

# Ethiopia: Washington update - June 11, 2021 - U.S. Policy towards Ethiopia

The United States government is poised to enact policies that would destabilize Ethiopia, creating a humanitarian catastrophe and a geopolitical disaster. The policies stem from a misunderstanding of the situation on the ground in Ethiopia, an honorable but misguided effort to calm a conflict, and a disregard for the suffering American actions could impose on millions of people who have played no role in that conflict.

There is still time for the Biden administration to pause and reconsider its approach to Ethiopia, for the U.S. to promote ideals it espouses – democracy, human rights, sovereignty, prosperity – rather than push the second-most populous country in Africa toward ruin.

The U.S. relationship with Ethiopia dates back to 1903, when King Menelik II signed a treaty of commerce with a representative of the U.S. government. Ethiopia supported the U.S. during the Cold War and has sacrificed the lives of its soldiers in the war on terrorism.

The U.S. has provided generous support for Ethiopia, on a humanitarian basis and in support of American strategic objectives. For decades after the fall of the communist regime in 1991, American aid helped Ethiopians overcome drought and famine, even as the country was ruled by a corrupt, violent and repressive dictator, Meles Zenawi.

Meles was a leader of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and when he came to power, head of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRD). The U.S. government looked away as Meles and his government imposed a constitution on Ethiopia that swept away a centuries-long tradition of ethnic and religious tolerance in favor of a divide-and-rule strategy that pitted neighbor against neighbor in a struggle for access to food, land and security.

U.S. financial assistance helped the Ethiopian people, but it also helped sustain Meles, who turned them on his own citizens, as well as deploying them for African peacekeeping missions and for the fight against Al Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist groups.

Now the Ethiopian government, led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, is engaged in a struggle in Tigray province against the TPLF forces that Meles created and supported during his decades in power. At the same time, the ethnic divisions that the EPRD constitution inflamed have erupted around the country. Members of every ethnic especially the Amharas and religion have suffered from massacres and rapes, have been forced out of their homes and impoverished.

The violence, against all parties, is wrong and it must be stopped. Ethiopians can only live in peace again if the root causes are addressed. First and foremost, this requires replacing the constitution that has torn apart the country with a new charter based on national unity, democracy and respect for human rights.

This carnage has made Ethiopia vulnerable to threats from abroad.

Sudanese forces have invaded and occupied Ethiopian territory. Their illegal actions have not been opposed by the Biden administration.

Citing treaty rights negotiated by colonial powers without the participation of Ethiopians, Egypt and Sudan have threatened military action to prevent Ethiopia from completing the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). GERD will bring electricity to millions of Ethiopians at no cost to Egypt, Sudan or any other country.

The Biden administration is being counseled to impose sanctions on Ethiopia that could devastate innocent Ethiopians. Doing so would turn ordinary Ethiopians against the United States. It would also rip holes in fragile safety nets that are preventing the country from becoming a failed state and a haven for terrorists.

Rather than harm and alienate Ethiopians, the U.S. should support the Ethiopian people while pushing the Ethiopian government to respect human rights, release political prisoners including Eskinder Nega, stop censoring news media, eradicate corruption and start a process of national reconciliation.

Mesfin Mekonen, Ethiopian/Americans Community