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**TIBIBIR CALLS FOR THE UNCONDITIONAL RELEASE OF ALL POLITICAL PRISONERS AND THE FORMATION OF A CARE TAKER GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY TO PAVE THE WAY FOR A FREE AND FAIR ELECTION**

After a long and secretive meetings and deliberations by the four major EPRDF member parties and the Executive Committee of the EPRDF, issued a rather equivocal Press Statement that was released on January 2, 2018. TIBIBIR and the wider Ethiopian public gave the benefit of the doubt to the EPRDF and its member parties to come to a genuine and comprehensive assessment of the gravity of the crisis in Ethiopia, and embrace the wisdom of national reconciliation process, and start an inclusive process of political transition in urgency. Considering and carefully assessing the contents, decisions, interviews, intentions, and resolutions of the just concluded meeting of the EPRDF regime, it is now the position of TIBIBIR and its member civil organizations that the outcome of the EPRDF meeting falls far short of expectations and grossly inadequate to address the grave challenges faced by Ethiopians and the country as whole.

The ruling Front has demonstrated that it is neither able nor willing to understand the nature, complexity, and underlying causes of the current crisis in Ethiopia. Whereas there are some elements within the Front that seem to recognize the severity and causes of the problems, they remain marginalized for the sake of maintaining political power in the firm hands of the TPLF, which is now completely controlled by the security cluster. The long and futile meeting of EPRDF that took place from December 12 to 29, 2017 was a lost opportunity for those Ethiopians within the Front to bring a genuine change and the start of true national reconciliation. Instead, what transpired was infighting, plots and purges, intra-Front bickering, search for escape goats, and ultimately ensuring the hegemony and brutal and corrupt rule of the TPLF.

The ruling Front interpreted the crisis as if it is caused by “mistrust” and “suspicion” amongst the coalition members. It somewhat stated that consensus had been reached among coalition members and the party will be victorious in renewing itself. Moreover, the regime attributed the two-year long popular protests across the

country on issues such as the rises of contraband trade, illicit financial flows, mismanagement and corruption as well as interference of foreign agents. This diagnosis is too simplistic. It is apparent that the crisis in Ethiopia demands major and inclusive efforts far beyond the capacity and framework of the ruling Front.

The EPRDF regime has no peace plan, whatsoever, for Ethiopia. Despite the self-incriminatory tone of the statements, their proposed solution is to keep the status quo however unsustainable it has become. The Front seeks to purge individual members of coalition parties and use whatever force that is at its disposal to ensure the continuity of TPLF's hegemony. We observed this political and criminal episode in 2001, the year that the TPLF leadership split into two, and again in 2005 to mention just a few. In March 2001, the late Prime Minister Zenawi contended that corruption was rampant and his comrades were deeply involved in it. He used the "anti-corruption" agency to incarcerate and disable his political opponents. The TPLF/EPRDF in 2017 is trying to replay the same game while Ethiopia is in the worst crisis in its long history to the extent that its survival is in question. Recent Ethiopian political history is replete with missed opportunities for national reconciliation and transition to a more inclusive and democratic governance system. TPLF/EPRDF has missed yet another opportunity for peace and national reconciliation. We believe the current wave of resistance is mature and is bound to bring a new day to our homeland. History will judge harshly those who have played a repressive role, those who are directly and indirectly cooperating with them, and those that are pretending to be "neutral". The popular struggle for a peaceful transition to democracy in Ethiopia and the call for justice will hold them accountable.

Thanks to the relentless popular resistance and perhaps the pressure from the international community, the regime finally recognized the existence of political prisoners and promised to release some of them. Closer examination of the ruling party's statements regarding the subject matter suggests that the statement is meant to respond to the pressure from outside and also manipulate public opinion.

1. Mixing up the essence and spirit of release of political prisoners with normal legal process of pardoning and clemency indicate the regime's disingenuous position.
2. Releasing political prisoners as part of a peace building process is entirely different from ordinary pardons and clemency. Ethiopians had a bitter memory of the 2005 election crisis that led to the imprisonment of the elected parliamentarians and other CUD members. In ordinary pardons, the individual or group has/have made a mistake, acknowledges the mistake and commits not to do it again. In the Ethiopian case, the pardoned individuals were forced to sign papers under duress, and eventually abandon politics, and the parties were made dysfunctional. When a political prisoner is released as part of a peace process, the release is often followed by negotiation. It is part of a conflict resolution mechanism. Prime Minister Hailemariam did not name the individuals nor did he suggest that there will be a formal negotiation in regards to moving the country forward into a post conflict political and economic order. In short the release of some political prisoners will neither stop the mass protests nor will it convince armed groups to lay down their arms.

3. Maekelawi is not the only torture chamber of the TPLF/EPRDF: TIBIBIR welcomes the conversion of Maekelawi prison chamber into a museum. However, the Prime Minister's statement is factually inaccurate in that many human rights abuses have been committed in the same prison by the TPLF security forces. Its closure, therefore, has much to do with a public relation exercise and destroying incriminating evidence rather than concern for human rights. Converting prisons to something else is not new. For example, the African Union building in Addis Ababa is located at the old prison, and many other old prisons internationally have been converted to other uses. It is important that the closure is preceded by forensic investigation of tortures and extra judicial killings during the terror reign of the TPLF. Several high-ranking members of the TPLF, who later became dissidents, have indicated that the TPLF uses several secret prison cells scattered all over the country, reminiscent of the Soviet gulags. The torcher chambers and gross violation of human rights and crimes against humanity did not exist without the full knowledge and approval of the defense and intelligence cluster of the TPLF/EPRDF government. If the regime is serious about closing its torture chambers and seeking reconciliation, the TPLF must reveal those secret torture chambers and mass graves. TPLF/EPRDF must cleanse itself of its bad apples and give chance to its reformist wing (if any). Holding these important reservations and reminders, TIBIBIR, as an umbrella of 25 Ethiopian Civic Organizations, welcomes the statement by Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn regarding the intention to release political prisoners and to close the notorious Maekelawi detention center (A.K.A., torcher chamber).

4. However, **It is the firm stand of TIBIBIR that ALL political prisoners, prisoners of conscience, journalists and rights activists that are languishing in different prisons and torture centers in Ethiopia be released immediately and without any precondition. This first step should be followed up with official recognition of those innocent Ethiopians who suffered brutal imprisonment and torture for exercising their basic political and human rights. It is also important that these Ethiopians get justice and those who committed human rights violations and torture be held accountable for the crimes they have committed.**

Whereas the release of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience is the first step in the long process of building national reconciliation and managing restorative justice, the gravity of the current crisis in Ethiopia demands for comprehensive measures and inclusive processes. The urgent need for building national consensus and building the foundation for inclusive, fair, and free political space requires collective effort to address all the issues that have bedeviled our country and undertake principled negotiation and consultation across the country. This is necessary because TPLF/EPRDF's attempt to resolve the crisis by the use of force has failed. The slogan throughout the county is "Down Down Woyanne!". Neither open nor de facto State of Emergency has diminished the resistance to minority rule. The country has reached a point where the conflict cannot be resolved without long and arduous conflict resolution process. It is evident that all the parties to the conflict must be involved in the process.

TIBIBIR encourages those in the Front to have the courage to see and embrace the political reality our country finds itself. We are also ready to do our part.

TIBIBIR calls on the ruling party to repeal its draconian laws such as the "anti-terrorism law," "Charities and Societies Law", restrain its military from wanton destruction and allow independent investigation into the cause of the mass human displacements in the country.

**TIBIBIR strongly calls for all Ethiopians and friends of Ethiopia to facilitate the establishment of a transitional administrative arrangement in which ALL parties, movements, civic organizations, intellectuals, and the wider public would be involved to build the foundation for sustainable peace, the rule of law, democratic institutions, and the formation of a democratically elected, representative, and accountable government in Ethiopia.** This is the most plausible and practical long-term solution to address the various and complex political, social, and economic challenges of Ethiopia. **We also call upon each member of the EPRDF to recognize the inevitability of system-wide change and stand on the right side of history by facilitating the smooth and peaceful transition from within, and set the stage for the birth of a democratic, just, inclusive and peaceful Ethiopia.**

**LONG LIVE ETHIOPIA AND ETHIOPIAWINNET!!!**