**Conflict in Ethiopia**

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The unfolding Russian assault on Ukraine is pushing other global conflicts into the shadows, but the latter keep festering nonetheless. Some of these will also have important geostrategic consequences. One of them is the still ongoing armed conflict in Ethiopia, initiated by the TPLF (Tigray Peoples Liberation Movement) with a massive and unprovoked attack (in the night of 3-4 November 2020) and kept alive by it. The USA has not played an enlightening role in the conflict, primarily blaming the federal government for the violence. Politically, the US efforts over the past 1.5 year were even marked by undue interference and sanctimoniousness. US policy circles have not shown honest understanding of the war, of its context, and of the means to help end it. The State Department as well as USAID (which is self-admittedly an arm of US foreign policy) have rarely sided with Ethiopian government efforts to bring this conflict to an end and seem to have condoned the TPLF – incorrectly equating it with the Tigrayan people.

But the US Congress has not stayed far behind. The latest gaffe about to be produced by the USA is discussion and voting on the HR6600 Bill, proposed in Congress on 4 February 2022 by a Democratic Party representative (T Malinowski, of New Jersey) and a Republican Party representative (Ms Young Kim, of California). It is up for consideration in Congress tomorrow. The initiative is surrealistically called the ‘Stabilization, Peace, and Democracy’ bill. In practice, it will produce more of the opposite: destabilization, hindering peace, and undermining democracy in Ethiopia. Here is why.

The Bill says that: one, the State Department is required to develop a plan for supporting democracy and human rights in Ethiopia, including plans “to combat hate speech online, support accountability measures for atrocities and efforts to buttress a national dialogue”. Two, the President must impose sanctions on individuals “who undermine negotiations to end the conflict, commit human rights abuses, exacerbate corruption, or provide weapons to any hostile party”. Three, security assistance to the government of Ethiopia should be suspended “until it ceases offensive operations, takes steps towards a national dialogue, improves protection of human rights, allows unfettered humanitarian access to conflict areas, and investigates allegations of war crimes”. Four, the Administration must “oppose loans or other financial assistance from international agencies like the World Bank and IMF to the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea unless for humanitarian purposes until they take steps to end the war and restore respect for human rights”. Five, a determination from the State Department is required “concerning allegations of crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide in Ethiopia”.

This is a programme of unprecedented interference in the internal affairs of Ethiopia, based on ignorance and bias. Many of the conflict issues and food aid efforts are under the brief of the Ethiopian government and are being addressed already. And nowhere the Bill mentions the TPLF and its war actions. This is surprising if not laughable. It looks like TPLF people were co-drafters of the Bill. The target of the sanctions and strictures in the Bill are Ethiopian and Eritrean government people.

Again, no one denies that the humanitarian problems in Tigray Region are serious and painful: there is a huge lack of food supplies, fuel, medical facilities, etc. There have been unlawful killings and expulsions by federal army soldiers, Eritrean soldiers and militias in the early stage of the war – in a spiral of TPLF-induced violence. Ethiopian federal force excesses were and are being tackled via the courts. TPLF violence and abuse not – impunity reigns, as the TPLF does not call any of its forces to account – on the contrary. Their violence was dramatically expanded in the course of 2021 by the movement in Amhara and Afar Regions – in a spirit of revenge and destruction.

The onus of initiating, perpetrating and sustaining the crass violence lies with the TPLF. And there has been no more ground fighting in the Tigray Region since June 2021: all of it occurs in the Afar and Amhara regions, still partly occupied. Any serious analysis would reveal that the damage, the number of victims, and the abhorrent nature of the violence (as a war policy) was on the TPLF side. The problems were compounded by hundreds of thousands of civilians in the Amhara and Afar Regions, made IDPs by the TPLF – they are still waiting in camps, with nothing but their bare clothes as possession. In addition, areas mainly in western Ethiopia are still terrorized by the ‘Oromo Liberation Army’, allied to the insurgent TPLF and engaged in massive ‘ethnic cleansing’ operations – not mentioned in the Bill either.

The same for Gumuz rebels in the west, who appear to get support in Sudan, probably with Egyptian backing. Unfortunately, the TPLF does not show interest in stability or cessation of conflict – neither in Ethiopia as a whole nor in ‘its own’ region Tigray: it needs tension and conflict to stay in power. This in contrast to the Ethiopian government which has three times offered a ceasefire: none was responded to. The HR6600 Bill ignores this as well, again showing the Bill’s very poor quality.

Ethiopian government spokesperson Mr. Dina Mufti said: “The [HR6600] bill doesn’t measure up to the level of historic relationship between Ethiopia and the United States”. That is putting it in an admirably mild way. The Bill would be an unprecedented and an unjustifiably mean blow to an elected government and it will jeopardize a long and dynamic relationship between two countries. It would alienate not only the Ethiopian government but also the Ethiopian people from the USA – and regrettably so, because most Ethiopians value a good relation with the USA. Millions of Ethiopians have family and friends living there; thousands have studied there, and economic relations are important. To jeopardize this growing and often mutually beneficial relationship is irresponsible.

The HR6600 Bill and its aggressive and arrogant tone would add extra damage to the situation, after the already absurd delisting of Ethiopia from the AGOA, that is only hurting the ordinary workers and not the government – and for quite unacceptable reasons. As law, HR6600 would even be imperialist: the Biden Administration could wield control over Ethiopia in social media, traveling, domestic politics, economic affairs, international loans, etc. under a 10-year sanctions regime.

Excerpted: ‘US Congress and the Armed Conflict in Ethiopia’.

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