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Tigray External Affairs Office

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Statement on the Current Condition of Religious and Cultural Heritages in Tigray

The people of Tigray are the proud owners of rich traditions, civilizations and ancient history. In fact, Tigray is among the cradles of ancient world civilizations. As often attested to by the international community, the Axumite Kingdom, stretching from present-day Tigray through parts of the Middle-East, was one of the great powers that prevailed in the 3rd and 4th centuries. Giant obelisks, artifacts and tombs of various kings, can be found alongside other historic traditions. At the height of the Axumite Kingdom, its history, literature, parchment, the music and melodies of St. Jared, philosophy, unique alphabets, and literatures extended across present-day Yemen. In the 4th century, Axum adopted Christianity through Abuna Salama and then spread it to the rest of Ethiopia.

While Axum is often rightly considered the cradle of Ethiopian Christianity, what is less appreciated but no less significant is the fact that it was also a pioneer in welcoming Islam in the 7th century. Today, the world-famous Al-Nejashi mosque memorializes Islam's distinguished origin in Tigray. The Al-Nejashi mosque, a potential candidate for UNESCO World Heritage status, houses the tombs of the followers of Prophet Mohammad, pbuh. The followers of the Prophet had sought refuge in Tigray, following a vicious campaign of persecution in Saudi Arabia in the 7th century. They solicited and received protection and sanctuary in peaceful Tigray— *“the land of peace and justice.”* Indeed, the Christian King at the time, King Nejashi, based in Axum, gave the followers of Islam refuge and legal protection to practice their faith, building the Al-Nejashi mosque, widely considered the second-most important mosque to the Islamic world after Medina, and spreading Christianity to the rest of the country.

The early adoptions of two of the world's grand religions greatly contributed to the harmonious coexistence of people in Tigray and throughout Ethiopia, cementing religious and cultural diversity as a source of harmony and strength.

Since November 2020, however, the federal government of Ethiopia, in collaboration with an assortment of forces from the Amhara region and the Eritrean military, has been waging a genocidal campaign on Tigray. These forces occupied Tigray for about 8 months. The people of Tigray had rallied and fought back, liberating most parts of Tigray from the clutches of these invading forces. However, large swaths of Tigray remain under enemy occupation. In particular, the entire Western Tigray remains under occupation by the Eritrean military and expansionist Amhara elite, as do parts of North-Western and Eastern Tigray.

During their occupation of Tigray, these invading forces inflicted incalculable pain and damage on Tigray, decimating its economic base, and destroying various social institutions. In a clear contravention of common norms, decency and the International Convention on the Protection of Heritages during Armed Conflict, these forces deliberately and systematically destroyed cultural and religious heritages. This act of religious and cultural vandalism and wanton destruction was explicitly designed to deprive Tigray of its status as the proud owner of diverse religious and cultural heritages. The invading forces deliberately destroyed places of worship, and damaged well-known monasteries that had survived for centuries. They also systematically murdered hundreds of priests, deacons and other religious leaders. In the harrowing expression of one eyewitness to this cruelty, "They burned the holy books, and sacred objects. Churches became the most unsafe places." The Church, long a spiritual and physical sanctuary for the downtrodden, had been turned into a killing field. Similarly, the invading forces have also damaged the celebrated Al-Nejashi mosque, following indiscriminate artillery shelling of the area.

There is no doubt that the systematic destruction, vandalization and looting of Tigray's heritages were part and parcel of the broader genocidal campaign to exterminate the people of Tigray. It is precisely for this reason that some commentators have gone so far as to compare what these invading forces have done in Tigray to cultural genocide.

Today, a number of historic artifacts shamelessly plundered from Tigray are circulating in various countries. In recent days, the world has witnessed the degree of cultural and religious depredation perpetrated in Tigray, as some of those stolen historic artifacts have been put up for sale on the online bidding platform, eBay. It was after a concerted campaign by Tigrayans in the diaspora, as well as friends and supporters of Tigray that eBay was compelled to remove the stolen objects that included crosses and historic manuscripts from its website. The people and Government of Tigray are grateful for these people's contributions in, at least for the time being, stopping the illicit trafficking of stolen artifacts from Tigray.

The people and Government of Tigray believe that it is imperative that those stolen historic artifacts be returned to their rightful owner and rightful place. In order to facilitate the repatriation of looted artifacts, the Government of Tigray has established an *ad hoc* committee. This committee is tasked with preparing relevant documents with regards to the looted items and working in collaboration with all concerned persons and entities the world over. Going forward, the committee will work in cooperation with UNESCO, ICOMS (International Council of Museums), the World Tourism Organization and INTERPOL as it seeks to repatriate any and all stolen artifacts.

