



## DEFEND ETHIOPIA EUROPE

13 July 2021

International Committee of the Red Cross  
19 Avenue de la Paix  
1202 Geneva  
Switzerland

Dear Sir / Madam,

We are Ethiopians and European citizens of Ethiopian origin residing in twelve European countries, organized as members of the European branch of the global Defend Ethiopia Task Force (<https://defendethiopia.com/about/>).

Following the Ethiopian government's declaration of a unilateral humanitarian ceasefire on Monday, 28 June 2021 and the withdrawal of its army from most of Tigray, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) took over the area including the capital city Mekelle. Since then, hundreds of civilians have reportedly been tortured and killed by the TPLF, accused of being collaborators of the Tigray Interim Regional Administration, the Federal Government or the national army. We condemn these brutal murders and implore the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to intervene to stop these and offer support to the families of the victims.

We also would like to bring to your attention a case of grave violation of human rights and violation of international law regarding the protection of prisoners of war (POWs) and civil servants in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. We think that the ICRC has a special role and the moral-legal obligation to monitor the situation very closely, handle it as priority and stop this serious human drama.

A couple of days after the TPLF took over most parts of Tigray, images of utterly unacceptable treatment of the POWs appeared on local and international media, where hundreds of soldiers were paraded through Mekelle for exhibit, some of them being carried by their comrades who were themselves not in good condition. The soldiers were visibly intimidated and distraught with the vociferous jeers and apparent abuse from on-lookers.

All of this spectacle is against the long-established Geneva Conventions on prisoners of war that applies to all belligerents and stipulates that "prisoners of war must at all times be protected, particularly against acts of violence or intimidation and against insults and public curiosity" (GC III, Art. 13). To date, it is also not clear if the wounded or sick prisoners received help from the ICRC or any other organization. Overall, what happened is a clear case of violation of the Convention under which POWs must be "treated humanely with respect for their person and their honour". We believe that TPLF's exposure of these POWs was intended as an act of disheartenment, demoralization and humiliation of the federal army and the people of Ethiopia.





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We also have unconfirmed information that some of those paraded for humiliation and public curiosity may have been non-combatant, civil servants from other parts of the country. By doing so, the TPLF might be planning to artificially boost the number of soldier-POWs through the imprisonment of civilians for political bargaining with the federal government. Worryingly, no official number of the POWs is available and different leading members of the TPLF were quoted as giving widely differing numbers, ranging from 2,000 to 10,000 prisoners in their hands. Such inconsistencies can endanger the safety of POWs and it will be difficult to account for each and every person involved. Thus, TPLF should disclose the official number of POWs and ICRC has the mandate to get this figure, visit them, assess and verify their conditions.

In addition, some of the captives were subjected to 'interviews' in local media that was subsequently released on social media networks. While the Geneva Convention indicates that POWs are “not compelled to give any information except for name, age, rank, and service number”, the interviewees were asked where they come from and why they came to the Tigray region, among others. These POWs will undoubtedly suffer the personal humiliation because it is a deliberate contempt for their personal dignity and honour, exposes them to further “public curiosity” and is an invasion of their privacy, since they can be easily identified by others.

The TPLF and its supporters have waged sustained defamation of members of the Ethiopian National Defence Force as "human right abusers" and “perpetrators of massacres”. Several international NGOs and global media uncritically amplified this without thorough investigation or legal process, which we totally reject. Now that the federal army POWs are entirely dependent on aid provision by these same NGOs, this unjust negative framing makes them extremely vulnerable, unless the ICRC, with its good reputation as defender of the rights of prisoners, intervenes. We implore you to see to it that supplies and medical care are provided to POWs, as international law prescribes.

We appeal to the ICRC to, according to its mandate and the Geneva Conventions, provide humanitarian protection and assistance for victims of armed conflict as well as those who are no longer involved in armed-combat and those made to appear as such, that are in custody of the TPLF. TPLF leaders need to be reminded that POWs should be humanely treated at all times with respect for their dignity and honour and protected from intimidation and public insults.

We trust that the ICRC can do these and contribute to protection of and assistance to the most vulnerable.  
Sincerely,

Mr Zelalem Getahun,  
Coordinator, the Defend Ethiopia Task Force in Europe Steering Group organized in Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom

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