

Briefing with U.S. Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman On the Ongoing Situation in Ethiopia

SPECIAL BRIEFING

AMBASSADOR JEFFREY FELTMAN, U.S. SPECIAL ENVOY FOR THE HORN OF AFRICA VIA TELECONFERENCE

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MR PRICE: Good morning, everyone, and thanks very much for joining us, especially today, for this very important topic. We wanted to offer another opportunity for you to hear an update from, in this case, our Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Jeff Feltman on the situation in Ethiopia. The special envoy will have some opening remarks at the top, after which he will look forward to taking your questions.

This call is on the record. Its contents are embargoed until the conclusion of the call. But with that, I will turn it over to Special Envoy Feltman.

AMBASSADOR FELTMAN: Thanks, Ned, and good morning to everybody. I returned from Ethiopia yesterday, and this was my second trip there in just a couple of weeks. And there is some nascent progress in trying to get the parties to move from a military confrontation to a negotiating process, but what concerns us is that this fragile progress risks being outpaced by the alarming developments on the ground that threaten Ethiopia's overall stability and unity.

I want to be clear: The basis for talks to lead to de-escalation and a negotiated ceasefire exists. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy told me again on Sunday that his top priority is to get the Tigrayan Defense Forces and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, the TDF and the TPLF, out of the lands that they have occupied in the states of Amhara and Afar and get them back into Tigray. We share that objective. The TDF and TPLF leaders that we have engaged tell us that their top priority is to break the de facto humanitarian siege that the Government of Ethiopia has imposed on Tigray since July. We share that objective as well. And the two sides have

given the same message to a number of other diplomats and leaders, including former Nigerian President Obasanjo, who, as you all know, serves as the African Union's high representative for the Horn of Africa.

The basic point is that these two objectives are not mutually exclusive. With political will, one can achieve both. Unfortunately, each side is trying to achieve its goal by military force, and each side seems to believe that it's on the cusp of winning. After more than a year of fighting and hundreds of thousands of casualties and people displaced by fighting, it should be clear that there is no military solution. The government must remove the shackles that are hindering humanitarian relief and stop offensive military actions, and the TDF must halt its advance on Addis. All those in need, regardless of ethnicity or geography, should have immediate access to lifesaving humanitarian assistance, and we call for an immediate end to human rights abuses and violations.

Our goal is to support diplomacy as the first, as the last, and as the only approach to address the underlying causes of this conflict. We are not taking sides here. Rumors that we are supporting one side are simply false. We have no intention of any engagement except diplomatic engagement on behalf of international efforts to promote a political process. Ethiopia's neighbors, the African Union, the United Nations, and the international community all agree: There is no time to waste in pivoting to diplomacy.

Ethiopian Americans, too, have an important responsibility to create a conducive atmosphere for de-escalation. For decades, Ethiopian Americans have been instrumental in advocating for reforms that would ensure that all Ethiopians live in dignity with their basic human rights and freedoms respected. Now is the time for Ethiopian Americans to play a similar leadership role in advocating for an end to incitement and fanning the flames of war.

Continued war risks unraveling Africa's second-most-populous country, the home of the African Union, and the traditional linchpin of security and stability in the strategic Horn of Africa/Red Sea area. We're putting our collective – we're putting our diplomatic tools behind

the collective efforts to promote de-escalation and a negotiated ceasefire. It is time for the Ethiopians to pursue their objectives not on the battlefield, but at the negotiating table.

And one final note is I want to reiterate that the Department of State has been urging U.S. citizens in Ethiopia to depart now using commercially available options. The U.S. embassy has been issuing daily messages to U.S. citizens since early November with this message.

With that, I look forward to your questions.

MR PRICE: Terrific, thanks. Operator, would you mind repeating the instructions for putting yourself in the question queue?

OPERATOR: Once again, ladies and gentlemen, if you have a question, press 1 then 0 on your telephone keypad.

MR PRICE: We'll start with the line of Francesco Fontemaggi from AFP.

OPERATOR: Francesco, your line is open.

QUESTION: Thank you. Thank you both. I was wondering if you can elaborate on how you're so confident that there has been progress on the diplomatic front at the same time the TPLF claims being just 130 miles northeast of Addis and the prime minister said he would go himself on the battlefield to fight against the rebels. The – all this doesn't really sound very optimistic. So is there a discrepancy between your progress and what's going on on the battlefield? Thank you.

AMBASSADOR FELTMAN: Francesco, thanks for the question. And I hope I didn't come across as excessively optimistic. I think I made it clear that what worries us is that while there's some nascent progress, that it's highly at risk of being outpaced by the military escalation on the two sides.

But I've been having a series of trips to Addis and elsewhere in the region. Of course, the Secretary has engaged the Ethiopian officials by phone. We had Senator Coons back in March go out. There's been a number of U.S. engagements with the Ethiopians, and what I sense is a much greater willingness to brainstorm with us about how you would put together the pieces of a de-escalation and negotiated ceasefire process. There's no longer just a refusal to talk

about how you would move into a negotiating process. There's more of a sense of realism that after a year of this horror, that there might be other approaches to consider in order to achieve goals.

What I find interesting is when you talk to the two sides separately – and of course, we're talking to them separately, of course – when you talk to the two sides, the elements that they describe as being essential to get to de-escalation, negotiated ceasefire overlap: end to incitement, end to offensive military operations, opening of humanitarian corridors to whoever – wherever the needs are, having the TPLF withdraw back to Tigray, a – removing the TPLF from the terrorist designation that the Ethiopian parliament put in place. They're willing to discuss these issues now. That's not the same as saying that they're moving forward in putting together some kind of program, but I think that there is the potential for President Obasanjo with the support of the international community to take these elements that both sides agree have to be part of a political process and start sequencing them, start deciding how does the reciprocity work between the sides.

But again, what I worry about is that the military developments on the ground are moving more rapidly than we've been able to get the diplomatic process to move.

MR PRICE: We'll go the line of Daphne Psaledakis from Reuters.

OPERATOR: Daphne, your line is open.

QUESTION: Oh, sorry. Thank you for doing this. I was wondering if you could give some details on the rough estimates of the number of people that have been detained in Ethiopia, as well as on the front line. Do you have any sense of where the front line is in Afar and Amhara?

And if the TPLF can secure the road to Djibouti, would aid convoys move down it? If so, would that involve a no-fly zone? Thank you.

AMBASSADOR FELTMAN: Thanks, Daphne. Our information on the detainees is not at all – I mean, it's not at all clear to us how many have been detained. We're alarmed by the numbers of people who've been picked up, by the reports of people being sort of put in camps where

COVID may be rampant, where they have – where they're not having access to due process. But the numbers we simply don't know.

In terms of the lines of – the battle lines on the ground, it seems to us that in terms of the TDF/TPLF's moves toward Mile, which is the road to Djibouti, it looks to us as though for whatever reason that they've not advanced as much, that the Ethiopian National Defense Forces and their partners – the regional militias and stuff – have been able to more or less stem the TDF's advances toward Mile and keep the major access roads between Djibouti and Addis open, whereas the – it looks as though the TDF/TPLF in the information we have has been able to move past some of the defensive lines on the road to Addis – the defensive line that was Ataye, the defensive line at Shewa Robit, down toward Debre Sina.

So the – for a while the lines were static, and then about a week ago, the TDF/TPLF started to move again. And this alarms us. It alarms us for several reasons. It alarms us because more – the more that you have the military conflict expand, the more people are affected. The closer that the TDF is able to move to Addis, its own demands may increase and what it would expect in the negotiating process. And I want to make it clear we are absolutely opposed to the TDF threatening Addis by cutting off the road to Djibouti or threatening Addis by actually entering Addis.

MR PRICE: We'll go to the line of Jennifer Hansler from CNN.

OPERATOR: Jennifer, your line is open.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you so much for doing this. I just wanted to confirm that you met with Prime Minister Abiy, and did he give any indication in your meeting that he would put out this call that he would go to the front lines to direct the war effort from there? Did you discourage him from taking this step? And if this military campaign continues to outpace the diplomatic efforts, is the U.S. prepared to take more punitive actions, perhaps under the sanctions regime or another step? Thank you.

AMBASSADOR FELTMAN: Thanks, Jennifer. I mean, what the prime minister and I mostly discussed was how his goals could be achieved through the negotiating table rather than on the military battlefield. He has – he is confident that he will be able to push back the TDF

northward back into Tigray. I question that confidence. I'm just looking at a map over the – of what's happened since the Ethiopian National Defense Forces withdrew from Tigray at the end of June. Just looking at a map makes me question his confidence.

But be that as it may, even if it's true, what I was trying to tell him was that the cost to Ethiopia's stability, the cost to the civilians, the dignity of Ethiopians being damaged by this war, the costs are too high; that you can achieve the same thing through a diplomatic process that has the support of the African Union, the immediate neighbors of Ethiopia, and the international community; you can achieve what it is that you say you're trying to achieve militarily, which is to get the TDF/TPLF back into Tigray. That's what we discussed.

But again, I was encouraged that he was willing to talk to me in detail about what a diplomatic process could look like. This is not something that would be a U.S.-led. It would be something where the U.S. would be one of many actors supporting it, supporting a process. But at the same time, he also expressed confidence that militarily he would be able to achieve his goals, which is – but no, in terms of did he preview the statement that he released yesterday, no.

MR PRICE: We'll go to Rosiland Jordan from Al Jazeera.

OPERATOR: To whom was that again? Rosiland, yes. Your line is open. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) much for the call. I wanted to follow up on yesterday's call from a couple of senior department officials strongly encouraging Americans and legal residents to leave Ethiopia as soon as possible. Is that a pragmatic bit of advice given how tenuous the political and security situations are inside Ethiopia, or is this because there is a real fear within the U.S. Government that the country is about to collapse into civil war and the U.S. does – would not be able to assist Americans in that case?

AMBASSADOR FELTMAN: Thanks for the question. I mean, it's basically a reflection of the reality that we view travel to Ethiopia right now as being unsafe due to the ongoing armed conflict and that the situation may – and I emphasize may – escalate further and cause supply chain shortages, communications blackouts, and travel disruptions.

Right now, the airport in Addis is operating normally. I flew – as I said, I flew back overnight Sunday/Monday morning, and there were empty flights on the – empty flights on the Ethiopian Airlines plane that I was on. And so what we're saying is that since the U.S. embassy would be unlikely to be able to assist U.S. citizens in Ethiopia with departure if commercial options became unavailable, take the available seats on the commercial flights now since we can't predict if demand would eventually exceed capacity.

MR PRICE: We'll go to Ali Rogan from PBS NewsHour.

OPERATOR: Ali, your line is open.

QUESTION: Hi there. Thank you so much for doing the call. I have a very specific question regarding reports out of Kenya that a Tigrayan businessman was abducted. There has been a social media campaign that appears to be linking his abduction to the Abiy government, and so I wanted to know if you have any comment on this particular abduction. And in general, are you concerned about any other instances of individuals who are Tigrayan descent or are Tigrayan being detained outside of Ethiopia?

AMBASSADOR FELTMAN: I hadn't heard that – I had not heard that report, to be honest, so we'll have to look into that. I mean, what we are concerned about are the levels of incitement by the various actors or those who support the various actors in this fight, the incitement against the Tigrayans, the Tigrayan incitement against others, the possibility of Amhara-Oromo violence, the two largest ethnic groups.

And we really have been calling on all sides to dial back the incitement that's sort of exacerbating the ethnic aspects of this conflict. And as I said earlier, we are alarmed by the roundup, what seems to be a systematic roundup, of Tigrayans in Addis and house-to-house searches looking for Tigrayans in Addis. It's time to dial back the incitement and roll up the sleeves and work on diplomacy rather than trying to exacerbate the conflict through ethnic polarization.

MR PRICE: We'll go to Nick Wadhams from Bloomberg.

OPERATOR: Nick, your line is open.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks very much. Ambassador Feltman, I just wanted to try to clarify something, because at the beginning you said essentially that you see some progress on getting the sides to move from a military-political process, but everything you've said since that initial comment seems to go exactly the other way. So could you elaborate a little bit more on what positive signals you actually see that makes you think either side wants to move to a political process? Because your description of the conversation you're having with the Ethiopian leadership suggests that they don't have any desire or have shown any indication that they would be willing to do that.

AMBASSADOR FELTMAN: As I said, what's different, what has – I've gone out to Ethiopia and had a number of conversations with the same people. We have met with – we've met with TPLF leaders in Nairobi and discussed with them elsewhere. And what has changed is the willingness to engage.

Now, this is still – I put this in the premediation or sort of intellectual discussion part. I don't want to overstate the case. This is not the – that there's no sign that there would be direct talks on the horizon between the two sides, and nor is that necessary, frankly.

As you know, I was at the UN for six years, and I have learned that there's a whole different – a whole lot of different ways to have political processes. You don't have to go to the Palais des Nations in Geneva with international spotlight and journalists and lots of hoopla in order to be able to have – to have processes back and forth. Look at how the Colombia peace process got started when you had the representatives of the FARC and representatives of the Government of Colombia having proximity talks via some intermediaries in Havana before they moved to direct talks.

There's a lot of different ways you can do a peace process that is discreet, and that's the sort of things the two sides are now talking to us about, that there's a – it would be politically costly for the Government of Ethiopia right now to sit down with TPLF leaders across the table when parts of Amhara and Afar, the constituents of the government, are under occupation. They don't have to.

And the fact that they were talking to us about how processes might work politically for them I found encouraging. That wasn't possible a few weeks ago. The fact that both sides were talking to us about the elements that they would expect to see on the table if they're in an active proximity talks encouraged me, the sorts of things I said earlier. The fact that the – that what they've – that what both sides have defined as their primary objectives can be made compatible, I found encouraging.

Now, I don't want to overstate this case. What I want to say is that we are using our diplomatic channels along with the political support of the neighbors, of the African Union, of the international community more generally, to try to encourage this. I mean, what I would say that what you're seeing now is that the two sides are starting to think about whether or not they can really achieve their goals only on the battlefield.

When we talk – there's politics on both sides. When we talk with the Tigrayan leaders, there are some who recognize that entering Addis could be catastrophic for themselves and catastrophic for the country, and they don't want to be responsible for the collapse of Ethiopia. But they do want to see the siege that's been imposed on Tigray since the end of June lifted.

So are there ways that they can get the humanitarian relief that they need that would strengthen the more moderate voices inside the Tigrayan camp to refute this idea that they need to move – try to move on to Addis? These are the sorts of things that we're trying to encourage now. There was a little bit of humanitarian relief that we believe reached Tigray today, but not nearly enough to be able to strengthen those voices inside the Tigrayan leadership that, as we would think, as we believe, moving on Addis is just unacceptable and catastrophic.

So right now, both sides are still pursuing military options, but they are also engaged on the idea that there may be other ways to pursue their objectives. That's – and they're engaged not only with us but with others. And that's what I find, again, marginally encouraging, but I don't want to overstate the case.

MR PRICE: Time for a couple final questions. We'll go to Simon Ateba from Today News Africa.

OPERATOR: Simon, your line is open.

QUESTION: Yes, thank you for doing this. It is Simon Ateba with Today News Africa in Washington. On the administration call for U.S. citizen to leave Ethiopia now while commercial flights remain available, to your assessment, how much time do they still have? Do they have to leave now, this month, this week? And on the American citizen being detained in Ethiopia, how many are currently being detained, U.S. citizen? Thank you.

AMBASSADOR FELTMAN: We are urging and we have been urging U.S. citizens in Ethiopia to depart now. As I said, there are commercially available options now. And the U.S. embassy has been giving that message daily to U.S. citizens since early November. So it's simply a reflection of the fact that the situation on the ground is changing, that the U.S. embassy would be unlikely to assist U.S. citizens in Ethiopia with departure if the commercial options would become unavailable. And so now is the time for them to leave.

Whenever we have information on detained U.S. citizens, the embassy asks for consular access to them so that we can perform the consular services that are such an important part of our overseas diplomatic presence. There's obviously a very large Ethiopian American community in Ethiopia as, of course there's a large Ethiopian American community that has enriched the United States on this side of the Atlantic.

MR PRICE: We'll go to a Pearl Matibe.

OPERATOR: Pearl, your line is open.

QUESTION: Thank you so much. Good morning, Ambassador Feltman, and thank you for your availability. Ambassador Feltman, I have a three-part question here for you. In 1991 Mengistu Haile Mariam fled from Ethiopia and was granted asylum in Zimbabwe. He's now an official guest of Zimbabwe, as he was under Mugabe – he is under the current President Emmerson Mnangagwa – and he blamed the Soviet Union's Mikhail Gorbachev for his policies and the ending of his regime. From your assessment, who do you believe Prime Minister Abiy blames for this crisis? Photos are circulated him being real friendly with President Uhuru Kenyatta. Do you see in your evaluation any indication that Abiy may be making private plans to seek asylum from some leaders on the continent?

And I also just wanted to say I appreciate your sharing your diplomatic efforts, but might be – you are being overtaken by events on the ground. So I'd like to press you further: Could you be more precise on what is it exactly that is demonstrating to you that you – about what's happening on the ground – what has happened faster, and why is diplomacy not happening faster? What would it take for the diplomatic effort to move faster? What is the – what are the barriers? What are the hurdles? Help my audiences understand why diplomacy is not moving faster?

And if you say you spoke to Abiy on Tuesday, are we days away from the diplomatic effort succeeding? Are we weeks away from a siege on Addis? How far away are we from either track? Thank you so much, Ambassador Feltman, for all of your sharing.

AMBASSADOR FELTMAN: That's a rather expansive list of questions there, Pearl. I mean, first of all, let me – you raised 1991. And this is a message that we have said to the Tigrayan leaders, to the TPLF, to the TDF leaders: that they need to remember this is not 1991. In 1991, as you know, the TPLF led a popular entry into Addis with the fall of the Mengistu regime. The TPLF would be met with unrelenting hostility if it entered Addis today. This is not the same as 1991, and we believe that the Tigrayan leaders understand that.

In terms of Prime Minister Abiy, I – again, I have spoken with him repeatedly in our meetings over the months since I've had the honor of serving this administration in this capacity. And he is very concerned that the United States and others did not properly credit him for things like the June 28th unilateral humanitarian ceasefire, or properly attribute blame for what happened back in November with the assault on the Northern Command. But there's a larger narrative that I want to really refute, which is that somehow the United States is nostalgic for the TPLF's return to government, for a return of that EPRDF, TPLF-dominated regime that was under Meles Zenawi for 27 years.

That is not what we're after here. We are not taking sides in this conflict. We're not trying to tip the scales in favor of the TPLF. Prime Minister Abiy emerged – his party emerged successful in elections that took place in June and additional elections in September for other districts. He

has a parliament that backs him. Whatever the imperfections are in the elections, I think that they – in general his premiership reflects a popular mandate that we recognize. And so this idea that we're taking sides on behalf the TPLF is pure fantasy, but it persists.

You mention President Kenyatta of Kenya. President Kenyatta is very concerned about the stability in Ethiopia. He shares the same concern we have about Ethiopia's overall stability, but he shares it as a neighbor. So I think that he's playing an extremely important role in being able to talk to Prime Minister Abiy, sort of peer-to-peer, about the need for stability in the Horn of Africa with stability in the Horn of Africa not being possible if there's destabilization in Ethiopia.

The main hurdle to moving decisively to a diplomatic negotiating track isn't the United States; it's not the African Union; it's not the international community. It's the political will of the parties themselves. One would think that at this point, given the suffering, given the loss of dignity to too many Ethiopians and northern Ethiopia, that the two sides would recognize that the cost of continuing this conflict militarily is far too high for Ethiopia. And that's the case that we're trying to make. But in the end, they're going to have to muster the political will.

And as I said, I was encouraged that they're at least willing now to talk to us, to talk to President Obasanjo, to talk to others about the elements that they would see as essential to get to de-escalation and negotiated ceasefire. The – I think the tragedy is, the sadness is, that both sides have in mind the same type of elements. They may have different views on sequencing – who goes first, how far does the TPLF withdraw before something happens on the government side, et cetera, et cetera – but the elements, they agree upon. The primary goals, as I said earlier, of each side are not mutually irreconcilable. So they just need to muster the political will in order to pivot from the military to the – to negotiations. And we're not the only ones encouraging them to do so, but we can't force them to the table.

MR PRICE: We'll take one final question from Conor Finnegan from ABC.

OPERATOR: And Conor, your line is open.

QUESTION: Hey. Thank you, Ambassador. I just wanted to follow on the blockade of Tigray. You spoke about the small amount of aid that was able to enter the region. Do you take that as sort of a first gesture here? Do you expect more in the coming days? And you said that the prime minister seemed open to other means of achieving his objectives, but did you get a sense that he would be willing to end the blockade, that he understands the situation on the ground there, as opposed to continuing to deny the reality?

AMBASSADOR FELTMAN: The – I mean, I should say that the aid that we understood – understand reached Mekelle and Tigray today was quite modest, so I don't want to – we hope it's the beginning of sustained, expanded assistance, because the amount of assistance that has reached Tigray since the beginning of July is something like 12 percent of the needs that should have reached Tigray. But I also want to note that there are needs in Afar and Amhara as well, in the areas that the TDF now occupies, where you have civilians under TDF occupation outside of Tigray.

So our goal is to be able to deliver assistance to wherever it's needed across the military frontlines. And that's been the conversation that we have had with the TDF/TPLF leaders, and with the Government of Ethiopia, is that we need to find mechanisms, channels, corridors to reach the – to have the assistance reach those in need wherever they happen to be in Ethiopia. And I think that there's – again, there's a greater understanding. I mean, it's no longer just the Tigrayans who are suffering from deprivation under this conflict that you have – as I said, you have people in Amhara and Afar now, so there's a collective need for assistance to flow. And we've been looking at a number of ways with the government, with the UN, of how you would do that.

But in terms of Tigray itself, the restrictions are largely imposed by the government and there's layers of restrictions. We have this – I have the sense that there's a seriousness on the part of the government to start to strip away some of the restrictions that have been put in place since June. But I'm not even sure that the government recognizes how many layers of restrictions have been imposed since June and how difficult it's going to be to dial all of this back.

The other thing is the commercial siege of Tigray, that the banking services, the utilities, electricity, telecom, et cetera have been cut off also since the end of June, and fuel supplies, et cetera. And simply having trucks drop off food in Mekelle is not going to be sufficient to address the needs. There needs to be cash, telecom, fuel, et cetera to be able to do this. And it's a struggle, still, even if there's a stated willingness of the government to work with us on releasing it.

We see this as essential. It's essential not only to save people's lives wherever the people's needs happen to be, but it's essential in order to make that argument as strongly as possible with the Tigrayan leaders that they cannot enter Addis under the guise of trying to break the humanitarian siege, that there are other ways to achieve those goals without tipping Addis into a bloodbath situation or chaos.

MR PRICE: Thank you very much, Special Envoy Feltman. Thank you all for tuning in. Again, this call was on the record, attributable to the special envoy. The embargo is now lifted, and we look forward to speaking with many of you very soon. Thanks, all, very much.