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NEWS: TIGRAY REGION INTERIM HEALTH BUREAU HEAD ADMITS CIVILIAN DEATHS IN BATTLE TO CAPTURE MEKELLE, LOOTING OF HOSPITALS AND UNIVERSITY

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On November 29, ICRC released a report saying “Hospitals in Mekelle struggling to care for wounded as medical supplies run out; Red Cross ambulances evacuate the injured.” Picture: ICRC

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Addis Ababa December 25/2020 – In a rare interview with the Voice of America (VOA), Dr. Fasika Amdesellaise, who was serving as a surgeon at Ayider Referral Hospital in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray regional state, revealed the death of civilians in Mekelle he also said that Wukro and Adigrat hospitals were “completely looted and empty”.

Dr. Fasika Amdesellaise **has just been assigned to head** Tigray Regional State as its Interim Health bureau head. He spoke to the VOA after his assignment, becoming the first such official to speak of the damage the ongoing military operation has caused on civilians and health installations.

Dr. Fasika said he was serving as a surgeon at Ayder referral hospital during the time the national defense forces took control of Mekelle on November 28. Dr. Fasika recalled harrowing stories during the military operation. “There were two air strikes while I was performing treatment. A seven year old girl came to the hospital after sustaining a critical injury to her head. A fourth year sociology student was hit and both have died. On that Saturday they [the defense forces] controlled Mekelle, the city was bombarded with heavy artillery, many injured civilians came to the hospital in the morning during the day and at night,” he said.

In a report it released on November 29, the International Committee of the red Cross (ICRC) **released a report in which it said** hospitals in Mekelle were “struggling to care for wounded as medical supplies run out; Red Cross ambulances evacuate the injured.”



Dr. Fasika Amdesellaise. Picture VOA

The doctor continued recalling the number of casualties and injured civilians. “I witnessed 40 wounded people and 22 people were dead on arrival.” He explained that the victims are people of all ages, children, youngsters and the elderly. He recalls that electricity was cut three days after the military took control of the city. “On the day the city was shelled, we had electricity so we helped the patients as much as we could. But after electricity was cut everything was shut down. We ran out of

medicine. it was scary to move around. The people stopped coming to the hospital. Everything started getting worse.”

Dr. Fasika explained the shortage of medication such as insulin for weeks. But now the medicines are arriving and are reaching Adwa, Adigrat and Dombosco cities through the Red Cross. He also explained how the hospital he served in survived amidst an electric black out and pointed out that the community that lived around the hospital have organized and began helping the patients with biscuits and food. “The biggest challenge was the morale of the people affected. We couldn’t perform wound dressing because we didn’t have electricity. The food supply was cut short. The patients went hungry. Many patients in intensive care died because oxygen ran out.”

When asked about the responsibility he took on during these challenging times, he answered, “I was only a head of a medical school. I am not that experienced. But currently, we’re not considering politics, healthcare provision must continue despite it.” He emphasized the need to work harder to prevent further damage to healthcare, provide services, connect with people, work with the Federal Ministry of Health, NGOs, and the United Nations. “The health bureau must recover from the damage it suffered so when the university recommended me for the position, I accepted on the principle that I should do my best to provide medical treatment to those who need it.”

The doctor expressed the readiness of the federal ministry of health to provide medical supplies along with the Red Cross. Mekelle is close to returning to normalcy according to him. However, the coverage in Tigary remains very limited. He said it worries him that the bureau doesn’t have access to Axum, Adwa, Shire and Tembein.

“We have seen doctors in Adigrat and Wukro areas who have been working alone for three weeks without anyone to talk to,” said Dr. Fasika, describing how they chose to stay at work instead of running for their lives.

Asked to comment about the current situation in areas from Mekelle to Adgrat, where heavy fighting took place Dr. Fasila replied, “There aren’t any people. There was no activity in all the cities we passed through. All the houses are closed. There is a reign of fear. Adigrat Hospital and Health Center and Wukro Hospital were all looted. The health centers and hospitals are empty. Burnt cars and tanks are seen. I was told that the pharmaceutical factory in Adigrat was also completely looted although I haven’t seen it. They also told me that Adigrat University had been looted and destroyed.”

Dr.Fasika called on the international aid agencies to assist the people of Tigray in all possible ways with food, medicine and everything they can. “The people of Tigray, who have been challenged with Covid-19, should not suffer from the problem it did not create.” AS