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Ethiopian Catholic Church

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Ref.

**The Cry of the people on the CROSS with Jesus**

**“MY GOD MY GOD WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME (MT 27:46).”**

## **I. Introduction**

As a country, Ethiopia has been experiencing spiraling conflicts for the last two years consecutively. Consequently, the unrelenting and nerve breaking conflicts has impacted quite heavily on people from all walks of life most especially in the affected areas. Basically, **two Eparchies** (ecclesial jurisdictions) which geographically lie in the northern part of the Ethiopia bore the brunt of the insurgence of wars and conflicts. Both **Adigrat** and **Bahir Dar-Dessie** (which includes Afar and Benishangul Gumuz) were the two Eparchies heavily affected by the war. This comprises four Regional Governments (**Amhara, Tigray, Afar** and **Benishangul Gumuz**). The result of the two years war was visible both socially and economically as infrastructure worthy Billions of dollars was destroyed, damaged or reduced to pulp. Some of the infrastructure that was affected or reduced to debris include schools, hospitals...and Church structures and properties. After two years of harrowing conflict, the Federal Government of Ethiopia and TPLF reached a truce that propelled to the signing of a peace agreement in Pretoria, South Africa, (Nov. / 2022). The peace agreement was a big relief to the people of the two Eparchies and a remarkable beacon of hope for a peaceful and brilliant future for all Ethiopians. Hardly a year after the signing of the peace agreement, a new conflict has broken up between the Federal Government Army and a group that is popularly known as **FANNO** in the Amhara Region. The war broke out in all the major towns of the region at once and persisted for almost three weeks consistently until the government intervened and managed to control the situation.

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When the war broke out suddenly I was in Addis Ababa attending a meeting and had to cancel every plan I had and fly back to **Bahirdar** to be with the people and reaching home from the airport was on foot and so dangerous. Thank God that I managed to navigate my way home and arrived safely. When the war broke out number of priests who were out of the Eparchy for different pastoral reasons before the conflict remained locked out where they were for a longer period. Likewise, some seminarians, deacons, and pastoral agents from **Debre-Markos** on their way to Bahir-Dar were forced to spend few nights in the car and on the way hiding somewhere after coming across active fighting. As the war began, the Eparchy was having a group of youth leaders and lay leaders who were participating in a training sessions were constrained to remain in the bishops' house for three weeks more as the conflict continued in many areas of the region and had to wait until roads were relatively peaceful. This was a big challenge to the Eparchy as we had no resources at hand to feed them.

In this short period of time so many lives were lost, many displaced, and many properties damaged and destroyed. More than anything else people are so much affected emotionally, economically and socially. We all live under continuous fear. However, there are still some towns that are not yet fully free from security threats and not controlled by the Government (Ethiopian Defense Army).

## **II. The impact of the conflict in the Eparchy of Bahir-Dar Dessie**

1. **Shortage of Basic needs:** The insurgence of the conflict between the **Federal Government Forces** and **FANNO** has largely affected the neighboring **Regional Governments** of **Afar** and **Metekel Zone** of **Benshangul Gumuz**, both of which are geographically within the boundaries of the **Eparchy of Bahir-Dar**. As it were, the conflict was unexpected and a big shock that caught everyone by surprise. Most of the people did not have extra food in their houses so as the conflict intensified many households ran short of food and other basic items. In some areas water pipes ran dry while in other areas people experienced lasting power failure. Since there was no food coming to the city from the farming areas, the little that sneaked to the market was three times more expensive than usual. As days went by, the fighting escalated to different squares of the city hence making it completely inaccessible.

2. **Limited movement:** People remained in their houses for some days during the active conflicts in the regional especially in big towns including Bahirdar town and the only way to purchase some food for those who could manage was through the black market whereby the prices of food items was extremely high and unaffordable, and the cost of items tripped immediately.
3. As the conflict escalated, **orphans and HIV carriers youth** who are scattered in four towns (**Gondar, Bahir Dar, Debremarkos and Debretabor** and **little number in other small towns**) mainly depend on us for their daily upkeep ran short of food. These orphans are around **56 boys** and girls who are living by their own in rented houses. Having no other way to survive, they constantly requested the support of the Church for food and/or financial support. People living in surroundings of Church and Church office were approaching us to ask for the same and since they were many who needed our help we only managed to assist those we could. The experience of people seeking for safety and food in Church compound was experienced across the board in almost all our parishes in the Amhara Region.

### **III. Financial constraints as a consequence of the conflict**

1. Since the conflict was unexpected, the needs have been financially overstretching beyond our previous yearly budgets. As a consequence of the harrowing conflict, the following institutions of the Eparchy are heavily affected financially: the Bishop's House in Bahir-Dar, St. Joseph's Parish and school in Debremarkos, and St. Mary's Parish in Debreselem and the Arbaba Church communities in Gondar, In Dibati, St. Michael's Parish and Hostel, Mary mother of the Church and Madura Holy savior Parish at Gilgel beles and Gublac Blessed Dawdo and Jildo Parish of the First Evangelization areas.
2. **The Gumuz** People who left their houses and who sheltered themselves in the forests for safety during the previous conflicts came back to their villages out of the forest and when they came back they have found out that their houses were burned down. The Priests working at the Parishes in Gumuz Territory were trying to assist and tried to distribute food when it was possible. Security situation in the area is not yet fully secured.

3. In **Kobo**, the **Ursuline Sisters** have been experiencing hardships and financial problems for the last one year since their house was totally looted during the previous war. The Eparchy is currently stepping in, to assist them, so that they can find a funder to help them facilitate both community and apostolic duties.
4. Besides, the Eparchy was compelled to evacuate several pastoral agents together with some members of their flock to safer places including Addis Ababa by air, since the roads are blocked due to lack of security.
5. **Debremarkos**: In particular a **Catholic Elementary School of St. Joseph's Parish in Debremarkos** has to continue paying salary for teachers and staff members without collecting school fees from parents, for the school is closed due to the ongoing conflict in the area and inside the town. At the same time this town uniquely remained locked from any contact with other zones of the region starting the month of August until today. Within itself, internally there was nonstop fighting and mobility was totally affected. This situation has heavily affected the living situation our faithful and the priest and the Missionary of Charity Sisters and affected the pastoral and social work of the Church in the town of Debre Markos.

#### **IV. Pastoral challenges because of the conflict**

1. During the conflict it has been quite challenging to carry out our usual pastoral duties since it is not possible for us to move out freely. Likewise, the people have not been able to move freely so both pastoral and sacramental activities are currently paralyzed.
2. The Eparchy had previously planned to ordain two deacons to the Order of Priesthood but due to security reasons, we had to decide to ordain them outside of the Eparchy at the Vicariate of **Jimma Bonga** with the agreement of the Local Ordinary. This new and unexpected arrangement was an extra financial burden on the Eparchy.
3. All pastoral activities which need our attention are affected and we cannot attend any pastoral needs of our parishes in this very vast eparchy due to the conflict situation which erupts here and there until nowadays.

## **V. The serious challenges that our communities are currently facing in the Eparchy**

- 1. Terrible Drought:** on one side the conflict has affected people's daily life but most importantly drought has seriously affected some areas in our Eparchy where lives are lost and children and elderly are suffering malnutrition. Many animals have been killed during the conflicts. It did not rain for the last one year. Localities bordering Tigray Region like: in **Sekotta** and the whole of **Waghimra** and **Tsegebgi Zones**, in general **North Wolo** and **South Gondar are seriously affected**. Some parts of the Region of **Afar, Metekel Zone in Benishangul Gumuz Region is suffering of the same situation**.
- 2. Economical Challenge:** due to the insecurity of the roads the only available access between our main cities and Addis Ababa is by air. This has brought additional economic burden for us as we had to pay air tickets to all movements of pastoral agents and including seminarians.
- 3. Communication:** For the last four months we have been operating without internet, a situation that has radically complicated our office daily functions and operations. For us to send urgent information or to facilitate our projects and reports, we are obliged to purchase air tickets for some of our staff members to go to Addis where internet is accessible; and this has been very expensive for us.
- 4. Livelihood:** Due to persistent and harsh conflicts in the region, the cost of living has also doubled in some places hence creating scarcity of essential food items in the market, shortage of fuel, and unaffordable food prices. However, in the past few weeks we have not heard any information about fighting. We pray that peace will be achieved soon.

## **VI. Conclusion**

So far, no political agreement has been struck between the Federal Government and the FANNO as a guarantee of lasting peace, but it is our hope that some peace agreement will possibly come soon. In addition, fighting is still raging in some areas of the region, and we are not sure when the guns shall be silent. Most of the main roads connecting the city with the rural areas are still blocked

and not yet safe for travel, so it is not possible for us to reach out to some of our pastoral frontiers. Given the above devastating circumstances, we are not yet fully engaged in our apostolic works and duties as we wish and desire, but we have our heads up high and our eyes immersed into the skies for God to intervene and grant peace and sobriety to the region. As people of God, we trust in Him that sooner or later things will get better, then, we will get access to reach out the affected communities and the vulnerable. At this time, I desperately need your kind supports and solidarity by being with the Eparchy of Bahir Dar – Dessie and give your due attention in responding to the great needs of the society both pastorally and to humanitarian needs by giving priority. **In this view, I kindly appeal to your organization to support both pastoral and humanitarian needs in the Eparchy in whatever possible ways you can, as soon as possible before things get out of hand.**

**As Jesus says in Mt: 25: 40; “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did to me.”**

Thanking you in Advance for your kind attention and consideration in this critical time. Let us be united in prayer asking the Lord, the King of Peace, for his intervention to give us lasting peace.

Yours in Jesus and Mary



**+Abba Lesanuchristos Matheos**  
**Bishop of the Eparchy of Bahirdar-Dessie**

