



Human Rights and Governance in Ethiopia

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ASSISTANT SECRETARY KRAMER: Thank you very much for the introduction and thanks for inviting me to join you here today and to be with such a great panel. I do regret I'm just back from South Korea this weekend, so I won't be able to stay to hear the panel. But colleagues from the Department – Jeff Krilla, Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, is here and certainly an expert on Africa, and there may be other colleagues here from State who can certainly address any questions or issues that might come up during the discussion. But it is a real pleasure for me to be here. I actually worked at CSIS – I won't say how many years ago, but quite a long time ago, and it's always a pleasure to come back here.

It's a pleasure for me to join you here today to talk about Ethiopia, the human rights situation there. I have paid two visits to Ethiopia in my time as the Assistant Secretary in DRL, as it's called. I started the job at the end of March, and I was in Addis in late July, and then I just returned, as he said, in October.

And the reason I paid two visits to Ethiopia, and it has so far been the only country I've made a return visit to, is out of recognition of the importance Ethiopia represents for the United States. It is a key strategic partner with the U.S. in the war on terrorism. It's a key player in what is obviously a rather difficult region, in the Horn of Africa. And I went out of respect and recognition for the importance we attach to the relationship with all of Ethiopia, with the government, with opposition, with civil society, with journalists with whom I met.

And we very much want to see Ethiopia succeed, become a democratic, prosperous member of the international community, fully integrated, so that it represents a real stable anchor in the region and a model for others to follow.

I also did go to Ethiopia a second time because of concerns that we have in the area of human rights, and including legislation that is being considered that could affect civil society organizations. And I'll talk about that a little more in a few minutes.

The United States has had a long, close, and productive relationship with Ethiopia, and we very much value our partnership with that country. We recognize that the Ethiopian government has made lots of progress in democracy and human rights over the past 17 years. And as I said, we also recognize that Ethiopia is located in one of the most volatile regions in the world. It's the third – Ethiopia is the third largest recipient of U.S. assistance on the African continent and will host the largest Embassy facility, once it's finished with construction, in sub-Saharan Africa – a reflection of the importance we attach to our relationship.

The U.S. has a significant interest and stake in promoting stability and effective governance in the entire Horn of Africa. And it's toward this end that we provide lots of humanitarian assistance in the wake of natural and man-made disasters, we promote increased respect for human rights, we build counterterrorism capacity, and collaborate with regional governments to transform their countries by investing in their people and creating the conditions for sustained economic growth.

While U.S. policy on Ethiopia, I think for obvious and understandable reasons, focuses heavily on counter- terrorism and promoting regional stability, that focus is only part of our approach and our bilateral relationship. It is our firm conviction that promoting human rights, the rule of law, good governance, are, in fact, essential cornerstones for creating a solid foundation for internal and regional stability and deterring terrorism. And it's toward that end that Ambassador Yamamoto, who has done an outstanding job in country, is working closely with colleagues of his from like-minded governments to persistently press the Ethiopian government to pursue legal and constitutional approaches to advance Ethiopia's democracy and to respect the principles enshrined in international treaties to which Ethiopia is a party.

Now, on the positive side, the government permitted an unprecedented and praiseworthy opening of political space in the lead up to the May 2005 national elections. And such progress included: key reforms by the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia; the adoption of a code of conduct by opposition parties and the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF); also, it was guaranteed media access for opposition candidates; and civil society participation in voter education trainings.

On the negative side, however, as you all know, the experiment with multiparty democracy suffered a major setback in the aftermath of that hotly contested 2005 parliamentary election and even in subsequent events and developments since then. In 2005, in the aftermath of the election, the situation rapidly deteriorated as it became clear to the government that the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) had, in fact, won in many urban areas, including in the capital. Accusations surfaced of voter intimidation, ballot tampering, and other things. And in June and November opposition supporters protested the conduct of the elections; and very sadly, at least 193 people were killed as security forces and protestors clashed. Over 100 prominent CUD leaders, journalists and civil society leaders were detained and charged with crimes ranging from treason to outrages against the constitution, and many were imprisoned, some for terms up to 18 months.

Now moving up to this year, to events of this year, EPRDF tightly controls the country's political space. Its landslide victory in the April 2008 local elections was, I think, due in part to the withdrawal of several opposition parties from that election before the second round of the polls because of the concern of harassment of candidates, party activists, election observers, and a general sense that the election was heavily tilted in favor of the ruling party.

From that time, from April local elections to more recent developments, we have seen a number of efforts that are perceived in many circles in Ethiopia and here –of efforts to try to close the political space in Ethiopia. Of most immediate concern, the reason – one of the main reasons I went back ten days ago, is the latest draft of the Charities and Societies Proclamation, as well as the Media Law that was passed right before my first visit to Ethiopia in July. And both of these, I think, run the risk of curbing freedom of speech, civic development and capacity building that we feel are extremely important to development of the democratic system, of respect for human rights in that country.

All these developments, as I say, taken together, do, I think, suggest a closing of political space, a concern that I shared directly with the Prime Minister on both occasions when I saw him in July and when I saw him on my most recent visit. Now, the Prime Minister assured me that this was not the case, that democratic development is an existential issue for Ethiopia. I certainly don't question his statements and his commitment. But as a friend of the countries representing the United States, I felt an obligation to point out to him as well as to other government officials and to others with whom I met, the areas of real concern we have when we see that there could be, if, in fact, that is not where they want to go, unintended consequences of certain developments that are underway.

In addition to meeting with the Prime Minister, I also met with others in the ruling party. I met with representatives of opposition parties. And these meetings were true on both visits, with representatives of civil society, with members of the press, and held two press conferences at the end of both visits.

And in all those meetings, I raised the areas of concern we have on human rights and governance challenges. I raised directly the issue of the closure of political space, as I mentioned, including the Media Law and the CSO Proclamation.

Now, the CSO legislation may be going through yet another iteration. It had gone through four. And I must also take this moment to thank certain organizations here who have done analyses of the legislation. The analyses, I think, have been invaluable in helping us in the government in trying to raise areas of concern with the Ethiopian Government. I think the detail has been just right and they've been most helpful.

And it's from those analyses as well as our own assessments of the CSO draft legislation that we've raised concerns with things like the 10 % threshold of foreign financing that would raise lots of questions about organizations, given the dearth of funding domestically for many operations there. The 30% cap on administrative overhead, I raised with the Prime Minister and others. I quite simply don't understand why the government is legislating how much an NGO can spend on overhead. It

would seem to me that that's an issue for donors to be concerned with. Restrictions on the kinds of activities that would be affected by this legislation – basically, any organizations that are considered foreign or receive foreign financing that engage in human rights issues or issues dealing with the rights of women or the rights of children or the disabled, or conflict resolution – all of those things would be at risk under this legislation. And all of those issues are ones that my bureau as well as AID and others support and fund, and so we run the risk of seeing some of our programs adversely affected, including possibly even closed down.

So I warned officials there that if it is not intended, the unintended consequence of this legislation may be the closing down of a number of the programs we fund and support, including ones that my bureau funds in the area of women's rights and empowerment, conflict resolution, media capacity building – all of which would seem to me to be in everyone's interest to continue and sustain.

I also stressed the importance of the need for electoral reform, looking ahead to the elections in 2010. And I raised all of these concerns as a friend and ally. I didn't go there wagging my finger. I didn't go there to lecture. I went because we want to see Ethiopia succeed and we want to make sure that there is full awareness among government circles, in the opposition, in civil society, in the media circles that we do have these concerns. And it's also important, I think, that the government in Ethiopia hear these concerns not just from the United States but from other donor countries as well so that it isn't simply a message that they think is coming from Washington only.

With Ethiopia, we try to support an ongoing process of transition to multi-party democracy, we try to promote economic growth and reduce poverty, build domestic capacity to respond to food emergencies, improve access to basic education and health services, and bolster broader regional stability. So our programs are multifaceted, but unfortunately, we also fear that a lot of our programs could be adversely affected by the legislation that's being considered. Ethiopia, of course, is also a major recipient of funding and support under the President HIV/AIDS initiative, which is also extremely important.

Ethiopia is Africa's second most populous country, the seat for the African Union, and a counterweight or an anchor of stability in a volatile region and a strong example of a diverse country with a tradition of religious tolerance. So for all of these reasons, we think Ethiopia has the potential to play a significant leadership role on the continent. And it's critical that we all – as stakeholders in Ethiopia's stability, democracy, and prosperity – encourage and engage the Government of Ethiopia, as well as civil society, as well as representatives in the opposition, to capitalize and build upon the advances that were made before the problems that started to emerge in 2005, and to make sure that, in fact, this sense and impression that the political space is closing, in fact, goes in the opposite direction so that there is an opening up of political space and so that we don't run into the kinds of problems, Jennifer, that you mentioned in the introduction. I think with that, in the interest of time, let me stop there. I'm happy to take questions that people may have.

MODERATOR: Great. Thank you very much. Why don't we open the floor for questions. We have maybe five, ten minutes max.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY KRAMER: Yeah. Again, my apologies that I have to leave to you and to all who are here and to my fellow panelists.

MODERATOR: We have a question there.

QUESTION: I'd like to ask a question concerning – some of the speech that you just did was kind of vague, but I want to know exactly how does the instability, like now, like, relate to the instability and famine that happened in – I guess maybe the '80s when they did that "We are the World" type thing that Ethiopia, you know – that issue. Are you aware of that (inaudible)?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY KRAMER: Yeah, I remember.

QUESTION: Also, talking about, you know, Eritrea and the conflict between the two countries – basically, your speech was kind of vague, so basically I want to know what steps you took to actually fix those problems so that we can actually see the rationale behind how you solve the problems. Is that possible? If not, then I understand, but –

ASSISTANT SECRETARY KRAMER: Yeah, I mean, let me – I'll try quickly. The issue of dealing with famine problems is – there is certainly a human rights component to it. I don't want to suggest there isn't. But helping Ethiopia deal with regions that are facing famine or starvation of people at risk, malnutrition, is largely an area that AID and others in the U.S. Government work on, so it's not – doesn't directly fall under my bureau's purview.

But we certainly do recognize the need for providing whatever help we can, but obviously the responsibility lies first and foremost with the government of Ethiopia. And any pockets of instability created by famine or starvation put at risk what the government is trying to do, and we certainly don't want to see that.

In the case of Ethiopia and Eritrea, this is an issue that I have sort of divided up with my colleagues in the African Bureau, with Assistant Secretary Jendayi Frazer, and so she's been the one taking the lead on that. And what we do want to see and what we do want to promote is for Ethiopia to play a role in enhancing and promoting stability throughout the region, and that's something we work very closely with them on.

MODERATOR: Let's take another question Steve Hadwick (ph). I mean, one of the questions is how will this affect kind of how the U.S. engages with Ethiopia. One of the problems is we don't have a whole lot of leverage on the government. And I just wonder if, in your talks with the Africa Bureau, you know, how you see perhaps the relationship evolving or changing as a result of internal dynamics. We can take a couple of questions –

ASSISTANT SECRETARY KRAMER: Sure, no, that's fine. Yeah, that's fine.

MODERATOR: Yeah. So Steve Morrison (ph) in the back had a question, then we have a gentleman here.

QUESTION: Thank you. This is to follow on what Jen raised. David, thank you for your speech and thank you for your leadership on taking these issues up in the way you have in the last few months.

This just does seem to bring forward in a very dramatic way Ethiopia, the dilemma that we face, that many countries have gone in a regressive direction on tightening down and narrowing the space. Our leverage in many cases has diminished. In the case of Ethiopia, we're putting this year probably over \$900 million of assistance, but we don't get leverage against PEPFAR money or emergency humanitarian programs, and we have an active, tacit security cooperation with the Ethiopians in Somalia. So it's – you're operating against a very tough background of trying to leverage the government in Ethiopia to decide not to proceed along a track or even to accelerate moving along that track anticipating the end of this administration and a delay in the transition leading into the next one.

So how do you deal with that overarching problem that we don't seem to have much leverage, we're in a phase where it's going to be even more difficult to feel like you're getting leverage? And is the congressional piece really where we should be also looking? I mean, the Feingold legislation, the fact that you have strong leadership there setting down some markers, maybe that is another dimension of this that we need to take account of.

Thank you.

MODERATOR: (Off-mike.)

ASSISTANT SECRETARY KRAMER: Sure, sure.

MODERATOR: If you can identify yourself.

QUESTION: Yes, my name is Dr. Bala Haftiesis (ph). My question relates about Ethiopia's specific space in terms of the geopolitical environment, where there are serious challenges of governance (inaudible) in Eritrea, Djibouti, Yemen, Somalia, specifically, and how this instability and security challenges the whole population whereby there is a population influx into Ethiopia be it for humanitarian, economic or sometimes political and security concerns? When you talk about the political space shrinking within Ethiopia, are you also considering the external factors around in Ethiopia that are facilitating this very perhaps vulnerable political space to be (inaudible) especially I'm mentioning the works of al-Shabab, al-Qaida, al-Shabia (ph), the Eritrean (ph) terrorist network, and the fact that Ethiopia is the only viable state in that whole region to support some level of sustainable democracy or governance. Within that context, therefore, the shrinkage of political space and Ethio-U.S. relations, where does it balance? Is making Ethiopia vulnerable more by reducing some of the socioeconomic partnerships that we have with the United States – is that one way to go? Are there (inaudible) efforts being made in Somalia, Eritrea, those vulnerable areas, so that this communication also is balanced in terms of Ethiopia's role within African Union and specific responsibility to protect the interests of the big international diplomatic community? Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Let's take one more. The gentleman there.

QUESTION: Thank you so much. My question is regarding the Asafa (ph) (inaudible) the closing of political space (inaudible) the draft law only Ethiopian citizens can work in areas of democracy human rights issues. And you know, as you know, many (inaudible) still someone who has (inaudible) control the agenda of any activity. So the whole issues about promoting indigenous development of democracy, I mean, with money (inaudible) have a disproportionate control in the agenda of the country, so the whole (inaudible) just to local citizens to work in the area for democracy and human rights, and I don't see in doing that Ethiopia breaking any international law. Is there any international law that allows foreigners to demand political rights in another country? This is the whole issue of allowing only – allowing democratic and political rights for citizens, not foreigners, they can work and so forth, economic issues and other social issues, but democracy and political rights are only rights that can be demanded by citizens. So I don't – is there any (inaudible) breaking in this regard? Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Do you want to start with those – the leverage?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY KRAMER: Sure. All very good questions. Let me, Jennifer and you and Steve's points on leverage. It is interesting, I mean, hearing your comments about our limited leverage contrast with some people whom I saw in Ethiopia who say we have lots of leverage, given how much assistance we provide. But your point, Steven, I think is absolutely right, which is we don't want to politicize humanitarian assistance, we don't want to politicize HIV/AIDS assistance. Those are – those are programs we need to continue and support because life and death is at stake in those programs and it's a very slippery slope to go down and start politicizing those.

I think what we can do and are doing and need to do more of is coordination with the donors, because I think speaking collectively, we do perhaps add up to more leverage than might otherwise be the case that it's simply the United States voicing concerns. And Ambassador Yamamoto, I think, has done an excellent job of this. We perhaps need to think of some other ways to ensure full coordination among the donor community outside of the capital. But I think the Ambassador with other ambassadors do get meetings with senior people in the government and I think that is an effective way of trying to get our points across.

The issue of legislation certainly gets their attention. I heard plenty of this when I was there about pieces of legislation before the Congress. And I think Congress has a rightful role to play in this, and so I'm not going to stand up here and second-guess the Congress in terms of what role it might be able to play.

I think the kind of engagement that we are practicing is one that takes patience. It's a long-term process. There are certain issues that rise to the fore that require immediate action or short-term action. That's what we've been doing on the CSO legislation. But I think we also have to realize that we, while responding to certain developments, have to maintain a long-term approach. That's true in Ethiopia. It's true around the world when we try to push on issues of human rights and democratization.

We want to be able – and this comes to the gentleman's question here – I think we want to be able to – but it also dovetails with the question of leverage. We want to work with Ethiopia on counterterrorism, we want to work with Ethiopia in promoting regional stability. But it's our firm view that doing so is best ensured by seeing Ethiopia develop in a more democratic direction. Our most reliable, secure, stable partners are those that are on a democratic path and those that respect human rights, and that's one of the reasons why we stress to the government of Ethiopia that, as critical a partner as it is, it does not want to run the risk of producing pockets of instability or extremism as a result of efforts it launches domestically, perhaps unintendedly. It's very important, I think, that Ethiopia stay on a democratic path, a path that respects not only its own people's human rights but the human rights of people in the other countries, too, while it works very closely with us and others in trying to promote stability.

So it's our view that being as open as possible, appreciating the problems that are out there in the region, is the best way of approaching this. And we – as I said in my remarks, we do recognize it's a tough neighborhood. It's a very tough neighborhood. But Ethiopia, I think, has as good a chance to be a leader in the region as anyone, and that's why we stake so much importance on what's happening with Ethiopia both domestically and in foreign policy terms.

And in terms of closing political space and some of the question about violation, which I appreciate, thank you very much, some of the analysis that's been done suggests there are questions about freedom of association, freedom of assembly, as it relates to some of the international conventions and covenants – the ICCPR, International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, which Ethiopia is a party to, and questions about the impact the legislation would have on the rights that are provided in those covenants.

We agree that having indigenous movements lead the way is absolutely the right thing for any country, whether it's Ethiopia or anywhere else around the world. It doesn't work if it's either the image or the reality that democracy is being imposed from the outside, that what we want to do with Ethiopia and elsewhere is to give people the opportunity, the choice, the freedom.

One of the concerns I have based on the conversations I had while I was in Ethiopia was there isn't the ability domestically to provide funding and support for the kinds of organizations that we hope will lead the way, and that's one of the reasons why I think foreign funding for an interim period – I don't know how long interim is – is important. It's one of the reasons why I think, given the lack of domestic sources of support, the foreign donors need to fill a void that's there and give people the opportunity to establish roots and a firm foundation so that over time they don't need to be relying or dependent on foreign funding.

So we do want to see Ethiopians take the lead and take full responsibility. We're not trying to substitute for that, but we are trying to give them the ability to help them get established. And the Prime Minister was very eloquent on this point about indigenous capacity and I appreciated his comments on it. What we're simply trying to do is to provide as much possibility and opening so that indigenous capacity can really take off in the country.

MODERATOR: (Off-mike.)

ASSISTANT SECRETARY KRAMER: I do, unfortunately. I can take one more if there's one more.

MODERATOR: (Inaudible) one more pressing question.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY KRAMER: It's probably usually a mistake, too, by the way. (Laughter.)

MODERATOR: Okay. This could be the one that really knocks you over.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY KRAMER: Exactly. The one I'll say Jeff Krilla will stay here and answer it.

QUESTION: My name is Abdullah (ph) and I'm one of the (inaudible) candidate (inaudible) conflict resolution. Originally, I came from that region, actually, but I do have a

lot of question concerning my area and maybe you can (inaudible) you know, explain me a little extra. (Inaudible) I have a (inaudible) report on page thirteen of the report that states (inaudible) Somalis share mistrust of the federal government and sense of (inaudible) from their right share of the service and development. So what is – what was methodology Human Rights Watch used to come to this conclusion?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY KRAMER: I hate to punt on this, but Human Rights Watch is right here and --

MODERATOR: We have a Human Rights Watch representative here

ASSISTANT SECRETARY KRAMER: -- I think they're probably in a better position to answer what's in their report than I am.

QUESTION: Thank you.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY KRAMER: So, anyway, my apologies, Jennifer. Thank you very much.

MODERATOR: Thank you so much for joining us.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY KRAMER: Sure.

MODERATOR: Let's join me in thanking – (applause).

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