

A letter of concern on the crisis in Tigray and on the involvement of H. E. Cardinal Berhaneyesus Souraphiel(head of the Ethiopian Catholic Church).

Your Holiness Pope Francis,

We are Catholic faithful from Tigray, Ethiopia residing in the United States. We thank Your Holiness for Your untiring prayer and Your call for peace and reconciliation at the beginning of the war in Tigray. Your Holiness' prayer and voice has been a beacon of hope and encouragement to the millions of people going through unspeakable darkness in Tigray and especially to the Catholic faithful in the region. We consider and value Your Holiness' prayer and call for peace as coming on behalf of the universal Church. Thank you very much for that!

It has been more than 120 days since the war in Tigray started, and the people of Tigray have been going through tremendous sufferings. Multiple actors, the Ethiopian federal government forces and Eritrean troops supported by many other groups, are committing inexcusable crimes and atrocities on our people. Since November 4, 2020, Tigray is suffering from extrajudicial killings, mass slaughters, mass abduction, rape including nuns, looting public and private properties, destruction of buildings including religious sites, hospitals, factories, universities and historical heritages, burning of crops, killing and looting of livestock and so on.

As a consequence of the war, tens of thousands of civilians have lost their lives, and over sixty thousand fled to the Sudan. The newly established administration in Tigray reports that "over 4.5 million people, 75% of Tigray's population, are left in need of emergency food assistance, of whom 2.2 million are internally displaced persons(IDPs)."

The Catholic Church, as part of the community of Tigray, is not spared from the horrible war crimes. Its institutions: churches, colleges, hospitals and schools were looted and destroyed. Hundreds of the Church's faithful, including 4 and 5 members of a single family, have lost their lives.

As to our humble faith and knowledge, the Catholic Church's teaching about politics is clear and impartial. We firmly believe that "the Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system. She is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person,"(GS, 76). In spite of this clear teaching of the Catholic Church, H. E. Cardinal Berhaneyesus, seems to have committed regrettable mistakes, as he acts both individually and representing the Catholic Church in Ethiopia. As a consequence, we as Catholics and as Tigrayans feel betrayed, hurt and even scandalized by what he has done so far and still continues to do. We would like to point out some of the hurtful acts of H. E. Cardinal Berhaneyesus in relation to the war in Tigray.

1. Before the war, H. E. Cardinal Berhaneyesus accepted to be a "designated President "of a commission which is not independent by composition and stand of its members. The "Ethiopian Reconciliation Commission"(ERC), henceforth established by the Ethiopian prime minister on February 12, 2019. In fact, many members of this commission were openly speaking provocative and

hateful rhetoric against the people of Tigray. In spite of alarms and calls from many people of good will that the commission was partial and not independent, H. E. Cardinal Berhaneyesus willingly accepted to be its president.

2. As head of the Ethiopian Catholic Church and as the president of the ERC, we believe that H. E. Cardinal Berhaneyesus should have been the first one to condemn the war and call for peace and reconciliation. Unfortunately, H. E. Cardinal Berhaneyesus has not condemned the war.

3. On the 13th of November 2020 the ERC released an official statement through the government's media. The statement said that "TPLF's call for negotiation and peace is not acceptable." We believe it is unethical that a commission named as 'Reconciliation Commission' and headed by a Catholic Cardinal to issue that statement.

4. On November 18, 2020, H. E. Cardinal Berhaneyesus and most members of the ERC officially supported the war on Tigray publicly saying "I stand for the Ethiopian Defense Forces." It should be noted that at the time, the Ethiopian Defense Forces and other actors were committing terrible war crimes on the People of Tigray.

5. On the eve of the Ethiopian Christmas, January 6, 2021, H. E. Cardinal Berhaneyesus issued a pastoral message concerning the feast of Christmas. At the time, the war on Tigray had already caused indescribable harm and disaster both in terms of life and material loss. To be specific, starvation and sexual violence were being used as weapons of war in a complete communications blackout. In spite of our expectations and hope that H. E. Cardinal Berhaneyesus would clearly condemn the war atrocities by raising his voice for the voiceless, he plainly supported the war. In the middle of his message, written in Amharic, he wrote: "We request the government to strengthen and continue its efforts of ensuring people's right to life, rule of law and securing peace." To a government that waged war on its people in the name of "law enforcement," this was a clear license and permission to go ahead with the unspeakable crimes being committed. On the conclusion of the same message, H. E. Cardinal Berhaneyesus writes, "I wish successful work for the defense forces and federal police, who are looking after the borders of the country and ensuring peace." In fact, the defense forces were destroying Tigray in coordination with foreign invading forces.

6. The Ethiopian Catholic Church's participation in the recent visit to Tigray by a delegation of the Ethiopian government on February 6, 2021, was an act understood by the people of Tigray to be a collaboration on a Genocidal crimes. We and the people of Tigray in general feel that the mission of the visit by the delegation was meant to cover up the war crimes of the Ethiopian and Eritrean troops'. We Catholics from Tigray living in the United States and all the people of Tigray feel betrayed and we are saddened by H. E. Cardinal Berhaneyesus' actions. In a time when our people are facing a Genocidal acts by multiple actors and when the Church is meant to be a voice for the voiceless, H. E. Cardinal Berhaneyesus' actions and omissions are worsening the situation.

Incidentally, we would like to express our appreciation to The Eritrean Catholic Bishops for standing on the side of peace and calling for dialogue. In addition, Thabo Makgoba, the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town," has mobilized the church and reached out to the South African government in an attempt to halt the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Ethiopia". We Thank him for that! It is our desire for H. E. Cardinal Berhaneyesus to stand for peace and for all people of Ethiopia.

Your Holiness, we, the Catholics from Tigray living in the United States and all the people of Tigray are calling on Your Holiness to help us stop the genocidal crimes being committed on our people.

We thank Your Holiness for Your blessings, kind attention and prayer.

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