

Statement of Acting Assistant Secretary Robert F. Godec
Bureau of African Affairs
U.S Department of State

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Hearing: “The Ethiopia Conflict”
Tuesday, June 29, 2021

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, distinguished Members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss with you the dire situation in Ethiopia. Today, increasing intercommunal and inter-ethnic conflicts across the country are putting Ethiopia’s unity and territorial integrity at risk. If the crisis continues to worsen, the Horn of Africa and wider region will be destabilized.

The worst conflict is in Tigray where the scale of the suffering of civilians is shocking, horrifying, and heartbreaking. Tigray is an emergency that demands immediate action from the international community.

Before I outline the urgent steps the United States is taking to end the conflict, stop the atrocities, and provide humanitarian assistance, however, there were potentially important developments yesterday. The Ethiopian government announced a unilateral, temporary cessation of hostilities in Tigray. Some reports indicate that the Tigrayan Defense Forces made significant gains in recent days and this may have factored into the government’s decision. The announcement was accompanied by what appears to be a significant withdrawal of Ethiopian National Defense Forces from Tigray, including its capital city Mekele. We understand that the Ethiopian government’s decision to pursue this cessation of hostilities and to withdraw its military forces has been communicated to the Government of Eritrea, and that it was asked to take similar action. We urge the Eritrean government to comply immediately. We will watch closely to determine if the ceasefire results in changes on the ground, but the Ethiopian government’s decision to declare a temporary end to hostilities is a promising development, and we welcome it.

Earlier this month, the UN announced that famine is occurring in Tigray. USAID now estimates that between 700,000 to 900,000 people are experiencing “catastrophic” Phase 5 food insecurity. This is the largest number of people living with such high levels of acute food insecurity since the 2011 Somalia famine, but in this case, it is entirely man-made. This is unacceptable, and we condemn it in the strongest terms. Assistant to the Administrator Charles will discuss the humanitarian emergency in more detail.

Atrocities have been committed by all actors involved in the conflict, notably by the Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Amharan forces. In western Tigray, security forces allied with the Amharan regional government are forcing ethnic Tigrayans from their homes in what Secretary Blinken has described as acts of ethnic cleansing. Eritrean and Ethiopian forces have purposely and methodically destroyed water points, health facilities, schools, food storage sites, agriculture and livestock inputs, and farming equipment, leaving the Tigrayan population with no ability to feed itself. They have impeded humanitarian relief efforts and threatened and even killed assistance workers. Our thoughts are with the friends and family of the three *Médecins sans Frontières* staff members tragically killed last week in the course of their work in Tigray. Such attacks on humanitarian actors are unacceptable and must stop.

The UN has reported mass rapes of women and girls and widespread massacres of civilians. There are credible reports of hundreds of unlawful killings, including one captured on video showing likely Ethiopian troops shooting unarmed prisoners and then throwing the dead bodies of prisoners off a cliff. Civilians have been dragged from their homes or IDP camps and shot for no apparent reason other than being Tigrayan. Just last week, an Ethiopian airstrike hit a market in Togoga killing or injuring at least 80 civilians. These atrocities must stop and stop now.

The Administration is using every available tool to end this conflict. Along with a growing number of governments around the world, we have called for an immediate cessation of hostilities; full and unhindered humanitarian access; protection of civilians; the withdrawal of Eritrean forces and Amhara regional forces; a political settlement of the crisis; and independent, international investigations of human rights violations, abuses, and atrocities; and justice for victims and accountability for those responsible.

To achieve these goals, we are working with like-minded partners, regional governments, the African Union, and a range of organizations and individuals at the highest levels. We have pressed the UN Security Council and the UN Human Rights Council to work towards ending the crisis. At the G7 Leaders Summit and US-EU Summit in June, the United States and our partners spoke with one voice about the crisis. We have engaged with the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments at the highest level, pressing them to end hostilities and to follow through on commitments for the withdrawal of Eritrean forces, protection of civilians, and humanitarian access. The Secretary of State remains personally engaged, Presidential Emissary Senator Coons traveled to Ethiopia in March, and Special

Envoy Feltman and other senior officials are intensively working to end the conflict.

In May, the Secretary announced a visa restriction policy for current or former Ethiopian and Eritrean government officials, members of the security forces, and other individuals—to include Amhara regional and irregular forces, and members of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)—who are responsible for, or complicit in, undermining resolution of the crisis in Tigray, including by blocking access to humanitarian assistance or committing wrongful violence or other abuses against the people in Tigray. It is important to note that, contrary to some allegations, these targeted restrictions do not and in fact cannot harm the people of Ethiopia. We have also restricted foreign assistance to Ethiopia and are imposing defense trade controls. We are withholding our support for most new lending from Multilateral Development Banks except for basic human needs and have asked other countries to do likewise.

If the government's announcement of a cessation of hostilities does not result in improvements and the situation continues to worsen, Ethiopia and Eritrea should anticipate further actions. We will not stand by in the face of the horrors in Tigray. At the same time, we continue to emphasize to the governments in Addis Ababa and Asmara that another path is possible. We stand ready to work with them to end the humanitarian suffering, resolve the conflict, and renew momentum toward economic and political reforms. We urge them to make the right choices for all the people of Ethiopia.

Tragically, ethnic divisions are hardening across other parts of Ethiopia as well. There have been attacks on Amharans and Gumuz in Benishangul-Gumuz Region and on ethnic Oromo and Amharans in Oromia Region. In addition, there has been conflict between groups in the Afar and Somali regions and several conflicts unfolding in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region.

Ethiopia's response, regardless of where conflict is unfolding, has been inadequate. In some cases, the Ethiopian government's response has exacerbated the conflicts. Indiscriminate arrests, media restrictions, human rights violations and abuses, and shrinking political space have angered populations, fueling inter-ethnic rivalry and imperiling national cohesion and the territorial integrity of Ethiopia.

The election on June 21 was largely peaceful, and the United States commends all Ethiopians who exercised their right to vote. Nonetheless, we do not believe the elections will solve the widespread problems facing the country. We have raised

our concerns about the elections with the Government of Ethiopia on many occasions, including through our June 11 and June 25 statements, which noted grave concern about the environment in which these elections occurred. We continue to press the Ethiopian government to begin an inclusive dialogue of reconciliation to heal the current divisions and find a shared, democratic path forward. Prime Minister Abiy has promised to undertake such a dialogue and we urge him to do so immediately.

Finally, we also remain focused on the ongoing regional challenges around the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and the al-Fashaga border area between Sudan and Ethiopia. Both issues pose risks to regional peace and security and the U.S. government is working hard with bilateral partners and the AU to help resolve them.

I want to thank members of Congress for the strong resolutions and statements that have been issued. They are important and they help. The State Department will continue to work closely with you to address the crises in Ethiopia. I look forward to your questions.