

US lobbying: Ethiopia fights to reverse AGOA trade suspension

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ADDIS AFTER AGOA

In the third instalment of our series on the Top 10 lobbying operations by African actors in the United States, we look at the Ethiopian lobby's push to preserve duty-free access to the US market.

With the US President Joe Biden administration sensing an [‘opportune’ time](#) for peace negotiations to end the conflict in northern Ethiopia, the Addis Ababa government and its diaspora supporters are doubling down on their lobbying campaign to restore trade benefits.

In late January, the leadership of the Pennsylvania-based American-Ethiopian Public Affairs Committee (AEPAC) met with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in Addis Ababa for a five-hour meeting to discuss the next steps and reconstruction efforts after 15 months of war. A central topic of discussion, an AEPAC lobbyist tells *The Africa Report*, was restoring Ethiopia’s eligibility under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) after US Trade Representative Katherine Tai suspended the country from the duty-free trade scheme effective 1 January, citing human rights abuses.

Ethiopia was the fifth-largest beneficiary of the AGOA programme last year, with \$237m worth of exports to the US in 2020. In an [op-ed](#) last year, the country’s chief trade negotiator, Mamo Mihretu, warned of an “existential threat” to Ethiopia’s fledgling manufacturing sector and a disproportionate impact on poor young women if AGOA privileges were revoked.

AEPAC was established last year and is represented by lobbyists at Mercury Public Affairs and Actum International UK (formerly Mercury International UK), which has also had an \$85,000-per-month [contract](#) to represent the Ethiopian embassy in Washington since last August. Registered foreign agents on those contracts include former Louisiana senator (Republican) David Vitter and former Connecticut congressman (Democratic) Toby Moffett for AEPAC and former Florida congressman (Democratic) Joe Garcia for the embassy.

The diaspora group is taking solace from recent comments by a senior administration official that Ethiopia’s suspension may not last for the whole year.

“We’ve also been quite clear that if more positive and constructive steps are taken to address the concerns that were raised by the US trade representative that we would be willing to enter a process of discussion with the government of Ethiopia about an off-cycle review of their status,” the official said in a 10 January [background call](#) with reporters.

Divided congress

Ethiopia’s reinstatement would be welcomed by several key members of Congress, which wrote the AGOA requirements.

The Democratic chairs of the house and senate foreign affairs panels on Africa — representative Karen Bass of California and senator Chris Van Hollen of Maryland — [wrote a letter](#) to President Biden at the end of December urging him to reconsider the suspension, calling it “counterproductive”.

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“Loss of AGOA eligibility,” they said, “will reverse economic gains that have been hard won by the people of Ethiopia, American investors, and exacerbate the circumstances of the most vulnerable sectors of the population, including women and children. Furthermore, this decision invites China to strengthen its economic foothold in the Horn of Africa.”

Top Republicans on the foreign affairs committees, representative Mike McCaul of Texas and senator Jim Risch of Idaho, by contrast issued a statement last year [placing the blame](#) squarely on the Ethiopian government for running afoul of AGOA’s requirements.

“The AGOA statute clearly states that any country responsible for committing gross violations of human rights shall lose its eligibility for preferential AGOA trade benefits,” they said. “We are greatly concerned that the Ethiopian government, as a direct result of its continuing reckless actions, could force Ethiopia’s expulsion from a program that supports the livelihoods of millions of Ethiopians.”

Peace and other lobbying

Joining Actum in the government’s corner is global law firm Holland and Knight, which signed a \$45,000-per-month [contract](#) with Ethiopia’s ministry of peace in March 2021.

Abiy’s opponents are not ceding the battlefield of US public opinion without a fight, however. In November, a coalition of nine Ethiopian groups led by the Tigrayan rebels and their Oromo allies gathered in Washington to [announce](#) the formation of a multi-ethnic alliance to topple the government.

Meanwhile, a number of ethnic-based diaspora groups, including the Amhara Association of America, the Oromo Legacy Leadership & Advocacy Association and the Tigray Centre for Information and Communications, have launched their own lobbying campaigns.