

Washington Update  
January 7, 2019

1. Senators Ben Cardin (D-Md.) and James Inhofe (R-OK) are discussing wording of a resolution expressing support for democracy and human rights in Ethiopia. According to congressional staff, both senators are encouraged by recent progress, but they are also concerned by continuing violence, especially clashes between ethnic groups. If they agree on a resolution, it could easily pass the Senate. The resolution would be based on SR 168 which Cardin introduced in the session of Congress. Among other things, SR 168 “calls on the President to apply appropriate sanctions on foreign persons or entities responsible for extrajudicial killings, torture, or other gross violations of internationally recognized human rights committed against any nationals in Ethiopia as provided for in the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act.”

SR 168 would apply to the former security chief, Getachew Assefa, as well as other former government officials who have violated human rights. At present, the Ethiopian government is attempting to arrest Getachew Assefa.

2. It is important to note the progress that has been made in addressing and reversing human rights abuses in Ethiopia. The government has released political prisoners, removed bans on dissident groups and allowed their members to return from exile, declared press freedom and granted diverse political groups the freedom to mobilize and organize. Ethiopia’s parliament has approved the creation of a reconciliation commission as part of an effort to end intercommunal ethnic violence. The objective of the Commission is to maintain peace, justice, national unity and consensus and also reconciliation among Ethiopian peoples. Eskinder Nega, Journalist, Human Rights and Democracy activist, and Mesfin Mekonen, initiated and delivered to Prime Minister Abiy during his recent visit to the United States a declaration calling for Ethiopia to move forward with a truth and reconciliation project animated by the spirit that propelled change in South Africa. The goals are clear: peace, justice, respect for human rights, democracy, and prosperity. Achieving these basic goals will require a process of truth telling, particularly about human rights abuses, achieved through testimony from both victims and perpetrators, coupled to a pledge of reconciliation. The declaration, was signed by prominent Ethiopians.

The Ethiopian parliament has written a draft law repealing the Anti-Terrorism and Charities and Societies Proclamation. This is a high priority for advancing human rights in Ethiopia.

3. The promises and challenges Ethiopia faces as it attempts to shake off decades of misrule and oppression have attracted the world's attention. For example, the New York Times ran a commentary on January 3 by Mahmood Mamdani that describes some of the recent progress, and also expresses concerns that the flawed Ethiopian constitution could throw gasoline onto simmering ethnic conflicts. He concludes: "Mr. Abiy can achieve real progress if Ethiopia embraces a different kind of federation — territorial and not ethnic — where rights in a federal unit are dispensed not on the basis of ethnicity but on residence. Such a federal arrangement will give Ethiopians an even chance of keeping an authoritarian dictatorship at bay." The commentary is at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/03/opinion/ethiopia-abiy-ahmed-reforms-ethnic-conflict-ethnic-federalism.html>

Integration of the Oromo Liberation Front is also a major challenge for Ethiopia. Prime Minister Abiy is trying to integrate the OLF back into Ethiopian civil society, allowing its members to return from exile and to participate peacefully in Ethiopian politics. So far, however, the OLF has responded with violence and criminality. Abiy continues to try to persuade the OLF and all other groups to discuss their grievances and proposals peacefully.

Mesfin Mekonen