

Press Release

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SPECIAL BRIEFING VIA TELEPHONE

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And Erik Woodhouse
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[English audio file](#)

Moderator: Good afternoon to everyone from the U.S. Department of State's Africa Regional Media Hub. I would like to welcome our participants dialing in from across the continent and thank all of you for joining this discussion. Today, we are very pleased to be joined by Bryan Hunt, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Africa and the Sudans, and Erik Woodhouse, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Counter Threat Finance and Sanctions.

Acting DAS Hunt and DAS Woodhouse will discuss an upcoming national security action related to the current crisis in Ethiopia.

We will begin today's call with opening remarks from Acting DAS Hunt and DAS Woodhouse, then we will turn to your questions. We will try to get to as many of them as we can during the briefing. If you would like to join the conversation on Twitter, please use the hashtag #AFHubPress and follow us on @africamediahub.

As a reminder, today's call is on the record, and with that, I will turn it over to Acting DAS Bryan Hunt for his opening remarks.

Mr. Hunt: Thank you very much. First, let me say that the Biden-Harris administration is determined to press for an end to the ongoing humanitarian and human rights crisis in northern Ethiopia. This expanding conflict is causing immense human suffering and threatening the unity of the Ethiopian state as well as regional stability.

Last Friday, President Biden announced a new executive order that provides the Department of the Treasury, working in coordination with the Department of State, the necessary authority to impose sanctions against individuals and entities linked to the Ethiopian Government, the Eritrean Government, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, and the Amhara regional government, if they continue to pursue military conflict rather than meaningful negotiations to the detriment of the Ethiopian people.

This action follows months of failure by parties to the conflict to respond to international calls to stop the fighting and commit to a durable political solution. This conflict has already sparked one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world today, with more than 5 million people requiring assistance, of which over 900,000 are already living in famine conditions. For far too long, the parties to this conflict have ignored international calls to initiate discussions to achieve a negotiated ceasefire and the human rights and humanitarian situations have worsened. Less than 10 percent of the needed humanitarian supplies have reached the Tigray region over the past month due to obstruction of aid access.

As the United Nations Secretary-General and African Union leaders have stated clearly, there is no military solution to this political crisis. Absent clear and concrete changes, the Biden-Harris administration is preparing to take aggressive action under this executive order to impose targeted sanctions against a range of individuals and entities.

However, if the Government of Ethiopia and the TPLF take meaningful steps to enter into talks for a negotiated ceasefire and allow for unhindered humanitarian access, a different path is possible, and the United States is ready to help mobilize assistance for Ethiopia to recover and revitalize its economy. Those meaningful steps include accepting African Union-led mediation efforts, designating negotiation teams, agreeing to negotiations without preconditions, and accepting an invitation to initial talks. Steps towards humanitarian access could include authorizing daily convoys of trucks carrying humanitarian supplies to travel overland to reach at-risk populations, reducing delays for humanitarian convoys, and restoring basic services to Tigray such as electricity, telecommunications, and banking.

I want to be clear: These sanctions authorities are not directed at the people of Ethiopia or Eritrea. The new sanctions program is deliberately calibrated to mitigate any undue harm to those already suffering from this conflict. The United States provides Ethiopia with more humanitarian assistance than any other country, and we will continue to help those in Ethiopia who need our assistance. The executive order should not affect the continued provision of humanitarian and other assistance to address basic needs throughout Ethiopia.

As I said at the top, the United States is determined to work with our partners and allies to make it clear that there are consequences for perpetuating this conflict and for denying life-saving humanitarian assistance. It is time to agree to a negotiated ceasefire and to turn away from military escalation. Thank you very much.

Moderator: Over to you, DAS Woodhouse, for your opening remarks.

Mr. Woodhouse: Thank you very much. I first want to follow up on the comments from Acting DAS Hunt by emphasizing that sanctions are a tool that seek to change the behavior of the targets. These measures impose tangible costs on human rights abusers and perpetrators of conflict. By imposing such costs, the United States seeks to send a signal that such actions are not without consequence. These measures will apply pressure on individuals and entities to end the targeted behaviors.

The situation in Ethiopia shocks the conscience with millions displaced, widespread reports of human rights abuse, and over 900,000 people in Ethiopia experiencing famine conditions. For months, the United States has been using a range of tools to press for a peaceful, durable, political solution to the crisis. The extent of the human rights and humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia is too great now not to use every tool at our disposal. This is why President Biden signed this

executive order authorizing the use of financial sanctions against those contributing to or prolonging the crisis.

I want to emphasize, as others have, that the United States did not announce sanctions against specific individuals or entities on Friday. We are hoping we will not have to. We hope President Biden's action on Friday prompts the Eritrean Government to withdraw troops immediately and the Ethiopian Government, Tigray People's Liberation Front, and Amharan forces to stop fighting and commit to a negotiated ceasefire. We hope we will see concrete steps towards these roles immediately, including that the Ethiopian Government end its restrictions on humanitarian supplies entering the Tigray region and the TPLF to stop its advances in the Amhara region, which are fueling displacement and deepening ethnic tensions.

However, if we do not see such progress immediately, we will take further action. We will not hesitate to use the authorities provided by President Biden in this executive order to impose financial sanctions against those involved in the conflict, including those responsible for threatening peace and stability, obstructing humanitarian access or progress toward a negotiated ceasefire, or committing serious human rights abuses.

I want to underscore that our support for the people of Ethiopia, the work of the United Nations, the African Union, and NGOs in the region is steadfast. The sanctions program is designed to mitigate any negative impact on commercial activity, life-saving humanitarian assistance and longer-term assistance to address basic needs of at-risk populations in Ethiopia and the greater Horn of Africa. To that end, the Department of the Treasury has taken a series of steps to help ensure these sanctions will not affect personal remittances to non-sanctioned persons, humanitarian assistance, shipments of food and medicine, and the activities of certain international organizations and NGOs, including the African Union, the United Nations on the ground in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Thanks very much and I look forward to taking questions.

Moderator: Thank you, Acting DAS Bryan Hunt and DAS Erik Woodhouse. We will now begin the question and answer portion of today's call. For those asking questions, please state your name, affiliation, and limit yourself to one question related to the topic of today's briefing: the Biden administration's response to ongoing crisis in northern Ethiopia.

We have received some questions submitted in advance by email and journalists may continue to submit questions in English on Twitter and via email to AFMediaHub@state.gov. Please be considerate to other journalists on the call and make your questions as brief as possible, in the interest of time.

With that, we'll go to one of the questions sent in to us from Ethiopian News Agency, from Mr. Gosaye Feyissa. His question is, "U.S. President Joe Biden signed a new executive order on Friday, September 17th, authorizing broad sanctions against those responsible in prolonging the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia. In your view, will this sanction or these sanctions negatively affect Ethiopia's commitment in ensuring peace and stability in the Horn of Africa?"

Mr. Hunt: Our view is that it should not. The Ethiopian Government has a number of interests of its own in ensuring that there is stability in the Horn of Africa. We fully anticipate that they will continue to try to act as a constructive partner across a range of issues, but at the same time we need to be very clear the conflict in northern Ethiopia is already having a destabilizing impact on the Horn. There are refugees that are fleeing the conflict into Sudan, causing immense

problems in that country. We have Eritrean troops which have come into northern Ethiopia as part of the conflict and are carrying out horrific atrocities in the Tigray region. And we continue to be very concerned that the advances of the TPLF into Amhara and Afar could have significantly destabilizing economic and political impacts across the Horn.

So using the tools at our disposal to attempt to bring the parties into meaningful negotiations towards a ceasefire is, frankly, the only viable way forward given the worsening impact that we are already seeing this crisis have on regional stability.

Moderator: Thank you. Next we'll go live to Mr. Nick Schiffrin of PBS NewsHour. Mr. Schiffrin. Operator, open the line. Mr. Schiffrin, you may ask your question.

Question: Hi, Bryan.

Operator: Mr. Schiffrin, your line is open.

Question: Hi, guys, thanks for doing this. Bryan, I assume these questions are for you. Can you talk a little bit more about the Ethiopian Government restrictions on aid going in? Can you confirm or comment on the fact that the Ethiopian Government is restricting what aid workers can bring in, including hard drives and cameras, presumably to stop them from documenting what's happening in Tigray? Can you talk about the extent of the aid that they are stopping, and do you believe the TPLF is also in any way hindering aid from arriving in Tigray? Thanks.

Mr. Hunt: Sure, Nick. To the first question, on the Ethiopian Government restrictions, what I can say is that the estimates from the international humanitarian community are that we need about 100 trucks a day moving into Tigray with supplies if we are going to be able to address the scale of the crisis we're currently dealing with. Since August 19th, we have seen a total of just over 150 trucks permitted to go into Tigray by the Ethiopian Government. That's despite the international community being in a position to mobilize a significantly greater number than that, which could have potentially gone into Tigray.

So if the Ethiopian Government wishes to be constructive in this manner, they need to permit a regular stream of trucks on the scale that the international humanitarian community believes are necessary to travel on a daily basis into Tigray. I would add to that that the trucks which have been permitted into Tigray have not been allowed to deliver medicine, they have not been allowed to deliver fuel. Both of those are absolutely critical to addressing the humanitarian needs of the population in the region at this time.

I would add to that, as you've said, there have been restrictions on international humanitarian workers as to what they are able to take into Tigray, particularly on flights which have been organized into Mekelle. Some of the items that you have mentioned have not been permitted to go into the Tigray region. We do not see why personal communication devices, which are, frankly, critical to the safety and security of humanitarian workers, are not being allowed to be brought into Tigray. I will not speculate as to what the motivation for that is; I will only point out that it further hinders our ability to respond to the more than 5 million who are currently in need up there.

On the question of the TPLF, we are very concerned that the TPLF military offensives in Amhara and Afar make the delivery of humanitarian assistance in those regions more difficult. Certainly anytime there is ongoing conflict, it adds a degree of complexity to humanitarian assistance operations, but we believe that the international community is experienced and able to

deal with the delivery of humanitarian assistance in conflict zones. So if the Ethiopian Government were to remove the bureaucratic obstacles that continue to exist to operations, allow in the humanitarian supplies that are necessary at the scale necessary, and allow in the equipment that's necessary to ensure the safety and security of those who are working on this response, we would be able to address the significant needs both in Tigray as well as in other regions of Ethiopia in spite of the ongoing fighting.

Moderator: Thank you. Next we'll go to Cara Anna of the Associated Press in Kenya, followed after Julian Pecquet of the Africa Report. Cara Anna, you may ask your question.

Question: Hi, thanks for this. When will the United States decide whether the situation in Tigray is genocide? And has Prime Minister Abiy even agreed to talk about Tigray these days [inaudible]? Thank you.

Mr. Hunt: I don't have any information to offer on your first question. I will say that we are extremely concerned by the scale of the human rights abuses, violations, and atrocities that we have seen throughout the Tigray conflict. We have repeatedly called on all parties to bring them to an end. We will continue to work very closely with international partners to try to document exactly what has transpired in the course of this conflict on the human rights front. We've very much looking forward to the report that OHCHR and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission have been working on. We hope that they are given all of the access they need to be able to fully document the scale of what has transpired in Tigray so that we can hope to see some degree, at some stage, of accountability for what has transpired there.

Moderator: Julian Pecquet.

Question: -- with the Africa Report. I'm sure you saw the letter from Prime Minister Abiy to the President, I think it was Friday, where he said the Ethiopian Government would not succumb to pressure. I was wondering, one, if you had any response to that, and two, if privately you're hearing anything at all that suggests that the Ethiopians are ready to negotiate, ready to be openminded about this or if the letter just kind of is the same as what you're hearing privately that the Ethiopian Government currently is not at all ready to do what you want it to do? Thank you.

Mr. Hunt: Yeah, we have a robust dialogue that's ongoing with the Ethiopian Government at a number of levels, including with Prime Minister Abiy directly as well as numerous other officials within the Ethiopian Government. It is our hope that the Ethiopian Government recognizes that there is no military solution possible. That's become very clear over the nearly 10 months of conflict that we have seen in the country, and it is our view that the only possible way forward is for the Ethiopian Government ultimately to pursue a negotiated ceasefire with the other parties to this conflict. We do not believe that a continued military conflict is going to be viable for any of the parties over the long term. It's a question of how quickly they decide to move towards a negotiated ceasefire, which is ultimately what's going to be required here. And our hope is that this executive order will serve as a catalyst to bring all of the parties to the negotiating table in as rapidly a timeframe as possible in support of the efforts that the African Union has launched under President Obasanjo.

Moderator: Thank you. The next question goes to Mesfin Bezu of the TG Ethiopian Broadcasting Company, followed by Simon Ateba of Today News Africa. Mr. Bezu, your question.

Question: Okay. Thank you for taking my question. Before President Biden issued his executive order on Ethiopia, there was a press call by the senior administration official on Ethiopia and he said that it is not fighting that is preventing the government of – the movement of fuel and medicine into Tigray; it is government’s decision, government harassment, local harassment that has prevented the type of supplies going in. But on the contrary, the Ethiopian Government blames TPLF because TPLF forces are the ones that prevent aid from reaching the Tigray people and put the blame on the Ethiopian Government. The Ethiopian Government also stated that after the Ethiopian Government announced a unilateral – excuse me – a unilateral ceasefire and withdrew troops from Tigray, instead of accepting the ceasefire, TPLF has taken the fight beyond the Tigray region into Amhara, Afar, and other regions, as you mentioned. As a result of TPLF’s offensive actions --

Moderator: Mr. Bezu, please state your question.

Question: -- the humanitarian situation in the region has continued to have deteriorated. Since the conflict began in Ethiopia’s Tigray region, I see that the United States has been pushing for a peaceful resolution of this conflict. Sir, the big question here is: Who refused to have a peaceful resolution of this conflict? To prevent a catastrophic event, why doesn’t the U.S. push TPLF forces to stop their fight beyond the Tigray region instead of blaming greatly the Ethiopian Government? Thank you for the chance.

Mr. Hunt: The United States has been very clear that we believe the TPLF should immediately cease its military offensive in Amhara and Afar. That has been stated publicly. That has been conveyed privately. We certainly believe that expanding the conflict outside of Tigray was counterproductive, and the actions in those regions need to stop. At the same time, that does not – that does not excuse the behavior of the Ethiopian Government. As I said earlier, we need 100 trucks of humanitarian assistance every day going into Tigray. The Ethiopian Government since August 19th has permitted just over 150 trucks in total – 10 percent of what is required to deal with famine conditions. This is not constructive behavior. The Ethiopian Government has consistently refused to come to the table for meaningful ceasefire negotiations. This is not constructive behavior.

Are both sides doing things that are counterproductive to ending the conflict? Yes. That is why the executive order provides the ability for us to impose penalties on all parties that are furthering the conflict. But the fact is that all parties are right now furthering the conflict and doing things that are counterproductive to humanitarian assistance, and are engaged in egregious violations of human rights. This conduct simply needs to stop.

Moderator: Thank you. Next question goes to Simon Ateba, Today News Africa.

Question: Yes, thank you for taking my question. This is Simon Ateba with Today News Africa in Washington, D.C. It does not seem that anything has changed on the ground since President Biden announced – authorized the sanctions on Ethiopia on Friday. I guess my question is: What needs to happen for the sanctions to kick in? Is there any timeline, any deadline? And why can’t the administration immediately sanction Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia now and President Isaias of Eritrea? It’s been almost 10 months that these atrocities have been going on, and those two guys have ignored all calls from the U.S. Government for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. They even refused to meet with the USAID Administrator Samantha Power, claiming that she was too small, even though she’s responsible for disbursing billions of dollars to Ethiopia. So why not act right away instead of dancing around the bush and wasting time? Thank you.

Mr. Woodhouse: This is Erik Woodhouse.

Question: The – oh, please, Erik.

Mr. Woodhouse: Yeah, I can take that and then, Bryan, if you want to jump in. So, as you note, the United States did not impose designations along with the release of the executive order. The executive order both authorizes the application of those sanctions and makes clear that we're prepared to use them if we don't see progress towards the goals that we have identified. As we've repeatedly emphasized, we very much hope we will not need to make designations, but we are prepared to do so if we do not see immediate and swift progress towards the goals that we've identified.

Bryan can provide more color on those goals, but we've noted them time and again, including that we see the Ethiopian Government end its restrictions on humanitarian supplies entering the Tigray region, and that the TPLF stops its advances into the Amhara region, which continue to fuel displacement and deepen ethnic tensions.

So the goal of this executive order is to put in place the authorities necessary to take further action, make clear that we are very prepared to do so, and urge the parties to adopt a different course than they have taken so far – in other words, to move clearly towards a negotiated ceasefire and the other goals that we've outlined. If we don't see that progress, we will act.

Bryan, do you want to add to that?

Mr. Hunt: No, I'm good. Thank you.

Moderator: Thank you. Our final question will go to Jennifer Hansler of CNN. Ms. Hansler, over to you.

Question: Hi, thank you so much. Just to put a finer point on my colleague's question, is there a specific date ultimatum at which these sanctions would be applied? Have you relayed that to the parties involved in the conflict that if they don't take meaningful steps by X time, then they will be sanctioned? Thank you.

Mr. Hunt: Yeah, we've had extensive private conversations with all of the parties to the conflict related to the executive order at this time. They are fully aware that we expect to see action immediately to address these problems, and that if such action is not forthcoming that we are prepared to take action under the executive order.

Moderator: Acting DAS Hunt and DAS Woodhouse, do you have any final words? Let's start with DAS Woodhouse.

Mr. Woodhouse: None from me. Thank you very much.

Moderator: Acting DAS Hunt?

Mr. Hunt: I would simply sum up as I started: This is one of the worst humanitarian and human rights disasters that is taking place globally today. We need to see sustained action by all of the parties to the conflict to bring hostilities to an end, to ensure that the 5 million-plus people who require assistance are receiving it and to bring to an end the horrific human rights violations

that are taking place in northern Ethiopia today. We hope that the executive order will act as a catalyst to deliver those actions on the part of the parties, and we continue to urge them to evaluate their conduct closely and to take corrective actions at the earliest possible opportunity.

Moderator: That concludes today's call. I want to thank Bryan Hunt, Acting DAS for East Africa and the Sudans, and Erik Woodhouse, DAS for Counter Threat Finance and Sanctions, for joining us, and thank all of our callers for participating. If you have any questions about today's call, you may contact the Africa Regional Media Hub at AFMediaHub@state.gov. Thank you.

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