

News in Brief

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Africa and the African Union

African Union Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat announced this week that the AU Commission would issue guidelines on the design, production and issuance of the new African passport at the 32nd Summit of the African Union in February. He said: "This would take us one step closer to the long-held dream of complete free movement across the continent."

Ethiopia

Leo Varadkar, Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland made a working visit to Ethiopia this week (January 8-11). He held talks with Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed and President Sahle-Work Zewde as well as visiting the AU Commission. He also visited the Lalibela Rock-Hewn Churches, Irish Aid projects in Tigray Regional State and refugee camps. This year is the 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Ireland and Ethiopia and 25 years of Irish Aid's work in Ethiopia. **(See article)**

Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed arrived in Tessenai, Eritrea, on Monday (January 7) where he was welcomed by President Isaias Afwerki, before the two leaders cut a ribbon to officially open the Om Hager-Humera cross-border road between Eritrea and Ethiopia, another link in the resumption of transport, trade and communications and a further step in the normalization of Ethio-Eritrea relations. **(See article)**

The Federal President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, will make an official visit for three days to Ethiopia at the end of January. He will be holding talks with President Sahle-Work Zewde and Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed, and will also visit the Rock-Hewn churches of Lalibela. Prime Minister, Dr. Abiy was in Germany last October, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited Ethiopia two years ago. Ethiopia and Germany opened diplomatic relations in 1905.

A US\$30 million Substation Project for the Ethiopian Huajian International Light Industry City was signed in Dongguan, China at the weekend. Zhang Huarong, Chairman of Huajian Group, and Teferi Melesse Desta, Ethiopia's Consul General in Guangzhou were present. Mr. Huarong said the total investment for the Ethiopian Huajian International Light Industry City Project, planned for completion in 2020, was US\$ 1 billion and the project was expected to generate US\$2 billion and provide 50,000 to 60,000 jobs.

Djibouti

President Ismail Omar Guelleh and Chinese President Xi Jinping exchanged congratulatory message to mark the 40th anniversary of China/Djibouti bilateral relations on Tuesday (January 8). (See article)

President Ismail Omar Guelleh welcomed an Ethiopian delegation led by Defense Minister Aisha Mohammed Musa on Thursday (January 10). Defence Minister Aisha delivered a message from Prime Minister Dr. Abiy to deepen and maintain Ethio-Djibouti relations. The President underlined Djibouti's commitment to continue enhancing the bonds and cooperation further for regional peace, stability, as well as development.

Eritrea

Eritrean Airlines has started a twice-weekly service between Asmara and Djibouti.

Somalia

Defense Minister, Hassan Mohamed Ali, met a delegation from Turkey's Ministry of Defense on Tuesday (January 8). The delegation briefed the Minister on the special Somali military unit being trained in Istanbul. Turkey opened a military base in Mogadishu in 2017 to train members of the Somali armed forces and also provides specialized training in Turkey.

A conference in Mogadishu this week is considering the design and layout of AMISOM Forward Operating Bases to enhance the safety and security of its troops. The move is part of implementation of the Somali Transition Plan, which will see AMISOM withdraw another 1000 troops this year. Some of these bases are likely to be handed over to the Somali National Security Forces as part of the transfer of security responsibility.

The Pentagon has denied reports of any cutback in US actions in Somalia. "There have been no recent policy changes regarding U.S. operations in Somalia," A spokeswoman said, "We continue to support efforts to degrade Al-Shabaab." The US has some 500 military personnel in Somalia, and AFRICOM conducted 47 airstrikes in 2018.

The Somalia Humanitarian Country Team released the 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) last week. It called for funding and support to sustain aid operations, noting more than 4.2 million people (2/3 of whom are children) would need assistance in 2019. This is 34% down on 2018, but includes 2.6 highly vulnerable internally displaced persons (IDPs). Over 1.5 million people face acute levels of food insecurity and require immediate assistance.

South Sudan

Ethiopia's Ambassador to the Republic of South Sudan, Ambassador Fisseha Shawel took leave of President Salva Kiir on Sunday (January 7). President Kiir commended the strong bilateral relations between Ethiopia and South Sudan. Ambassador Fisseha said Ethiopia was working closely with IGAD and the international community to bring peace to South Sudan.

Sudan

Interior Minister Ahmed Bilal Osman told Parliament on Monday (January 7) that 816 people had been arrested in the protests since mid-December when the government raised the price of bread. The minister said the demonstrations began peacefully, but “thugs with a hidden agenda used them to indulge in looting and stealing. ” He said the situation across Sudan was now "calm and stable".

Ireland's Taoiseach Leo Varadkar visits Ethiopia

Leo Varadkar, Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland arrived in Ethiopia for a working visit on Tuesday (January 8). During his visit, Mr. Leo Varadkar held talks with Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed on bilateral, regional and international matters. The Prime Minister also paid a courtesy call on President Sahle-Work Zewde and met with the Acting Chairperson of the AU Commission as well as visiting the Lalibela Rock-Hewn churches and Irish Aid supported projects in Tigray Regional State. 2019 marks 25 years of diplomatic relations between Ireland and Ethiopia and 25 years of Irish Aid's work in Ethiopia, and the visit of the Taoiseach underlined the depth and strength of the relationship between our two countries and the achievements of the partnership to date.

During his talks with Prime Minister Dr. Abiy on Wednesday (January 9) both sides underlined the importance of further strengthening the longstanding and excellent relations between the two countries. Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed noted that the visit by the Prime Minister of Ireland was a testimony of the strengthened ties between Europe and Ethiopia. The Irish Prime Minister praised the reforms being made in Ethiopia over the last few months and reiterated his government's continued support to Ethiopia, particularly in agro-processing investments. They also discussed Ireland's support for the political and economic reforms underway in Ethiopia, the growth of Ireland's development cooperation program with Ethiopia and regional issues in the Horn of Africa, including the historic rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Prime Minister Varadkar paid a courtesy call on President Sahle-Work who welcomed the Prime Minister and underlined the excellent relations between Ireland and Ethiopia which is moving forward. She stressed the importance of strengthening cooperation on bilateral and multilateral fora and thanked the Irish Government for the support provided in agriculture, health, education and social protection sectors. She underlined the role of the Irish investors in Agro-processing and encouraged Irish investors to take part in agro-processing in the industrial parks. The Prime Minister, who mentioned that he was the first Irish Prime Minister to visit Ethiopia for a decade, highlighted Irish/Ethiopian collaboration on a myriad of bilateral and regional issues of common interest, He said: “Ethiopia has been our single key international partner for 25 years and we would like to further deepen our relations” adding, “We support the recent political and economic reforms undertaken by Ethiopia.” “Ireland”, he said, “is committed to boost business, trade and investment cooperation with Ethiopia.”

During his visit, the Irish Prime Minister met with Irish NGOs working in Ethiopia and attended a reception with the Irish community in Ethiopia where he launched the Ethio-Irish Alumni Association. On Thursday (January 10) he flew to the Lalibela Rock-Hewn Churches, a UNESCO World Heritage where he announced a new partnership between Ireland and Ethiopia on cultural heritage and rural tourism. Mr. Varadkar said this partnership would allow for exchanges and experience sharing between Irish and Ethiopian institutions, focused on cultural heritage tourism and rural job creation through tourism. He said Ethiopia's Minister for Culture and Tourism, Dr Hirut Kassaw would visit Ireland to meet with relevant bodies in Ireland, and finalize a program of experience sharing between Ireland and Ethiopia. There is already an existing partnership covering cultural heritage tourism but the new program will deepen the partnership over the next two years. He said Lalibela would join the 2019 'Global Greening' and, along with hundreds of other sites across the world, will go green on St Patrick's Day 2019, to mark the deep friendship between the Ethiopian and Irish people.

He then travelled on to Axum where he visited a number of agriculture, health, education and social protection programs jointly supported by Irish Aid and the Ethiopian government. On Friday, he visited Eritrean refugee camps near Shire and met with refugees and local authorities to discuss Ireland's support for Ethiopia in hosting the second largest refugee population in Africa and their joint commitment to the Global Compact for Migration.

Ireland is one of the key development partners of Ethiopia. In 2018, the Government of Ireland, through Irish Aid, invested €30 million in social protection, health, rural development and women's empowerment in Ethiopia. This will increase this year by nearly 7% to €32 million (1 billion Ethiopian Birr). Ireland's Development Cooperation Program with Ethiopia is the largest Irish government bilateral program in the world. Many Irish investors and companies are engaged in various investment sectors in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia and Ireland have a very strong and excellent relationship cemented on longstanding diplomatic and people-to-people ties. Ireland opened its embassy in Addis Ababa in 1994, and Ethiopia resumed its mission in Dublin, in 2003, but the relationship is based on wide ranging issues of mutual interest and precedes formal relations. The most visible example of this was during the height of the 1984 famine in which so many Ethiopians died. Ireland's response to that catastrophe remains a vivid and warming memory for Ethiopians. Most notable among the humanitarian efforts of the Irish people was the work of the Irish rock star, Sir Bob Geldof, whose initiative in organizing the Band Aid program mobilized the international community to provide the support that enabled the survival of millions of Ethiopians. The passionate and full-hearted response of the Irish people and their government to that crisis has remained a linchpin underlying current bilateral cooperation as well as people-to-people relations.

The Wind of Hope continues to blow steadily in the Horn of Africa

Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed, arrived in the town of Tessenai, in Western Eritrea, on Monday (January 7) where he was welcomed by Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, before the two leaders

cut the ribbon to officially open the Om Hager-Humera cross-border road, closed for more than two decades. They were accompanied by senior officials of both countries including the presidents of Ethiopia's Tigray and Amhara Regional States. Eritrea's Minister of Information Yemane Gebremeskel, said the reopening of the road was in line with article 3 of the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship that the two countries signed on July 9. This refers to the resumption of transport, trade and communication links between the two countries. He said the opening of the border would further expand people-to-people relations on both sides, as well as to facilitate cross-border trade among the two countries. Indeed, the occasion provided another link in the resumption of transport, trade and communications between Eritrea and Ethiopia and a further step in the normalization of Ethio-Eritrea relations provided for in the Joint Declaration.

The historic paradigm shift that is underway in the Horn of Africa following the recent rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea continues to gather strength. A few months ago, nobody would have even remotely anticipated that the two countries would end their hostility and normalize relations with this unprecedented speed. The peace deal signed by Prime Minister Abiy and President Isaias in July last year has led to the restoration of diplomatic and trade relations was an historic event ending two decades of enmity, and contributing to strengthening security, normalcy and stability in the region.

Since taking office in April 2018, Prime Minister Abiy has consistently conveyed the message of reconciliation including forgiveness, togetherness, love and tolerance in most of his encounters with the Ethiopian public and during his visits abroad. The political reforms the Prime Minister has been implementing domestically have laid down the solid and firm foundation for national consensus, unprecedented in the modern history of the country. The same approach has appeared in his foreign policy calculations, which have been responsible for the paradigm change in the relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea and in the Horn of Africa at large.

Ethiopia reopened its embassy in Asmara, the Eritrean capital, on September 6 last year, after Eritrea's embassy was reopened in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa on July 16. The peace process has also seen Ethiopia and Eritrea reopen air links and trade routes. Amid the easing tensions, telecom services between the two countries resumed, and agreements made to strengthen economic ties, reopening border crossing points. A cultural symposium, held recently in Addis Ababa, brought together some 500 participants drawn from both countries, including senior government officials, to discuss various issues including ways to enhance the cultural and linguistic ties as well as the need for cultural collaboration between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The 40th anniversary of Djibouti-China relations

Chinese President Xi Jinping exchanged congratulatory messages with President Ismail Omar Guelleh to mark the 40th anniversary of China/Djibouti bilateral relations on Tuesday (January 8). In a message, President Xi Jinping recalled President Guelleh's state visit to China in November 2017 when the two presidents announced the establishment of a bilateral strategic partnership; and President Guelleh's participation in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Summit when they reached a new consensus on further ties and signed a Memorandum of Understanding on pushing forward Belt and Road construction.

President Xi Jinping said that in the past 40 years, China and Djibouti had seen a healthy and stable development of their relations, with mutual understanding and support on issues concerning their core interests, in addition to plentiful results of cooperation in various fields. He said he highly valued the development of China-Djibouti relations, and was willing to work with President Guelleh and take the opportunity of the 40th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic ties to consolidate their mutual political trust, deepen the cooperation in co-building the Belt and Road Initiative, and implement the results of the FOCAC Beijing Summit, to lift their bilateral strategic partnership to new heights.

In his message to President Xi Jinping, President Guelleh said he was satisfied with and was proud of the smooth development of bilateral ties during the 40 years of their diplomatic relationship. He said the November 2017 decision to lift bilateral relations to the level of a strategic partnership showed the two countries' resolve to forge closer ties while providing the direction for their economic and trade cooperation. President Guelleh, who underlined Djibouti's support to the one-China policy, thanked the Chinese government and people for their help and support to Djibouti. He said he would joint President Xi Jinping in efforts to further expand their bilateral relations further.
