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February 18, 2021

Embassy and Permanent Mission of the State of Eritrea  
Rue de Lausanne 80,  
1202 Geneva, Switzerland

Transmitted via email.

## Re: Alleged Violations of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law in Axum, Tigray

Dear First Secretary Adem Osman,

I am writing on behalf of Human Rights Watch to share with you the preliminary findings of our research documenting the shelling, looting, pillaging, and extrajudicial killings of civilians allegedly by Ethiopian and Eritrean armed forces in Axum town in Tigray between November 19 and November 29, 2020, and to request your response to several questions below.

Human Rights Watch is an international nongovernmental organization that documents human rights abuses by states and non-state armed groups in more than 100 countries around the world. For several decades, we have conducted research and advocacy on a range of rights issues in Eritrea and the Horn of Africa more broadly.

Human Rights Watch strives to reflect all perspectives in our research and publications. Therefore, we would appreciate your response in writing by February 23, 2021, to the questions below to ensure your views are reflected in our reporting and any other information that will shed light on these events.

### Preliminary Findings

Between December 2020 and February 2021, Human Rights Watch researchers interviewed 19 victims of abuses, their relatives, and witnesses about Ethiopian and Eritrean military operations in Axum, Tigray. Witnesses said that shelling on November 19, 2020 killed and displaced civilians. In the days that followed, residents said that Eritrean forces pillaged civilian property, hospitals, and government buildings and banks, while Ethiopian federal forces did not intervene to prevent or stop the acts from taking place, with some soldiers participating in the destruction and looting of property.

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Our research also indicates that Ethiopian forces left Axum on November 26, and that more Eritrean forces arrived on November 27 and set up a base at a technical college located on Mai Kuho hill in Axum. On November 28, a group of 10 to 30 Tigrayan militia members from surrounding villages, as well as youth from Axum town attacked Eritrean forces at May Kuho hill, where they exchanged gunfire until the afternoon. Eritrean forces called for reinforcements, pushed back the attackers, and then attacked Axum town's civilians in apparent retaliation for the attack. Young men and boys were the primary targets of extrajudicial killings by the Eritrean forces, but not the only victims. Eritrean forces killed scores of Axum's residents during door-to-door house searches, as well as individuals found out on the streets until November 29.

Eritrean forces allegedly refused to allow the community to bury the dead, with bodies left out between November 28 and 29, and apparently rounded up hundreds of young men in Axum, including those sheltering in Saint Mary's Church, temporarily holding them in at least three different sites and threatening retaliation if there was further resistance. Residents said that Ethiopian federal forces returned to the town with officials from Addis Ababa on November 30, Saint Mary's Day, and permitted burials to proceed.

We would appreciate the Eritrean government's answers to the following questions in as much detail as possible and any other information that will shed light on the attacks in Axum town and subsequent investigations.

1. According to our findings, Ethiopian and Eritrean forces jointly entered and captured Axum town on November 19, 2020. Please describe or explain the role and decision-making authority of Eritrean forces in military operations in Tigray, particularly following the capture of Axum town during the period covered by our research.
2. Please explain the rules of engagement or orders Eritrean forces were operating under in Ethiopia to limit civilian casualties and prevent or stop abuses such as the looting and pillaging of Axum and other towns in Tigray from taking place.
3. Please describe whether the Eritrean government has taken steps to identify, investigate, or prosecute Eritrean military personnel responsible for alleged war crimes in Tigray, particularly allegations of the involvement of Eritrean forces in the pillaging and extrajudicial killings of mainly young men and boys in the context of military operations in the region in November 2020?

We kindly request that you can communicate your response to me by **February 23, 2021**. I can be reached at ---

Human Rights Watch is continuing to monitor and document the human rights situation in Tigray and would also be pleased to discuss our research findings and broader human rights issues with you or your staff at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Laetitia Bader  
Horn of Africa director,  
Africa division, Human Rights Watch