

Friday 4 June 2021

Dear International Development Committee and Foreign Affairs Committee Chairs,

We are writing as the Co-Chairs of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Eritrea to thank you for the report of the International Development Committee on 'The humanitarian situation in Tigray', published Friday 30 April 2021. We particularly appreciated the Committee's speed in preparing a report, in recognition of a closing window of opportunity to prevent further avoidable deaths and suffering created by war, atrocity, and famine. We await the Government's response, which we hope takes into serious consideration the excellent recommendations contained within.

We are today writing to request that your Committee considers launching a fuller inquiry in coming weeks, and our APPG offers you its fullest support in such an endeavour.

We entirely agree with you that the conflict in Tigray presents a test of the 'diplomacy and development' approach of the now combined Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. This is why we believe any future inquiry would ideally be held jointly with colleagues in the Foreign Affairs Committee able to consider political and diplomatic dynamics and solutions.

We also believe a future inquiry needs to be held with a consultation period that allows for the formal input and evidence of government ministers, relevant ambassadorial staff, non-governmental organisations, humanitarian agencies, survivors, and diaspora. In recognition of the regional implications of the Tigray conflict, the inquiry should also engage neighbouring countries' representatives and policy communities, notably those from Eritrea and Sudan.

A future inquiry's scope and terms of reference could additionally encompass the following:

- Eritrea's role in the conflict, and its long-term intentions, are insufficiently understood and critiqued by policy actors. The Committees could play a leading role in aiding understanding, including by holding Eritrea accountable for the swift, unconditional and verifiable exit of its troops from the Tigray region, and suggesting appropriate verification mechanisms. There is growing consensus from all quarters that such a step is a necessary prerequisite before a lasting political settlement can be reached. But despite this there has been little progress on withdrawal, and additionally both HMG and United States spokespeople have cited credible reports of Eritrean forces 'rebadging' as the Ethiopian military.¹ In addition, it must be recognised that Eritrean troops are themselves often victims of forced recruitment, including in some cases as child soldiers, so dismantling Eritrea's systems of indefinite national service must be held as a contiguous long-term policy aim.
- Ensuring accountability for those guilty of atrocity crimes, notably the use of rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war, making use of the UK's long and proud record of judicial capacity-building and on preventing sexual violence in conflict. On the latter, the experience of the UK Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative Team of Experts, and of the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office in producing the International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict, must be brought to bear.²
- The use of the UK's human rights and newer corruption sanctions regime to hold conflict actors and notorious human rights abuses accountable. We can draw on the recent expertise of the European Union, which in March 2021 blacklisted Eritrea's National Security Office (NSO) tasked with information-gathering, arrests, and interrogations. The UK risks being out of step with other actors if it continues to allow travel, free ownership of assets, and provision of financial and economic services linked to one the most notorious human rights violators, despite NSO abuses falling within the sanctions programme's jurisdiction and scope.

¹ See <https://usun.usmission.gov/statement-by-ambassador-linda-thomas-greenfield-on-the-situation-in-ethiopia-tigray-region/> and <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-04-19/183271>

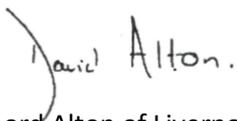
²https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/598335/International_Protocol_2017_2nd_Edition.pdf

- The fate of refugees in the region, including those newly displaced to Sudan, but also the fate of the 96,223 Eritrean refugees documented by UNHCR in Tigray prior to the breakout of conflict in November 2020. Camps at Shimmelba and Hitsats have been destroyed, and these traumatised individuals have since been displaced again. Worst of all, some have been forced back across the border and to Eritrea. We have heard from Eritrean individuals in the UK about their concern for missing family and friends. This constitutes a major violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Such evidence gathering would also aid understanding of Horn of Africa dynamics within the Home Office, which is witnessing rising numbers of Eritrean asylum applicants.³
- The report correctly calls for increased humanitarian aid and assistance to Tigray, but without addressing the modalities of delivery, including an assessment of delivery partners. A full inquiry could allow for an exploration of creative humanitarian solutions, for instance the provision of cross-border aid to Tigray via Eritrean-held areas. It is not clear why this is not being discussed as an option unless it is simply understood to be unviable, a fact which itself rightfully causes us to doubt the commitment of Eritrea to humanitarian principles. Eritrea has already been accused of actively preventing aid access and delivery, including by our own Foreign Secretary in a response dated 12 April 2021 to a joint letter from respective Committee Chairs Sarah Champion and Tom Tugendhat, and more recently in reporting by CNN and others.⁴ The inquiry might also choose to consider how remittances are used to fund the conflict in Tigray, including the use of Eritrea's 2% diaspora tax, levied on UK-based individuals.
- The importance of operationalising Her Majesty's Government's new commitment to atrocity prevention in the Integrated Review to be more explicitly a part of country strategies in the Horn of Africa region, and for country teams to be given a budget for training in atrocity prevention and atrocity risk monitoring.
- Holding the UK Special Envoy with a mandate on famine prevention, Nick Dyer, accountable for discharging duties under United Nations Security Resolution 2417 regarding starvation crimes. Appropriate investigations could be called for, and accountability ensured, especially as this has been singled out as a UK Government priority.

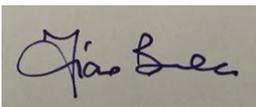
The case of Tigray is a test for a combined 'diplomacy and development' approach. It is a test with fatal consequences should we fail. Now is the time for your Committees to hold our government to account by launching a joint and full inquiry. You will have our full support.

Writing in admiration for your important work.

Signed,



David Alton of Liverpool
Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Eritrea



Fiona Bruce MP
Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Eritrea

³ Applicants rose 33% in 2020 compared with 2019 according to Home Office immigration statistics.

⁴ <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/05/12/africa/tigray-axum-aid-blockade-cmd-intl/index.html>