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News in brief

African Union

Commemoration of the 20th Anniversary of the 1994 Rwanda Genocide was launched on Thursday (February 20) at the African Union in Addis Ababa under the theme of "Remember, Unite, and Resolve." The event, remembering the victims and aiming to revitalize Africa's commitment of the 'never again' campaign against genocide in Africa, was organized by the Department of Political Affairs of the AU Commission and the Rwandan Embassy, and attended by Ethiopian government officials, the AU Commission, the diplomatic community, international organizations, and the Rwandan community in Addis Ababa. **(See article)**

Ethiopia

Prime Minister Hailemariam held talks with Sudan President Omar al-Bashir in Mekelle on Tuesday this week (February 18) during the celebrations marking the 39th anniversary of the establishment of the Tigrean People's Liberation Front. Discussions covered ways to strengthen bilateral trade, opening border crossings and activation of joint economic and trade committees. President Al-Bashir donated the airplane used by the late Prime Minister Meles and his colleagues to fly from Khartoum to Addis Ababa in May 1991 to the TPLF.

Somali Prime Minister Abdiweli Sheikh Ahmed paid a three-day official visit to Addis Ababa at the end of last week (February 14 to 16), accompanied by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Transport and Aviation, and Information. He held meetings Prime Minister Hailemariam, Foreign Minister Dr. Tedros and other government officials, before going on to Djibouti. **(See article)**

Dr. Tedros Adhanom on Wednesday (February 19) met a delegation headed by Dr. Doylin Oluwole, executive director of the Pink Ribbon Red Ribbon (PRRR) program designed and launched to save women from cervical and breast cancer in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, set up by the George W. Bush Presidential Institute. Dr. Tedros told the delegation that Ethiopia presented excellent opportunities for pharmaceutical companies and researchers in terms of establishing medical research and development centers.

Ethiopia's Ambassador to the UK corrected the BBC over "damaging and factually incorrect statements" over security issues at Addis Ababa's Bole International Airport, following an

Ethiopian Airlines co-pilot rerouted a plane to land at Geneva in an incident which involved no threats or violence and had nothing to do with any airport security details.

Djibouti

Somali Prime Minister Abdiweli Sheikh Ahmed paid an official visit to Djibouti at the beginning of the week where he met with President Ismail Omar Guelleh and Prime Minister Abdikadir Kamil. Discussions covered security as well as bilateral relations and regional issues.

French forces in Djibouti on Wednesday (February 19) have donated a number of military vehicles and equipment for use by the Djiboutian contingent for AMISOM. Djibouti's Minister of Defense, Hassan Darar Houffaneh received the donation.

Eritrea

Eritrean Foreign Minister, Osman Saleh, was on an official visit this week (February 16-18) to the Russian Federation at the invitation of Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov. Following talks, the two sides signed their first ever cooperation agreement to encourage bilateral cooperation, and enhance trade, investment, educational and cultural links.

A Turkish delegation headed by the President of the Turkish Workers' Confederation, Mr. Mahmout Arsila, paid a three-day working visit to Eritrea this week. Mr. Arsila said the visit aimed to strengthen ties with the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers, foster mutual trade activities and lay the groundwork for exchanges of experience and educational activities.

Kenya

Deputy President William Ruto and Somali Prime Minister Abdiweli Sheikh Ahmed at a joint press conference in Nairobi renewed Kenya's and Somalia's commitment to the fight against Al-Shabaab and the elimination of terrorism from the region on Wednesday (February 19). Mr. Ruto said Kenya would open an embassy in Somalia before the middle of the year,

The 15th session of the Committee of the Defense and Security Council of Eastern Africa was held in Nairobi last week (February 13-15) with Kenya as chair. General Karangi, Chief of Kenya's Defense Forces, emphasized their responsibility to oversee the activities of the East African Standby Force as it prepares to go to Full Operational Capability next year.

Somalia

Somali President Hassan Sheikh held a closed door meeting with Minister of Security Abdikarim Hussein Guled and Police Chief General Abdihakim Dahir Sa'id and other senior security officials on Monday (February 17) to discuss the series of security incidents in Mogadishu over the past few weeks including several incidents of night time shelling and the operations to hunt down the Al-Shabaab members believed responsible.

Somalia's Prime Minister after a three day official visit to Ethiopia at the weekend, visited Djibouti and then Kenya (February 18-20) where he said the military offensive led by an

expanded AMISOM aimed to drive Somali Islamist rebels out of their remaining strongholds by the end of the year.

Prime Minister Abdiweli continued his tour of states contributing troops to AMISOM with a visit to Uganda on Thursday (February 20), following his visits to Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya. He is expected to meet with President Museveni and other senior Ugandan officials.

John Ging, Director of the Coordination and Response Division in the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said this week that the humanitarian situation in Somalia remained fragile with an estimated 857,000 people “in crisis and emergency condition”, approximately 2 million Somalis food insecure, a million people internally displaced and another million Somalis refugees in neighboring countries.

The joint UN and AMISOM working group on the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP) held an inaugural meeting in Mogadishu on Saturday (February 15), to discuss ways to build Somali national institutions with a strong human rights foundation. The meeting was co-chaired by the Special Representative of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Ambassador Mahamat Saleh Annadif, and Deputy Special Representative for the UN Secretary-General for Somalia, Fatiha Serour.

Federal Government officials, Ethiopian military officers and AMISOM commanders attended a welcoming ceremony on Monday (February 17) in Belet Weyne for an Ethiopian battalion as part of the initial phase of AMISOM's stabilization operations against Al Shabaab-held towns in central Somalia.

AMISOM this week completed a training program for the first inter-clan, light infantry company at its training facilities at Jazeera Camp in Mogadishu. Soldiers from different Somali National Security Force commands finished a rigorous six months training covering all aspects from basic rifle marksmanship to moving as a group in formation during attack.

The IGAD Executive Secretary, Mahboub Maalim, and Italian Ambassador to Ethiopia, Ambassador Renzo Mario Rosso on Tuesday signed an agreement for the provision of 500,000 euro to be used for restructuring administrative apparatus and stabilization efforts for the Jubbaland Administration as well as for the implementation of the Addis Ababa agreement signed last August. Ambassador Rosso said the grant would enhance the efforts to strengthen a federal system in Somalia.

South Sudan

The second round of peace talks between the South Sudan Government and the SPLM/A-in-Opposition, though officially reopened last week, have yet to resume. The SPLM/A delegation said talks had been delayed because of issues over the withdrawal of Ugandan forces and release of the remaining four detainees. Both sides have continued to accuse each other over violations of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement. **(See article)**

Sudan

A UN Security Council Presidential statement (February 14) welcomed the resumption of talks in Addis Ababa between the Sudan Government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement - North and urged the Sudanese government and the rebels in Blue Nile and South Kordofan to stop hostilities and to reach a peace agreement to end their two and half year conflict. It also said the Security Council was gravely concerned over the "the dire humanitarian situation" in the Two Areas.

The African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) chair, Thabo Mbeki, announced on Tuesday (February 18) that talks between Sudan's Government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/North (SPLM-N), over the conflict in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states had been suspended for ten days for consultation over proposals put forward by AUHIP.

The Sudanese-Egyptian Permanent Joint Technical Commission for Nile Waters (PJTC) convened a long delayed 54th regular meeting in Khartoum on Sunday (February 16) to discuss technical cooperation, a list of Egyptian projects to increase Nile water revenues and ways to develop and manage water resources as well as Ethiopia's GERD project. Sudan has accepted the conclusions of the International Panel of Experts on the impact of the Dam on the lower riparian countries

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) said on Thursday (February 20) that it expected fighting in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile states, and a poor 2013-2014 harvest, to increase the number of food-insecure people in the Sudan to around four million this year.

South Sudan's Cessation of Hostilities' Agreement under pressure

The IGAD Special Envoys for the South Sudan Mediation Process have expressed their serious concerns over reports of ongoing clashes in various locations across Upper Nile, Jonglei, Warrap and Unity states. In a statement issued on Wednesday (February 19), the IGAD Envoys deplores breaches of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement signed by the Government of South Sudan and the SPLM/A-in-Opposition on January 23 in Addis Ababa. The statement said "these developments will only serve to undermine the ongoing mediation process and the worsening of the suffering of the people of South Sudan." The Special Envoys "strongly urge the parties to immediately adhere to the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement as well as continue with their strong commitment to the mediation process." They pointed out that IGAD had repeatedly called for the peaceful resolution of the crisis in South Sudan and rejected any military moves by either party as this would hamper the efforts by the Special Envoys to have a civilized and political dialogue. In this regard, the Envoys further called on the parties to fully cooperate to the speedy operationalization of the Monitoring and Verification Mechanism agreed under the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement.

The Special Envoys' statement came after latest call came after fighting erupted between the two sides at Malakal. There were fears that the clashes, the most serious fighting since the signing of the agreement, could jeopardize the peace talks underway between the government and the opposition. This second round of talks expected to focus on political dialogue and the national reconciliation process formally opened on Tuesday last week, but the two sides have yet to meet face to face again. Opening the second phase of the peace negotiations was delayed due to preconditions set by the SPLM/A-in-Opposition over the withdrawal of Ugandan troops from South Sudan as well as the release of four detainees, including the suspended Secretary-General of the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), Pagan Amum. These have remained sticking points for the resumption of peace negotiations.

The United States State Department on Wednesday denounced the "blatant" violation of the South Sudan ceasefire and condemned "the failure of both parties" to respect the truce. A State Department spokeswoman, Marie Harf, called "on both parties to end any military actions aimed at the other." However, both sides accused the other of violating the ceasefire first. South Sudan's Information minister, Michael Makuei, in a protest reaction to the opposition's attack on Malakal called it a "flagrant violation of the cessation of hostilities agreement signed by both sides". He said the city was not yet fully calm and there were pockets of resistance within the town: "it is divided between the two sides." He claimed, however, "we here to continue talking despite the aggressive and intolerable violations," adding that "ultimately, whenever we are under attack, we will not fold our hands and say we are abiding by the cessation of hostilities." The SPLM/A-in-Opposition which claimed it had taken over the whole of Malakal, said it had responded to attacks by government forces.

The IGAD Special Envoys have now appealed to the countries which have agreed to contribute to the Joint Technical Committee (JTC) and the Monitoring and Verification Teams (MVTs) to send their representatives in the next couple of days to ensure the urgent implementation of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement. They further appealed to the Partners of IGAD to provide the necessary logistical support for expeditious operationalization of the Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (MVM).

On Wednesday last week, (February 12), the seven SPLM leaders, previously detained in Juba and released to Nairobi, arrived in Addis Ababa from Kenya at the invitation of the IGAD Special Envoys to participate in the talks. They met with the IGAD Special Envoys and held a press conference on Thursday (February 13). They said they were committed to participate effectively with other parties in finding a peaceful solution to the crisis in South Sudan, and called for the full and urgent deployment of the Monitoring and Verification Mechanism for the ceasefire which began with IGAD's deployment with 18 ceasefire monitors on February 2. The released detainees, who stressed the need to focus on a political settlement that addressed underlying issues comprehensively, said they would participate in the on-going peace talks as a third independent group, which they called 'SPLM leaders former detainees'. One member of the group said they did not have different political positions from those of the SPLM/A-in-Opposition delegation but they didn't have armed forces on ground unlike the PLM/A-in-Opposition.

Meanwhile, there has been growing concern over the presence of Ugandan troops in South Sudan. The Uganda's government initially said it deployed the troops at the request of the South Sudan government to secure the airport to allow for the evacuation of Ugandan citizens and other foreign nationals trapped there by the conflict, but the SPLM/A-in-Opposition subsequently accused them of interference in South Sudan's internal affairs when they fought alongside the South Sudan army, attacking SPLM/A-in-Opposition positions.

On Wednesday this week (February 19), Uganda's Foreign Minister Sam Kutesa said the Ugandan forces would be withdrawn. He said "the UPDF will be pulled out of South Sudan gradually once an African emergency force, the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises force (ACIRC) is put in place" as this will facilitate Uganda's progressive withdrawal. The Minister said that Uganda had no desire to keep her troops on South Sudan soil longer than it was necessary, and it was "in that context that Uganda has proposed, and the government of South Sudan agrees, on the deployment of ACIRC, consistent with the decision of the AU in January." He said deployment of ACIRC was the most logical way to withdraw from South Sudan, without leaving a security vacuum that could be taken advantage of. It would he said take two months to put this in place after it was agreed by the AU Peace and Security Council which is expected to meet soon to work out modalities for such a deployment. According to the Ugandan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Minister Kutesa and Kenyan Cabinet Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Amina Mohamed met in Kampala last week and agreed their commitment to the decision of the AU Summit in January to deploy an African Force in South Sudan as this would go a long way to help stabilize South Sudan and the parties to engage in finding a lasting solution to their current problems.

Somali Prime Minister's visit to Ethiopia

Somali Prime Minister Abdiweli Sheikh Ahmed paid a three-day official visit to Addis Ababa at the end of last week (February 14 to 16), before travelling on to Djibouti and then to Kenya. The Prime Minister arrived on Friday accompanied by a sizeable delegation, including Abdurrahman Duale Beileh, Minister of Foreign Affairs; Said Jama Mohamed Qorshel, Minister of Transport and Aviation; and Mustaf Sheikh Ali Dhuhulow, Minister of Information, as well as other high-level government officials. During his visit, he met Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, Foreign Minister Dr. Tedros Adhanom, and other high level Ethiopian government officials.

In his meeting with Prime Minister Hailemariam, Prime Minister Abdiweli Sheikh Ahmed applauded Ethiopia's efforts in assisting the people of Somalia to restore peace and stability. He welcomed Ethiopia's contribution and assistance to the provision of sustainable peace and security of his country in curbing the terrorist threats from Al-Shabaab. He commended the commitment and decision of the Ethiopian Government in contributing troops to AMISOM and in supporting the Mission and the Somali forces in their determination to finally defeat Al-Shabaab. Prime Minister Hailemariam underlined Ethiopia's determination and devotion to extend and enhance its support to bring peace and stability in Somalia. He stressed Ethiopia's willingness to help Somalia in the area of defence through shared experience, and the exchange of skills and expertise as well as training. He suggested both sides should also broaden and

strengthen their cooperative partnership in the areas of investment, trade and business. He noted that the flawed and erroneous policies of past governments had encouraged enmity between the peoples of the two countries. This was a matter of history, however, and now Prime Minister Hailemariam emphasized that both countries were pushing forward their bilateral ties to a higher scale to attain peace, stability and prosperity in the region.

On Saturday (February 15) Prime Minister Abdiweli held discussions with Foreign Minister Dr. Tedros on various aspects of the bilateral relations of the two countries. Dr. Tedros noted that Ethiopia was committed to deepen and enhance the mutually beneficial cooperation and partnership with Somalia in the spheres of security and defence in order to join hands in combating terrorism and other regional security threats. He pointed out that Ethiopia was willing and ready to provide quality military training to Somali troops in order to build up their capacity and fight terrorism. This would also, he noted, pave the way for Somali Government to consolidate peace, stability and tranquillity in the country.

Dr. Tedros suggested that both countries should explore new ways of cooperation and partnership in addition to the already existing security partnership. He further urged that both sides should identify common areas of partnership for the mutual benefit of their peoples. He recommended they should broaden and strengthen their ties in the area of communication, including railways, roads, port development and other infrastructure connectivity. Infrastructure development, he said, would help the two countries connect their people and economies more closely. This would also have the effect of pushing forward IGAD's development agenda for the realization of the economic integration of East Africa and eventually Africa.

Dr. Tedros noted that Ethiopia had made huge progress in the areas of health, agricultural productivity, infrastructure development and other development projects to reduce poverty and, as a result, had improved the lives of many people over the last decade. He indicated Ethiopia had witnessed tremendous improvements in rapidly and equitably expanding education to all and increasing the number of universities to over thirty. These were now producing thousands of students to provide the necessary skilled manpower to speed up the country's development goals. Ethiopia's experience in the education sector, he suggested, could be one major priority area of cooperation. He also indicated Ethiopia had managed enormous progress in health, meeting almost all the MDG targets through health extension programs, expansion of primary healthcare services, promotion of disease prevention mechanisms, and life-saving interventions. He suggested Somalia should cooperate with Ethiopia on health issues. Similarly, in agriculture, Dr. Tedros said the Government of Ethiopia was committed to increase and enhance food productivity through the employment of innovative and appropriate technologies to prevent the threat of food insecurity. Ethiopian experiences in these and other areas could be areas of use for Somalia.

Prime Minister Abdiweli thanked Dr. Tedros for Ethiopia's unremitting support and its pivotal role in participating in peace-building activities and its contribution of troops to AMISOM, and hailed the significance of Ethiopia's support for security in Somalia. Equally, he said, there was a long way to go and a need to improve and sustain the security of the people inside the country. Prime Minister Abdiweli acknowledged the importance of infrastructure development including railways, roads and other projects and said these would also promote trade, investment,

businesses, and people-to-people relations between Ethiopia and Somalia. He emphasized that Somalia would continue to reinforce its efforts in promoting security, social, economic and diplomatic ties with Ethiopia. These he said would also hasten progress on attaining IGAD's integration agenda through the regional economic communities and regional common markets. He stressed that security and development were interlinked, adding that Ethiopia-Somalia cooperation in the development agenda including trade, investment and business, would contribute to the consolidation of peace and stability in Somalia and the welfare of the people. This would enable the people focus on development projects to improve their livelihood. He also said Somalia would like to share Ethiopia's best practices in achieving double-digit economic growth for the last ten years and its successful and comprehensive policies and strategies in education, agriculture, health, infrastructure and other areas.

During the visit, Ethiopia and Somalia signed cooperative agreements in the fields of information, aviation and capacity building for the Somali police force. Redwan Hussein, Ethiopian Minister of the Government Communications Office and Mustaf Sheikh Ali Dhuhulow, Somalia's Minister of Information, signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the promotion of a partnership in the spheres of information and the media and for establishing strong people-to-people relations. Dr. Shiferaw Teklemariam, Ethiopian Minister of Federal Affairs and Abdurrahman Duale Beileh, Somalia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, signed a cooperative agreement on building up the capacity of the Somali police force to bolster and increase a cooperative partnership in the exchange of knowledge, skills and expertise as well as training. On aviation, Workneh Gebeyehu, Ethiopian Minister of Transport and Said Jama Mohamed Qorshel, Somalia's Minister of Transport and Aviation, signed an agreement to enhance regional cooperation in various activities of the aviation sector, and push forward cooperation in capacity building and improve air transport services between Ethiopia and Somalia.

Earlier in the month, for the first time in the history of their relations, Ethiopia and Somalia also signed a Memorandum of Understanding on defence cooperation. This allows for cooperation in military training and technical assistance. The training focuses on basic military training for new recruits and for existing soldiers, as well as officer training, special force training and specialization staff training for intelligence, engineers, communication and logistics personnel, at each other's respective military training institutions. The agreement allows for joint operations against Al-Shabaab or any other armed groups that threaten peace and security in either country, and for exchanges of intelligence, security and experience. The two countries also agreed to work together to strengthen the Somalia National Security Forces, both police and military, in their respective areas of responsibility as well as to cooperate in peace support operations to bring peace and stability in Somalia and the region. They agreed to work together to support the IGAD and the Eastern African Stand by Force (EASF). The agreement signed by the respective Ministers of Defence of Ethiopia and the Federal Government of Somalia is an excellent example of the way the relationship between the two countries continues to gather momentum and it an exemplary illustration of the way they have begun to share consolidation of the fruits of peace and stability in Somalia and the Horn of Africa.

Commemoration of the 20th Anniversary of the Rwanda Genocide

The African Union Commission and members of the international community in Addis Ababa launched the Commemoration of the 20th Anniversary of the 1994 Rwanda Genocide on Thursday (February 20). The ceremony was held at the African Union under the theme: “Remember, Unite, and Resolve.” The purpose of the commemoration was to remember the victims of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda and to revitalize the commitment of the ‘never again’ campaign of the AU against genocide on the African continent. The event was jointly organized by the Department of Political Affairs of the African Union Commission and the Embassy of the Republic of Rwanda.

On behalf of the Government and the People of Ethiopia, Ambassador Fisseha Yimer, Special Advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, conveyed his profound sympathy and solidarity to the victims, the People and the Government of Rwanda. He noted the enormous importance of remembrance of the victims of the genocide in order to avert conflicts, atrocities and crimes against humanity in Africa and more widely. He said the event would contribute a lot to revitalize the commitment of Africa to prevent similar crimes against humanity. Ambassador Fisseha remembered the firm conviction of the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi that it was imperative to investigate the various issues of the 1994 Rwanda genocide in order to learn from it and prevent similar atrocities in the years to come. Following from this belief, the then OAU established the International Panel of Imminent Personalities to investigate the tragic occurrence of the Rwanda genocide and draw lessons from this catastrophic event to prevent further conflicts. The African Union has since made huge strides in improving and building its legal and institutional capacity to encourage peace and reconciliation in all parts of Africa.

In spite of many impediments, Ambassador Fisseha said the African Union must be commended for the adoption of its Constitutive Act and the setting up of the African Peace and Security Architecture which had done much to prevent escalation of conflicts in and between Member States through peacekeeping operations, mediation initiatives, peace-building and other post-conflict reconstruction efforts over the last two decades. He stressed the significance of remembering and drawing lessons from the Rwanda genocide in order to tackle the new and emerging challenges of the continent. He urged those present to thoroughly consider and reflect on ways to deal with new threats to security in Africa, including bad governance, state fragility, socio-economic malaise, managing diversity, terrorism, drug trafficking, piracy and other issues. Such discussions could have a tremendous impact for AU Member States and provide ways for them to use national policies and strategies to address emerging threats effectively.

Erastus Mwencha, Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission, expressed his thanks to the Government and People of Rwanda for their unwavering dedication and efforts to encourage unity, peace and tranquility. He noted that the commemoration had brought together intellectuals to share experiences and to discuss how to prevent conflicts and manage the issue of diversity in Africa. This kind of reflection and understanding, he said, would enable the continent to avert similar atrocities, and prevent the genocide and crimes against humanity that had occurred in Rwanda. He urged all warring parties on the continent to learn from the route of peace and reconciliation demonstrated by Rwanda and follow its example by dropping their guns and machetes and look to the general welfare of their people. He emphasized that the African

Union was committed to engage in conflict prevention and management of diversity on the continent in order to respect the sanctity and dignity of humankind.

Thursday's Ceremony was marked by a "flame of remembrance", carried by a relay of young people representing the five regions of Africa. A high level panel discussion was held with eminent personalities presenting papers on the response of the AU to the Rwandan Genocide, lessons learned, the need for better management of diversity, the capacity to prevent conflicts and the post conflict reforms required to manage conflicts. The African Union Commission also launched a competition for the design of the planned African Union Human Rights memorial to be erected at AU Headquarters.

Eritrea's continued extortion of the 2% Diaspora Tax

A group of Eritrean women from the Eritrean Diaspora in London, calling themselves Team Eritrea, are demanding that the British government ends its toleration of the infamous 2% Diaspora tax that the Eritrean Government extorts from all its citizens living across the world. The demand for payment is levied under the pretext of providing a "social cushion for the dependents of martyrs of war, disabled war veterans and national reconstruction and development." Its collection is often conducted unlawfully, and Eritreans in the Diaspora wherever they are, are forced to pay 2% of their income under threat and intimidation. If they refuse they are not allowed to renew their passports, they are told they cannot obtain visas to visit their own country or conduct any form of business there. It is made very clear that they can expect no form of service from their embassy if they do not pay the tax immediately as well as any back payments that might be owed. The demands have brought considerable financial burden for many of the Eritrean Diaspora working in Europe, America and other parts of the world to make a living and support families back in Eritrea out of their earnings. The UK campaigners point out that the money is extorted in many cases from refugees who are some of the poorest people in the community, people who just want to help their families. The practice of forced extortion of the Diaspora Tax has been almost universally and repeatedly condemned by Eritreans across the world, as they have shown in many demonstrations.

In fact, the Government of Eritrea collects this Diaspora Tax by employing lawless and coercive tactics using its missions abroad and, where it has no diplomatic representation, through members of the ruling People's Front for Justice and Democracy (PFDJ). It is often collected in direct contravention of the laws of the host country, and involves opaque financial transactions to conceal the reality of the operations. Indeed, in efforts to make collection of the tax non-traceable, the regime has started employing different ways of collection, refusing to provide receipt of payment, using private accounts instead of embassy or consul accounts and making collection in cash.

Irrespective of the way the tax is collected, the collection of the Diaspora tax and its extortion from Eritreans in the Diaspora is in clear violation of the UN Resolution 2023 of May 2011. This was an extension of an earlier Security Council UN resolution 1907 of 2009 which condemned the usage of the Diaspora tax for acts of destabilization including support and arming of the AI

Qaeda-affiliated Al-Shabaab in Somalia. Resolution 2023 went further, condemning the use of the Diaspora Tax collected from the Eritrean Diaspora by the Eritrean Government to destabilize the Horn of Africa region or violate other relevant resolutions, including 1844 (2008), 1862 (2009) and 1907 (2009). In this context it noted that possible purposes included “procuring arms and related materiel for transfer to armed opposition groups or providing any services or financial transfers provided directly or indirectly to such groups”, as outlined in the findings of the Somalia/Eritrea Monitoring Group in its 18 July 2011 report (S/2011/433). It called on Eritrea to cease all such practices.

Resolution 2023 also “decides that Eritrea shall cease using extortion, threats of violence, fraud and other illicit means to collect taxes outside of Eritrea from its nationals or other individuals of Eritrean descent, decides further that States shall undertake appropriate measures to hold accountable, consistent with international law, those individuals on their territory who are acting, officially or unofficially, on behalf of the Eritrean government or the PFDJ contrary to the prohibitions imposed in this paragraph and the laws of the States concerned, and calls upon States to take such action as may be appropriate consistent with their domestic law and international relevant instruments, including the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, to prevent such individuals from facilitating further violations.”

In the face of this very clear directive, it is hardly surprising that Eritrea’s extrajudicial and extraterritorial taxation of its nationals and indeed in some cases of Eritreans with dual nationality, has been meeting some resistance from host countries at the behest of those who are at the receiving end of this continued extortion. Since the passing of UN Resolution 2023 in 2011, the Governments of Germany, the UK and Canada have all requested Eritrea to stop the use of coercive tactics to collect the Diaspora Tax. In Canada, the Government has taken the matter further. Following repeated requests by Eritreans and Canadians of Eritrean descent for government intervention, the Canadian authorities finally expelled the Eritrean consul in Toronto in May last year after he had repeatedly ignored Canadian demands to stop collecting the tax and time and again given false assurances that he would do so. The Canadian government’s decision was widely welcomed as a response to the Eritrean regime’s continued flaunting of its refusal to acknowledge or take any notice of the UN Security Council or its resolution 2023.

The UK Government also warned the Eritrean embassy in the UK that some aspects of the collection of the tax levied on Eritreans living in the UK were unlawful and in breach of the Vienna Conventions on Diplomatic and Consular Relations. A UN Monitoring Group report noted that “On 20 May 2011, the Government of the United Kingdom notified the Eritrean authorities that, since aspects of the collection of the two per cent tax may be unlawful and in breach of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, until it was demonstrated otherwise, the Eritrean embassy should suspend, immediately and in full, all activities relating to the collection of the tax.” The Senior Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Baroness Warsi is quoted as saying “The UK supported UN Security Council Resolution 2023 which condemned Eritrea’s use of the Diasporas tax to destabilize the Horn of Africa region and decided that Eritrea should cease using illicit means to collect the tax. We are aware of allegations over the use of harassment to collect revenue from members of the Eritrean Diaspora in the UK.”

In June 2012, the UK Government also introduced its Eritrea Asset Freezing Regulation to enable it to discharge its duties as a member state of the UN in enforcing Resolution 2023. The UK Foreign office apparently raised the matter again in December 2012, telling the Ambassador that the government was “aware of allegations over the use of harassment to collect revenue from members of the Eritrean Diaspora in the UK” and reminding him of UN Security Council resolution 2023. He was told to stop the practice. However, it appears Eritrea has continued to ignore all warnings.

Certainly, according to recent UK press reports, Eritreans in the UK are still facing demands for payment of the tax and for any and all back payments for which the embassy claims a person is liable. The UK papers have published recordings of conversations between Eritreans residing in UK and Eritrean Diplomats which confirm the continued extortion of the Diaspora Tax. One Eritrean was told that he would have to pay the tax for the whole period of seventeen years since he had graduated. Without this, he would be unable to access any embassy services. These apparently include any embassy activity including assistance in sending remittances back to their families or even dispatching old clothes. Those who fail to pay the tax are also prevented from opening or closing businesses or obtaining any sort of authorization or license without a tax certificate from the authorities. The Eritrean regime which has, in fact, systematically failed to follow any of the established customs and rules of international diplomacy, continues similarly to blackmail its own nationals over their basic human rights in order to seize minimal amounts of hard-earned foreign exchange.

This latest evidence of the Eritrean Government’s continued extortion in defiance of UN Security Council resolution 2023 also emphasizes the need for UN member states to undertake close scrutiny of all Eritrean Missions and implement effectively the resolution which clearly calls for the cessation of forced extraterritorial taxation by the Eritrean regime. Implementation of effective mechanisms to save Eritreans in the Diaspora from harassment and undue fiscal burdens is also directly linked by the resolution to security in the Horn of Africa. The money collected through Diaspora Tax has been, and still is, used to finance terrorists. The way the regime has switched to fraudulent collection of this tax, using dubious private accounts and denial of receipts, demonstrates its efforts to try to conceal its activities from the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea. It is the Monitoring Group’s reports which have exposed the way the Diaspora Tax, and indeed other forced contributions of funds to the Eritrean Defense Forces, have been in continued support of regional efforts at destabilization.

It is surely now incumbent on countries that are home to Eritreans in the Diaspora to uphold United Nations Security Council resolutions, and particularly resolution 2023, and ensure that the Eritrean regime cannot use its diplomatic presence to extort monies illegally, and in defiance of the Vienna Conventions, from its citizens. This, after all, is a government which also continues to provide national service conscript “slave labor” for the companies involved in mining operations in Eritrea. It is hardly surprising that so many regard Eritrea as a pariah state. Nor is it surprising that the campaigners of Team Eritrea now want the British Government to implement UN resolution 2023 on the Diaspora Tax fully and properly, and follow the example of Canada in expelling Eritrean diplomats responsible for these extortionate and illegal practices.

Growth and development are the reality of the Somali Regional State not “silence and pain”

Martin Plaut’s recent article “Silence and pain: Ethiopia’s human rights record in the Ogaden” deserves comment not just for its inaccuracies but also because it is highly misleading in terms of omission and in its extensive use of controversial sources, some of which, besides being seriously outdated, have also been the subject of detailed corrections which Mr. Plaut carefully ignores.

Serious omissions creep in at the outset. It is true that the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) took up arms in 1995 but it is certainly relevant to note that the organization ran the government of the Somali Regional State between 1992 and 1995 before splitting over whether the time was ripe to try to hold a referendum over self-determination as allowed under the Ethiopian constitution. Well over half the organization disagreed with its Chairman and a majority refused to follow him when he called for an armed struggle rather than continue to operate within Ethiopia and the Somali Regional State’s political process. That majority remained part of the political process within the Somali Regional State and later joining with other Somali political parties to form the Somali Peoples Democratic Party, currently the ruling party in the region.

Well before 1995, it was very clear that a very substantial majority of the population of the regional state and all the other parties in the state were opposed to the ONLF, which was then, as now, a minority organization. Most of the Ogaden clans have always been opposed to the ONLF, many very strongly so, not least because of the way the ONLF has operated, consistently carrying out assassinations, terrorizing its opponents and critics and attacking civilians. The Ogaden clans, incidentally, make up no more than a third of the Somali region’s population, though they inhabit up to a half of the land. None of the other clans in the region have ever been prepared to accept the idea of being ruled by the Ogaden in an Ogadeni state, something on which the ONLF has always tried to insist.

Martin Plaut talks about “dark, dirty secrets”, “far from prying international eyes,” alleging “a terrible silence has descended over the Ogaden” and claiming that the Ethiopian authorities have sealed off the region to international journalists. No, they haven’t. If Martin Plaut had done his research properly he would know that there were international journalists reporting from the region only a few months ago. There have been reports in the Guardian, the Globe and Mail, and Time World and other outlets. These have painted a very different picture of the situation in the region and of the developments there. Aid organizations operate freely as do a number of NGOs, and there are no problems in entering the region though some areas are subject to security constraints because of ONLF terrorist activity.

It is true that two Swedish journalists, Martin Schibbye and Johan Persson, were arrested in the region in July 2011, but they were not arrested for entering the region. They were detained because they had illegally crossed the border and, more importantly, were accompanying a group of armed ONLF fighters on a terrorist mission, as they subsequently admitted. That was why they were given what were certainly heavy jail sentences. In the circumstances they were lucky to receive pardons a little over a year later.

Martin Plaut does, quite rightly, make the point that since 2008 there have been only a few reliable reports published on the region. He might have added that the report he quotes from most extensively, and his main source, a report by Human Rights Watch on the Ogaden in June 2008, even though hardly up-to-date, is also one of the most unreliable and indeed suffers from most of the same omissions and inaccuracies of Mr. Plaut. It almost completely fails to provide chapter and verse of the numerous atrocities it claimed to have taken place. These included allegations the Ethiopian Defense Forces had carried out a “brutal counter-insurgency” campaign, involving a systematic campaign of forced relocation, and burning of villages, arbitrary killings, mass detentions, torture, rape and assault, livestock confiscations and killings and restrictions on civilian movements, amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The report, in June 2008, concerned the government sufficiently for it to commission an independent report later in the year to investigate HRW’s allegations. A team spent some weeks touring the region, visiting almost all the places to which HRW referred, and investigated as many of the claims as possible. That report found major problems with HRW’s report and its approach. The team talked to specific people that HRW claimed had been tortured to death, alive and well; many of the names of people allegedly killed proved simply fictitious; villages that HRW claimed had been burnt were untouched, and populations that had allegedly been forcibly relocated were still in place. The independent investigation on the ground found no evidence to support allegations of systematic war crimes or crimes against humanity; though it did find evidence of a few cases of abuse, and one of torture – the officer responsible was court-martialed. It was also able to clarify the reality of claims of political manipulation of food distribution, of border closures, and of “economic war.

The inquiry also highlighted major flaws in HRW’s methodology, including almost exclusive use of anonymous telephone interviews with external sources outside Ethiopia or even the region, a total failure to enquire into the political affiliation or interest of informants, a lack of any attempt at assessment of ONLF terrorist activities, a total failure to carry out any investigations on the ground visit regional prisons or talk to alternative sources. HRW even claimed that satellite imagery could prove responsibility for burnt villages!

Mr. Plaut quotes HRW as saying “Ethiopian security forces have committed serious violations of international humanitarian law in at least three separate armed conflict situations over the past decade: in the Somali Region in 2007, in Somalia between 2006 and 2008, and in Gambella in 2003 and 2004.” They haven’t. HRW and other sources among armed opposition movements, many based in Eritrea, and their supporters in the Diaspora, merely claim they have, and that is a very different matter. The Ethiopian government has indeed dismissed many of these allegations of human rights abuses as unreliable or politically motivated. There is good reason for this. Many of them are indeed unreliable, politically motivated and do not stand up to investigation. Almost none of HRW’s allegations, for example, have been sufficiently detailed to allow for any investigation. Where investigations have been carried out, the allegations have been almost always found to be false, but HRW repeatedly dismisses any findings that disagree with their “findings” as “unreliable” and “non-credible”. In fact, when the independent 2008 inquiry into events in the Ogaden failed to find evidence for most of the claims made by HRW, HRW immediately accused it of failing “to meet basic standards of credibility”.

It is also difficult to accept Mr. Plaut's claims of human rights abuse concerning events at the end of last year and in January this year. Apparently quoting from someone who was said to be in Liyu police in June 2012, he gives what he calls eight examples of abuse in the last few weeks. In fact, five are no more than notice of arrest, though in one case this is qualified as 'unlawful' without explanation. It is difficult to see why these classify as abuse. In three cases, certainly, the allegations concern claims of theft and a killing. They are, most unusually, possibly specific enough in time and place for investigation. This is particularly unusual and may therefore be investigated. In fact Ethiopia has never refused to investigate human rights abuses, whether committed by security forces or anyone else, if reliable evidence has been produced of such activity with sufficient detail to allow investigations to be made. HRW and others almost routinely fail to do so.

Mr. Plaut goes on to extract other allegations from HRW reports, again without bothering to note that these have been widely criticized for exaggeration. Neither the independent media nor civil society organizations have been "decimated" by the Charities and Societies Proclamation, the Press Law or the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, though the CSP has certainly brought some much needed and welcome structural organization and control into the administration of CSOs, whose numbers, it might be noted, have increased. The main critics of this legislation have been organizations that were unprepared to allow the government to audit their books on an annual basis! There has been no decline in the operation of the free press, and to suggest otherwise indicates a failure to read current press publications in Ethiopia. It is simply untrue to say that "over the past five years most legitimate political avenues for peaceful protest have been shut down and opposition leaders, civil society activists, and independent journalists have been jailed or forced to flee", though certainly some of those involved in illegitimate activities, including terrorist activities, have been arrested, tried and in some cases sentenced.

A couple of other points: the ONLF has made much in the last week or two of what it calls the "mysterious disappearance of two senior ONLF negotiators from Nairobi." In fact, there is nothing mysterious about their leaving Nairobi. They decided to return to the Somali Regional State and are now in Jigjiga. They were not kidnapped or in any sense constrained; they had merely decided to abandon the ONLF, something that they feared might lead to attempts to assassinate them as a number of others have been killed when trying to do the same thing. They are not alone in leaving the ONLF. Many in the Diaspora have done exactly that particularly in the last year or two as officials from the Somali regional State have toured Somali Diaspora populations in Europe and America, giving account of developments in the region and the progress made. A large element of the ONLF, including over half of its central committee at the time, gave up armed struggle in 2011 and negotiated a settlement, as did another Ogadeni organization, the United Somali Western Liberation Front, the previous year.

Secondly, with reference to all the abuses that are continually alleged to take place throughout the Somali region, it might be noted that all the people in the region carry mobile phones, most with photo capacity. The Somali speaking areas of Eastern Africa have one of the most efficient and cheapest series of mobile phone networks in the world. Yet, oddly, no specific evidence has been produced of these hundreds of supposed atrocities; none of the alleged prisons, the burning villages, the public killings and other apparent abuses have been photographed. One has to ask why not?

False allegations and the reality of the private press in Ethiopia

The history of the private press in Ethiopia is remarkably short despite the country's long history, having a life span of no more than twenty three years. During this relatively brief period, although there were some papers that consistently showed mature professionalism and ethical journalistic standards, the private press has on the whole been dominated by what can only be described as the worst examples of the tabloid press. In the early days following the removal of the military junta, the Derg, there was a flood of papers on the streets of Addis. Heralding a new era of the freedom of press, the Transitional Government's Charter gave rise to all sorts of publications, reflecting the euphoria of the nation's newly gained freedom of conscience, speech and the press. Much of this was welcome but it also led to the appearance of a disquieting number of self-proclaimed journalists who had neither experience nor education in journalism. Their efforts resulted in a number of publications which were disappointing in content, often libelous, pornographic, even racist, as well as unethical, failing to observe even the most elementary standards of journalism.

Some of the new tabloids of the early 90s in fact published numerous offensive articles, including news and features that actually contravened established laws both of Ethiopia and of other nations. Some openly preached violence and war against the new government, filling their columns with hate speech, denigrating different nations and nationalities in the country and openly advocating hatred and even incitement to genocide. That period also saw the concoction of an amazing number of fictitious stories, most politically inspired and deliberately aimed to try to undermine the constitutional order.

The paradox was that much of the press, this "gutter" element, made every effort to attack the very system that had given it life. Its proponents left no stone unturned to undermine the government that had allowed a free press to operate for the first time in Ethiopia's long history. In the first years of the new regime, some of the most notorious offenders were brought to justice, but overall the government exercised quite extraordinary tolerance for the output of the press. It underlined time and again that it wanted to see the evolution of a press that could eventually play a proper role as the "fourth estate" in Ethiopia. It also showed considerable understanding of the problems posed by the infancy of the press, the lack of professionalism and the shortage of professional journalists, and the difficulties that arose from the government's own failure to supply a steady flow of information or organize an effective information machinery. Nevertheless, this was a period that will be remembered most clearly for the demise of the censorship which had controlled and constrained the press under previous regimes.

With the steady growth in a culture of reading newspapers in the 1990s, a number of changes occurred. Many of the papers fell out of favor of readers as these became more discriminating in their choices. The verdict of the market on many of the publications was damning and a significant number were forced to close. Those that survived were, in most cases, the better and more professional publications as they demonstrated in subsequent years. Some publications took a balanced view of the political landscape, whether supporting the EPRDF or opposition

parties. Equally, some publications continued to make every effort to underline the system, trying to make a name for themselves by raising the temperature whenever a crisis arose, all-to-often using inaccurate, invented or libelous stories. Some of the papers even went to the extent of lending themselves as instruments of foreign finance, allowing themselves to be manipulated as part of a puppet show of yellow journalism. Some of their output would have put their editors and writers behind bars in almost every country in the world.

Another defining characteristic of some elements of the press in the last decade or so has been the repeated criticisms made by external advocacy rights group over allegations of imprisonment of journalists and shutdown of papers. These have often been exaggerated and nearly always unhelpful in the operation of a free press, not least because many of the claims made have been inaccurate, with no effort to verify them and often made in ignorance of the details or realities of the charges. It has been frequent for external groups to call for the release of journalists without making any effort to understand the reason that gave rise to their arrest and imprisonment. It makes no difference whether the journalist had been jailed for breaking any law or acting in a criminal way. These rights group echo what they were told and never try to understand what really happened or why, or indeed to look at what the journalist might have actually done.

These groups have time and again issued statements casting doubt on the independence of the judiciary and other organs of the justice system. This happened even when journalists were content to participate in the judicial proceedings without qualms. Subsequently, the proclamation of the Anti-Terrorist law gave added impetus to a series of concerted efforts to denigrate the law by rights groups and their supporters. Ethiopia was consistently given a bad press as one of the worst jailers of journalists. The allegations were made almost irrespective of the facts. Despite the fact that every weekend, dozens of magazines are published freely, Ethiopia is continually described as a nightmare for journalists, the victim of an ongoing smear campaign, claiming that the Anti-Terrorist law, usually referred to as “draconian”, is consistently used to try to control the press. Despite repeated statements by government and others that any journalists are on trial for criminal or other offences unrelated to the exercise of journalism, these rights groups continue to claim it is the freedom of the private press in Ethiopia which is under attack.

The truth of the matter, however, remains: the Anti-Terrorist law was not issued with the covert agenda of muzzling the press. It is a law copied almost verbatim from the legislation of many developed countries passed to control the threat of terrorism. The peculiar nature of terrorism calls for separate rules from the normal criminal legislation. The fear that the press will be targeted under anti-terrorist legislation is misplaced and cannot be supported by any cogent argument. Equally, this does not mean that being a journalist should make one immune from prosecution if someone is found to have committed a crime or has become an accomplice to an act of terrorism. Recruiting members to an organization defined by parliament as a terrorist group or providing open propaganda for such a body would not be seen as an exercise of the freedom of press in almost any country.

While attacks on the supposed government attitude towards the private press in Ethiopia continue, the reality on the ground offers a very different picture. The private press in Ethiopia today is witnessing an unprecedented growth in circulation, a sharp rise in the number of professional journalists and in the financial capabilities and organizational strength of the media.

Quite a number of magazines now boast a weekly circulation figure exceeding 30,000 or so. This is a significant rise when compared to earlier years. The electronic media has also seen the addition of private FM radio stations attracting sizeable audiences. The private press representatives are now invited to press briefings by senior officials, and there are growing signs of an increased partnership between the private press and the government.

One noteworthy development has been the formation of the Press Council. This will provide an institution that can go a long way to address the ethical concerns over the practice of journalism through the issuance of a code of conduct. The Press Council will play a big role in setting the bar for healthy journalistic practice and the development of professional standards. The recent announcement by the Minister of Government Communications Affairs lowering the price of printing paper and several other measures that will provide support for the private press, also offers evidence of a very different press reality than that suggested by advocacy groups.

The coming into effect of the Freedom of Information Act has also had an important impact, consecrating the right of the public to seek and impart information. Giving further effect to the freedom of speech clauses of the constitution, the Act has laid down the duty of government offices towards journalists and citizens to give information except in cases of national security. The law allows citizens or journalists to bring cases before the court, if members of the administrative hierarch unjustifiably deny information. This law has provided a considerable boost for the private, and government press, and for exercise of the freedom of the press in general. Indeed, the passing of the Freedom of Information Act in effect says it all as far as the determination of the government to give full effect to the freedom of the press is concerned.