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Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Ethiopia

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As delivered

Mr. President, thank you.

Just over two weeks ago on 15 June, we briefed the Council on famine in Tigray, with over 350,000 people in catastrophe conditions – the worst famine situation we have seen in decades. In the short space of time since then, the situation has worsened dramatically.

You have just heard from Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo about the political and security dynamics in Tigray and Ethiopia. What I would like to speak about is the humanitarian situation. This, I am afraid, is more alarming than when you were briefed two and a half weeks ago. Two million people are still displaced and close to 5.2 million people still require humanitarian assistance – the great majority of them women and children.

One of the most distressing trends is an alarming rise in food insecurity and hunger due to conflict. More than 400,000 people are estimated to have crossed the threshold into famine and another 1.8 million people are on the brink of famine. Some are suggesting that the numbers are even higher. Thirty-three thousand children are severely malnourished and, moreover, the food insecurity crisis will continue to worsen during the impending rainy season, as food supplies are exhausted, and the risk of flooding and waterborne diseases, including cholera, increases. Considering where we already are, this means that more people will die certainly if we do not reach them with humanitarian assistance.

Let me also emphasize that what we are seeing in Tigray is a protection crisis. On 22 June, an air strike on a busy market in Togoga killed and injured dozens of civilians. This is just one of many times when civilians have been killed in the eight months of conflict in Tigray.

As has been widely reported by senior UN official, civil society and others, we have multiple credible and widely corroborated cases of serious sexual and gender-based violence. More than 1,200 cases have been reported, with more continuing to emerge. This is likely, we fear, only a

fraction of the actual cases, as stigma, shame, fear of reprisals as well as the lack of health and psychosocial services are leading to underreporting.

All parties to the conflict must respect their obligations under international humanitarian law. Attacks directed against civilians and indiscriminate attacks are prohibited. Allegations of serious violations must be thoroughly and independently investigated by the State, and the perpetrators must be prosecuted regardless of who they are.

Mr. President,

To recall what should be already obvious to all of us, humanitarian workers must never be a target. Still, last week three humanitarian colleagues from Médecins Sans Frontières were brutally and deliberately murdered in Tigray. This only weeks after aid workers from the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) and the International Committee for the Development of Peoples (CISP) were killed on 29 May and 28 April, respectively. Twelve humanitarian workers have now been killed since the start of the conflict.

Despite the challenges, humanitarian workers continue to work to reach people in desperate need. In the last two months, 3.7 million people have received emergency assistance, 167,000 displaced persons have received non-food items and 630,000 people have been reached by water trucks. However, it is estimated that over 2.5 million people in rural Tigray have not had access to essential services over the last six months. This includes many of the people facing famine and is also part of the reason that they face famine.

The lives of many of these people depend on our ability to reach them with food, medicine, nutrition supplies and other humanitarian assistance. And we need to reach them now. Not next week. Now. As you have heard us say before, to do so we need timely, unimpeded, safe and sustained access. International humanitarian law requires all parties to a conflict to facilitate this. Let me explain what this looks like and be clear about what exactly we are asking for.

Over the past few days, our colleagues in Mekelle have been able to move towards Abd Adi and Samre and from Shire teams have reached Selekleka and have travelled from Axum to Adwa. This is positive and we now plan to dispatch convoys with humanitarian supplies to many of the areas which have been difficult to reach for us before.

But we can only do so for as long as we have something to deliver. Today, WFP has enough food for only 1 million people for the next month in Mekelle. This is a fraction of what we need for the 5.2 million people who need food aid. However, we have also almost run out of health, water, sanitation and other non-food items kits. Food alone does not avert a famine. Water, sanitation and nutrition supplies are essential in such a response. We also desperately need to prevent a cholera outbreak or people dying from other communicable diseases.

Mr. President,

Earlier this week, the Government of Ethiopia announced a humanitarian ceasefire. We wholeheartedly welcome this and look forward to its implementation throughout the conflict area. It is imperative that all parties to the conflict, whoever they are and wherever they are, ensure no further escalation of conflict. We cannot afford to fail in this endeavour. The affected populations in Tigray on the brink of starvation deserve no less. All groups must stop fighting to allow humanitarian aid to get through unimpeded and to protect civilians. There is no other way to achieve this.

While inside Tigray we may now be able to reach areas that were difficult to reach before, it is essential we act fast and without any further obstruction.

What we need first and foremost is for all armed and security actors to provide guarantees for safe road access for humanitarian workers and supplies to and from Tigray, as well as to and from the most remote parts of the region. This means not stopping us from getting through checkpoints, but rapidly letting us proceed in all directions. As we speak here, there are five UNICEF trucks loaded with life-saving water and sanitation supplies blocked in Afar. Earlier this week, a convoy of WFP trucks was prevented from entering Tigray from Gondar. All these trucks must immediately be allowed to proceed.

Secondly, we must be allowed to use the fastest and most effective route to get humanitarian supplies to the people in need. We need immediate, unhindered and sustained access from both Komolcha and Semera to Mekelle, and from Gondar to Shire. I am deeply alarmed by yesterday's destruction of the Tekeze River Bridge – and the reported damage to two other bridges – which has cut off our main supply route from Gondar to Shire, which we use to bring in food and other life-saving supplies. We call on the Government of Ethiopia to undertake immediate repairs to the bridges and by doing so help prevent the spread of famine.

Third, we must also be able to use the fastest and most effective modality to deliver supplies and transport humanitarian staff. This means that we need to be able to fly, and I welcome the information received today that the Government of Ethiopia has approved our request for an UNHAS flight to Mekelle tomorrow. We hope that this is not a one-off, but this must continue and be extended to all airports in Tigray. I also call on all parties to provide security assurances for these humanitarian air operations.

Fourth, we need to be able to bring in and use all appropriate communication equipment, such as VSATs, VHF radios, HF radios and satellite phones for humanitarian purposes. These are imperative and critical for the safety and security, you will understand, of humanitarian workers. We use these all over the world. We ask that the Government of Ethiopia fast-track all requests made by humanitarian organizations. We also call on the Government to see to the immediate return of the communications equipment confiscated from the offices of humanitarian organizations by the Ethiopia National Defence Forces. Trucks commandeered from humanitarian organizations must also be returned by those who have done so.

We also urge the Government of Ethiopia to restore and maintain electricity, communication networks and banking services in Tigray, without which we cannot effectively reach populations, as well as to allow the free flow of essential commercial goods, including fuel at scale. Without fuel, we cannot transport the food, and people will indeed starve. We cannot run water pumps providing clean water and prevent cholera, which kills. Hospitals cannot operate and people will suffer. In short, without fuel, humanitarian operations will not be possible and lives will indeed be lost.

We have repeatedly said that the only way to stop the humanitarian situation from further deteriorating is peace. The welcomed announcement, as I mentioned, by the Government of Ethiopia of a ceasefire must be the beginning of this peace – for the sake of millions of innocent civilians. The conflict has already caused enormous suffering to the civilian population. It must stop now. The ceasefire has raised expectation among the population, and we now need to reach people throughout Tigray with humanitarian assistance to prevent a spread of famine and, as I mentioned before, an outbreak of cholera. But humanitarian assistance alone is not enough. We are not the solution. Unless civilians can return to normality and farmers can access their fields, famine will take an even tighter grip on Tigray.

We welcome the Government's announcement today of the formation of a High-level Mechanism to solve access problems and challenges in real time, and we look forward to working together to make sure we immediately reach people. There can be no reason for the ceasefire to fail and humanitarian convoys to be blocked. We hope this mechanism can be operational within the next 48 hours so as not to lose any more time, nor lose any more lives.

I conclude this by asking the Council, Mr. President, and all those with influence to help us save lives and prevent famine and further suffering by ensuring these fundamental requests are fulfilled.

Thank you.