and 2) tightening his oppressive vice against his own people and ensuring their complete submission and docility in order to pursue the first objective. The larger objective remained achieving his long-held dream of becoming the uncontested regional strongman. He pursued this two-pronged agenda with single-minded stubbornness, cunning manipulation and utter ruthlessness. The rise of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in Ethiopia and the so-called peace agreement they signed in 2018 provided the long-awaited and golden opportunity to take his plan to its logical end.

This is the reason why Eritrea has been on a war footing for over two decades and why generations of Eritreans have been under indefinite military service. Eritrea, a proud country of many gallant heroes, a rich history, and home to honest, hard-working and peaceful people, has been turned into a land of misery, of countless prisons, where thousands languish for decades or perish without a trace, a country with no constitution, no elections, and not even the pretense of rule of law. The best hope for its young people today is to flee the country by any means possible. In the process, they often perish in the Sahara Desert, during perilous journeys on flimsy boats over the Mediterranean Sea, or while crossing the border into Ethiopia. And now many of its sons and daughters are being forced to fight this ugly war; they are being slaughtered and made to commit heinous crimes that we, as Eritreans, find utterly impossible to fathom.

In the course of the current conflict in Tigray, Eritrean troops have attacked and destroyed refugee camps hosting tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees, forcibly taking thousands of them back to Eritrea, killing and imprisoning others. UNHCR has stated that some twenty thousand of the ninety-six thousand refugees remain unaccounted for. These actions and the Ethiopian government's apparent collaboration or failure to protect the refugees represent serious violations of international law.

The Eritrean government, which essentially means Mr. Afewerki and a dozen or so close confidants, has no regard for the rule of law, for its international obligations as a member of the United Nations, or for African institutions like the African Union and regional arrangements like IGAD. It has flouted international law and it routinely and contemptuously dismisses international opinion and calls for it to behave as a responsible member of the community of nations. It should, therefore, not be expected to behave differently this time around. It will not respond to the growing and reasonable calls for it to end its involvement in the war in Tigray and its dangerous behavior in the region. The only language it responds to is coercive action by the international community.

It is, therefore, with pained hearts but complete clarity of mind about the realities of the situation, that we respectfully ask the Security Council to act immediately by taking the following measures:

- 1) Demand the immediate, unconditional, complete and verifiable withdrawal of Eritrean forces from Ethiopia and that Eritrea desist from any act or behavior of involving itself in this conflict or other internal matters of its neighbors
- 2) Authorize the deployment of a UN force to verify adherence to the above (acting under Chapter 7 of the Charter)
- 3) Demand unfettered access to all parts of Tigray for UN and other international humanitarian and human rights organizations for the delivery of emergency humanitarian assistance and the protection of civilians, including Eritrean refugees in Tigray and other parts of Ethiopia
- 4) Mandate an independent investigation into the prosecution of the war in Tigray, the allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity, with the explicit intent to refer those found responsible for atrocities to the International Criminal Court
- 5) Since Ethiopia has stated it did not invite Eritrea into its territory, declare Eritrea an aggressor and take the appropriate action against the Eritrean government
- 6) Mandate a process of political dialogue to resolve the difficult challenges Ethiopia is facing and mediation efforts to resolve the regional dimensions of the conflict

The situation is very likely to get worse, not better. The latest reports indicate an escalation of fighting. We are going to witness further large-scale civilian casualties and possibly worse human rights violations are inevitably going to continue. Famine will become unavoidable. This war can only be brought to an end by the decisive action of the United Nations, and specifically the Security Council. This is now absolutely clear. Do not let history judge all of us, once again.

Thank you,
Bayto Yiakl USA