



ethiopian enterprises

Newsletter July 2021

“The Pen Is Mightier Than The Sword”



Dear Friends of Ethiopian Enterprises

It will come as no surprise to you when we say that the Ethiopian region of Tigray and its neighbouring towns in Amhara have been in a state of political and economic chaos since our last Newsletter. What may come as a surprise, however, is that the TPLF itself (Tigray Peoples Liberation Front) is largely responsible for this situation. Contrary to many misinformed press reports, the behaviour of TPLF leaders, their soldiers and followers even towards other non-TPLF Tigrinians, has been atrocious.

Since Lesley's return from Tigray in March, we have had daily telephone contact with Tigray or, when this was no longer possible, at least with our well informed project manager in various locations in Amhara. Lesley has just returned from her latest trip to the Ethiopian capital Addis Abeba where she was involved in helping some of our scholarship students settle into their first year at the University of Addis Abeba. She also initiated and attended meetings with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on behalf of the thousands of displaced Tigrinians from our region who are currently seeking shelter in Amhara. This Newsletter is based on both her eye-witness reports and the accurate and updated information she collected from other players in the story.

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EE scholarship students receive our support in Addis Abeba

In our last Newsletter we reported that the majority of our 12th grade scholarship students had been rewarded for their courage. When the TPLF sent 12th-grade students and their parents threats per SMS in February saying that the students would be killed by the Ethiopian National Defence Forces if they attended their 12th-grade national exams, the students nevertheless braved these threats to travel to their exams. Fake threats like these have been part of an insidious and ongoing destabilization campaign carried out in Tigray over the past 8 months by the TPLF and their followers. They are scary even when more educated people realise that they are unlikely to be true.

„The TPLF sent the students and their parents threats per SMS, saying that they would be killed by the ENDF“

The students were accompanied by a school principle and EE manager Melkamu Abate to the regional exam center at the university in the town of Maychew back in mid-March. Their determination inspired over 100 other 12th-grade students from Mehoni and Cher Cher to attend the exams as well. You may remember that we financed the journey to Maychew and exam stationary costs for all these students, as well as food before the university campus cafeteria opened to provide their meals for the exam week.

Eight of our ten 12th-grade scholarship students who sat for their exams received sufficiently high scores to be accepted to universities around Ethiopia. Harignesh Teketay, one of our two privately sponsored female 12th graders, was accepted to Hawasa

University in southern Ethiopia where another EE sponsored student is in his second year. This has been helpful as he has been able to show her around and to provide her with various information. Our other female 12th-grade graduate, Fireweini Zinabu, will attend teachers' training college as soon as training colleges in Tigray reopen.

Harignesh Teketay



Five of the male students in our program passed their 12th-grade exams well enough to be accepted to the prestigious University of Addis Abeba Science and Technology Faculty.

They had to sit for a special entrance exam at the university three weeks ago and we are delighted to report that they all passed. They have joined their classes which had already begun, and Lesley spent the weekend of 10th/11th July with them in Addis Abeba. Her report follows.

'Melkamu and I met with the boys at the Bekelech Hotel in Addis. This is a 'new' find for me, a stately building with Italian-influenced balconies which is hidden in a quieter back street off the main road. The rooms are very clean, almost everything worked, and it costs 30% of other tourist hotels we have used in Addis. There were no other tourists in the hotel but then I only saw one other white face during my entire stay in Addis. Ethiopia is not a favourite tourist destination right now.



Five of the male students in our program are now enrolled in the prestigious University of Addis Abeba Science and Technology Faculty

"There are no shelters for people, why would we shelter animals?"

The only troubling thing was the howling of ownerless dogs in the street at night. There are hundreds of them which are clearly visible during the daytime lying on footpaths in groups or on the concrete dividers of the main roads. It is pitiful and I found this deeply upsetting.

When I asked a driver whether there were no shelters for animals in Addis Abeba, he laughed in amazement. 'There are no shelters for people, why would we shelter animals?' was his reply. However, we have since investigated and learned that there is work being carried out for these animals by the volunteer organization AAP: Addis Animal Program.

"The Pen Is Mightier Than the Sword"

For our meeting the hotel manager gave us the use of the hotel's larger conference room so we had plenty of space to spread out our materials. We started the morning with a general chat during which we passed on the message sent to the students by EE president Thomas Baumann containing the English proverb: 'The pen is mightier than the sword.' The students loved those seven words, especially at this precarious time. Most of them have had no contact with their relatives for weeks because phones in Tigray remain blocked, and they can neither send nor receive money as all accounts registered in Tigray in the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia have been frozen. While there are understandable reasons for this extreme measure by the central government, it is causing financial chaos for millions.

The boys enjoyed a platter of fruit and biscuits, and were very excited to try cherries and peaches for the first time. We also had chocolate for them which they love. Then they received bags of

much-needed stationary materials collected and donated by Family Matters Switzerland and the volunteer group at GE Electric. Addis Abeba is currently in the midst of its wet season and is very cold. So our students were very happy to receive warm hoodie jackets as well as hygiene articles including masks and hand disinfectant.

We then interviewed each boy individually so that we could prepare our sponsor updates. We are truly grateful to all our student sponsors for their patience in connection with these updates. The civil war has made it impossible for EE board members to see students in Mehoni for several months, and the task of ensuring that students receive their allowances each month has been left for the past half year to Melkamu Abate. The students' gratitude in their interviews was very clear and was especially well illustrated by the comments of our pilot program student Haile Tsegay.

Four years later a dream has come true for him, the dream of being able to attend university.

Haile was one of the pilot group of the Ethiopian Enterprises scholarship program sponsored by the Lotte and Adolf Hotz-Sprenger Foundation. We can well remember the desperate and nervous young man who we interviewed at Mehoni High School in August 2017 for the first year of the program. He had just become an orphan after losing his father, and was sharing a room in Mehoni with two schoolmates. He had no money at all and his friends were covering his share of the rent and trying to persuade him to stay on at school. Four years later, a dream has come true for him, the dream of being able to attend university.



Haile Tsegay and Hayelom Mesfin

We have followed Haile's path closely since he entered the program as we were concerned about him. His development has been amazing. He has shown true grit and huge courage, especially in the past 18 months, continuing to study for himself during nearly a year of lockdown prior to his final 12th-grade exams.

Determined to succeed, he faced danger during the civil war in leaving Tigray to travel to Addis in early July to begin his studies. Even the threat of death did not deter him.

Haile is incredibly proud to have made it to university after the low times he experienced earlier, describing himself at the time we met him as 'hopeless'. At our interview he tearfully thanked EE, the Lotte and Adolf Hotz-Sprenger Foundation and especially our manager Melkamu who has been a great support for him. It was Melkamu who organized for the boys to be permitted to take a separate, late university entrance exam, and it was he who handled their registrations for university. Having a project manager who is himself a university graduate and former university

lecturer, and who knows the leading university cities of Addis Abeba, Bahir Dar and Mekelle, has had huge advantages for our program and for our scholarship students. He has not shied away from any task to help these students, and their respect and affection for him as a friend and 'father figure' is huge.

Haile is sharing a room on campus with three other boys, one of whom is another student from the pilot program, Hayelom Mesfin. Both the other Mehonians in their room were also given some stationary and a provisional scholarship allowance for the next two months. By then it will be clear if they are able to keep up in their class and whether they fulfil the strict academic criteria we have in place for full scholarship recipients.

During the interviews, it became clear that the boys had further problems in their rooms. Some of them had managed to buy a sheet or blanket with their first semester allowance, but with their bank accounts frozen this had not been

really happy that the extremely heavy rain stopped for the duration of our journey back to the hotel with this load. All of our students are now sleeping snugly and we ensured that other boys in their rooms were also provided with bedding. Those who already had any bedding items agreed to pass them on to other students in their classes who had nothing. This is particularly important in Ethiopia where envy is a huge issue to be recognized and handled carefully.

At lunchtime, we ate in a nearby habesha restaurant (serving indigenous food only). Most of the boys ordered huge platters of so-called ‘fasting food’ which is all made without eggs,

meat or milk products. Along with the Ethiopian bread known as injera, the platter is served with chick-pea puree, beetroot, cabbage and potato salads, lentil mousse, and other healthy and delicious foods. I had never seen such platters disappear so quickly and we had to reorder soon after the boys started. They admitted that the food on campus was served in very small portions and that they were often hungry. As they cannot access their allowances to buy extra food, fruit, etc., we ensured that they each received some additional cash to cover the coming days or weeks until their accounts are reopened.



Our purchase at Addis Abeba wholesale market

possible for those who did not travel with cash reserves. They were cold at night in unheated rooms and this is a recipe for unwell students.

Melkamu and I were able to purchase bedding at a large wholesale market in Addis and, as the picture suggests, this was something of a circus. Our entire purchase was wrapped in a large sheet of canvas and carried to a taxi by three men where it was tied on the roof. I was

Melkamu and I made the mistake of taking the bedding to the campus ourselves the following day as it would have been difficult for the

students to carry this to the other side of the city on local buses. When we arrived at the designated meeting point, there was a line of unfamiliar faces awaiting us. These were Tigrayan students from the same faculty who had heard about us and the scholarships, and had come to request our help. This was difficult.



None of these students went away empty handed but it is clear that we cannot just give out scholarships to students we don't know and have not officially interviewed on the basis of our selection criteria. In two months' time we will interview those whose interim results are good and we will then seek additional sponsors for those who genuinely deserve our help.'

Again, we want to thank all our scholarship (STIP) sponsors, both private and institutional. We are proud of all our 12th-grade students, and rightly so. One student, Hiluf Abay, one of 20 students sponsored by MIMB (Mankind is our Business), placed fifth in all Tigray in the March 12th-grade exams, and privately-sponsored student Dawit Fitsum also notched up a very high score. We hope that there will be more university entrants at the end of this year. A large number of our current 12th-grade students will sit for their state exams in October. We will be informing our sponsors about them in the individual sponsor updates which we are currently preparing.

Tigrayan 'Internally Displaced People' underway in Amhara

Depending on which Newspaper you read you will likely have varying information about the events in Tigray at the end of this past June. Some reports told us that the TPLF had overcome the Ethiopian National Defence Forces and taken the city of Mekelle back under their control. Others claimed that the Ethiopian National Defence Force had withdrawn deliberately, calling for a unilateral ceasefire. From the reports we have received daily over the past three weeks, and based on information from Lesley's interviews with government members last week in Addis Abeba, the latter is certainly closer to the truth. The ENDF did not just withdraw from Mekelle,

its forces withdrew step by step from southern Tigray as well. This included the Woredas of Mehoni and Raya-Azebo which were quickly retaken by the local TPLF forces, and even the geographically strategic town of Alamata which had been returned to Amhara at the beginning of the conflict, i.e. at the end of 2020.

During the first days of their revenge campaign, TPLF soldiers and their followers killed over 70 people in and around Mehoni.

An address made to the Ethiopian nation on television by Abiy Ahmed on July 15th suggested that withdrawal of ENDF troops from Tigray at the end of June had been carried out deliberately in order to see if the TPLF would lay down their weapons and get on with returning stability to their region. We cannot say if this was the true motivation for this surprising operation, but one thing is clear. Since reassuming control over large parts of Tigray at the end of June, the TPLF have shown clearly to what extent they believe in solidarity with their own fellow Tigrayans. In and around Mehoni alone, 1'500 hundred homes of Mehonians who had not actively financed or otherwise supported the TPLF were burnt to the ground, including the homes of the members of our interim government. Hundreds of these families fled on foot to Alamata, believing that they would be safe there. EE project manager Melkamu was in Alamata at the time as the military convoy with which he had hoped to reach Mehoni at the end of June had been rerouted when the withdrawal began. He spoke to many of the displaced families who all confirmed what had happened. During the first days of their revenge campaign, TPLF soldiers and their followers killed over 70 people in Mehoni alone. These were largely not Amharans or Oromians but Muslim Mehonians or simply



other Tigrayans whose only crime was that they had not supported the TPLF.

To cut this shocking story short, we want to tell you about the concrete steps we have taken to help. It is estimated that over 30'000 people from our Woredas and those neighbouring them are now underway in Amhara. Despite the fact that we have heard that Alamata is again under central government control, these displaced people have moved further south to towns like Woldiya and Mersa out of fear of attack by the TPLF. In Mersa a shelter has been set up in the agricultural college but they lack food, water and infrastructure. Having received this information, Lesley and Melkamu went to the Addis Abeba office of the International Committee of the Red Cross. We knew that we could not solve this crisis alone and that our people needed government-funded aid.

One thing led to another. Members of the Mehoni and Raya-Azebo interim governments had also arrived in Addis Abeba to seek help for their displaced townsfolk. Following her first meeting with the ICRC, Lesley was able to take three members of the interim government group to a lengthy discussion with the Red Cross team. The latter had not had the information with which she provided them, and agreed to help within their mandate. We received an update from the ICRC Field Operations Coordinator on July 23 which informed us that trucks were leaving the following day with tents and medical supplies for Mersa and Woldiya. This is good news but does not solve the issue of food and water. We remain in daily contact with the 'Internal Displaced Persons' delegate from Mehoni who is coordinating the efforts at Mersa. While Red Cross surveys take place, the scarcity of food and water grows more critical by the day.

Mehoni Marsa Elementary School

While Lesley was in Addis she was able to speak to the builder responsible for the construction of our second school. As agreed by our board, the digging of a storm water channel on an exposed side of the new school is under way and will hopefully be completed before the heavy rains set in. Our construction leader Dawit Berhe told us that the main problem was finding workers who were prepared to carry on with the work under difficult conditions. However, so far none of his workers on site have been threatened or injured. We hope to hear further on this in the near future.

Early Learning Center at Lemlem Baro Elementary School

Until now there has been no further work carried out on this project since the outbreak of war. We are greatly hoping that once a more stable state has been reached in the town, our Mekelle construction team will return to complete this enormously important asset for Mehoni and Lemlem Baro Elementary School.

Grain allocation at Lemlem Baro Elementary School

Given the grave situation in our region in spring, the interim government of Mehoni asked us if we could concentrate our emergency support on our own school community of over 900 families. At the same time, the interim Tigray state administration had called for an official continuation of

schooling throughout Tigray. In the week of enrolment in late May, almost 900 families received a sack of grain when they brought their children back to school at Lemlem Baro. Parents were desperately grateful for the food and also reported that they were overjoyed that the schools were again reopening because they were having great problems keeping watch over their younger children when they themselves needed to work. However, a month later the Ethiopian National Defence Forces had withdrawn and Mehoni Town and its surrounding suburbs were subjected to the brutality of the TPLF. As phone connections to Mehoni and Raya-Azebo have been interrupted since then we cannot say whether schooling has continued in the past month.

As you can see, the allocation was as usual well organized and implemented by our project manager and his team.

Emergency food allocation at Lemlem Baro School



Many, many thanks

We want to thank the many individuals and organisations who have given extra support for our community during these past hugely challenging months. With your help we have been able to carry on our work at a time when it is most needed. We don't give up.

Lesley, Caroline, André und Thomas



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(anti clockwise)

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- Thomas Baumann, President and Project Leader**
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