

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS

30 March 2021

Senator the Hon. Marise Payne
Minister for Foreign Affairs
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Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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Dear Minister Payne

**RE: CIVILIAN MASSACRE AND INDISCRIMINATE SHELLING IN ETHIOPIAN CITY OF AXUM
BY ERITREAN ARMED FORCES**

The human rights violations perpetrated by Eritrean armed forces in the city of Axum, Ethiopia, against its civilian population must be scrutinised by the international community. I write to ask you that the Australian government **support such scrutiny** and encourage Ethiopian and Eritrean authorities to be **held accountable for their obligations** under humanitarian and human rights law.

After entering Axum late November 2020, Eritrean and Ethiopian forces have been responsible for widespread looting, deadly indiscriminate shelling of the city, and wanton killing of its civilian population, in a series of actions prohibited under international humanitarian law. Between 28 and 29 November 2020, Eritrean troops deliberately shot civilians in the street and carried out systematic house-to-house searches to perform extra-judicial executions of Tigrayan men and boys. This massacre carried out by Eritrean troops may constitute crimes against humanity, in addition to previous actions that may amount to war crimes.

Amnesty International has since conducted interviews with 41 witnesses and survivors of the massacre, both online and in-person, in addition to 20 others with knowledge relevant to the situation. These accounts named over 200 people killed on 28 and 29 November, while we estimate hundreds of deaths resulting from this event. Our Crisis Evidence Lab has also used remote sensing and digital verification techniques to corroborate some of the events described in these testimonies. **The evidence from this research forms a new report that I have enclosed for your information: *The Massacre in Axum.***

I urge you to **consult the Ethiopian Ambassador** to Australia on this issue, encouraging the Ethiopian government to:

- grant complete and unfettered access to records and information to UN investigators, as well as humanitarian, human rights, and media organisations,
- honour its promise of granting humanitarian access to Tigray, and,

- stop the further commission of human rights and humanitarian law violations, including both indiscriminate shelling or aerial bombardment, and deliberate attacks on civilians.

I also urge you to work with the international community to support a UN-led investigation of the events in Axum between 19 and 29 November, as well as the totality of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the context of the conflict in Tigray since 4 November 2020.

In the five months since this conflict has broken out between forces loyal to the TPLF and those loyal to the national government troops, the Tigray region has been subjected to an interminable period of violence and looting.

The announcement from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the intention to launch a joint investigation with the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission into alleged war crimes in the Tigray region is a welcome step towards a comprehensive, internationally-coordinated response to these reports.

We remain convinced however that the UN Human Rights Council must take urgent action to hold a special session and launch a full-blown investigation into the situation – to ensure robust monitoring and regular reporting to the international community; and to collect and preserve evidence in a manner that would be appropriate for future use in criminal investigations and prosecutions.

An independent investigative and accountability mechanism – along the lines that we have seen in regards to Burundi, South Sudan, Myanmar and Venezuela – is critical given the gravity of crimes committed, the complexity of the situation, and the involvement of a range of actors. Such a mechanism should be considered to be complementary to any other efforts towards accountability and the prevention of further violations and grave crimes

This attention must continue in light of the Ethiopian and Eritrean authorities' equivocation and contradictory statements over the credibility of the allegations, and even the presence of Eritrean forces in the region.

For further information, or to discuss and organise a meeting, please contact Joel MacKay at joel.mackay@amnesty.org.au or 0424 242 112.

Yours sincerely,



Sam Klintworth
National Director
Amnesty International Australia