

Nato beware, Ethiopia could turn out a big policy blunder for Biden

(Source Nation - Africa)

Monday, August 23, 2021

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A protester holds a banner depicting the Head of USAid Samantha Power at a rally against pro-TPLF forces and to support for Ethiopia's armed forces in Addis Ababa on August 8.

More disturbing than the images of desperate people in Kabul scrambling to flee from Afghanistan is the realisation that the United States may not have learnt from experience and could bring havoc to another global region.

The outcome of Washington's negotiations with the Taliban, a non-state armed group, should have appeared inevitable. And now, the US has been supporting the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and adopted an increasingly belligerent stance towards the Ethiopian federal government's handling of the terror in the northern regional state of Tigray, home to five per cent of the country's 110 million-plus population.

In another age, the Taliban swept across Afghanistan and exacted a pitiless vengeance on those who opposed its fanaticism. In Ethiopia, the TPLF planned and coordinated attacks on northern command outposts of the National Defense Force, in which thousands of federal troops were murdered. It is not an overstatement to call this Ethiopia's 9/11.

Yet American policy statements on Ethiopia directly align with terrorist propaganda. Despite its high crimes and the TPLF being listed for years by the US government as a Tier 3 terrorist organisation, Washington has suddenly decided that, contrary to the decision by Ethiopia's parliament, it no longer is.

Trust the US

The October 2019 decision to assassinate Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, former commander of the Quds force, was unsighted by other Nato partners of the US in Iraq. He was killed in a US drone attack on January 3, last year. Nato countries were entitled

to ask how much they could trust the US when it took such unilateral decisions. The failed bid for regime change in Kabul resulted in trillions of America's dollars wasted and a world effort to develop Central Asia undermined.

The question is, will Ethiopia — and the Horn of Africa region — be foreign policy blunder for the Biden Administration?

The recent state visit of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to Turkey resulted in water, finance and security agreements being signed, signposts of a growing divide among Nato allies towards Ethiopia. What drives the hardened US position towards Ethiopia is puzzling.

Unilateral ceasefire

Addis Ababa's unilateral ceasefire in June came as a result of both international pressure and the potential risk of civilian casualties. The international community appealed to the Abiy Administration to give the region a chance to work with aid workers without a federal military or interim political presence.

This is significant. Even when ISIS held great swaths of Iraq and Syria, no Western government would have sent in humanitarian aid to its occupied territories while foregoing military responsibilities. And after the federal government withdrew from Tigray, blame for the crises could not be simply placed at Addis Ababa's feet. The humanitarian disaster mushroomed, so did the conflict zone, and TPLF atrocities were revealed.

The TPLF could no longer flog the federal scapegoat, so it pushed into other regional states. This has resulted in hundreds more civilian deaths, a further 400,000 displaced persons and, in the absence of any international condemnation towards these crimes, dim prospects for a political solution.

Faced with diminished resources and military hardware, the TPLF relies mainly on information operations, as well as relationships with US officials nurtured over 27 years of its brutal reign. With many in Tigray deprived of food aid, splits within the insurgency group are inevitable. Addis Ababa's insistence on "no equivalency" between itself and TPLF may pave the way for only more moderate TPLF voices to come to the table.