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May 18, 2023

H.E. Dr. Gedion Timothewos Hessebon
Minister of Justice, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
Jomo Kenyatta St.
P.O. Box 1370
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia



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Sent via email to Dr. Gedion Timothewos, [REDACTED]

RE: Human Rights Watch preliminary findings regarding alleged ethnic cleansing in Western Tigray

Your Excellency,

We are writing to share with you the preliminary findings of our research on human rights violations in the Western Tigray administrative zone and to request your response to several questions.

Since the outbreak of conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region in November 2020, Human Rights Watch has shared key findings of our research and sought information from relevant government ministries, including your office. On February 25, 2022, we shared the findings our joint [report](#) with Amnesty International on the ethnic cleansing campaign against Tigrayans in Western Tigray carried out by interim Amhara regional special forces, formal and informal militias, including groups known as "Fano," and local authorities in the area. On March 22, 2022, we sent a follow-up letter that provided a summary of the prima facie evidence we obtained implicating the following individuals in crimes in Western Tigray Zone: Col. Demeke Zewdu, Commander Dejene Maru, and Belay Ayalew.

Between September 2022 and April 2023, Human Rights Watch interviewed 35 people, including witnesses and victims of abuses and aid agency staff, about the most recent wave of atrocities in Western Tigray Zone, including abuses since November 2022.

Our research found that Amhara security forces, militias, and interim authorities summarily killed, tortured, arbitrarily arrested, and forcibly expelled Tigrayans from Western Tigray Zone in an ongoing ethnic cleansing campaign.

Arrests of Tigrayans escalated in late August 2022. Tigrayans held on the basis of their identity in formal and informal detention sites in the Zone, particularly in the towns of Humera, Adebai, and Rawyan, described

deaths in detention as a result of torture and the lack of food or medical care, as well as extrajudicial executions.

In early November 2022, interim authorities in the Zone, including Belay, expelled Tigrayan detainees from detention sites towards central Tigray—a week after the cessation of hostilities agreement was signed by the Ethiopian federal government and Tigrayan authorities in Pretoria, South Africa. In January 2023, interim authorities and Amhara security forces forcibly expelled Tigrayan residents and detainees held in the “Badu Sidiste,” also referred to as the old Bet Hintset prison, as well as Setit and Geter police stations in Humera town.

Several witnesses said that Belay played an oversight role over the guards at detention sites, which included Fano and Amhara regional special forces, in addition to carrying out intelligence gathering and interrogation work in detention sites. Former detainees described Belay, in addition to a security official known as “Kassahun,” as being directly involved in the interrogation and torture of Tigrayans and in overseeing the expulsion of Tigrayans from the Zone in November 2022 and January 2023.

Human Rights Watch strives to understand all perspectives to ensure that our reporting provides a complete and accurate picture of events. **We would therefore appreciate your response in writing by May 29, 2023 to the questions below, so that your ministry’s views can be reflected in our upcoming report.**

Questions:

1. What specific actions, if any, did the Ethiopian federal government take to prevent or stop serious abuses, ethnic cleansing, and the forcible displacement of Tigrayans from Western Tigray by the interim authorities in the Zone and the Amhara regional special forces and Fano and other allied militia, following allegations of human rights violations, including those raised in the April 2022 Human Rights Watch report with Amnesty International and by the United States government?
2. What is the status of any federal or military investigations into possible crimes committed by Ethiopian federal and regional forces against Tigrayan residents in Western Tigray since November 2020?
 - a. Have any of the above-named individuals been subject to a criminal investigation or judicial proceedings under Ethiopian law for alleged crimes committed in the Western Tigray Zone since the beginning of the conflict in November 2020?
 - b. Have any military personnel or civilian officials been held to account by a court? And if so, who, before which courts (civil or military), and for what acts?

- c. What specific actions, if any, did the government take to investigate allegations of abuses by Amhara special forces, Fano, and allied militias?
3. In a September 2022 [report](#), the government's Inter-Ministerial Task Force on Accountability and Redress, Investigations and Prosecutions Committee released its preliminary (Phase 1) Criminal Investigations Report on allegations of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other violations of international and domestic law committed by the parties to the conflict in Northern Ethiopia. The report described plans to complete a third criminal investigative track looking into abuses committed by all actors in "Wolqayit, Qafta Humera, and Tsegede localities," by December 2022. Please provide an update on the work of the inter-ministerial task force, which was established in November 2020 to oversee investigations, accountability, and redress measures for human rights violations committed in the conflict in northern Ethiopia, particularly with respect to the third criminal investigative track.

We would be grateful if you would send your responses to these questions to Laetitia Bader, Deputy Director, Africa Division, at Human Rights Watch, by **May 29, 2023** at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. We may reflect any information we receive from you in our published materials, as appropriate, including quoting your responses verbatim.

We look forward to engaging in continued dialogue with the Government of Ethiopia towards the advancement of human rights in Ethiopia and would be pleased to provide a briefing and discuss our research findings and broader human rights issues with you or your staff at your convenience.

Yours sincerely,

Laetitia Bader
Deputy Director, Africa Division