Web-Site : http://scholars4tigrai.org
Email : gstsp@tigrai-scholars.org
Twitter: https://twitter.com/GlobalGsts
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/groups/wefritsan

Official Correspondence GSTS-O.C-2021-056
The Global Society of Tigray Scholars
and Professionals (GSTS)[i]

For Immediate Release

Ethiopia's airstrike at Togoga market in Tigray: Old habits die hard

On the 22nd of June, an airstrike by the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) on the town of Togoga, 30 km northwest of Tigray's capital, Mekelle left more than 80 people dead and 180 injured[1]. The airstrike appears to be well-planned to cause maximum damage and hence targeted a busy market at the peak of trading hours. In its characteristic way, the Ethiopian army spokesman, while admitting to bombing the market, denied the targets were civilians, insisting that the injured and killed were fighters from the Tigray Defense Forces. However, medical doctors confirmed that the targets were civilians including that, among the victims, were children as young as 1 year old and many mothers who were conducting the usual market activities – making the attempt to characterize the victims as combatants false and futile.

We are aware that this has triggered strong condemnations and denouncements by the international community, including the U.S government and the European Union. However, the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments have adamantly continued their atrocities on civilians, giving deaf ear to all these calls. The past eight months have made it abundantly clear that the two governments do not respond to admonishments, and it is high time the international community took direct action. In particular, the continuous airstrikes targeting civilians call for the urgent establishment of a "no-fly zone" in the whole Tigray to prevent further attacks on civilians. The unabated airstrikes and use of internationally prohibited incendiary and chemical weapons on civilians over the last 8 months have caused large number of civilian causalities and sufferings.

The 1949 Geneva Conventions set out the specific protection that civilians are entitled to in armed conflict. International Humanitarian Law stipulates that all parties to a conflict must distinguish at all times between combatants and civilians and must direct attacks only against combatants and other military targets. As all those killed and injured in the Togoga airstrike represent civilians (including children and mothers), these airstrikes are in clear breach of International law. Beyond condemnations, real action needs to happen to effect real change in the behavior and actions of the Ethiopian government and its allies.

The bombing of the Togoga market happened 33 years to the date since the Ethiopian Dergue regime bombed the Hawzien Market, killing 2,500 civilians. The Hawzien massacre has remained etched in the collective memory of Tigrayans as a reminder that brutal governments in the past have used mass bombings against innocent civilians as part of their war strategy. The Ethiopian government's bombing of Togoga on this particular day could not have been a mere coincidence. This inhumane act is intended to scratch the wounds from a painful past and carry the cynical message that history is being repeated in Tigray right before our eyes. It is also a reminder that the Ethiopian government is in no mood and under no real threat to refrain from targeting civilians as its war strategy.

The brutality of the act did not stop at the airstrike of a crowded market. The cruelty and contempt for Tigrayan lives was demonstrated as reports were coming out that government soldiers blocked

[1] Scores killed in Ethiopian airstrike on Tigray market | Ethiopia | The Guardian

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transport taking the injured from reaching medical centers in Mekelle and prevented Red Cross ambulances from reaching Togoga, causing most of the critically wounded victims to die. This was aimed to rub salt in the wound, by adding to the suffering and humiliation of a people who are already going through considerable stress and facing daily anxieties. The past 8 months are taking their toll on the wellbeing of people in Tigray as all imaginable crimes continue to be committed against them: sexual violence, ethnic cleansing, summary killings and starvation. The airstrike at Togoga and its aftermath is a continuation of the long list of deliberate attacks to subdue and subjugate, and ultimately force the people of Tigray to accept the dictatorial order from the center in Ethiopia.

Grave violations of International Humanitarian Laws are being committed across Tigray. In the coming days and weeks, these violations are expected to escalate as the war reaches new heights. Recent interview by the Ethiopian Prime Minister insinuates further atrocities on civilians if the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments are left unchecked. From its track-record so far in this war, the Ethiopian government will show no restraint or remorse to the inhumane deeds the ENDF has been committing. While strong condemnations of these atrocities are welcome and appreciated, they are futile without bold and tangible actions to stop them. The collective duty and conscience of the entire world community (and especially those in positions of power to act) demands immediate action. Anything less would be, yet again, an indefensible failure of our collective humanity.

We therefore reiterate and demand the international community for urgent action to establish a "no-fly zone" over Tigray to protect civilians from unrestrained aerial attacks. The time for action has come to coerce the Ethiopian and Eritrean forces live up to their international obligations that the right of civilians to protection is upheld as sacrosanct.

Sincerely,
The Global Society of Tigray Scholars
and Professionals (GSTS)
26th June 2021

[i] GSTS is a 501(C), and 33/2011 legally registered non-partisan, not-for-profit, and autonomous Global Knowledge Network of over 3,000 Tigray Scholars and Professionals aimed at creating Knowledge-based economy and society in Tigray, and beyond. It stands for academia, multidisciplinary and cross sectoral research and applied policy development, human capital development, fostering and advancing science, technology, and innovation, technology and knowledge transfer, youth and gender development, migration and displacement, and other educational and development related endeavors. It also works in educational advocacy and collaborates with various stakeholders towards promoting peace, good governance, human rights, and humanitarian activities.