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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 000163

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E.O. 12958 DECL: 02/01/2020

TAGS PREL, PGOV, KDEM, MOPS, ECON, KE, ET

SUBJECT: UNDER SECRETARY OTERO'S MEETING WITH ETHIOPIAN
PRIME MINISTER MELES ZENAWI - JANUARY 31, 2010

Classified By: Under Secretary Maria Otero for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (SBU) January 31, 2010; 4:15 p.m.; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

¶2. (SBU) Participants:

U.S. Under Secretary Otero Assistant Secretary Carson NSC Senior Director for African Affairs Michelle Gavin PoOff Skye Justice (notetaker)
Ethiopia Prime Minister Meles Zenawi Special Assistant Gebretensae Gebremichael

Summary

¶3. (C) Prime Minister Meles Zenawi told Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs Maria Otero his government placed no restrictions on its citizens' democratic and civil rights, only the right of foreign entities to fund them. Foreign funding of civil society organizations (CSOs) is antithetical to democratization, he said, as it makes civil society leaders accountable to foreign entities rather than their own members, turning the concept of democratic accountability on its head. Democracy in Ethiopia must develop organically, and Ethiopians must organize and fund themselves and defend their own rights. Meles assured U/S Otero that Ethiopia's upcoming elections will be free, fair, transparent, and peaceful, and elaborated steps his government has taken to ensure this. While opposition groups may resort to violence in an attempt to discredit the election, the GoE will enforce the recently enacted Electoral Code of Conduct and its existing election laws without regard to party affiliation. Meles said he has warned opposition leaders that the international community will not be able to save them should they violate Ethiopian law, but rather if they do so they will face the same fate as opposition leader Birtukan Midekssa, who will "vegetate in jail forever." The U.S. delegation noted that Ethiopia's forthcoming elections would be closely watched in the U.S., and urged Meles to exercise wise judgment and leadership, give the opposition more political space, and consider the release of Birtukan Midekssa.

¶4. (C) Meles said the GoE is not enthusiastic about Kenya's Jubaland initiative, but is sharing intelligence with Kenya and hoping for success. In the event the initiative is not successful, the GoE has plans in place to limit the destabilizing impacts on Ethiopia. On climate change, Meles said the GoE fully supports the Copenhagen accord, but is disappointed with signs the U.S. may not support his proposed panel to monitor international financial contributions under the accord. Meles made no substantive comment on inquiries regarding the liberalization of banking and telecommunications in Ethiopia. End summary.

Foreign Funding of CSOs Antithetical to Democratization

¶5. (C) Prime Minister Meles Zenawi told U/S Otero the development of a strong democracy and civil society is the only way Ethiopia can ensure peace and unity among an ethnically and religiously divided population. He noted that the Government of Ethiopia's (GoE) commitment to democracy is directly related to stability, adding that for Ethiopia, "democratization is a matter of survival." Responding to U/S Otero's concern that Ethiopia's recently-enacted CSO law threatened the role of civil society, Meles said while the GoE welcomes foreign funding of charities, those Ethiopians who want to engage in political activity should organize and fund themselves. The leaders of CSOs that receive foreign funding are not accountable to their organizations, he said, but rather to the sources of their funding, turning the concept of democratic accountability on its head. Meles asserted that Ethiopians were not too poor to organize themselves and establish their own democratic traditions, recalling that within his lifetime illiterate peasants and poor students had overthrown an ancient imperial dynasty.

¶6. (C) Meles said his country's inability to develop a strong democracy was not due to insufficient understanding of democratic principles, but rather because Ethiopians had not internalized those principles. Ethiopia should follow the example of the U.S. and European countries, he said, where democracy developed organically and citizens had a stake in its establishment. When people are committed to democracy and forced to make sacrifices for it, Meles said, "they won't let any leader take it away from them." But "when they are spoon-fed democracy, they will give it up when their source of funding and encouragement is removed." Referencing his own struggle against the Derg regime, Meles said he and his compatriots received no foreign funding, but were willing to sacrifice and die for their cause, and Ethiopians today must take ownership of their democratic development, be willing to sacrifice for it, and defend their own rights.

¶7. (C) Meles drew a clear distinction between Ethiopians' democratic and civil rights on the one hand, and the right of foreign entities to fund those rights on the other. There is no restriction on Ethiopians' rights, he asserted, merely on foreign funding, adding that the U.S. has similar laws. U/S Otero countered that while the U.S. does not allow foreign funding of political campaigns, there is no restriction on foreign funding of NGOs. Ms. Gavin noted the examples of foreign support for the abolitionist movement in the U.S. and for the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa as positive examples of foreign engagement of civil society, and expressed that aside from the issue of foreign funding, the ability of local organizations to legally register, operate, and contribute to democratic discourse was of tantamount importance.

GoE Will Hold Free and Fair Elections, Despite Opposition

¶8. (C) Meles assured U/S Otero that Ethiopia's upcoming electoral process will be free, fair, transparent, and peaceful. The GoE has learned from the violence that followed the 2005 elections, he said, and taken action to ensure that violence is not repeated. Meles said the recently signed Electoral Code of Conduct (CoC) was not done for the benefit of political parties, but for the Ethiopian people. The people will ultimately judge political actors, he said, and they must have parameters agreed to by the parties by which they will judge those actors. After the CoC was passed, Meles noted, the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) gathered over 1,300 of its senior leaders to discuss party strategy and train all leaders on the CoC. The EPRDF

knows violations of the CoC by its members will hurt the party and provide a rallying cry for the opposition. This message will flow down to all EPRDF members, he said, so that they know what is expected of them, and know both the courts and the party will hold them accountable to the CoC.

¶9. (C) Meles told U/S Otero he feared a repeat of the 2005 violence, and that many opposition members were not interested in peaceful elections, but would rather discredit the electoral process. As such, the EPRDF cannot give them any excuse to resort to violence. Meles noted that in addition to opposition political parties, the GoE had intelligence that the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki were all directly or indirectly involved in plots to discredit the elections. The EPRDF, he said, would "let them be" to show the population that even though their opponents' goal is not peace, the EPRDF will abide by the law.

¶10. (C) Meles recalled that in 2005, he had told opposition leaders in the presence of the diplomatic corps that they should not believe foreign allies would protect them if they violated the laws of Ethiopia. Opposition leaders were right to believe the diplomatic corps would try to protect them, he said, as evidenced by the statement they issued demanding the release of opposition politicians upon their arrest in 2005. Today, Meles said, foreign embassies are inadvertently conveying the same message, that they will protest the jailing of opposition leaders and potentially take action against Ethiopia to secure their release. However, the GoE has made clear to both opposition and EPRDF leaders that nothing can protect them except the laws and constitution of Ethiopia, and the GoE will clamp down on anyone who violates those laws. "We will crush them with our full force," Meles said, and "they will vegetate like Birtukan (Midekssa) in jail forever."
ADDIS ABAB 00000163 003 OF 003

¶11. (C) In an extended discussion in response to Meles' comments, U/S Otero, A/S Carson, and Ms. Gavin noted that Ethiopia's forthcoming elections would be closely watched in the U.S. and that the GoE's treatment of the opposition would be subject to public criticism by the Ethiopian diaspora and U.S. political figures. The U.S. delegation urged Meles to exercise wise judgment and leadership, give the opposition more political space, and consider the release of Birtukan Midekssa. A/S Carson stressed the importance of putting Ethiopia's democracy on an upward and positive trajectory, and not letting it atrophy or slide backward, using the suffrage and civil rights movements in the U.S. as an illustration of challenges the U.S. has faced as it improved its own democratic system. (Note: Three quarters of the nearly two-hour meeting focused on democracy. End note.)

Ethiopia Not Enthusiastic About Jubaland Initiative -----

¶12. (C) Meles said he had been briefed extensively regarding Kenya's Jubaland initiative. Because Ethiopia had previously intervened in Somalia without seeking Kenyan approval, he said, the GoE would not presume to analyze the Kenyans' chances for success in their own intervention. The GoE is sharing intelligence with Kenya, but Meles expressed a lack of confidence in Kenya's capacity to pull off a tactical success, which he feared could have negative regional impacts. The GoE is therefore working to minimize the likelihood of a spillover effect in Ethiopia's Somali Regional State. Noting that Ethiopia might have underestimated Kenya, Meles said, "We are not enthusiastic, but we are hoping for success."

GoE Prepared to Move Forward from Copenhagen -----

¶13. (C) U/S Otero urged Meles to sign the Copenhagen accord on climate change and explained that it is a point of departure for further discussion and movement forward on the topic. She noted that while the agreement has its limitations, it has the international community moving in the right direction. Meles responded that the GoE supported the accord in Copenhagen and would support it at the AU Summit. However, he expressed his disappointment that despite President Obama's personal assurance to him that finances committed in Copenhagen would be made available, he had received word from contacts at the UN that the U.S. was not supportive of Ethiopia's proposal for a panel to monitor financial pledges regarding climate change. Ms. Gavin assured the Prime Minister that she would look into his concerns.

No Promises on Liberalizing Telecoms, Banking -----

¶14. (C) U/S Otero and A/S Carson encouraged Meles to hasten steps to liberalize the telecommunications and banking industries in Ethiopia, and highlighted both the micro- and macroeconomic benefits of liberalization. Meles offered no substantive response to A/S Carson's query whether any progress had been made toward liberalizing or otherwise improving telecommunications, joking that Americans' concept of time was much faster than Ethiopians'. In response to U/S Otero's recognition of the important role of private banks in microfinance projects that directly benefit the poor, and assurance that private and state-owned banks could thrive side-by-side, Meles said he would be happy to discuss the issue in the future. YATES