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Carol Monaghan MP

House of Commons

London

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18 January 2021

Dear Carol,

Thank you for your correspondence of 16 December to the Foreign Secretary about the conflict in Tigray Province, Ethiopia. I am replying as the Minister for Africa.

We are concerned about the continuing violence in Tigray region and its impact on neighbouring countries, including Eritrea. We are deeply worried about the risks the conflict poses to civilian lives. We are pressing all parties involved to secure immediate humanitarian access and ensure the restoration of basic services.

We are also concerned about the risk these events pose to Ethiopia's overall stability, its democratic transition and the implementation of a democratising political reform programme - of which the UK has been supportive. The risk that the conflict becomes regionalised, drawing neighbouring countries into the fighting and forcing movements of refugees across borders, is also of grave concern.

The Foreign Secretary spoke with Prime Minister Abiy on 10 November and called for the immediate de-escalation of violence, for the protection of civilians and for unfettered humanitarian access. He reiterated these messages when he met Ethiopian Deputy Prime Minister Demeke on 25 November. I also stressed these points when I had a call with Ethiopian Finance Minister, Ahmed Shide on 16 December and when I spoke with the Ethiopian Ambassador in London on 18 November. I have also called publicly for unfettered humanitarian access, in my tweet of 9 December. Our Ambassador in Addis Ababa continues to engage across the Ethiopian leadership in support of these objectives.

The UK continues to liaise closely with a wide range of regional and international partners in support of these objectives. The Foreign Secretary spoke on 16 November with Foreign Minister Pandor of South Africa, communicating our support of President Ramaphosa's efforts towards a political solution. He also discussed approaches with

his French and German counterparts in Berlin on 23 November, with President Kenyatta of Kenya on 24 November, and with Prime Minister Hamdok of Sudan on 12 November. I also reiterated our concerns about the need for an urgent peaceful settlement in Tigray when I spoke with Foreign Minister Kutesa of Uganda on 26 November, and raised the situation in Ethiopia, and the role Ethiopia plays in regional stability, with the Governments of Somalia and Kenya during my visit to those two countries on 9 and 10 December. The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, James Cleverly MP, has done similarly with counterparts in the Gulf. The situation also remains under consideration by the United Nations Security Council.

We are very concerned at reports that Eritrean troops have entered Ethiopian refugee camps in Tigray and forced a number of refugees to return to Eritrea. If proven, this would be a serious violation of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Alleged violations of IHL must be investigated to secure respect for IHL and prevent future violations, including as necessary through international criminal tribunals.

The British Ambassador in Eritrea raised these questions with the Eritrean Foreign Minister on 2 December, who denied that Eritrea is involved militarily in the conflict and categorically denied that Eritrean forces had forcibly returned Eritrean refugees to Eritrea. He also stated that there are no Ethiopian refugees in Eritrea. Due to the ongoing restricted access for humanitarian agencies, it has not yet been possible to fully corroborate these reports.

The UK has been consistent in calling for free and unfettered humanitarian access. We welcome news of an ICRC convoy arriving in Mekele over the weekend of 12/13 December.

The UK is working closely with humanitarian organisations to make sure aid reaches civilians affected by the fighting. UK-funded aid agencies in Tigray are working hard to deliver support in challenging circumstances, including shelter, water and healthcare. Nick Dyer, UK Special Envoy on Famine Prevention and Humanitarian Affairs, visited Ethiopia from 14 – 15 December to push for humanitarian access to Tigray and to highlight deteriorating food insecurity across Ethiopia. We continue to track the situation and raise the importance of respect for human rights with the Government of Ethiopia and regional leaders on all sides. It is our hope that a resolution is forthcoming, and the UK is engaging with Ethiopian and international partners at the highest level to facilitate this.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James Duddridge', written over a horizontal line.

James Duddridge MP
Minister for Africa