

Washington Update
December 4, 2020

In his opening remarks to a December 3 hearing of the the House Africa Subcommittee on the crisis in Ethiopia, Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.) concluded: “It is...absolutely imperative that Ethiopia not succumb to internal division and ethnic hatred. Ethiopia is far too important, not just for the Ethiopian people, but for the entire Horn and Africa as a whole. It must overcome this year of crises, and return to being an example to be followed.”

Smith stressed the importance of Ethiopia, called for a return to peace, and said that long-term stability requires dismantling the system of ethnic division that was created by the TPLF regime. “It is my belief that Ethiopia is one of the two most strategically significant countries in Africa—Nigeria being the other one—and what happens there is amplified throughout the region,” he said. “And while I am hopeful that the Ethiopian government’s capturing of the regional Tigrayan capital of Mekelle, coupled with an announcement that the government will allow United Nations humanitarian assistance to flow in the region, signals an end to armed conflict, nonetheless my concern is that the fall of the capital marks simply the end to one stage of an armed civil conflict and signals the beginning of a protracted civil war characterized by guerilla tactics.”

Smith noted that in Ethiopia “ethnic tensions are further exacerbated by a constitutional order bequeathed by the TPLF commonly called ‘ethnic federalism,’ which has led to the pitting of one group against another and fueled regional separatism and the desire to ‘cleanse’ regions of other ethnicities.”

He told his colleagues that “though it may not be considered polite to discuss issues such as ethnicity and religion, one cannot understand the current crisis in Ethiopia without reference to the ethnic tensions which are often overlaid with religious ones. We in Congress must be careful, however, to not inadvertently stir up further ethnicity-based division by taking the side of one group over another, but rather, urge a path of reconciliation and negotiation which will likely lead to no one being fully satisfied, but will help reduce tensions.”

Susan Stigant, director of Africa Programs at the U.S. Institute of Peace, also provided some insightful testimony.

She emphasized the need to consider the broader context, not just the current conflict between the central government and the TPLF. “Solely focusing on what is going on today in Tigray risks obscuring broader concerns about violence, democratic backsliding, and repression elsewhere in the country. Even before the Tigray crisis, the International Organization on Migration recorded that more than 1.8 million people had been displaced in 2020. By July, Amnesty International had reported that at least 15,000 people had been arbitrarily arrested and detained as part of the government’s crackdown on armed attacks,

violence and following protests in Oromia. In the weeks leading up to the crisis, the federal government reorganized security institutions, including the ENDF, and several prominent political figures and journalists were jailed.”

Like Smith, Stigant, Director of Africa Programs at the U.S. Institute of peace accurately pinpointed the cause of the horrific violence as the divide-and-rule ethnically based constitution imposed on the country by the TPLF. “As a horrific example of the type of violence in Ethiopia that has become all too common, on November 1, ethnically targeted killings left at least 54 people dead in a schoolyard in the Wollega zone of Oromia state. Throughout western Ethiopia, communal violence has only increased since 2018. An attack on a bus in Benishangul-Gumuz in western Ethiopia left at least 34 people dead on November 14 and marked the latest in an unrelenting pace of violence. In southern Ethiopia, tensions remain high, as the consequences of the model of ethnic federalism continue to unfold.”

In comments that were clearly aimed at the Biden administration, Stigant called on the U.S. to create a policy that supports democracy and human rights in Ethiopia. “Ethiopia stands at an inflection point, and U.S. policy needs to be recalibrated to reflect that reality. The resistance to or disagreement with reforms by the TPLF and other parts of the political, social, and economic establishment is to be expected. Indeed, resistance and debate are fundamental features of democratic transitions. The challenge before the Ethiopian leadership is to develop a strategic approach to address that resistance without falling into the trap of continued cycles of violence.”

Stigant also noted that while the U.S. has no right to dictate to Ethiopia, it should work to support Ethiopians who are working to create a democratic society. “While it is not for the United State to dictate to Ethiopia how to resolve fundamental questions of governance and its constitutional order, the United States does have an interest in ensuring the integrity and stability of the Ethiopia state, that the aspirations of Ethiopia’s citizens for democratic reforms are channeled into a political discourse not suppressed through violence, and that Ethiopia contributes to the stabilizing rather than further destabilizing the volatile Horn of Africa.”

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