

A Week in the Horn 10.07.2020

News in Brief

Context and Updates on Current Issues in Ethiopia

Ethiopia Is Committed to Agreements On Mega Dam, says Ambassador Meles Alem

Africa and the African Union

The Director of Africa CDC on Thursday (July 09) provided an online briefing regarding the coordinated efforts by Member States to implement the AU's joint continental strategy on COVID-19 and highlighted key steps taken to support the PACT initiative across countries and other countermeasures taken to minimize fatality due to the disease in Africa.

At a briefing on Wednesday (July 08) for United Nations Member States on the humanitarian situation in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, OCHA called for more support to help vulnerable people in the region grapple with the “triple threat” of COVID-19, major flooding and desert locusts. The virtual briefing was chaired and moderated by the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, who highlighted that humanitarian needs are rising across Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia as a result of multiple, simultaneous and compounding shocks, including the worst desert locust upsurge in generations, recurring and increasing floods affecting millions of people, and the COVID-19 pandemic – sometimes referred to as the “triple threat” – in addition to conflict-related issues.

The Chairperson of the Assembly of the African Union, the African Continental Free Trade Area Champion and the Chairperson of the African Union Commission convened a virtual meeting on Wednesday (July 07) to close the inaugural commemoration of the African Integration Day which began on 1 July 2020. In a joint statement, participants said in celebrating the day “we reflect on and celebrate our

achievements in bringing African economies and peoples closer together, in conformity with our motto of Africa speaking with one voice and acting in unison.”

Ethiopia

The government of Ethiopia appeals to all stakeholders and friends of Ethiopia to discern the current situation in a careful and objective manner, a statement issued by the Prime Minister Office said. “While there are still rampant rumours of ongoing protests in the country, all need to be assured that these are simply rumours by forces determined to continue confusing the Ethiopia public and wreak havoc,” the statement added. The statement further said that the government of Ethiopia has fully controlled the situation in the country as of last week and the public have returned to their normal activities in both Addis Ababa and the Oromia region, where the incidents occurred. “Giving supremacy to the rule of law,” it said, “the government is working to hold accountable all those involved, in accordance with the Constitution and the laws of the land.” **(See article)**

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Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, Ambassador Dina Mufti on Thursday (July 09) gave a briefing to local and foreign media outlets regarding the current situation in Ethiopia. The briefing highlighted the diplomatic activities that the ministry has been engaged with for the last 15 days. The briefing was followed by a question and answers session where the ambassador elaborated on some critical issues, including, access to the Internet and the ongoing AU-led GERD talks.

Deputy Head of Ethiopian Embassy in the UK, Mr Ababi Demissie on Wednesday (July 08) briefed the UK Parliament All Party Parliamentary Group on Ethiopia on the current situation in the country including Embassy activities, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and the COVID-19 situation in the country.

Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, Gedu Andargachew on Tuesday (July 07) briefed the Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Quartey Thomas Kwesi about the current situation in Ethiopia. Their discussion includes the current status of the tripartite talks over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

In a televised address aired through the national television last week on Friday (July 07), Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said that coordinated attempts in the last few days aimed at igniting civil war and communal violence in Ethiopia have been thwarted due to the hard work from law enforcement agencies and the public. The Prime Minister thanked both law enforcement agencies and the public during his address delivered at a meeting attended by members of law enforcement agencies including officials from defense ministry as well as federal and Oromia regional state-senior level officials.

Ethiopia's Ambassador to Kenya, Meles Alem Tekea last week on Saturday (July 04) gave an interview to "The East African" about the country's stand on the filling of the Grand Renaissance Dam. He explained why Ethiopia needs to fill the dam now and commented on some of the concerns raised by the parties in the tripartite talks over the dam. (**See article**)

Eritrea

President Isaias Afwerki on Monday (July 06), met and held talks with President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi of Egypt at Al-Ittihadia Palace in Cairo. The two leaders held frank and extensive discussions on bilateral relations and regional developments. The two sides agreed to promote comprehensive bilateral cooperation. As regards regional development, the two leaders recognized that challenges and tensions are casting their shadow over vast opportunities which remain untapped, despite their undisputed benefits for all countries. The two leaders agreed to work together to foster mutual understanding and concrete actions to protect the interests of all parties and advance common interests. The meeting was attended by Osman Saleh, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Presidential Adviser Yemane Gebreab and Ambassador Fasil Gebreselasie on the Eritrean side and Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sameh Shukri, Intelligence Chief, Abbas Kamel and Minister of Agriculture Mohammed Marzuq.

Somalia

Explosions rocked two of Somalia's largest cities on Saturday (July 04) as officials said a suicide car bomber detonated near the port in

Mogadishu, the nation's capital, and a land mine in a restaurant on the outskirts of Baidoa, the south western Bay region, killed five people. The bomber sped through the first security checkpoint before police officers opened fire at the vehicle which exploded outside the gates, Ismail Mukhtar, spokesman for Somalia's information ministry, told The Associated Press.

Burundian soldiers serving under the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) on Saturday (July 04) donated medical supplies to Hir Shabelle state, to help improve access to medical care by local communities and mitigate hardships brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Officers from the Burundi National Defense Forces (BNDF) handed over cartons of the medical supplies to Hir Shabelle authorities, led by the state Minister for Women and Human Rights, Sa'adiya Mohamed Nur, in a ceremony held at Jowhar airport.

Somali President Mohamed Farmajo has held talks with Chinese Ambassador to Somalia Qin Jian, focusing on the respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the two countries. During the meeting held at the president's office on Saturday (June 04), the two sides stressed the importance of strengthening the historical relationship between the two countries and their people. Farmajo welcomed China's support for Somalia's unity and sovereignty and guaranteed Somali's unwavering respect for China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Domestic flights in Somalia have resumed after the suspension for more than three months due to COVID-19 on Monday (July 06). The director-general of civil aviation, Ahmed Moalim Hassan said passengers flight staff will be required to follow instructions on the prevention of coronavirus issued by the Ministry of Health to help curb the spread of respiratory disease. "All passengers will be screened before entering the airport and after to ensure adherence to health guidelines," Said Ahmed Moalim. The ease of restrictions in the aviation sector comes amid a surge in COVID-19 cases in Somalia which has so far reported 2961 cases amid concerns the cases are largely due to community transmission.

Kenya

Kenya is inching closer to the global target of testing, treating and virally suppressing HIV/Aids in 90 percent of its population, a new report by the United Nations Programme on HIV/Aids (UNAIDS) titled Seizing the Moment says. The agency says Kenya and 24 other countries are “well on the way to ending their Aids epidemics.” Those countries have an incidence: prevalence ratio of 3 percent or less. This milestone is reached when there are fewer than three new HIV infections annually per 100 people living with HIV, UNAIDS explained.

The governments of Kenya and the US have launched negotiations for a landmark Free Trade Agreement that will pave way for trade and investment relations between the two countries. Industrialization Cabinet Secretary Betty Maina says the agreement, which is the first of its kind in Sub-Saharan Africa, will provide continued market access for Kenyan goods to the expansive US market. It will also enable both countries to commit themselves to increase trade between them by reducing trade barriers, including tariffs and import quotas.

South Sudan

The UN refugee agency (UNHCR) on Wednesday (July 08) called on South Sudanese leaders to reinvigorate efforts to establish a lasting peace and end Africa’s largest displacement crisis. The High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, said that, after years of conflict, the South Sudanese people deserve the chance to return to their homes, to live in safety in their communities and to focus on building a bright and prosperous future. UNHCR also called on all parties to the violence to urgently implement a ceasefire, particularly as the pandemic is expected to reach its peak in the coming months.

The UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) last week on Thursday (July 02) organized a two-day workshop for community leaders and business owners in Wau and Jur River counties to spread messages on preventing the spread of COVID-19. Together with the Interfaith Base-Council for Peace Initiative in Western Equatoria State, the peacekeeping mission has launched an awareness campaign at the Masiya market, one of the most populated parts of the town of Yambio.

South Sudan President Salva Kiir on Wednesday (July 08) announced that his government would start a full-scale disarmament campaign to end tribal violence in the country. Kiir made the announcement in a

speech to the nation delivered on the Ninth Anniversary of the Country's Independence which also will not be celebrated due to the health crisis caused by the COVID-19.

The transitional government, Freedom and Change Forces (FFC) and armed groups agreed on Wednesday (July 08) evening to allocate 75 seats of the Transitional Legislative Council to Sudanese Revolutionary Forces and SLM of Minni Minnawi. The deal struck on the transitional parliament comes after over ten days of difficult talks in Khartoum as the armed groups initially requested 140 seats.

Sudan

Negotiations on filling and operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam continued between Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan. The delegations of the three countries held separate bilateral sessions with the group of the observers and the experts. Sudan News Agency on (June 08) said that the Sudanese delegation, headed by the Irrigation Minister, Professor Yassir Abbas, reviewed during the meeting his vision of how to address the points of disagreement between the three countries in their technical and legal aspects. The Sudanese delegation has explained in detail its proposals that include the formula of filling and refilling of the dam in the years of drought, the continuous operation, and the extent of the daily change of water flows to Al-Rosseiris Dam.

The government delegation to the peace negotiations headed by the First Vice-President of the Sovereign Council, Lieutenant General Mohamed Hamdan Deqlo, and the Sudanese Revolutionary Front delegations held on Tuesday (June 07) a session of talks in Khartoum, in the presence of the South Sudan's mediation team, which discussed the outstanding issues on which the two negotiating parties did not reach an agreement.

The United States of America on Tuesday (July 07) has said that its support for Sudan, during the transitional period leading to democracy and peace, would continue. US Secretary of State Michele Pompeo reiterated his country's support for Sudan and the Sudanese transitional government. "We are making progress in helping Sudan convert to a more democratic and peaceful lifestyle," he said.

Sudan has established a national mechanism for coordination with the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), which will begin its activities on January 1, 2021. On June 3, the UN Security Council approved the establishment of a political mission in Sudan to support democratic transition and peace implementation, in response to a request by Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok. “The Prime Minister issued a decision to form the national mechanism for coordination with the UNITAMS, and appoint Ambassador Omer al-Sheikh as the national coordinator,” reads a statement issued by Hamdok’s office on Sunday (July 05).

Saudi Arabia would host a conference for peace in Sudan the Friends of Sudan group agreed to hold, said the foreign ministry Khartoum on Monday (July 06). State Minister for Foreign Affairs Omer Gamar Eldin received the Saudi Minister to Khartoum Ali Hassan bin Gaafar to discuss bilateral relations and the Kingdom support to Sudan. Following the meeting, the foreign ministry stated that the Saudi diplomat request to host a conference support peace implementation in Sudan.

Tut Kew Gatluak, head of the South Sudan mediation team, disclosed that the number of seats in the legislative council allocated to the armed groups is the only sticky issue in the talks for peace in Sudan. Gatluak left the Sudanese capital to Juba after spending more than ten days. As he arrived on 25 June flanked with a delegation of the armed groups and a number of pending issues they failed to reach an agreement on it with the Sudanese negotiating team. Speaking to reporters at the Khartoum airport he said the two parties reached an agreement on the outstanding issues that they were unable to strike a deal on it during the videoconference meetings between Juba and Khartoum.

Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

Office of the Prime Minister

Context and Updates on Current Issues in Ethiopia

Context

The killing of Hachalu Hundesa, an Oromo musician and rights activist on June 29, 2020, has sent shock waves of anger, resentment and frustration throughout Ethiopia. Millions of his fans, citizens across all ethnic and faith groups and the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia have been deeply saddened by this disturbing and tragic incident.

Following his death, protesters took to the streets in Oromia region and the capital Addis Ababa on June 30, 2020 to express their grievance and to demand justice for the death of Hachalu. But not all of them were peaceful. In the course of the protests, many citizens, including government security members lost their lives. Hundreds of people were wounded and private and state properties estimated in millions of birr were destroyed within two days.

The government of Ethiopia has been working day and night to uncover the identities of all those involved in the killing of Hachalu and the master minds behind this heinous act. We would like to assure all Ethiopians and friends of Ethiopia that the government will leave no stone unturned until justice is served and the perpetrators face justice.

The government of Ethiopia would like to highlight that there are a number of rumors and misinformation being spread through social and traditional media on the political situation in the country and the legal measures undertaken by the government following this tragic incident. Some international media have reported that the government had “unlawfully” arrested opposition leaders. Some others have claimed that democratization process started two years ago is rolling back. Some others went to the extent of saying that government has continued to “marginalize” certain ethnic groups. This is an attempt to paint a wrong picture of the current political situation by highlighting piecemeal information, with little effort to delve into what really caused the current incident.

The Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia feels responsible that it has to set a correct context in order to clarify the existing confusion and bring about clarity regarding facts on the ground and the transparency of its operation.

We cannot fully grasp the current situation without understanding two main contexts that have to be put together in order to have a better understanding:

1. Unabated attempt made by aggrieved forces to perpetuate political tensions
2. Increasing political polarization and the negative role of media in creating ethnic tensions

Unabated attempt made by aggrieved forces to perpetuate political tension

When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018, Ethiopia ushered in a new era of democratization and economic, political and social transformation. The government of Ethiopia has undertaken bold reforms that has given hope to millions in Ethiopia and beyond. Opposition leaders and banned media groups in exile as well as armed groups, were given amnesty and welcomed back home; oppressive laws were changed; freedom of expression and media freedom was fully granted and many more bold reforms were undertaken by the government. Ethiopia re-established diplomatic ties with Eritrea, leaving behind decades-long animosity and letting the atmosphere of peace breathe into in the Horn of Africa. These changes have brought hope to many citizens of the country, neighboring countries and the world at large. But they did not make everybody happy. As much as it had brought waves of hope to millions, it has also aggrieved some forces whose unfair political and economic upper hand was challenged as a consequence of the reforms.

One of the perils of our nation's politics for more than a century has been political marginalization and exclusion of different forms. The current administration strongly believes that the political culture of exclusion and marginalization should come to an end and a new era of trust, togetherness and true federalism should start. It is with this strong belief and hope that the government made unprecedented decisions to open up the political space, inviting all political parties in exile, to come back home and engage in peaceful political struggle.

Nevertheless, while the government believes that the way of reform is arduous and full of challenges, it should be mentioned here that the government has been under constant and unrestrained pressure from

disgruntled forces, organizing and supporting anti-peace elements, by using the economic and political muscles they have built over the last three decades, in order to undermine this inevitable reform process.

It should be clear to friends and foes alike that the current Ethiopian government led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has a strong desire, commitment and capacity to build a democratic order based on equality and respect of fundamental rights and dignity of every citizen. Any inordinate desire to maintain political and economic supremacy at the expense of millions of citizens is unacceptable and unjustifiable. The government will continue fighting against unjust political, economic and social relationships in order to bring about a true democracy and genuine economic and social transformation in Ethiopia, reflective of the context.

Increasing political polarization and the negative role of media in creating ethnic tensions

In spite of constitutional provisions, freedom of expression and media freedom were highly restricted in Ethiopia for nearly three decades. When the current administration led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed decided to open up the political space two years ago, different dissenting voices, views, opinions and thoughts began to resurface and draw public attention. Political views that were once spoken only among close friends began to be openly spoken freely on national media. There was no “big elephant in the room” any more. Citizens became free to say whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted.

The government strongly believes that dissenting views, even the most uncomfortable ones, should be heard and voiced. It is clear that this does not take place at no cost. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed likened this situation to “opening windows of a house that remained closed for more than two decades.”When you open it, all the stuffy smells come out, and some find it irritating. However, in this new era of hope for Ethiopia, the Prime Minister encouraged that all ideas can be tabled for discussion, calling upon all Ethiopians to move from the streets to the tables, where debates on ideas can be had without resorting to sticks and stones on the streets.

This action of the government, however, was not positively welcomed and utilized by everyone. Some opposition parties and political figures

began to misuse it. Some others began to throw offensive slurs against members of other ethnic groups. Some others engaged in defamation and finger-pointing without reference to established facts. Some media reporting could now draw a clear line between opinion and facts and engaged in media practices that put a certain ethnic or religious group under negative light.

Still others also began to employ a certain media framing to put blame on the government. They accused the government of “destroying the federal system, bringing back the old centralist government system and threatening to roll back the hard-won political gains.” These accusations were, however, hurled at the government without adequate facts and often based on invalid arguments. The government has patiently refrained from taking corrective action with the hope that they would correct themselves and get back to the right track in due time. The government believed that it must exercise some patience in order not to discourage the nascent exercise of freedom of expression the nation has been yearning for. Unfortunately, this did not happen.

The current Ethiopian government believes that the present political arrangement in the country establishes true federalism and empowers regional governments that were marginalized during the previous administration. For the first time in 30 years regional states such as Somali, Benishangul, Afar and Gambella have moved from the periphery to the center and can now fully take part in political decisions that impact their respective regions. Not more than a week ago, the 10th regional state was established in Ethiopia, realizing the age-long desire of the Sidama people for self-determination. In contrast to the popular claim that the federal system is being undermined, the government is striving hard to make sure that true federalism takes roots in the country.

Another destructive media and social media campaign started when certain media houses and social media activists falsely accused Prime Minister Abiy of being “Naftegna” or sympathizer of the “Naftegna System.” Some private media and media organizations under the auspices of a regional government were pushing this false accusation, time and again without heeding its dangerous repercussions.

In its literal meaning neftegna means “gun bearer.” It refers to military occupiers who settled in Southern Ethiopia from the late 19th century

onwards. This was a historical development that came to an end in 1974 with the fall of Emperor Haile Sellasie's monarchy and the rise of the Dergue communist regime to power. So, it has nothing to do with the current government; it has nothing to do with the Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali. This is a part of history, and it, in no way, reflects the current political situation. However, irresponsible media practitioners and the disgruntled forces behind the media campaign have been making a desperate attempt to defame the leadership of Abiy Ahmed and to distort this government by labeling him as a Naftegna.

These and other similar false claims, half-truths and disinformation spree have misled sections of the public into thinking that the old-centrist, anti-federal force is lurking behind the person of Abiy Ahmed. It should be noted that this is a fabricated conspiracy created to distort the good image of the government and to abort the current reform process. By way of unrestrained and irresponsible media use, certain political parties and figures managed to misuse these historical narratives. They repeatedly bombarded the public with the false claim that "the comeback of neftegna is a real political danger." Most of the agitators who employ this Naftegna conspiracy reside in the comfort of their homes in big cities in Europe and North America, constantly supplying dangerous and outrageous agenda to wreak havoc among our people in Ethiopia.

The main goal of setting this agenda was to fuel ethnic conflict in Ethiopia, particularly between the most populous ethnic groups in Ethiopia: the Oromo and the Amhara. The most dangerous part of this media campaign began to take shape when gullible and often young media consumers began to associate Naftegna with ethnic Amhara. Neftegnais a name often related to the ethnic Amhara, the second most populous ethnic group in Ethiopia. Historically speaking however, not only the Amharas were part of the Neftegna ruling class. Some of them were also ethnic Tigres, Oromos, Ghuraghes, etc.

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Since the media campaigns have been pushing young people into believing that Neftegnais the enemy operating in the persona of Abiy Ahmed, some targeted attack on alleged ethnic Amharas and their properties in the aftermath of Hachalu's death did not come as a surprise. All these have happened because of the constructed irresponsible media conspiracy, with no credible fact on the ground.

The same social media campaigners were defaming the name of Hachalu Hundesa, accusing him of “supporting the government of Abiy, forsaking the cause of Oromo and working for the “*Naftegna*” government. In an interview he gave to OromoMedia Network (OMN) not more than three weeks ago, Hachalu was seen trying to innocently defend himself that he did not forsake the cause of the Oromo. This very interview was a breaking point of the political tensions that have gained momentum over the course of the last 3 months, owing to irresponsible media use.

These media campaigners also accused Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his administration of forgetting the cause of the Oromo people and marginalizing the Oromo. But all facts on the ground speak otherwise. Like other ethnic groups in the country, the Oromo have been fighting for freedom and equality.

The government believes, at this point in history, there is no force that can deprive them of the right to freedom and equality. The government will continue working with all ethnic groups and stakeholders to ensure that political and economic marginalization and exclusion based on ethnicity, religion or any other classifications, would never take place on our soil again.

Establishing and maintaining rule of law

Following the death of Hachalu Hundesa, the government has undertaken legal measures in order to maintain peace and security in the country and to safeguard the constitutional order. One of the actions undertaken by the government was to arrest those suspected of involvement in the killing of Hachalu as well as those involved in illegally hijacking his remains and inciting violence through media. The government also arrested certain political leaders suspected of attempting to undermine the constitutional order.

It is worth describing, at this point, an incident that seems to remain unknown to the media and international community. Following the sad news of Hachalu’s death, the government of Ethiopia spoke with his family members, parents and siblings in order to find out where they want the burial ceremony to take place. His family members and parents unequivocally expressed their wish to hold the funeral in his birthplace—Ambo. Having obtained the consent of his loved ones, the

government started organizing a burial ceremony befitting a national hero. While the remains of Hachalu was being transported to Ambo, surrounded by thousands of young people weeping and mourning his death, another group of people started to force the return of the body back to Addis Ababa.

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Among members of the group police have accused of pushing for the return of the body to Addis Ababa were Jawar Mohamed and Bekele Gerba. They brought back the body to Addis Ababa against the wish of his family members and in violation of cultural norms of the society. Hachalu's remains were forcefully taken to the headquarters of the Oromia Prosperity Party, where a member of government security force was killed in a fire exchange that occurred during an attempt made to trespass the premises of the office.

During the same time, cabinet members of the Oromia Regional Government were taking part in an emergency meeting in a building located a few yards away from the headquarters. It was only after a careful military intervention and operation that government security forces arrested on the spot more than 35 people, including Jawar Mohamed and Bekele Gerba. They were arrested, amongst others, with rifles, handguns and security radio transmitters in their possession.

One point should be clear again: against all the rumors being circulated on social media, those political figures were arrested not because of their political views. They were rather arrested for their alleged involvement in the crime and for undermining the constitutional order. No one is above the law, even the most prominent activists and politicians.

Conclusion

The government of Ethiopia appeals to all stakeholders and friends of Ethiopia to discern the current situation in a careful and objective manner. While there are still rampant rumours of ongoing protests in the country, all need to be assured that these are simply rumours by forces determined to continue confusing the Ethiopia public and wreak havoc. The government of Ethiopia has fully controlled the situation in the country as of last week and the public have returned to their normal

activities in both Addis Ababa and the Oromia region, where the incidents occurred. Giving supremacy to the rule of law, the government is working to hold accountable all those involved, in accordance with the Constitution and the laws of the land.

The government of Ethiopia is no less committed today to democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights than it was when it started anew journey of reforms two years ago. Ethiopia will without a doubt stay the course of the political, economic and social reforms. The political will at the highest level exists to hold a free, fair and democratic election, once the threat of the COVID19 pandemic ceases. Political parties that are peacefully engaged are further encouraged to define and develop their policy options and engage in constructive dialogue. Media entities are also encouraged to continue their work in accordance with the laws of the land and the ethics required in dispensing their information sharing responsibilities to the public. And the government will continue dispensing its responsibility of maintain human security and undertaking activities and projects that have been designed to guarantee the Ethiopian people the prosperous and dignified life we are deserving of.

Our commitment to working towards maintaining peace and order in the Horn of Africa, strengthening fraternity and good relations with our neighboring countries and ensuring the prosperity of all Ethiopians, is as vigorous as it was two years ago.

Ethiopia: Meles – Ethiopia Is Committed to Agreements On Mega Dam

By Fred Oluoch

Ethiopia's Ambassador to Kenya, Meles Alem Tekea last week on Saturday (July 04) gave an interview to "The East African" about the country's stand on the filling of the Grand Renaissance Dam. He explained why Ethiopia needs to fill the dam now and commented on some of the concerns raised by the parties in the tripartite talks over the dam.

Please Note that the article was originally published on “The East African.”

Why does Ethiopia want to start filling the dam now?

Accessing and utilising the Nile waters is a matter of priority to enable Ethiopia to meet its energy, water and food security needs for its more than 110 million citizens and to lift millions out of extreme poverty. That is why the construction and filling of the dam should be done simultaneously. Once the construction reaches 595 metres above sea level, it automatically retains 4.9 billion cubic metres of water. Filling it now is therefore not a political decision.

It is also an opportune time as the expected rains in the basin are above average. Lake Victoria is at 13.42 metres high, a record since 1964. The High Aswan Dam, on the Nile in Egypt, currently has 180 billion cubic metres of water, that is a 30-year record. This enables filling the dam without Egypt and Sudan experiencing a reduction in water flow.

Why does Ethiopia feel an agreement is not a condition for filling the dam?

When signing the Declaration of Principles (DoP) on the GERD in 2015, Ethiopia gave Sudan and Egypt the opportunity to discuss and agree on the guidelines and rules for first filling and annual operation. Nevertheless, the DoP does not subject Ethiopia to getting permission from Egypt and Sudan to fill the dam. In addition, Ethiopia communicated its filling schedule to both countries in 2017.

The three countries have no difference of opinion on the guidelines and rules for the first stage filling. Therefore, Ethiopia isn't filling the dam without agreement. Ethiopia is fully committed to engaging in genuine dialogue to address all outstanding issues in the negotiation, for a win-win outcome.

The challenge Ethiopia is facing is Egypt's push to make the guidelines and rules a permanent water sharing agreement, which constrains Ethiopia's share on the Blue Nile to the GERD only. Ethiopia contributes 86 per cent of the water of the Nile, which is an average of 77 billion cubic metres of water. The country's share is therefore well

beyond the GERD. Also, discussions on water sharing of the Nile River can only be held in the presence of all Nile riparian countries.

Egypt's concern is that the dam outlets may not allow sufficient water to reach its territory, risking livelihoods. Could you comment on this?

GERD is a hydroelectric dam and does not consume water. In fact, Ethiopia's benefit from the dam entails release of water. If it generates electricity, it naturally releases water. Ethiopia has not invested billions of dollars just to store water and not alleviate its acute power shortage. The design of the GERD, including its outlets and specific details were inspected by Egypt.

In 2012, Ethiopia established the International Panel of Experts (IPOE) made up of two experts from each of the three countries and four international experts from Germany, South Africa, France and Britain. This panel went through 150 design documents that Ethiopia provided. In their report, they concluded the design and construction of the GERD is up to international standards. While doing so, the panel looked into all details including the outlets and Egypt endorsed the report of the IPOE.

The ability of the GERD to release water downstream is not in question and even Egypt admits that the GERD will increase water availability in the Nile Basin. The dam will enhance the resilience of Egypt and Sudan to drought, it will control flooding and regulate the flow of water.

What safety measures has Ethiopia put in place to prevent spillage of water from behind the dam wall?

The GERD is being built by renowned dam construction companies with reputable work and track record worldwide. State of the art technology will be applied in the materials used for construction, and the structure and design of the dam. The safety of the GERD is vouched for by the International Panel of Experts, in which Egypt and Sudan as well as international experts are represented. The dam safety is also ascertained and recognised by Egypt and Sudan as provided under principle 8 of the DoP.

Furthermore, the three countries have agreed on the continued coordination and information exchange with regard to the safety of the dam. The Water Minister of Sudan Yasir A. Mohamed, said in an interview that aired on June 8 that the GERD is safer than the dams in Egypt and Sudan