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Statement by Alice Wairimu Nderitu, Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, condemning the recent escalation of fighting in Ethiopia

(New York, 19 October 2022) United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Alice Wairimu Nderitu expressed grave concern over the renewed escalation of conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region involving Federal Government of Ethiopia forces and allies and forces backing the Tigrayan authorities. Targeting of civilians based on their ethnicity or perceived affiliation to the warring parties remains a key characteristic of the conflict and one that is exacerbated by horrifying levels of hate speech and incitement to violence.

The Special Adviser echoed urgent calls by the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres and Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki, for an immediate cessation of hostilities. The conflict has reached new worrying levels of violence since a five-month humanitarian truce was broken in August. She expressed particular concern about reports of increased drone attacks in Shire resulting in large numbers of civilian casualties and a huge mobilization of military forces and equipment in the area.

In its report, A/HRC/51/46 of 19 September 2022, the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia, concluded that the indicators and triggers contained in the UN Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes are present in Ethiopia today including; Dissemination of hate speech and absence of independent mechanisms to address it; Politicization of identity; Proliferation of local militias and other armed groups across the country; Particularly dehumanizing types of violence inflicted upon civilians on the basis of their ethnicity and perceived allegiance with the enemy; Imposition of strict controls on communication channels, including internet shutdowns; Widespread arbitrary detention on ethnic grounds; and Obstruction of humanitarian access and attacks on humanitarian aid workers. Consistent with the findings of the Commission, the Special Adviser's statements on the situation (12 November 2020, 5 February 2021, 30 July 2021, and 8 November 2021) underscored the polarization along ethnic lines in Ethiopia, which has exacerbated the level of violence.

These acts, the Special Adviser stressed, could amount to atrocity crimes.

The Special Adviser expressed her dismay at the use of inflammatory language by political leaders and armed groups in the Tigray conflict that continues unabated. There is discourse often propagated through social media, which dehumanizes groups by likening them to a 'virus' that should be eradicated, to a 'cancer' that should be treated because "if a single cell is left untreated, that single cell will expand and affect the whole body" and calling for the "killing of every single youth from Tigray" which is particularly dangerous. Diaspora blogs that call for the genocide of the Tigray people are also of deep concern. Hate speech and incitement to violence are fueling the

normalization of extreme violence not just in Tigray and neighboring Amhara and Afar regions, but in Oromia and other parts of the country too, she added.

The latest outbreak of fighting is a further devastating regression for the people of Ethiopia. The atrocious abuses taking place are spurred by the deluge of ethnically motivated hate speech that is propagated online. Today the horrific cost of hateful language is borne by the innocent civilians stuck in the middle of this conflict, stated the Special Adviser. She reminded those involved that advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence is prohibited under international law.

The Special Adviser also expressed deep concern about the alleged widespread acts of rape and sexual violence as a key feature of the conflict. She emphasized the responsibility of the Ethiopian Government to ensure the protection and rights of all people in Ethiopia, including the most vulnerable as well as women and girls, and the importance of putting in place adequate measures to prevent violence, including conflict-related sexual violence. These measures should involve tackling the scourge of hate speech and incitement to gender-based violence.

She advocated for other actors such as religious and community leaders as well as Ethiopians in the diaspora to use their voice to speak out against hate and stand in solidarity with affected communities. Turning to the international community, the Special Adviser urged tech and social media companies to continue utilizing all tools available to stop the spread of hate speech that could constitute incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence on their platforms.

The Special Adviser implored the parties to pursue a peaceful end to the conflict by immediately putting down their weapons and recommitting to dialogue supported by the African Union. “Enough is enough. If we are really serious about stopping the ongoing atrocious violence in Ethiopia and preventing future atrocity crimes, we need to act now and put an end to this war that has cost already too many lives”, she added.

She urged the Federal Government and Tigray authorities to investigate and bring to justice those who have committed serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. “All perpetrators, regardless of their standing, must be brought to justice”.

For media queries please contact:
Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect
Email: osapg@un.org
<http://www.un.org/genocideprevention>