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ETHIOPIA: THE NEED FOR AN INDEPENDENT INTERNATIONAL INVESTIGATION OF THE AXUM MASSACRE

On 10 May 2021, the Attorney General's Office (AG) of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia issued a press statement about its criminal investigation of the massacre in Axum, in the Tigray Region, which took place on 28 November 2020. The massacre had initially been reported by international human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, and in the media. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) issued a 12-page preliminary report on the massacre in March.

Amnesty International's findings differ from those of the AG on two key issues: the identity of the victims and the role of Eritrean troops in killing civilians.

VICTIMS OF THE MASSACRE

Amnesty International documented the killing of hundreds of civilians in the massacre. However, the AG's statement said that the victims were Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) fighters who had attacked Eritrean forces who were based in a mountainous part of the city.

The evidence that Amnesty International collected indicates that most of victims of the massacre were unarmed civilian residents of Axum, many of whom were attempting to flee the violence. According to witnesses Amnesty International interviewed and who were on the spot when the killing spree started, Eritrean soldiers "*went on a rampage, shooting at civilian men and youths who were out on the streets attempting to flee*".¹

Rather than shooting fighters, Eritrean soldiers shot at men who posed no threat to them. The victims, residents said, carried no weapons and in many cases were running away from the soldiers when they were shot.

¹ Amnesty International, The Massacre in Axum, 26 February 2021 (Index: AFR2537302021), p 10.

In the Tsele neighborhood, for example, Eritrean soldiers shot a homeless man known as Oud who had suffered from mental health problems. A witness recalled:

*He was walking. After he started running, they shot him: he started running and then stopped and was lying on the incline of the asphalt. I saw when they shot him — his body shook. They were about 70 metres from him.*²

In addition, many of the killings took place in private homes, during house-to-house searches. Witnesses interviewed by Amnesty International described how Eritrean soldiers supported by mechanized units went house-to-house killing all males that they found, including teenagers, adults, and elders alike. In multiple instances Eritrean soldiers killed all male members of any family they found in a house.

For example, Habtom (name changed), a resident of Addis Ababa, said Eritrean soldiers killed four of his close relatives —Lisaneworq Laeke, Biniam Lisaneworq, Girmay Tekly and Birhane Weoday — near Axum’s Abune Pentalwos Church.³

Eritrean soldiers killed civilians in front of their family members, including children. Their house-to-house raids continued until late evening covering multiple neighborhoods of Axum City, including those located far away from the location of earlier fighting, such as St Abune Pentalwos Church, Sabian, Menaharia, and St Michael Church.

The following day, 29 November, Eritrean soldiers also attacked friends and relatives of the victims who tried to collect the bodies of those who were killed.⁴

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ERITREAN SOLDIERS FOR THE MASSACRE

The AG’s Office report minimized the role of the Eritrean forces in the massacre, claiming that the TPLF had distributed Ethiopian and Eritrean military uniforms to criminals released from prison.

However, witnesses interviewed by Amnesty International identified the Eritrean soldiers who conducted the house-to-house raids in Axum not only by their military uniforms but also by cultural and linguistic signs unique to Eritreans. Some of the identifiers cited by witnesses included:

Three scars on each temple, near the eye, marked some of the soldiers as Beni-Amir, an ethnic group that straddles Sudan and Eritrea but is absent from Ethiopia. While Ethiopian soldiers spoke Amharic, Eritrean soldiers spoke Arabic or Tigrinya, a language spoken by both Tigray people and Eritreans. Although the language is basically the same in both regions, the Tigrinya that Eritrean soldiers is a distinctive dialect, with its own words and accent. For example, as one woman explained, “They keep saying ta’ale, which in Tigrinya means ‘move it.’ But that’s Eritrean Tigrinya. We use laghak.”⁵

² Amnesty International interview (name withheld), Hamdayet, Sudan, 20 January 2021.

³ Amnesty International phone interview (name withheld), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 26 January 2021. This account is further corroborated by other witnesses in Axum who attended the burial of the deceased on 30 November.

⁴ Amnesty International, The Massacre in Axum, 26 February 2021 (Index: AFR2537302021), p 13.

⁵ Amnesty International, The Massacre in Axum, 26 February 2021 (Index: AFR2537302021), p 13.

CONCLUSION

The Ethiopian government has a responsibility under international law to investigate this massacre, and therefore, in principle, Amnesty International welcomes the fact that the AG's Office has commenced investigating the massacre in Axum. However, international standards require that such investigations be prompt, thorough and effective, independent, impartial and transparent.⁶ Amnesty International is deeply concerned that the investigation has fallen short of these principles, particularly as regards independence and impartiality, and that its findings are not credible. Indeed, the press release issued by the AG's Office raises concerns that the actual purpose of the investigation is to cover up the massacre by claiming that those killed were actually TPLF fighters and by minimizing the role of the Eritrean soldiers.

Overall, the findings of the Office of the Attorney General indicate that domestic remedies (including justice and accountability) for the Axum massacre—as well as for other serious human rights violations committed in the Tigray conflict—will be elusive. And that Ethiopia's duty under international law to effectively investigate the massacre has not been discharged. Amnesty International therefore reiterates its call for an independent international or regional investigation that has a mandate and capacity to collect and preserve evidence for possible future prosecutions.

⁶ UN Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions; The Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death (2016), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, New York/Geneva, 2017.