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GOVERNMENT OF TIGRAY

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EXTERNAL
AFFAIRS OFFICE

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Response to the WFP’s Baseless Allegations of “Stolen” Fuel

At the outset, the Government of Tigray would like to state that it seeks to maintain a good working relationship with humanitarian partners working hard to provide desperately needed aid to the people of Tigray, including the World Food Program (WFP). We are grateful to the various aid agencies operating in Tigray for their humanity as they seek to alleviate the suffering of the people of Tigray, who have been subjected to a deadly siege imposed by the Abiy regime.

Nonetheless, we are profoundly disturbed by WFP Executive Director David Beasley’s unhelpful public outburst, accusing the Government of Tigray of “stealing” fuel tankers belonging to the WFP. Director Beasley should have known better than to make such incendiary allegations without digesting the full set of facts surrounding the issue. The Government of Tigray has not “stolen” any fuel tankers. It had loaned over six hundred thousand liters of fuel to the WFP, and it simply demanded that it be paid back in accordance with the agreement we had. The fuel will be used to run basic services, such as hospitals, clinics and other health facilities across Tigray that have been looted, and damaged by the invading forces.

While the incident at the heart of Mr. Beasley’s allegation and facts surrounding it are being handled with WFP’s local representatives, his regrettably unfortunate choice of words has far-reaching ramifications for humanitarian operations across Tigray, exposing millions of Tigrayans to an elevated risk of additional pain and suffering. The genocidal Abiy regime has already latched onto Mr. Beasley’s words to discredit humanitarian operations in Tigray. It is our sincere belief that the WFP in general and Mr. Beasley in particular will see the errors of their ways and refrain from being unwitting accessories in the Abiy regime’s ongoing strangulation of Tigray. As the chief architect of Tigray’s indescribable suffering, including through its near-total ban on the entry of fuel into Tigray, the Abiy regime along with its lackeys has no moral standing to express outrage at the very crisis they deliberately precipitated.

It is well known to the WFP that back when Tigray forces were in control of the city of Kombolcha in South Wollo, the Government of Tigray took it upon itself to provide around-the-clock security guarding WFP warehouses, preventing certain looting. In fact, that members of Tigray forces, whose families and their fellow compatriots were being strangled by the Abiy regime, fulfilled their duty guarding those warehouses is a testament to their discipline and professionalism. As a people exercising our legitimate right of self-defense, we did not go to neighboring regions to do

what the enemy did to the people of Tigray. In fact, we had an understanding with the WFP to facilitate aid distribution to local residents, though foot-dragging by the WFP scuttled those efforts.

As the international community is well-aware, the Abiy regime has laid siege to the people of Tigray since June 2021. It has suspended all basic services, including banking, telecommunications, and electricity. Consequently, it has engineered a colossal humanitarian calamity. As UN Undersecretary-General and humanitarian coordinator Martin Griffiths publicly noted, the Abiy regime has imposed a “de facto humanitarian blockade.” It has obstructed humanitarian operations by preventing the entry of food, fuel and medicines as well limiting operational cash for aid agencies. Even in the aftermath of the cessation of hostilities, which the Abiy regime violated recently, aid had only been trickling into Tigray, with severe restrictions on fuel in place, forcing aid agencies to reduce the scale and scope of their activities across Tigray.

It is against this backdrop that the incident that the WFP characterized as stealing should be analyzed. A few months ago, when the WFP had difficulty distributing food aid to the needy on account of fuel shortage, it reached an agreement with the Government of Tigray to borrow some fuel at the latter’s disposal so that millions of Tigrayans would receive some aid. The understanding was that the WFP would pay back the fuel in kind, since the Government of Tigray cannot run hospitals, schools, and other public services without fuel. The Government of Tigray’s decision to loan the fuel to the WFP, appropriately documented, was driven by its appreciation of the gravity of the humanitarian catastrophe that the Abiy regime has engineered.

Nonetheless, the tradeoff involved in exhausting our fuel reserve by loaning over six hundred thousand liters of fuel to the WFP was that we severely compromised our ability to provide even limited services to our people. The Abiy regime’s immoral, cruel, and illegal blockade of Tigray has severely constrained the Government of Tigray’s ability to run basic services. In fact, Ayder hospital in Mekelle, the region’s flagship hospital, has been forced to suspend operations on multiple occasions due to shortage of fuel needed to run generators, leading to thousands of preventable fatalities. Hospitals and health facilities across Tigray are in dire straits, resulting in thousands of people dying of easily preventable diseases. The genocidal Abiy regime sees the provisions of basic services in Tigray as a charity to be granted and denied at will depending on its political interests, not a fundamental right that Tigrayans have as citizens and human beings.

Unfortunately, the international community continues to let itself be taken for a ride by this unscrupulous regime without an iota of moral fiber. Rather than pressing the Abiy regime to allow sufficient fuel into Tigray, the WFP in particular and the UN in general have been coddling it. Now, having borrowed hundreds of thousands of liters of fuel, the WFP is unilaterally revising the terms of the deal, essentially arguing that “we did not know the fuel provided was to be paid back in kind.” But contrary to this protestation, according to a January 13, 2022 situation report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “food aid will be dispatched from Mekelle to the affected population with fuel loaned from the local authorities.” It could not get any clearer than this.

Most disturbingly, the WFP claims to have made payments to individuals on account of fuel loaned to it by the Government of Tigray, supposedly for the use of their fuel stations. Accordingly, the WFP claims to have paid Oil Libya in Kombolcha over half a million Birr and close to 13 million Birr to another privately-owned fuel station in Mekelle. These payments raise serious questions about the integrity of the folks based in Addis running the WFP. We urge the UN to take this issue seriously and conduct a thorough investigation.

The Government of Tigray cannot be expected to loan the limited fuel it had at its disposal and not ask to be repaid in kind. That the WFP is backpedaling on this mutual understanding is regrettable. We hope that they will honor this agreement and set the record straight by retracting the highly damaging and inflammatory public statements issued by the WFP. Mutual trust that agreements would be honored is the essential ingredient in any cooperative relationship. And we remain committed to cooperating with humanitarian partners as they work hard to address the catastrophic humanitarian crisis raging in Tigray. In this spirit, we are ready to resolve all outstanding issues in discussion with WFP officials.

