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UN High-level Officials Express Deep Concern Over Escalating Ethnic Tensions in Ethiopia

(New York, 12 November 2020) The United Nations Acting Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Ms. Pramila Patten and the Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect, Ms. Karen Smith expressed deep concern over reports of escalating ethnic tensions in Ethiopia and recent military clashes in the Tigray region, in which many civilians have allegedly been killed. The two Special Advisers have received reports of incidents of ethnically and religiously motivated hate speech, incitement to violence and serious human rights violations including arbitrary arrests, killings, displacement of populations and destruction of property in various parts of the country. The Special Advisers strongly condemned reports of targeted attacks against civilians based on their ethnicity or religion.

The Special Advisers observed that ethnic violence in Ethiopia has reached an alarming level over the past two years. The two senior UN officials noted that stigmatization of certain ethnic groups, including the Tigray, Amhara, Somali as well as the Oromo among others has significantly contributed to ethnic intolerance in the country. “The ongoing ethnic rhetoric, hate speech, incitement to violence and attacks prevailing in Ethiopia constitutes a serious threat to internal and regional stability and should immediately be addressed to avert further escalation of widespread violence,” the Special Advisers warned.

Ms. Patten and Ms. Smith stressed that ethnically motivated attacks and reportedly ethnic profiling of citizens constitute a dangerous trajectory that heightens the risk of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, commonly referred to as atrocity crimes. In the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, the Member States of the United Nations unanimously pledged to protect populations from these crimes. While the protection of populations is the primary responsibility of States, the international community also has a responsibility to assist national authorities in protecting its populations whenever necessary. “We strongly urge the Ethiopian authorities to take urgent measures to protect its population from further violence and strongly encourage them to seek assistance from the international community, including from the United Nations and regional actors especially the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Union (AU) to aid in de-escalating the rising tensions in the country, especially ahead of the forthcoming elections”, the Special Advisers stated. They warned that if these urgent measures are not immediately taken, the risk of atrocity crimes in Ethiopia remains high.

The United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect stands ready and offers its support to the Ethiopian authorities and relevant stakeholders to counter and address hate speech and prevent incitement to violence in the country.

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