



United States
of America

Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 115th CONGRESS, SECOND SESSION

Vol. 164

WASHINGTON, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2018

No. 152

Reviewing Current Developments in Ethiopia

House of Representatives

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey... Mr. Speaker, yesterday we held a hearing Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations, which I chair.

Our first order of business was to note that today many Ethiopians are celebrating the start of the New Year under the Ethiopian calendar. To our Ethiopian friends who observe the new year, I wish to say “Enkutatash”— Happy New Year!

Many of the hearings that this subcommittee holds are hearings of condemnation – for abuses of human rights, for failures of governance, and for holding accountable those who betray the public trust.

Yesterday’s hearing, however, struck a different tone – one not of *condemnation*, but of *commendation* for the great strides Ethiopia has made since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed assumed authority in April of this year.

Consider where we were just over a year ago. A State of Emergency existed, and thousands of political prisoners languished

in jail. A cold war standoff existed between Ethiopia and its neighbor Eritrea.

As this subcommittee pointed out in a hearing we held in March of 2017, “increasingly repressive policies have diminished political space and threaten to radicalize not only the political opposition but also civil society by frustrating their ability to exercise their rights under law.”

In response to this, I introduced, along with original cosponsors Karen Bass and Mike Coffman, H. Res. 128, a resolution “Supporting Respect for Human Rights and Encouraging Inclusive Governance in Ethiopia.” The resolution set forth milestones which needed to be met, and passed thanks to the leadership of many – including Chairman Ed Royce who guided the Resolution through Foreign Affairs Committee markup and Leader Kevin McCarthy, who scheduled a vote on H. Res. 128 that passed the House unopposed and sent a clear message of Congressional resolve on the need for civil and political reform in Ethiopia.

But success of this measure was due in largest part to the efforts of the Ethiopian diaspora community in the United States,

which came together to demand that egregious human rights abuses immediately cease, and that fundamental human rights must be promoted and protected for all in Ethiopia.

Indeed, one of the greatest collateral benefits brought about by passage of H. Res. 128 is the political effectiveness of the Ethiopian American community, which provided a textbook civics lesson for all of us to admire. It is thanks to their tireless efforts of contacting your congressional representatives, of making your case in a persistent and respectful manner that helped spur Congress to action.

Since assuming office, Prime Minister Abiy has begun to implement some of the very reforms that H. Res. 128 called for. He has released thousands of political prisoners, and lifted the state of emergency, for example.

But he has also reached out to the diaspora community, catalyzed an end to a schism that had plagued the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and initiated an historic peace deal between Ethiopia and Eritrea this past July. Indeed, it is hoped that his domestic reforms will also inspire Eritrea, which remains a repressive regime, to undertake similar internal reforms.

Just a few weeks ago, Ranking Member Karen Bass and I visited the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, where we met with Prime Minister Abiy and a broad array of individuals and groups, including His Holiness, Abune Mathias I. One impression I had — was of a profound feeling of change and optimism.

For what he has accomplished in less than half a year, Prime Minister deserves praise and encouragement. Yet we still must

keep in mind that expectations have been raised, and the reforms he has begun must continue.

For example, the notorious Charities and Society Proclamation and the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, both passed in 2009, remain on the books and thus retain the potential to stifle legitimate civil society organizations and political speech.

Many former prisoners and torture victims still demand justice. Ranking Member Bass and I met with a group of torture victims in Addis Ababa, and what they described as having been done to them was horrific. One refrain we heard, including from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, is that there is a need for Truth and Reconciliation in order for the country to move forward.

There also needs to be an opportunity for people who have been displaced to return home. Catholic Bishop Abaraham Desta of Meki recently brought to my attention that over two and a half million people are internally displaced and require the government's immediate attention, especially by providing education for displaced children, as the school year has already started.

The economy needs to grow to provide jobs for the many youth, including those who participated in protests and civic disobedience. Reforms in the economic sector, including liberalization and deregulation as well as an opening of economy to ethnic groups that have not been fully enfranchised, needs to continue.

It has also been said that the reforms begun by Prime Minister Abiy represent a “once-in-a generation opportunity for

Ethiopia.” It is thus absolutely crucial that this opportunity not be squandered.

With this in mind, the United States must remain a partner Ethiopia can call upon. We collaborate on counter-terrorism measures, we support and are grateful for Ethiopia’s contribution to peace keeping missions – indeed, with 12,000 troops deployed, Ethiopia is the largest contributor to UN peacekeeping missions worldwide – and we must continue to encourage Ethiopia to participate in our IMET military professionalization programs.

I do believe, having met the man and had an opportunity to engage in substantive discourse with him, that Prime Minister Abiy is the right man at the right time, and is therefore deserving of our support.