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The Global Society of Tigray Scholars
and Professionals (GSTS)[1]

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- **UN Secretariat of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF)**

Call to IGF and UN DESA Leadership and Members to Rescind the Meeting in Ethiopia

We write to you on behalf of over 7 million people in Tigray who have been silenced, isolated suffocated, and are suffering immeasurably out of sight of the rest of the world for two years because of the systematic communication siege imposed by the Ethiopian government and its allies. This internet and telecommunications shutdown in the Tigray region of Ethiopia is the longest and most devastating in history.

We wish to express our deepest disappointment at the IGF Secretariat's decision to choose the Ethiopian government to host the 17th IGF annual meeting, including government officials in the list of panellists and the lack of effort to include voices that are critical of the government. It is appalling that these decisions were not reversed or adjusted despite the repeated reservations and criticism expressed by the IGF community during the several procedural steps and in the strict assessment.

We believe that the internet shutdown in Tigray and its consequences represent an affront to everything the IGF stands for, including its objective to foster the sustainability, robustness, security, stability and development of the internet. It runs directly counter to the IGF's efforts to close the digital divide and to realise the promise of accelerated economic and social development that closing the divide would bring.

With this in mind, GSTS would like to sincerely request the UN DESA, the IGF leadership and the IGF community to take urgent measures to rescind this shocking decision by:
1. Relocating the venue of the IGF annual meeting to another country where the internet is not being weaponized to hide heinous atrocities amounting to war of crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide;

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[1]GSTS is a 501(C) and 33/2011 legally registered non-partisan and autonomous Global Knowledge Network of over 5,000 Tigray Scholars and Professionals aimed at creating Knowledge-based economy and society in Tigray, and beyond. It stands for academia, multidisciplinary and cross sectoral research and applied policy development, human capital development, fostering and advancing science, technology, and innovation, technology and knowledge transfer, youth and gender development, migration and displacement, and other educational and development related endeavors. It also works in educational advocacy and collaborates with various stakeholders towards promoting peace, good governance, human rights, and humanitarian activities.

2. Disinviting Ethiopian government officials and individuals who publicly support, enable, and condone the internet and telecommunication shutdown in Tigray;
3. Publicly calling upon the Ethiopian government to immediately and completely restore all basic services, including internet, telecommunication, electricity, transport, banking services and trade in Tigray;
4. Considering creative ways to platform and amplify the voices of silenced minorities in Ethiopia by engaging with community groups and advocacy bodies. This can include facilitating secure digital participation by researchers and human rights advocates representing minority and silenced groups who would otherwise not be represented or feel safe to take part in a meeting held under the auspices of the Ethiopian government; and
5. Allocating adequate time to discuss the continued violations in Ethiopia, including the weaponization of the internet, which is severely affecting the Tigray people and other various population groups.
6. Pulling all levers of pressure on the Ethiopian government to immediately lift the digital siege and reconnect the isolated people of Tigray with the rest of the world.

As has been reported by UN Secretary-General and countless international media outlets, international human rights organisations and UN agencies, the Ethiopian government has effectively cut off the people of Tigray from communications networks and vital services including electricity, banking services, transport, food, fuel, medicine and other essential ingredients indispensable for survival for two years now, since the war was declared and launched by the Ethiopia government and its allies on the 4th of November, 2020. The blanket and prolonged shutdown of all means of communication including the internet, and fixed or mobile telephone lines in Tigray constitutes what the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called (A/HRC/50/55) rightly a 'digital siege'. As the UN body makes clear, the internet shutdown deeply affects many human rights protected under international human rights laws including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Furthermore, the blanket, systematic and prolonged shutdown does not meet the fundamental requirements of necessity and proportionality under international law.

The shutdown of all means of communication in Tigray also violates other relevant international and regional frameworks including the Sustainable Development Goals. UN Resolution on the Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet (A/HRC/RES/38/7), condemning internet shutdowns, and the African Commission Resolution on the Right to Freedom of Information and Expression on the Internet in Africa (ACHPR/Res.362(LIX)2016). According to the recent report (A/HRC/51/46) by the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE, the Commission), it makes abundantly clear that the Ethiopian government has used rape as a weapon of war, and starvation of the civilian population as a method of warfare. Specifically, the Commission also concludes that many of the indicators and triggers contained in the 2014 UN Framework for Analysis of Atrocity Crimes are present in Ethiopia today, including but not limited to, the imposition of strict controls on communication channels, including internet shutdowns.

This prolonged and systematic communication siege is causing incalculable damage to the people of Tigray, including but not limited to vital services, businesses, emergency response, information flow for humanitarian and other responses, critical administrative operations, and most importantly severely undermines a range of human rights violations. In addition, it has not only disconnected millions in Tigray from their families abroad inflicting immeasurable psychological and emotional trauma but also continues to hinder even those in close proximity from connecting.

The blackout has aided perpetrators of human rights violations by giving a cover and causing helplessness amongst survivors of multiple complexities including cultural, heritage and ethnic cleansing, widespread Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) and rape, extrajudicial executions of civilians; mass arrest, forced disappearance, heavy indiscriminate shelling and aerial bombing including using armed drones, systematic destruction of the Tigrayan economy and livelihoods, systematic siege and humanitarian blockade, and deliberate and long interruption of basic services, state-sponsored inflammatory and dehumanizing rhetoric against Tigrayans, massive internal displaced persons (IDPs), systematic destruction and pillage of UNESCO registered and other heritage and cultural sites, places of worship, and more. While putting the people of Tigray in the dark, the government also weaponised the internet to disseminate mis/disinformation. The internet has been used by high government officials including the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, for their mis/disinformation campaigns dehumanising Tigrayans, spreading hate speech and inciting violence and genocide against the people of Tigray.

As indicated in the Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation (A/74/821), the 17th IGF meeting will discuss strategic and urgent issues relating to the internet. If the sealing off of an entire population from the world for two years, in times of intertwined crisis (pandemic, war, and starvation) is not an urgent issue for the IGF, what would be? The IGF also aims in the 17th annual meeting to increase its efforts to draw upon the 'weak and missing voices' in the IGF's work. The IGF would fail to achieve this objective if it were to ignore the silenced voices of the more than seven million people of Tigray.

We also believe that choosing a country that has imposed the world's longest communication blackout betrays everything that the IGF and its national, regional and youth initiatives stand for. The decision runs counter to this year's overarching IGF theme 'Resilient Internet for a shared sustainable and common future' and all the remaining sub-themes (including Connecting All People and Safeguarding Human Rights, Avoiding Internet Fragmentation, Governing Data and Protecting Privacy and Enabling Safety, Security and Accountability), and the selected workshops (including but not limited to WS #70, WS #292, WS #395, WS #214, WS #482).

We, therefore, appeal to the UN Secretariat of the IGF, and relevant actors including Members of the Multi-stakeholder Advisory Group, IGF Leadership Panel, Regional and National IGFs, and the internet community in general to reconsider the decision to hold the 17th Annual Meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and call on the Ethiopian government to end the digital siege on Tigray. Moreover, we urge the IGF community to hold the Ethiopian government accountable for the horrendous crimes it has committed and continues to commit against the people of Tigray.

CC:
o   Members of the Multi-stakeholder Advisory Group (MAG)
o   IGF Leadership Panel
o   African Internet Governance Forum
o   African School of Internet Governance (AfriSig)
o   Internet Society (ISOC)
o   Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
o   Access Now
o   Article 19
o   Internews
o   Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)
o   Freedom House
o   The African Network Information Centre (AFRINIC)