

Washington Update
February 20, 2019

1. Progress and continuing challenges in addressing and reversing human rights abuses in Ethiopia.

The government has released political prisoners, removed bans on dissident groups and allowed their members to return from exile, declared press freedom and granted diverse political groups the freedom to mobilize and organize.

Ethiopia's parliament has approved the creation of a reconciliation commission as part of an effort to end intercommunal ethnic violence. The objective of the Commission is to maintain peace, justice, national unity and consensus and also reconciliation among Ethiopian peoples. Eskinder Nega, Journalist, Human Rights and Democracy activist, and Mesfin Mekonen, initiated and delivered to Prime Minister Abiy during his recent visit to the United States a declaration calling for Ethiopia to move forward with a truth and reconciliation project animated by the spirit that propelled change in South Africa. The goals are clear: peace, justice, respect for human rights, democracy, and prosperity. Achieving these basic goals will require a process of truth telling, particularly about human rights abuses, achieved through testimony from both victims and perpetrators, coupled to a pledge of reconciliation. The declaration, was signed by prominent Ethiopians.

The Ethiopian parliament has written a draft law repealing the Anti-Terrorism and Charities and Societies Proclamation. This is a high priority for advancing human rights in Ethiopia.

Amid this progress, Ethiopia faces serious challenges.

Ethnic conflicts that threaten to tear Ethiopia apart are the result of the 1994 Constitution, introduced by then-Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front governing coalition. The constitution recast the country from a centrally unified republic to a federation of nine regional ethnic states and two federally administered city-states. The system of ethnic federalism was troubled with internal inconsistencies because ethnic groups do not live only in a discrete "homeland" territory but are dispersed across the country. Nonnative ethnic minorities live within every ethnic homeland.

The flawed Ethiopian constitution could throw gasoline onto simmering ethnic conflicts. Prime Minister Abiy can achieve real progress if Ethiopia embraces a different kind of federation — territorial and not ethnic — where

rights in a federal unit are dispensed not on the basis of ethnicity but on residence. Such a federal arrangement will give Ethiopians a chance to avoid authoritarian dictatorship.

Ongoing violence includes ethnic conflict in the North, in the Tigre and Gonder regions. In the South, there is ethnic conflict among Somalis and the Oromo. In the Southwest in Wolega province there is violent conflict involving the Oromo tribes especially the Oromo Liberation Front which is robbing banks and harassing the entire population.

The government of Ethiopia lead by Prime Minister Abiy must maintain peace and the rule of law for all Ethiopians.

Another major concern is the political situation in Addis Ababa, where the population has been denied the opportunity to elect a mayor. Instead, the Prime Minister has appointed a mayor from outside the capital city.

At least 21 people were killed in two days of intense fighting between ethnic groups in southern Ethiopia. Escalating violence that has sent hundreds fleeing across the border to neighboring Kenya.

The violence broke out in December 2018 near the town of Moyale, on the border with Kenya, in a region claimed by both the Oromo and the Somali ethnic group. The fighting wounded 61, the state-affiliated Fana radio reported, citing the Oromia regional state communication office. Outbreaks of violence in the south between Oromos and other groups escalated since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed - assumed office in April 2018.

2. African Union honors Emperor Haile Selassie.

The African Union (AU) unveiled a statue of Ethiopian emperor, Haile Selassie, at the AU headquarters on February 10. Emperor Haile Selassie was the founder of African Union.

The Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Ambassador Kwesi Quartey, said "the commemorative statue of Emperor Haile Selassie is an important recognition of the Emperor's contribution to Africa's liberation and unity leading up to the founding of the Organization of African Unity in 1963."

Emperor Haile Selassie addressed the League on June 20, 1936 when the League officially condemned the Italian invasion and annexation of Ethiopia. During his address he asked, "What answer shall I take back to my people?" He warned: "It is us today, it will be you tomorrow." The

Emperor was toasted and hailed around the world by anti-fascists, and Time magazine named him "Man of the Year". Today his prophetic words to the League of Nations are often cited as a foreshadowing the Second World War to the ill-prepared nations of the world.

Mesfin Mekonen