

A PERSPECTIVE ON THE ETHIOPIAN-U.S. RELATIONSHIP

Jeffrey Feltman

U.S. Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa

United States Institute of Peace

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Had someone previewed for me in 2015 — in the middle of my six-year tenure as United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs — that I would someday serve as the U.S. Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa, I would have scoffed: Government service fell into the “been there/done that” category, and I was happy in my post-UN quasi retirement. But when the Biden-Harris Administration urged me to take on this portfolio, my sense of duty kicked in. Having spent time in the Horn during my UN career, I knew the strategic importance of the Horn’s geography, demographics, politics, and security: importance not only in Africa but across the Red Sea and beyond.

But had that same prescient person back in 2015 asked me to envision what my primary concerns would be in 2021 as Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa, I would have guessed that Somalia, still troubled today, would top the list. I would never have imagined Ethiopia – an exporter of stability via peacekeeping and a longstanding, important partner of the United States – to be consuming the bulk of my time and my conversations with Secretary Blinken and the White House. As a boy growing up in a small town in the Midwestern United States, I knew of Ethiopia’s Biblical references, as the origin of coffee, an ally of the United States in World War II, and as a courageous example of African independence against colonialism. Then, as a young adult, I began to learn more. I was so moved in 1985 by the Ethiopian famine reports to send a modest contribution. And subsequently, as I immersed myself professionally in foreign policy, I learned more of Ethiopian politics and history — I love the story of Negus Dawit I’s 15th century delegation to Venice as an early Global North/Global South exchange among equals. Like so many others, I graduated from a greater appreciation of the leadership role Ethiopia has played in Africa and beyond. But my initial, first-hand exposure to the reality of Ethiopia

was in September 2012. At the start of my third month as United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, I represented Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in Addis at the funeral of Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, a man I had never met. To my embarrassment, you can still see on YouTube just how banal my words were. The

UN, with its uneasy balancing act between the lofty principles of the Charter and the parochial interests of 193 member states and their leaders, does not habitually criticize deceased heads of state or government. My remarks that day bypassed entirely the subject of human rights in emphasizing the Meles' economic legacy. I had no idea that a ceremonial, representational appearance would, nearly a decade later, be fodder for misinformation on social media that the newly appointed U.S. Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa was somehow hopelessly partisan in favor of a man I never actually met. This distortion highlights the strong views that exist on Meles' legacy on today's Ethiopia. It is also a reminder that Ethiopia's social media is, if nothing else, wondrously creative.

What I also recall about that first trip to Addis was the whispering — whispering in the Sheraton, whispering on the margins of the funeral events, whispering even in gardens outside; conscious efforts to place cell phones at considerable distance from conversations; fingers pointing to ears then ceilings to as a reminder that walls in Addis have ears. What, people were whispering, would happen to Ethiopia now? Ethiopians had endured some very dark days in their modern history. Whatever one thought of his domination of Ethiopian politics, in the wake of Meles' death, the Ethiopians I met in September 2012 were contemplating their uncertain future with foreboding. In hindsight, we now recognize that the transition created a welcome opportunity that the Ethiopians eagerly seized, for a gradual opening of the political space in which they could raise their voices more freely to express their aspirations for their country. The peaceful transfer of power in 2018 to a government led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed opened a new chapter in Ethiopian history as well as a promising new chapter in U.S.-Ethiopian relations. The new Prime Minister wasted no time in unveiling his ambitious economic and democratic reform programs. In line with his vision of a vibrant Ethiopian civil society, he welcomed U.S. democracy support and governance programs that the former EPRDF government had firmly rejected. His decisive shift away from discredited

Marxist theories promised to attract considerable foreign investment to create jobs and economic growth. Our assistance and partnership programs, already considerable, grew to unprecedented levels.

From 2016 to 2020, the United States provided over \$4.2 billion in development and humanitarian assistance to the Ethiopian people. To bolster the momentum of reform under Prime Minister Abiy's leadership, the Administration and Congress provided tens of millions of dollars in new Development Assistance. Innovative programs supported the Prime Minister's economic reforms aimed to promote private sector growth and investment. U.S.-funded capacity building programs aligned with the Prime Minister's emphasis on democratic governance worked to strengthen the independence of the judiciary, electoral bodies, and the attorney general's office.

We even hoped that the reconciliation Prime Minister Abiy promoted between Ethiopia and Eritrea might create a positive side effect of an improved Eritrean-U.S. relationship. That is what we desired. Washington supported the lifting of sanctions that had been imposed on Eritrea by the UN Security Council, in hopes of turning a new page. Unfortunately, Eritrea did not reciprocate and continues to this day to play a destructive, destabilizing role in the region, including its deadly role inside Ethiopia. Few countries in the world have a worse human rights record than Eritrea.

Proud of the connections between Washington and Addis under Prime Minister Abiy, we firmly believed that this growing partnership benefitted both countries. We wanted to continue to travel this promising path together and saw even greater potential for the bilateral relationship. The Prime Minister has assured me on several occasions of the importance he places on Ethiopian-U.S. ties and told me of his affectionate memories of his own time in, and connections with, the United States.

But starting in 2020, solidarity between our two governments started to crack. To Ethiopia's understandable annoyance, the previous administration halted some U.S. assistance programs in the misguided belief that Ethiopia might then reconsider its rejection of a draft tripartite

agreement tabled by the Trump Administration regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, a symbol of national pride for all Ethiopians. Soon after taking office, the Biden-Harris Administration recognized the urgent need for meaningful Egyptian-Ethiopian-Sudanese negotiations leading to a mutually acceptable agreement on the filling and operation of the GERD. To that end, the new administration quickly made clear that it rejected Trump Administration's approach and disconnected any assistance considerations from the GERD. We believe that Egypt's need for water security, Sudan's safety concerns, and Ethiopia's development goals can be reconciled through good faith negotiations on the GERD, and the United States will continue to be actively involved with all parties to that end.

At the same time, the incoming Administration was alarmed by the growing crisis in Ethiopia's northern state of Tigray and worried it would have disastrous consequences for the stability and people of Ethiopia. The Biden-Harris transition team called for the Ethiopian authorities and Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (or TPLF) and to "take urgent steps to end the conflict, enable humanitarian access, and protect civilians." Since taking office, the Administration has consistently sought to engage the Government of Ethiopia and encourage a different path. As true partners should, we've tried to be candid in sharing our best advice, namely: this military conflict, if it continues, will have disastrous consequences for Ethiopia's unity, territorial integrity, and stability – and Ethiopia's relations with the United States and international community. We've repeatedly offered to help Ethiopia's leaders pursue a different path.

As we have engaged, we have been transparent in sharing our analysis of the situation in northern Ethiopia. We believe the parties to the conflict have committed rampant human rights abuses and atrocities. There have been credible, documented, persistent reports by a wide range of sources about these abuses and atrocities. Looting, displacement, executions, reports of rape and sexual violence as a tool of war, with the Ethiopian National Defense Forces, the Eritrean Defense Forces, the Amhara special forces, and the TPLF all implicated to some degree. We continue to carefully monitor and assess the human rights situation and will carefully consider in our own review the upcoming joint report by UN and Ethiopian human rights officials.

The conflict, of course, has not been static and we have adapted our message accordingly. There has been a major shift since late June when the TPLF forces seized control of Mekele, the regional capital of Tigray. Alarming, since July, the TPLF has widened the conflict and misery into the neighboring states of Afar and Amhara, displacing hundreds of thousands of additional victims of this needless war. Ambassador Pasi and USAID's head of humanitarian assistance recently visited Bahir Dar, the regional capital of Amhara, as we accelerate our efforts to reach those displaced by the TPLF. The stories they relayed back to us are heartbreaking. We watched the fighting around Dessie and Kolmbocha in horror, as thousands more civilians were forced to flee their homes. Some critics of U.S. policy claim the United States has an inherent bias toward the TPLF. This could not be farther from the truth. We have consistently condemned the TPLF's expansion of the war outside of Tigray and continue to call on the TPLF to withdraw from Afar and Amhara.

That expansion of the war, however, is as predictable as it is unacceptable given that the Ethiopian government began cutting off humanitarian relief and access to Tigray in June, which continues to this day despite horrifying conditions of reported widespread famine and near-famine conditions that have shocked the world: In Tigray, 90 percent of the population requires aid, and up to 900,000 people are facing famine-like conditions. This is happening in a country that has the expertise and experience to address famine, if the will were there. To meet the basic needs of Tigray's population of seven million, the UN has been clear: at least 2,000 trucks of supplies are needed per month. Since the beginning of July, only 1,100 trucks in total have entered Tigray—just 13 percent of what's required. There was a welcome increase of food deliveries in September and early October, but this still fell far short of the needs. No new convoys of humanitarian assistance have been able to enter Tigray due to lack of approvals since October 18. Fighting and insecurity have disrupted some convoys and flights, and there have been occasional shortages of trucks due to complicated issues. But without question, the most serious obstacles are intentional governmental delays and denials.

Moreover, the government has rejected the delivery of almost all medical supplies to Tigray since July. In practice, this means that those suffering from malnutrition or routine or long-

term illnesses cannot be effectively treated. Food alone does not save those whose bodies are already consuming themselves because of famine.

The government has also not allowed the importation of fuel into Tigray since early August. Humanitarian agencies need fuel inside the region to be able to distribute aid outside the capital. Three of the seven main food delivery partners had to suspend activities because of fuel shortages. The UN World Food Program suspended its operations in Tigray. The remaining food delivery partners fear that fuel shortages will prevent them from continuing any deliveries outside of Mekele, leaving millions even more vulnerable to food insecurity. Disruptions to banking services and the prohibition by the Government of Ethiopia on cash entering Tigray also hinder aid delivery.

The government's unprecedented expulsion of key UN officials—more UN humanitarian staff expelled in a single day by the Ethiopian government than Bashar al-Assad's regime has expelled in 10 years of war in Syria— and the investigation and, in some cases, closure of internationally renowned humanitarian organizations further erodes the ability of the international community to reach those in need, not only in Tigray but also those victims of the TPLF incursions in Afar and Amhara we are committed to help. This unfortunately suggests an intentional effort by the authorities to deprive Ethiopians who are suffering of receiving life-saving assistance.

I am familiar with the arguments that food, fuel and trucks can be diverted to TPLF war efforts. But my experience proves that such concerns can be satisfactorily addressed. For example, after initial delays and problems, the Israelis, who have genuine security concerns with the Gaza Strip, and the Saudis, who have legitimate security concerns about attacks on their territory originating in Yemen, have signed off on creative procedures for screening cargo headed to Gaza and certain areas of Yemen that address security concerns but also permit food, fuel, and medicine to reach needy populations in Gaza and Yemen. The United States and the UN agencies and NGOs to which we provide funding all have stringent monitoring requirements to mitigate diversion, which is illegal under U.S. law.

The humanitarian conditions in Tigray are unacceptable. No government can tolerate an armed insurgency — we get that. But no government should be adopting policies or allowing practices that result in mass starvation of its own citizens.

The United States has not been alone in articulating these concerns. Back in June, leaders of the G7 expressed alarm at the worsening situation and called for an end to fighting and to allow unimpeded humanitarian access. The UN Secretary-General has been increasingly outspoken about his concerns, saying a humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding before our eyes. He has urged an immediate cessation of hostilities, unrestricted humanitarian access, and dialogue among all parties to resolve the crisis. The European Union and European leaders have spoken out. African leaders have also become increasingly concerned. Last month, President Kenyatta told the UN Security Council there must be action toward a negotiated ceasefire and ending the humanitarian crisis. The AU appointed former Nigerian President Obasanjo as its High Representatives to help the parties to the conflict reach a negotiated settlement.

As the war approaches its one-year anniversary, the United States and others cannot continue “business as usual” relations with the Government of Ethiopia. The extraordinary partnership we have enjoyed is not sustainable while the military conflict continues to expand, threatening the stability and unity of one of Africa’s most influential countries and the fundamental well-being of its people. The United States and other donors have already limited significant amounts of development assistance to Ethiopia in an effort to dissuade the government from this harmful path. We have conveyed to Ethiopia that it is at risk of losing its trade benefits under the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, AGOA, if human rights violations are not addressed. This is due to the stringent human rights criteria for

AGOA eligibility required by Congress under U.S. law. The United States is prepared to pursue the first sanctions under the Executive Order President Biden signed in September against those fueling this crisis and obstructing humanitarian operations, targeting all parties implicated.

While Ethiopian officials have attempted to separate the conduct of the war from the Ethiopian-U.S. bilateral relationship, there is a direct, causal relationship between what is happening on the ground as a result of the policies of the Ethiopian government and the subsequent decisions that have been taken or are being contemplated by the U.S.

Administration. It gives us no pleasure to think about visa restrictions or sanctions or having Ethiopia lose trade benefits and preferences. The historically strong Ethiopian-U.S. relationship grew under Prime Minister Abiy, with the new programs and hopes I described earlier. The unfortunate deterioration in our relationship derives from the atrocities of the conflict in northern Ethiopia and the reports of the use of food as a weapon of war, which as UN Security Council Resolution 2417 reiterates, may constitute a war crime. We are reacting to behavior no person of conscience can accept and in manner which should come as no surprise to any party to the conflict.

We've attempted to maintain a frank and open dialogue with the government. Instead of responding to our concerns and our offer to support mediation of the conflict, many in the government falsely assert that the United States seeks to replace the Abiy government with another TPLF-dominated regime. This is just not true. We know full well and respect the view of the overwhelming majority of the Ethiopian public who oppose a return to Meles-style rule. This is not 1991, when the TPLF led the forces that discharged the hated Mengistu regime. Let me be clear: We oppose any TPLF move to Addis, or any attempt by the TPLF to besiege Addis. This is a message we have also underscored in our engagement with TPLF leaders. The United States seeks a relationship with all people in Ethiopia; we want to see stability and prosperity restored to the entire country and for Ethiopia to regain its position as a regional and global leader. Such an outcome requires Ethiopia's leaders to put down their guns and find a formula for peaceful co-existence.

We had hoped that recent political events inside Ethiopia would have led the Prime Minister to pivot from war to peace. Elections in June and September produced a super parliamentary majority for the Prime Minister's Prosperity Party. As the former UN Focal Point for Election Assistance (one of the responsibilities of my former UN position), I have concerns about elections when key opposition figures are imprisoned and restrictions on the media are

imposed. But I also believe that the Prosperity Party has significant support across Ethiopia as reflected in the election results. This means that the Prime Minister indeed has a mandate he can draw upon, and a new cabinet composed of hand-picked, trusted allies and partners. He was sworn in for a full, five-year term. But as Kenyan President Kenyatta said at that very swearing-in, that mandate obligates the prime minister to govern for those who supported him and for those who did not. Legitimacy can never be sustained through force or proclaimed by fiat.

The Prime Minister now has the power and the opportunity to embrace peace. Instead, we see the situation getting worse, not better. The government has exploited long-standing ethnic grievances with divisive rhetoric. It has launched a bombing campaign while using drones from questionable sources, including reportedly from U.S. adversaries, and promoted mass mobilization of militia, doing grave damage to Ethiopia's security institutions. Scarce foreign currency reserves are diverted to arms purchases and lobbyists rather than development. The TPLF, meanwhile, pushes ahead in Amhara and forges alliances with disaffected armed groups elsewhere in the country. The situation on the ground today is even more alarming than it was a few months ago. And that whispering phenomenon in Addis that I found so indicative back on the margins of Meles' funeral in 2012? It's back. That democratic opening that was so inspiring when Abiy Ahmed became prime minister appears to be another victim of the war.

Studies show the average modern civil war now lasts 20 years. I repeat: 20 years. A multi-decade civil war in Ethiopia would be disastrous for its future and its people. We urge the Government of Ethiopia to give peace a chance, to choose a different path and engage in dialogue without preconditions. Whether through direct contact or via an intermediary such as former Nigerian President Obasanjo in his role as African Union High Representative, the Government of Ethiopia and the TPLF should commence at once with negotiating and implementing a series of parallel steps that will stop the violence, allow life-saving access to Tigray, lead to TPLF withdrawal from Afar and Amhara and Eritrean forces from Ethiopian territory, result in a durable ceasefire (with rules understood and perhaps with third-party monitors), and initiate accountability for human rights abuses and any war crimes. Ethiopians can set an agenda for talks on issues, including internal border disputes and the role of the

central government versus the federal states, that must be resolved peacefully and constitutionally rather than through violence. There are many reciprocal steps the parties could take to move toward a negotiated ceasefire. The first step, though, is demonstrating an openness to try.

As I told a group of Ethiopian officials during a private retreat we hosted in June in Washington, the Ethiopian-U.S. relationship was then at a crossroads. I think the same is true for Ethiopia's broader relations with an important cross-section of the international community. We could proceed down one path that would inevitably lead to sanctions and other measures, or we go down another path on which we could revitalize the positive, promising bilateral relationship that was expanding to new heights after Prime Minister Abiy took office. The United States wants the latter. We sincerely want to chart a more productive path out of the current crisis. We do not want Ethiopia to lose its AGOA trade benefits or international economic assistance. We are prepared to exercise leadership in the international community to energize the support needed for Ethiopia's recovery from war and to realize the Prime Minister's ambitious economic and job-creation agenda. That remains our desired destination. But I emphasized to the June delegation—as I have repeatedly conveyed to the Prime Minister and other senior officials before and since—Ethiopia, not the United States, is in the driver's seat. Prolonging the war, dodging genuine negotiations to lead to de-escalation and a negotiated ceasefire, and refusing to allow unhindered humanitarian access to avert catastrophe are actions that are taking Ethiopia in a dangerous direction.

Unfortunately, now, at the beginning of November, that crossroad I described in June is behind us. It's not yet too late to retrace our steps toward the path not taken, but the change in direction must occur in days, not weeks. It requires the Ethiopian government to address concerns that we have been raising for months. (We are also insisting that the TPLF stop its military advance, refrain from threatening Addis, and prepare for talks. Eritrea must cease its destructive interference and withdraw its troops entirely from Ethiopia.) I am prepared to travel to Addis anytime to resume dialogue and assist, working alongside African Union High Representative Obasanjo and other international leaders.

Our priority is the unity and integrity of the Ethiopian state and our commitment to the Ethiopian people. And consistent with that commitment, we will continue to try to provide extensive humanitarian assistance across Ethiopia. Despite the circumstances, I am proud that the United States currently provides more humanitarian to Ethiopia than to any other country in the world and our significant development assistance package makes long-term investments in key areas such as public health, education, agriculture, and democracy and human rights. The United States was the largest bilateral donor to Ethiopia before November 2020, even now, with all the difficulties and restrictions I've described, we remain so.

In closing, I want to note that my remarks have concentrated primarily on the war in northern Ethiopia, since the violence, humanitarian catastrophe, and atrocities in northern Ethiopia — Tigray, Amhara, Afar — are the issues prompting U.S. consideration of new measures, including sanctions under the new Executive Order and the question of AGOA eligibility. But we are also deeply concerned with violence and tensions elsewhere in Ethiopia. If not addressed through dialogue and consensus, these problems can contribute to the deterioration of the integrity of the state. Ending the war in northern Ethiopia will allow government officials and others to concentrate on the processes necessary to address tensions elsewhere and to rebuild a national consensus on the country's future that includes enduring protections of the rights of members of minority groups. Such a process is necessary to restore Ethiopia's role as the cornerstone of stability in the Horn of Africa, the Ethiopian leadership so familiar to me from my UN tenure.

Ending the war is the best path to a more stable, more prosperous country. And ending the war will also enable us to renew a more affirmative Ethiopian-U.S. bilateral relationship, a partnership that benefits both countries. We urge Ethiopian leaders- from all parties - to take the steps necessary to arrest the current trajectory and permit its peoples and its partners to restore the promise that Prime Minister Abiy so compellingly outlined at the start of his premiership.