

**Statement by Assistant Secretary Tibor Nagy, Bureau of African Affairs
“U.S. National Interests in Developments in Ethiopia”
House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and
International Organizations**

Wednesday, September 12, 2018, 2:00PM

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Bass, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the invitation to testify today on U.S. national interests in recent developments in Ethiopia. I also wanted to take the opportunity of this hearing—my first before you—to address Eritrea, and the regional significance of the improving relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea. As a former U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia, this topic is of great importance to me personally, so it is a real pleasure to be here with you today.

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Bass, I also want to thank you for your recent trip to Ethiopia. I greatly appreciate the focus the Congress has on this region, which I believe is very important for our national interests, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss recent developments with the Subcommittee.

Allow me to open our time today with some thematic remarks on recent developments.

ETHIOPIA

In Ethiopia, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has initiated groundbreaking reforms across most every area of Ethiopian society since becoming Prime Minister on April 2, 2018. He deserves tremendous credit for his boldness in tackling issues that previous governments have not addressed. We have a strong relationship with the highest reaches of the new administration, which reflects not only our century-long diplomatic relations with Ethiopia – the only country in Sub Saharan Africa that was never colonized – but also our great support for Dr. Abiy’s reform vision.

Implementing this reform vision is not without its challenges, and to make such broad and rapid changes will require reinforcing the foundation for the relationship between the Ethiopian people and government.

We have seen Dr. Abiy do so, actively engaging with the public to support his government as it works to implement reforms. In July he came to the United States to meet with Ethiopian diaspora members, many of whom are enthusiastic participants in our own electoral process and care greatly for their homeland. Dr. Abiy has also taken dramatic steps to end the former government's repression of civil liberties, inviting a diversity of voices – including many who were previously criminalized – to participate in Ethiopia's future.

Yet strengthening institutions, setting the economy on a firm footing, and restoring stability to areas facing humanitarian disaster and ethnic conflict will not be done overnight. The expectations of the Ethiopian people are also incredibly high, and many of them are young. We estimate that there are around 70 million Ethiopians younger than 30, many of whom have participated in protests in recent years due to frustrations with corruption and the lack of economic opportunity. The Ethiopian government has openly sought partnership with the United States to achieve its ambitious reform plans. We have a tremendous opportunity to support Ethiopia as a friend and partner in the process.

We are working to provide support to Dr. Abiy and his administration across all of these challenges as he continues his work in years ahead.

PEACE BETWEEN ETHIOPIA AND ERITREA

Looking more broadly at regional issues, we enthusiastically welcomed Dr. Abiy and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki working together to end 20 years of conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. There is still much work to do to repair the consequences of the conflict for the peoples of both Eritrea and Ethiopia, especially in border regions. But we have already seen a tremendous outpouring of emotion on both sides supporting peace, and both governments have highlighted the positive consequences this will bring for the entire Horn of Africa.

We support both sides as they explore possibilities for peace, and continue to encourage and support their long-term success. But guaranteeing the full benefits of peace for years to come will depend on the strength of all parties' efforts to restore friendship and prosperity to both countries, and this must be done as inclusively as possible, including with other important partners in the region and beyond.

Since Eritrea's mid-June decision to send a delegation to Ethiopia, there have been several meetings between the two governments' officials in Asmara, Addis Ababa,

and capitals across the Horn of Africa to discuss trade, development, and tourism. So far, the public and tangible examples of improved relations are the reopening of telephone service and the resumption of regular flights between both countries. Eritrea is also expanding capacity at the Port of Massawa for use by Ethiopia, and it was just announced early in September that an Ethiopian commercial vessel used the Port of Massawa for the first outbound shipment on an Ethiopian vessel since the peace agreement. We anticipate that these and other steps will create the potential for greater development and people-to-people ties on both sides of the border.

ERITREA

Peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea leads us to another remarkable story: Eritrea's re-emergence onto the regional and global stage, and the many potential opportunities for the United States stemming from regional peace.

With Ethiopia and Eritrea's conflict ending, we see strong potential for Eritrea's contributions to improving regional security. Eritrea has resisted extremist threats, and could provide lessons to others on how to maintain a diversity of communities free from violent extremism. Eritrea can also contribute to regional peace and stability, as we have seen with Eritrea's engagement with Somalia and South Sudan, and Eritrea's role brokering agreements among Ethiopian opposition groups. Eritrea, which has a strong tradition of self-sufficiency and independence, could also promote a stronger regional approach to countering potentially malign influence of global competitors operating in the region.

Nonetheless, we still have significant concerns in our bilateral relations with Eritrea that we will continue to highlight in days ahead. Eritrea currently continues to imprison several of our Embassy's Locally Employed Staff members for politically-motivated reasons. We have also raised concerns about the detention of American citizens who are detained for the same reasons. Though Eritrea has regularly asserted that it has no substantive relationship with the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK), Eritrea has not fully explained certain past arms procurement transactions between Eritrea and the DPRK that the UN Panel of Experts reported. Broader human rights concerns such as indefinite, obligatory national service; the arbitrary detention of religious and political prisoners; and a tightly controlled, opaque system of government also hinder our scope for cooperation.

The United States has deliberately engaged with Eritrea in recent months with both these opportunities and concerns in full view, and we will continue to do so. Although we have already seen many gains from peace, which the President and the Secretary of State have both hailed publicly, further progress will require more action on some of these priority issues in Eritrea.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

