

Washington Update

March 3, 2020

Representatives of Global Amhara Coalition (GAC), Dr. Ambachew Woreta, Mr. Kidane Mawsha, Dr. Shiferaw Gesesse and Mesfin Mekonen met last week with senior staff of Rep. Chris Smith of New Jersey, the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health. We encouraged Rep. Smith to hold a hearing on the present situation in Ethiopia. Sr. staff of Rep. Chris Smith said that met with US Ambassador to Ethiopia, Michael Raynor recently to discussed about the present situation in Ethiopia.

The GAC members provided a briefing to Rep. Smith's staff on the current situation in Ethiopia and emphasized the importance of American support for human rights and democracy in Ethiopia. The U.S. must press the Ethiopian government to create an independent electoral commission, to foster and protect an independent judiciary, ensure freedom of the press and of expression, and respect human rights and the rule of law for all Ethiopians.

Ato Kidane Mawsha spoke about the plight of the Amhara and the threat of genocide. He expressed deep concern about the escalation and intensity of ethnic and religious conflicts in Ethiopia. Left unchecked and unaddressed by the global community, these conflicts will have catastrophic consequences not only for Ethiopia's 115 million people, but also, for peace, security and stability in the entire Horn of Africa and the Middle East, with negative impacts that will be felt around world. The respect for human rights and human dignity must be the foundation for all policies and actions. Ordinary Ethiopians are horrified at the daily occurrences of targeted killings, most notably of Amhara nationals and Christians, the burnings of Churches and mosques, and the displacement of millions of citizens.

It is clear from the evidence that the federal government of Ethiopia under Prime Minister Abiy is either incapable of, or is unwilling to stop the carnage and to bring criminals, including Jawar Mohammed, members of the terrorist organization Shine Oromo, extremist ultra-nationalists, and Muslim religious extremists to justice.

Silence under these dire conditions is tantamount to acquiescence. We urge the global community to prevent Ethiopia from sliding into a civil war

that would split the country and provoke a genocide that could be even more terrible than the Rwandan genocide.

Dr. Ambachew Woreta described how extremists have burned Ethiopian Orthodox churches. Ethiopia, he said, is nearing a tipping point. Conditions are similar to those in many other countries immediately prior to sudden, violent upheavals: widespread corruption; church burning; heartbreaking poverty and bleak economic prospects; a large and angry population; unstable and violent neighbors; and a complete lack of support for civil society.

Churches were burnt to the ground in the city of Jijiga and mosques were burnt in the town of Mota, as well as other Oromia and Amhara regions. These deliberate actions are propagated by separatist Oromia groups in order to ignite ethnic and religious conflict with the goal of disintegrating Ethiopia.

In total, 45 Ethiopian Orthodox Churches and several mosques have been burned.

This is a tragedy and a unique event in Ethiopian history. Ethiopian Christians and Muslims have lived peacefully together for thousands of years.

Dr. Shiferaw Gesesse discussed the origins of the crisis. The root cause is Ethiopia's constitution which is based on divide-and-rule ethnic federalism. This was put in place by former Prime Minister Meles and the EPRDF party, and was done without the consent of the Ethiopian population. It will be impossible to create a stable political or social environment until this is reformed. Ethnic divisions are artificial and do not have deep roots in Ethiopian history. It is also impossible to have free and fair elections until the constitution is reformed.

The system of ethnic federalism enshrined in the constitution is riddled with inconsistencies because ethnic groups do not live only in discrete "homeland" territories but are dispersed across the country. Nonnative ethnic minorities live within every ethnic homeland.

Peace and stability depend on abandoning the ideology of ethnic division and launching a project to revise the Ethiopian constitution. The present constitution was created to exacerbate ethnic divisions. It will lead to the destruction of Ethiopia.

The rule of law must be respected before elections can be scheduled.

The Prime Minister must focus on stabilizing the country. Recently Southern and Northern Ethiopia are in turmoil, as is Eastern Ethiopia. The ongoing persecution of the Amhara people includes beatings and forced dislocations.

Mesfin Mekonen spoke about the Blue Nile and the abduction of university students.

According to news reports, 18 Amhara university students, 14 of them female, were abducted. The government has taken no action to protect and release the innocent university students.

There was also a report that 35,000 to 40,000 non-Oromo students, most of them Amhara, have fled from universities in Oromia because of fear of retaliation and abduction.

Washington Update has been writing about the Blue Nile project, and submitting written testimony to Congress about its importance, for over ten years.

Now, with completion of the dam on the horizon, diplomatic negotiations in Washington are determining how effective it will be in addressing the urgent needs of Ethiopia for power and irrigation.

Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan have reached a preliminary agreement on water sharing from the \$4.6 billion Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project on the Blue Nile. News reports indicate that the three countries have agreed to fill the dam in stages during the wet season, starting in July; but Ethiopia Foreign Minister Gedu Andargachew said that there were outstanding issues that need negotiation.

Ethiopia must negotiate for the benefit of the Ethiopian people. Eighty-five percent of Nile waters originate in Ethiopia from the Blue Nile. The Renaissance Dam project is critical to Ethiopian economic development. It will be important to assess details of the agreement, which have not yet been released, to determine their effect on Ethiopia.

The Renaissance Dam project is critical to Ethiopia economic development. Ethiopia is at critical crossroads with a large and increasing population, a depressed national economy, insufficient agricultural production, and a low number of developed energy resources. The upper Blue Nile basin harbors considerable untapped potential for irrigation and hydropower development and expansion.

We discussed assistance by the United States Agency for International Development that will provide assistance for sustainable development of Ethiopia's Nile river basin resources, including assistance to help Ethiopia with the technology necessary for the construction irrigation systems, and hydroelectric power that might prevent future famine. It will help Ethiopia independent of foreign aid. Ethiopia can feed itself by employing modern agriculture technologies.

Mesfin Mekonen