**Eritrean Lowlanders League (ELL) Statement**

**on the Process of Rapprochement between**

 **the Ethiopian Government and the Eritrean Regime**

The Eritrean Lowlanders League has been closely and with great interest observing the changes taking place in the Ethiopian arena since the ascension of Dr. Abiy Ahmed to the premiership, and their ripple effect on neighboring countries, the Horn of Africa and beyond.

ELL’s interest on the current developments stems from its established principles announced in its manifesto document issued in March 2014, the positions in which were later reconfirmed by its founding conference that was held in July 2016.

ELL’s unwavering stand in this regard is for Eritrea to create and maintain positive relations with neighboring countries in particular, and the region and the world in general, based on common and mutual interests between all parties concerned.

Notwithstanding the historical bitterness caused by the long and fierce wars waged between the two countries, we believe that the relationship between the Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples is distinctive and deep rooted. The fact that the two peoples share many common historical, cultural, and social factors is conducive to developing their relationship in all fields of cooperation to serve their bilateral interests and enhance regional cooperation and peace within the framework of mutual respect based on mutual recognition of national interests and the sovereignty of all concerned countries.

The current developments unfolding in Ethiopia, which positively resonated with the Ethiopian people’s demands for greater democracy and reform in the economic, social, and political spheres, are a clear confirmation that no voice, no matter how high, could overwhelm the voice of the people. It is hoped that these profound changes will positively contribute to further enhance and develop the system of good governance based on realizing unity in diversity, decentralization and fair sharing of power and wealth among all stakeholders.

As we closely monitor current developments with cautious optimism, we take into consideration the importance of the Ethiopian role and its positive and/or negative impact on the general course of events in the region. And its direct impact on the future of peace, stability, and economic growth, not only on the Ethiopian people but also the peoples of the region in general, and Eritrea in particular. What concerns the constituents of the Eritrean people mainly is that the changes in Ethiopia have cross-border effects and are proceeding on the course of apparent reshuffling of the regional current setup, especially concerning the relationship with Eritrea.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed’s announcement of 5th June 2018 in which he expressed his country’s readiness to implement the peace agreement signed between the two parties in Algeria in December 2000 unconditionally, as well as his explicit full acceptance to implement the ruling of the Ethiopian-Eritrean Boundary Commission (EEBC) of April 2002, and the Eritrean regime’s subsequent positive response, have set in motion a hectic process of normalization overtures that have been accelerating at an unprecedented and worrying pace.

Driven by our firm conviction that peace between these two neighboring countries must be the norm and not the exception as it has historically been, we affirm that Ethiopia's declaration of its desire to end the state of no-war, no-peace is commendable; although late, it is a step in the right direction, and that for the following reasons:

1. Being an entitlement in compliance with international obligations that called for the implementation of the arbitration based on the Algiers’ Treaty, the outcome of which both parties had agreed in advance to abide by.
2. It ultimately serves the interest of peace and stability between the two peoples, as the state of no-war, no-peace had cost the two countries dearly in terms of lives and money, in addition to missing badly needed opportunities for economic growth, prosperity, security, and stability.
3. It also discloses and renders false and baseless, the pretexts upon on which Isaias’ regime and its supporters based the execution of a perpetual state of permanent mobilization, indefinite military recruitment. Moreover, the imposition of forced labor, continued denial of basic rights and freedoms, and postponement of all political and developmental entitlements under the pretext that all efforts and resources must be directed to the defense of the homeland. Using this false rationale, the regime sought to strengthen its iron grip and lengthen its stay in power without a mandate from the people or a constitution, continuing to rule the country under an “interim” government for almost three decades.

At this historic juncture, it is essential to remind all concerned countries in the region, including Ethiopia, of the hostile record of the regime concerning its relations with neighboring countries since it ascended to power in Eritrea:

It is understood that the defense of the homeland is a legitimate right and duty assigned to every state. However, border disputes shouldn’t be solved by resorting to war. There are many countries in the world that have border problems similar to ours, but they seek peaceful ways to solve their disputes, mainly through arbitration and by soliciting the help of international institutions. The wars instigated by the regime, under the pretext of resolving border disputes, were in reality intended to serve its own agenda and had nothing to do with protecting the sovereignty of Eritrea.

In addition to the catastrophic and meaningless Ethiopian-Eritrean border war that claimed the lives of tens of thousands on both sides, the Eritrean regime incited a war with Yemen over Hanish Islands, a dispute that resulted in unnecessary loss of lives and finally was resolved by international arbitration that ruled in favour of Yemen. The regime also invaded Eastern Sudan under the guise of supporting the Sudanese opposition. It handed over the Sudanese Embassy in Asmara to the Sudanese opposition in an unprecedented move contrary to all diplomatic norms. It also intermittently engaged in border skirmishes with Djibouti around the region of Doumeira, which was serious enough to require the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces between the two countries.

The aforementioned record shows that none of the neighboring countries could be safe from the inherently malicious nature of Isaias’ regime, no matter how developed their relations with it would be. This has been confirmed repeatedly by the regime’s adventurous and irresponsible inclination to wage unnecessary wars against all neighboring countries and its continuous, opportunistic shifting of alliances in the regional sphere.

Therefore, it is worth noting that the foreign policy of the regime, is primarily a reflection of its internal policy and its relations with the Eritrean people. Thus, the regime is incapable of achieving lasting peace, stability, and economic cooperation with others, as its neighbors may hope, for it is a regime that lacks constitutional and popular legitimacy and is bereft of tolerance. It has been in a state of continuous conflict with its own people for nearly thirty years, as it rules the country and the people by force, under the rule of fear and terror. A matter that has driven the country to the brink of security, economic and administrative collapse, and that would eventually have it slip to the ranks of failed states.

We recognize the importance and necessity for establishing security and peace for the two peoples by resolving all the outstanding problems between the two countries amicably, including the border dispute in line with the initiative of the Ethiopian Prime Minister. But we firmly believe that the Eritrean regime is unreliable and incapable of accomplishing the task of achieving lasting peace with Ethiopia. It goes without saying that one who has been the cause of wars and destruction in the region, killings, displacement of the constituents of the Eritrean people, cannot realize peace as that is fundamentally in contradiction with the nature and essence of a regime that is primarily based on national domination, hegemony, and exclusion.

It is also worth mentioning that Badme region could not have been the real reason behind the outbreak of the war. This was another false pretext by Isaias, as he hadn’t only overlooked TPLF’s control over that area but supported it during the Liberation War and seven years after Independence, in favor of the strong alliance and relations that bound the EPLF and TPLF at that time. The latter rewarded Isaias by enabling him to monopolize the Eritrean arena and realize the imposition of national domination and hegemony over the rest of the Eritrean constituents. This relationship reached its climax after liberation by signing common defense pact, security, economic and other agreements between the two parties.

In the Eritrean internal context, the implementation of the border dispute between the two neighboring countries and the restoration of relations between them, though it is important, doesn’t alleviate the grievances of the Eritrean people, as it doesn’t address the core problems of lack of fair sharing of power and wealth, and the consequent deprivation from rights and freedoms. It is necessary to restore social peace and security on the basis of adopting a consensual constitution to establish the rule of law over the people, realize freedom of expression and other liberal freedoms, release all prisoners of conscience, and make arrangements conducive to the rehabilitation and return of refugees to their places of origin. As well as the adoption of democratic measures towards the devolution of power and facilitation of meaningful public involvement in political life.

It is abundantly clear that the main objective of the Eritrean regime behind instigating wars and destabilizing the region has always been to avoid fulfilling internal entitlements of the people, while pushing ahead its project of national hegemony and exclusion, the result of which has been the high price paid by the Eritrean people at the expense of their security, stability, welfare, loss of life, displacement, deprivation from all human rights through the imposition of the monopoly of power and control and domination on all aspects of life politically, economically, and culturally.

It is inevitable to mention that the dire human rights record of the regime has been the subject of successive reports submitted by many reliable sources to the international community through its proper channels uncovering the blatant violations of human rights committed. However, the regime did not respond to any of the relevant decisions and recommendations taken to improve its human rights record. Instead, the regime is actually adamantly persisting in its violation of international resolutions and continues unhindered with impunity executing its detrimental policies of human rights violations against Eritrean national components. This in total disregard of all the reports compiled since the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Eritrea in 2012. The latest report of the Special Rapporteur, Ms. Sheila Keetharuth, on 25th June 2018 was damning. In line with that Mr. Mike Smith, Chairman of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights Inquiry in Eritrea, submitted a compelling report to the Human Rights Council on 4th June 2015, in which he stated, "The Committee concluded that gross and widespread human rights violations have been and continue to be committed by State institutions in Eritrea with total impunity.” He added, “Our findings are worrying. The many violations in Eritrea are of a magnitude and scope that has rarely been seen anywhere else in the world." All of the above is enough evidence to attest to the deteriorating situation of human rights and general conditions in Eritrea which clearly indicate that the regime is irresponsible, unreliable, and unfit to bring about real transformations leading to sustainable peace with others.

In conclusion, we remind all friendly countries, particularly Ethiopia, and all regional and international actors, that sustainable peace must be comprehensive and commensurate with major goals intended to be achieved internally and externally. In addition, it should not be at the cost of undermining any social component or to appease another as we have previously experienced. Sustainable peace is only achieved among peoples represented by democratically elected governments, a condition that is not fulfilled by the current Eritrean regime, therefore:

We call upon all international and regional players to be fair and demand that the Eritrean regime should meet the same requirements that were asked of the Ethiopian side, including fulfilling the conditions of internal political reforms aimed at advancing democracy, respecting fundamental human rights, and broadening the base of participation. Nothing of the sort has so far been required from the Eritrean regime, nor has Isaias mentioned - directly or indirectly - that he would embark on internal reforms. He hasn’t mentioned this in the speech in which he announced his acceptance of the Ethiopian initiative, nor in his speech during the visit of the Ethiopian Prime Minister or his reciprocated visit to Ethiopia.

We call on Ethiopia to stand at an equal distance from the Eritrean components and not to repeat the experience of supporting the hegemony of one component at the expense of other components. The Eritrean government has no popular support and does not rule by constitution or institutions. It depends on the fluctuating mood of the head of the regime.

On the Eritrean level, we call on all Eritrean components, political and civil organizations to be cautious about taking the developments occurring at face value. Not to get overoptimistically carried away along the line of thought presuming what is going on in Ethiopia, including the resolution of the border conflict over Badme, will positively reflect on the domestic situation in Eritrea in terms of the depth and credibility of the aspired democratic change. We also call upon all to work together, overcome differences, and focus on real change based on a clearly defined social contract for basis of the rule of law to build a nation where stability, development, security, and peace will prevail.

We reaffirm our conviction that the task of realizing change is primarily an Eritrean responsibility, while welcoming the assistance and support of external actors to achieve the above objectives to the benefit of all Eritreans.

We hope that all efforts and steps in Ethiopia will be directed towards achieving the common interests of the Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples and their aspirations for freedom, stability, progress, and prosperity, in a manner that promotes peace and cooperation among the peoples of the region.

Executive Office

Eritrean Lowlanders League (ELL)