United States Institute of Peace

"The Unfolding Conflict in Ethiopia"

Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations

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Chairwoman Bass, Ranking Member Smith and members of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the unfolding situation in Ethiopia. The timing for this hearing is critically important given the serious deterioration in the country's internal peace and stability, the risks that recent developments pose to regional and international peace and security, and the potential dangers of both to U.S. interests. If Ethiopia spirals down into further violence and fragmentation, the entire region will be severely impacted.

I am the director of Africa Programs at the United States Institute of Peace, although the views expressed here are my own. The U.S. Institute of Peace was established by Congress over 35 years ago as an independent, nonpartisan national institute to prevent and resolve violent conflicts abroad, in accordance with U.S. national interests and values. The Institute's Africa Center leads the engagement in sub-Saharan Africa and deepens, elevates, and expands the Institute's commitment to stem violent conflict in a region vital to American interests and that have global impacts.

Overview

A military confrontation between the federal government of Ethiopia and the regional state of Tigray, in the country's north, began November 4 and quickly escalated. The ruling party of Tigray, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which once led the ruling party coalition that preceded the Abiy government, claims that it launched a pre-emptive attack on the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) Northern Command. The federal government responded with an operation to regain control of the regional state and apprehend the TPLF leadership, which now stands accused of acts of treason. More than 40,000 refugees have fled into eastern Sudan. There is little information about the death toll or internal displacement, but initial reports suggest heavy casualties and human suffering.

The conflict between the TPLF and the federal government was not unexpected, nor did it occur in a vacuum. Political transitions rarely move forward with consistent, one-directional progress. It is normal that there will be resistance to reforms, both from those who previously held power and those who see a path towards power under a new dispensation. It is normal that there will be fundamental debates about the nature and shape of the state. It is normal that the legacy of a system based on exclusion and repression over decades requires sustained, generational efforts to forge justice, genuine inclusion, and agreement on how communities can share a common future.

Amidst escalating tensions and failed efforts of dialogue, it is also unsurprising that both parties would view the exercise of force as the logical, effective, and even a necessary decision in the short-term. However, all of our best thinking, practice and knowledge underlines that violence does not work in the medium to long-term. This knowledge has forged consensus about the imperative of prevention in U.S. policies and assistance, and this approach needs to be at the center of U.S. policy and partnerships with Ethiopia. We know that violence is costly – in unquantifiable human consequences, economic losses, investments in humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping interventions, risks of radicalization, and opportunities lost. For Ethiopia, this is not an abstract, theoretical practice. It is grounded in the country's own history and the people's lived experience. These reverberations resulting from the violence have provoked core

questions about the trajectory of the transition and should provoke a fundamental re-assessment of U.S. policy.

Complex Roots of the Crisis

Disagreement over the postponement of the anticipated August 2020 elections set the stage for the crisis. The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) determined in March 2020 that voter registration and other critical steps could not be completed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. That decision had broad support from political forces in Ethiopia. The decision by the House of Federation to extend the mandate of the prime minister and the parliament did not enjoy political consensus. When the Tigray region decided to proceed with organizing the state-level elections in defiance of the federal government and without the engagement of the NEBE, another step was taken towards November's violence.

The story is, of course, more complicated than postponed elections or COVID-19. The tensions between the federal government and the TPLF reflect broader, unresolved debates about Ethiopia's transition and federal arrangements. Past mechanisms for political dialogue were no longer fit for this purpose amidst rapid political reforms, and parties with diverging views or resistant to the reforms either opted out of or were not included in new forums. The federal government has detailed more than a dozen efforts to engage the TPLF through dialogue; however, none of these overcame fundamental obstacles. The tensions are also anchored in unaddressed reports, documentation and legacy of corruption, human rights abuses and state repression under the TPLF's leadership in the previous regime, along with allegations that the TPLF has been fomenting some of the disorder, violence and chaos during the transition period.

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.

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.

The Ethiopian transition is taking place against the backdrop of a fundamental geopolitical shift in the Horn of Africa and stretching across the Red Sea, as outlined in a recent report by the Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena convened by the U.S. Institute of Peace. In the last five years, the geopolitical landscape of the Red Sea arena has been

fundamentally reshaped. The Horn of Africa is now an integral part of and in fact the link among the security systems of the Middle East, the Indo-Pacific, and the Mediterranean. Middle Eastern states are asserting themselves in the Horn of Africa in ways unprecedented in at least a century, and the Red Sea arena is becoming increasingly militarized. The export of Middle Eastern rivalries into the Horn of Africa—with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Egypt contesting Turkey and Qatar for dominance—risks fueling instability and insecurity in an already fragile, volatile, and conflict-prone region.

Cost of Violence

The federal government announced on November 28 that it had completed military operations and would turn its attention to "rebuilding what has been destroyed, repairing what has been damaged and returning those who have fled." For its part, the TPLF withdrew from Mekelle and vowed to "fight…to the last" asserting that "this is about defending our right to self-determination." Given the TPLF's experience in waging an insurgency from the mountains of Tigray, it is too easy to breathe a sigh of relief and move onto a "post-conflict" phase. Indeed, silencing the guns – on all sides -- needs to remain the priority in the short term to avoid the intolerable costs of war.

Amidst a communications blackout and lack of independent reporting, it is difficult to ascertain the full human and humanitarian impact of this conflict. More than 40,000 refugees fled Ethiopia into eastern Sudan. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has requested $147 million to support the initial response. Access to nearly one million Eritrean refugees living in Tigray has been blocked over the course of the conflict, and it appears that large numbers of Ethiopians have been displaced internally and will require additional humanitarian support. This comes at a critical point in the harvest season and could have a ripple effect on food security for the months ahead, already exacerbated by the locust plague. In late November, the International Committee for the Red Cross reported that local hospitals and health facilities in Mekelle were running "dangerously low on medical supplies to care for the wounded as well as other mounting medical needs and conditions."

The targeting of individuals or groups on the basis of ethnicity comes at a great cost. Amnesty International and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission have investigated and documented horrific violence in Mai Kadra in Tigray. Independent investigations are needed to document the experience of those who fled the country and violence. Early indications suggest that the patterns of violence are widespread and complex. Reports of targeting of ethnic Tigrayans through restrictions on travel and removal from civil service and military posts have raised alarm bells with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. An escalating narrative of dangerous speech and division risks continued cycles of violence and deep damage to the fabric of Ethiopian society.

Even prior to the fighting, the International Monetary Fund forecast a growth rate of 0% for 2021, down from 9% GDP growth in 2019. Under immense pressure from the COVID-19 pandemic, the economy will depend on expanding foreign direct investment and advancing discussions about debt relief. Ongoing violence will almost certainly distract from the economic imperatives that underpin the political transition. The violence also risks curtailing private sector

investment and may lead international partners to call into question large-scale partnerships with the World Bank or other institutions.

Ethiopia has and continues to play a central regional leadership role: a founding member of the United Nations and African Union, a leading contributor to peacekeeping, and the seat of the continental body for peace and security. Narratives – some false – about the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces from Somalia are already fueling uncertainty in the lead up to Somalia's elections and at a moment when the U.S. Administration has indicated that it will draw down its military engagement there. The flow of refugees into eastern Sudan adds stress to a fragile transition and region. The resort to violence by all parties without activation of the African Union's own architecture missed an opportunity to exercise and underline the hard-won norms of peace and security. This may very well ripple into future conflicts. Attacks on the Eritrean capital by the TPLF and the allegations of reorganization of Ethiopian troops in Eritrea and even Eritrean troop involvement point to a regionalization of the conflict.

U.S. Policy Priorities to Advance Prevention in a Complex Transition and Interconnected Red Sea Arena

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. For the United States government, centering policy around the tenets of prevention, political inclusion and legitimacy enshrined in the Global Fragility Act as well as anchoring Ethiopia in the broader Horn of Africa and Red Sea Arena provide the best foundation to support the aspirations of the Ethiopian people for their transition.

Despite the escalation, I believe that there is a shared desire – by the federal government, the TPLF, the political opposition, the African Union and U.S. partners in the EU and beyond - to avoid the horrible costs of violence and support the possibility that a democratic, peaceful Ethiopia offers. Based on this, I would like to offer recommendations in three policy areas for the U.S. Administration and the continued leadership from this Committee:

- ***Do everything possible to prevent cycles of violence and mitigate the human consequences of the conflict.***

  - *Consistent, senior-level messaging.* The U.S. Administration and Congress need to continue to send consistent private and public messages about the need to prevent the spread and to de-escalate violence, actively discourage outside military engagement and fervently pursue a political solution. The U.S. can underscore the long-term costs that the conflict will have on Ethiopia's economy and international image. The U.S. can signal and galvanize broader coordinated support – diplomatic and perhaps technical or financial – for the African Union's leadership to silence and keep silent the guns.

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o *Humanitarian response*: Current efforts to secure unhindered humanitarian access to Tigray need to be sustained and operationalized with a clear-eye towards the evolving conflict dynamics and a conflict sensitive approach. Funds and resources to respond to the growing numbers of refugees in eastern Sudan need to be mobilized, as does contingency planning for the possibility of additional conflict-induced displacement in the coming weeks and months. Funding and resources are also needed to respond to the ongoing and unmet humanitarian needs resulting from the internal displacement even prior to the Tigray crisis.

o *Joint, independent investigations and mechanisms:* Allegations of incidents that could amount to war crimes have been reported by all parties. Investigation and documentation are needed to deter further violations, mitigate the risks of escalating rhetoric, and to provide a path towards justice and accountability. Preliminary reporting by Amnesty International and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission need to be bolstered by investigations in other areas where fighting occurred and with those who fled into eastern Sudan. Amidst the deep polarization, competing narratives and potentially complex jurisdictional issues, a joint independent investigation with the UN High Commission for Human Rights or the African Union could bolster the credibility of the EHRC's reporting and independence. The U.S. Administration and Congress can actively request and provide funding for such investigations.

- ***Safeguard the space for inclusive conversations about the transition.*** In the wake of the crisis between the federal government and the TPLF, there is an even greater urgency to safeguard space for inclusive conversation about the transition process. Difficult conversations will be needed about the redeployment of militias from Tigray and the ways that the military operation has shifted the relationship between Addis Ababa and the regional states. Conducting credible elections will depend on fostering security, trust, and reconciliation. Ethiopians will need to feel confident engaging in political debate and campaigning. And, eventually, agreeing on changes to the federal structure will require a sensitive set of discussions and negotiations. Setting a precedent that such changes will be done through discussion, and not be imposed, will be critical.

  With the escalation of conflict, calls for dialogue have been deeply polarizing and civic space has closed. The federal government has expressed its concern that dialogue or negotiations with the TPLF would accord equivalence, promote impunity, and impose an unworkable power sharing arrangement. However, the need for dialogue extends beyond the Tigray crisis. Detention of journalists, political opposition leaders, and civic activists who have voiced dissent with the reform process fuel concerns that the country is sliding back into closed, authoritarian tendencies. As a November 5 statement by USIP's Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena warned that neither an inclusive political dialogue nor free and fair elections can "be possible while many of the country's most prominent political leaders remain in prison."

  Structures and mechanisms for inclusive conversations are needed to safeguard the democratic transition. Ethiopians need to discuss and agree what formats are needed and

ways to include those who agree and, more importantly, those who disagree. In other transitions, local and regional dialogue, peace committees and interparty advisory councils have helped to defuse tensions. Civic group have forged coalitions to mobilize peaceful support for a reform agenda and bridge resistance by former and aspiring elites. The African Union envoys and the broader African Peace and Security Architecture can and should be called upon to support these dialogues.

The U.S. government needs to underline in public and private messaging the support for freedom of expression, space for independent journalism, and the need to expand conversations to those who have diverging views. The U.S. government can also express its strong interest in preventing violence through the activation of multiple, reinforcing mechanisms for inclusive conversations. Existing assistance programs in support of the transition and democratic development can be activated to support conversations about what inclusion means and ways that confidence can be built towards dialogue.

- ***Engage Ethiopia in the context of a new political and diplomatic strategy for the Red Sea Arena.*** Between May 2019 and September 2020, USIP convened a bipartisan senior study group to consider the factors that have reshaped the Red Sea arena. The Study Group determined that, in recent years, the geopolitical and geo-economic dynamics of the Horn of Africa have become tied to the Middle East and broader Indian Ocean in a manner unprecedented in the last century. However, U.S. strategy in this evolving environment has struggled to keep pace with these interconnected, complex, and transregional dynamics and to account for the region's increased relevance to U.S. interests. Three pillars of this new strategic approach need to be brought to bear in supporting the transition in Ethiopia and responding effectively to the current crisis:

  o *Overcome the bureaucratic seams between the Africa and Near East bureaus within the U.S. government* by designating a special envoy with responsibility for the Red Sea arena or designating the deputy secretary of state as the interagency lead for developing and executing an integrated strategy on the Red Sea arena. The special envoy or deputy secretary should ensure consistent, effective engagement with Gulf countries who have a stake and role in Ethiopia. A standing interagency policy committee (IPC) on the Red Sea arena, co-chaired by the National Security Council senior directors for Africa and the Middle East, can serve to coordinate overall policy approaches and priorities.

  o *Realign U.S. assistance to promote inclusive, legitimate governance and economic growth* by designating the Horn of Africa as a priority region under the Global Fragility Act, requiring a five-year Integrated Regional Strategy for the Red Sea arena encompassing the State Department, Defense Department, Department of Commerce, and USAID, and establishing a G20 working group on debt relief for the Horn of Africa to catalyze a dialogue among Paris Club and non-Paris Club creditors.

  o *Sustain active congressional engagement* by strengthening coordination among the relevant congressional bodies on both a transregional (i.e., Africa and Middle East) and interdisciplinary (i.e., foreign affairs, armed services, appropriations) basis,

establishing reporting requirements on the destabilizing actions by Middle Eastern states in the Horn of Africa, and encouraging bipartisan congressional champions to provide particular support to the transition in Ethiopia.

Let me conclude by elaborating on this last point in the specific context of Ethiopia. Congress provided clear guidance and leadership on the imperative of prevention through the adoption of the Global Fragility Act. This approach aligns with a broader consensus that a healthy state-society relationship, anchored in accountable, inclusive governance is the most consistent predictor of stability and peace. This all sounds rather theoretical in the abstract. But the crisis in Ethiopia highlights the very real human consequences, the implications for regional stability and the risks of violence and even extremism if we fail to support transitions in line with our own commitments and best practices.

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. The United States can and therefore should consider its bilateral relationship with Ethiopia in a manner that accounts for the events of the last month and brings to bear the benchmarks, tools, and approaches in the Global Fragility Act.

Congress can play a vital role in laying out the principles that could form the basis for the new bilateral relationship between the United States and Ethiopia that must by necessity emerge—a bilateral relationship that minimizes the likelihood of state fragmentation and the further internationalization of Ethiopia's multiplying conflicts.

The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.