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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 masterminds 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 to 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 his 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. *Neftegna* is 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.

Since the media campaigns have been pushing young people into believing that *Neftegna* is 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 Oromo Media 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.

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 a new 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.

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