
Donkoro Chaka: A "Deaf Bush" in Ethiopia

(Saturday, 15 April 2006) - Contributed by Glenn Brigaldino - Last Updated (Monday, 17 April 2006)

The rare glimpses at Ethiopia through the cracked lenses of mainstream media distort more than they inform about the political crisis in this country of over 75 million people. The blurred picture that comes to the distant minds in Europe and North America usually includes a long history of famine conditions and war with neighbouring Eritrea.

With the fall of the Mengistu dictatorship in 1991 and independence for Eritrea, cautious optimism emerged that Ethiopia may finally start to rebuild, heal and develop in peace and freedom. Hopes culminated in 2005 when the May 15 federal elections appeared to promise genuine democratic choice to Ethiopians. Today, nearly a year later, democracy and development have been stopped in their tracks. When election results indicated that the ruling regime of Meles Zenawi might have been voted out, the President unleashed his tightly controlled security and federal police forces on those who dared to protest against blatant manipulation of vote tallying and recounts.

First in June and again in November 2005, dozens of protesters, mainly in the capital Addis Abeba were shot to death. Tens of thousands of suspected sympathizers, even youngsters aged fourteen were hunted down and rounded up for deportation to various remote military centres and concentration camps. Abuse of detainees was widespread and continues for those still imprisoned. At the height of the detention wave in November last year, detention camp populations were quickly swelling, for example, a source on the ground in Ethiopia reported that:

- Birrsheleko in Gojam west Ethiopia more than 38,000 detained
- Dedessa in Wellega southwest Ethiopia more than 20,000 detained
- Denkorochaka in Wollo north Ethiopia, number not known, but estimated in thousands
- Shewarobit in north Ethiopia estimated in thousands
- Ziway prison in south Ethiopia estimated in thousands
- Hurso camp in eastern Ethiopia estimated in thousands. In addition there are many other detention camps throughout Ethiopia of which the exact locations and number of detainees is unknown.

The one time donor darling Zenawi, who had even been given a front row seat from where to smile on Tony Blair's "Commission for Africa"[1] may at last be falling into disgrace. By the end of the year, most donor countries were withholding US\$ 375 million in budget support to Ethiopia in protest over the grave human rights abuses. [2] Remarkably, Ethiopia's largest donor, the USA has not suspended its financial support. [3] Almost in parallel to the regime's assault on Ethiopia's emerging democracy, a new regional food crisis has deepened in Southern and Eastern parts of the country while on the northern border, the tensions with Eritrea have been rekindled. [4] By any account, this is a highly fragile and volatile situation that threatens many livelihoods and should be of serious international concern.

Although this deplorable situation may appear to be a mere resumption of past patterns of deprivation and tragic cycles of despair, globalization has dramatically changed how this crisis needs to be interpreted and politically responded to. First of all, in spite of superficial similarities with the past, the various social, economic and political developments in Ethiopia today are deeply marked by a new degree of inter-relatedness.

While complexity has always been a central explanatory factor, in recent years the fault lines in Ethiopia's political economy have become closely intertwined with the democratization process. In the aftermath of the May elections, the Government of Meles Zenawi has desperately been trying to turn back the clock on the democratic process in order to maintain its undemocratic grip on society and the state. The list of Government repression actions is a lengthy and relatively well-documented one. [5]

This first hand account from a 52-year old business manager in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, who has friends and associates in various centers outside the capital, points to some of the hidden atrocities the Meles-regime has been committing:

The security forces are committing the worst crimes against the detainees like shaving the heads of prisoners with a single shared razorblade. Nobody knows how many prisoners are going to be infected with HIV/AIDS. All of them are at risk of getting malaria, as they have no protection. There are detainees who are diabetic and these people are suffering a lot without proper medication. We have heard from inside sources that more than eight prisoners died in one camp due to beating and torturing.

The TPLF security forces have established a new Nazi-like camp in the north of the country in Wollo region, in a place called "Donkoro Chaka" (it means "deaf bush"). That is where most of the opposition party members and supporters are being tortured. It is completely forbidden to approach this torturing camp, which is deliberately established in a malaria-affected area. Practically, most of the military camps in the remote areas have been turned into temporary prison camps, for example the Hurso military camp in Harerge region. That is where Alemaya University students are detained. Bilaten military camp near the Kenyan border is where students from Debu university are detained and there many other torture camps throughout the rest of the country. No donors or reporters ever visit these sorry places. The problem for the TPLF leaders now, is how they are going to put over 70 million Ethiopian people in isolation camps without having to declare the whole country a concentration camp.

There are mixed and unclear messages being sent to the Zenawi regime, for example as Germany shamefully ignored the human rights abuses in Ethiopia and chose not to uninvite Zenawi to an international conference on Africa in early November in Bonn. Likewise, the role of the United Kingdom is ambiguous: while it is amongst the donors who have withheld budget support as well as suspended some bilateral aid, Tony Blair felt comfortable sitting next to Zenawi at a summit of so-called "centre-left" parties in February in South Africa, where he told journalists:

"The government [of Ethiopia] won the election, there was then a reaction to it, there was then, perhaps, if I can say this without being too undiplomatic, an overreaction to that, which often happens... We have to try and resolve the situation, the human rights issues, but do so — and I want to do so — in a way that supports Ethiopia". [6]

Such a half-hearted stance in public by influential international actors cannot be considered as being in the interest of democracy and development in Ethiopia. As donor countries continue to "work behind the scenes" they do appear to face a growing policy dilemma. On the one hand they need to step away from business-as-usual in their relationships with a now openly violent authoritarian regime, yet they cannot simply "jump ship" as they have large and long-term aid programs in Ethiopia, where human development needs remain as great as ever. All major donor countries (members of the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Cooperation or OECD) provide above OECD-average of levels of aid to Ethiopia (see box below). Such commitment binds in two ways: donors have committed sizeable amounts of aid to meet significant poverty reduction needs, while Ethiopia has become severely dependent on foreign aid and emergency relief.

Donor aid in 2003/04 to Ethiopia (Source: OECD)[7]

Percentage of total aid Country rank Rank of Iraq USA 2.6 8th 1st Canada 2.3 3rd 2nd European Union 1.7 11th - Norway 1.7 11th 8th Sweden 1.5 5th - United Kingdom 1.4 13th 4th The Netherlands 1.3 10th 3rd OECD average 1.2 13th 1st Germany 1 11th -

It is interesting to note that Iraq is now the largest donor recipient for the whole of the OECD. Among Ethiopia's major donors, only Sweden, Germany and the EU allocated less to Iraq than to Ethiopia. This could indicate that military efforts and aid to war zones have become eligible expense categories of development aid. Indeed official aid statistics have been extremely distorted by counting commitments to the US-instigated war on terror in Iraq as aid. The latest aid figures for the US would have uninformed observers believe that US development aid is on a steep rise, if no note were taken that \$10.2 billion are directed to Iraq. [8].

Clearly, the donors' retreat from such a substantial aid commitment indicates a breakdown of trust and sends a strong signal to the regime. Regrettably the regime feels strong enough to wait things out and try to muddle through less friendly international waters while it continues to crack down on dissent at home. However, the prospects for this strategy to succeed are increasingly doubtful, as "there is little or no prospect of a decline in the present levels of government opposition....in the near future while government repression can be expected to continue." [9]

The next political showdown will almost certainly happen in the course of this year, especially if the regime goes ahead with the show trials against the detained leadership of the largest opposition party, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD). On December 21, the government had arrested 131 persons, including prominent CUD politicians Hailu Shawel, Mesfin Woldemariam and the newly elected CUD mayor of Addis Ababa, Berhanu Nega on fabricated charges such as treason, inciting violence and planning to commit genocide. Several civil society activists and 13 journalists were included in the group, from which in early March 2006, some detainees have been released by the regime, possibly as a token

gesture to appease human rights concerns that have been voiced from amongst Ethiopia's aid donors.

From the perspective of the millions of Ethiopians with fragile livelihoods and who live at and below poverty levels, conditions may get worse before any improvements can be expected. Obviously the regime and its supporters have managed to feed of the aid-dependent economy and set themselves up relatively comfortably. The separation between state and the ruling party TPLF/EPRDF is at best formal, while considerable segments of the private sector, including banks and import operations are controlled by the regime.

This control of state and private sector resources has enabled the Zenawi regime to exert strong pressure on small farmers who heavily rely upon state-provided agricultural inputs, marketing services and infrastructures. This top-sided dependency relationship has frequently coerced rural populations into political submission or indifference. University of Cambridge African Scholar C. Clapham notes that

For several years, it has been clear that urban dwellers have been deeply alienated from the regime. Despite development in Addis Abeba and a small number of towns...most Ethiopian towns remain stagnant backwaters...Most rural areas... have been passive towards the government at best, resentful at worst. [10]

In the past the regime has gone to great lengths to create a semblance of good governance and political legitimacy. Behind the façade, the old authoritarian order was merely superseded by

...a new pattern of supremacy in which TPLF held all organs of political and military power. Such manufacture of puppet parties beholden to federal authorities and pseudo-elections doubly undermined regional autonomy from the centre and accountability of leaders to their communities. TPLF's practice to unseat and appoint any regional authority at will has completely alienated the public from the system of governance.[11]

Overall, Clapham sees three possible scenarios, namely the unlikely one of the regime leaving power peacefully, it leaving through force (armed opposition) or a prolonged clinging to power with ongoing repression, similar to the situation in Zimbabwe or Eritrea. This outlook does not bode well for any democratic and peaceful transition in Ethiopia and two critical weaknesses of the regime may now be reaching their snapping point:

"After 14 years in power, the EPRDF has not transcended its narrow base among the 10 percent of Ethiopians who come from Tigray nor has it built workable political institutions, particularly in the regions where electors want some autonomy from the centre". [12]

It is indeed very hard to be optimistic about the near-future outcome of the democratic struggle in Ethiopia. There is a tendency to look, perhaps even hope for a best case scenario to emerge. Samatar sees Ethiopia at a crossroads, hoping for an option of regional civic conferences leading to a national civic forum: certainly a worthwhile idea to advance. Clapham just hopes for the best, convinced that transition is irreversible and a return to central dictatorship is no longer possible. However, embarking on a straightforward course to democracy and development is a very remote possibility and in the most recent Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) country report on Ethiopia it is noted that "Ethiopia is now superficially calm, but it has entered what is likely to be a sustained period of political tension and uncertainty." [13]

What is largely missing from these inward-looking accounts is an appreciation of international influences on Ethiopia's transition processes. None of the donor countries are known to have been unwavering advocates in support of Ethiopian democracy. While the UK's role in Ethiopia remains unclear (as some British officials think that budget support to the Ethiopian government was suspended too hastily, see endnote 5) the interests of the US appear somewhat more obvious. Since the government of Zenawi has become an appreciated ally in the war on terror, there is openness to working towards new forms of compromise. Undisclosed numbers of US military and intelligence personnel are posted in Ethiopia (by some accounts more than 1000). From neighbouring Djibouti, the US now operates its Horn of Africa task force for counter-terrorism, including use of naval bases. [14]

Just as in Djibouti, where the Economist Intelligence Unit in its Outlook for 2006-07 expects that "...the US administration will continue to turn a blind eye to civil and human rights abuses by the regime, but will apply some behind-the-scenes pressure on the government to improve its record" [15], there is no reason to believe the US will adopt a different approach towards Ethiopia.

Ethiopia will need other partners than its donors in order to propel its democratic transition. Such partners may very well be found among civil society organisations, both from within donor countries as from other oppressed societies, in Africa and beyond.

There is a fair chance that although "the ruling regime is expected to continue to marginalize and neutralize any threat posed by the opposition via a dual strategy of physical force and parliamentary procedure" [16], this strategy will fail before long.

For global democrats in an online world, opposing repression and giving voice to democratic dissent extends across nation state borders. Democracy in places such as Ethiopia, cannot be left an issue for diplomats and international bureaucrats to deal with, it must be no less than a driving force behind the multitude of citizens working for global justice.

Many Ethiopians have lost any confidence they may have had in a Government that has proclaimed to break with the past politics of scarcity and which has played mind games with people's genuine democratic aspirations.

In Ethiopia today, past and present now seem to have merged and those who are suffering from the pain and humiliation of poverty and underdevelopment urgently need a chance for a better future. Given the country-wide scope of the current political crisis, it is very possible that the Zenawi regime will continue to impose its rule by force and under the guise of regional representation. This will prove to be a recipe for failure. Although active civil opposition and revolt against the current Zenawi government is very difficult for the majority of Ethiopians, direct oppression may well leave little choice. A broadened international support base for the democratic groups within the major national and regional level opposition parties may have a critical role to play in bringing about democratic and peaceful regime change in Ethiopia. The longer the Zenawi regime holds on to power, the greater the potential for prolonged political turmoil and the loss of social and economic development opportunities is likely to be.

Sources:

1. The British Prime Minister Tony Blair launched the Commission for Africa in February 2004. The aim of the Commission was to take a fresh look at Africa's past and present and the international community's role in its development path. The work set out to be comprehensive and challenging, addressing difficult questions where necessary. The Commission for Africa's report "Our Common Interest" was published on 11 March 2005.

<http://www.commissionforafrica.org/english/home/newsstories.html>

2. ETHIOPIA: Elections not up to par, despite open campaign – EU NAIROBI, 16 Mar 2006, IRIN

http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=52244&SelectRegion=Horn_of_Africa&SelectCountry=ETHIOPIA

3. "The United States will not suspend the \$600 million in aid it is currently giving to Ethiopia, acting U.S. ambassador to Ethiopia Vicki Huddleston (a former "Peace Corps" volunteer in Peru and US ambassador to Mali) said Jan.5." STRATFOR, 2006, <http://www.stratfor.com>

4. For a detailed account of the political processes and procedures behind this conflict see: Ethiopia and Eritrea: Preventing War, Africa report no 101 – 22 December 2005, International Crisis Group, online at:

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?l=1&id=3850>

5. For example "Crime and Nourishment in Ethiopia – American Taxpayers' Money at Work", a detailed chronicle of the Zenawi regimes' atrocities. Online at: <http://www.kinijit.org/content.asp?ContentId=1041>

While this report provides a good collection of news items and references, the author concludes her report in a more than naïve manner by imagining "moral principles and …doctrines of democracy" of being applied by the USA in Iraq.

One local source has provided a glaring account of the regimes violent assault on political dissent: Addis Ababa, 3 Nov 2005 13:40

Yesterday more than 23 innocent people were killed and more than 200 wounded in Addis Ababa alone. These figures are collected from our hospital sources and it is for sure there are a lot of dead people taken to the Army and Police force hospitals where nobody have access to enter. I myself witnessed that the police force hospital was very busy the whole day bringing in those who are shot. I could have used my digital camera but it was very dangerous and I could get killed easily for using it. Then I drove towards Piassa where the protest was very strong and observed that men and women were fighting with bare hands with the heavily armed TPLF forces. Then Tanks and heavy machine guns were moving toward Merkato area where a lot of casualties were observed and then I drove toward Saris area where a lot of fighting took place and I observed burned police vehicles. It looks very scary to move around but also it is cowardness to sit at home while children and women are fighting the criminals. Yesterday the savages killed one seven-year-old boy while he was playing and also they killed one lady while arresting her husband. The security forces came to her house to arrest her husband because he is a supporter of CUD and she begged them not to take him, but the blood thirsty TPLF soldier gave her two bullets in the chest in front of her husband and she became quiet forever.

Submitted online to: http://www.epo.de/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1131&Itemid=68

6. Africa Confidential, Vol. 47, no.4, 17 February 2006, page 6, Ethiopia – Waiting but not sitting

7. Source: OECD DAC Development Co-operation Report 2005, downloadable at <http://thesius.sourceoecd.org/vl=641681/cl=20/nw=1/rpsv/dac>

8. David Roodman, U.S. aid skyrocketed in 2005--at least in Iraq, March 27, 2006:

"U.S. Official Development Assistance spiked to \$27.5 billion in 2005, from \$19.7 billion the year before and \$11.4 billion in 2001. …Iraq unsurprisingly accounts for the lion's share of the increase, receiving \$10.2 billion, up from \$3.0 billion the year before. ….But aid to the rest of the world was essentially unchanged, from \$15.9 billion in 2004 to \$15.7 billion a year later." Online at:

http://blogs.cgdev.org/globaldevelopment/2006/03/us_aid_skyrocketed_in_2005at_l.php

9. FAST Update Ethiopia, Semi-annual risk assessment July to December 2005, page 4

http://www.swisspeace.org/uploads/FAST/updates/Ethiopia_FAST%20Update%202_2005.pdf

Swiss Peace reports: Monitoring activities in Ethiopia have temporarily been suspended due to the worsening security situation and resulting effects on our Local Information Networks. Monitoring will be picked up again shall the situation improve.

10. Comments on the Ethiopian Crisis, 7 November 2005, Christopher Clapham, University of Cambridge,

<http://www.african.cam.ac.uk/people/registry/subjectlist/clapham.html>

11. A.I.Samatar, The Ethiopian Election of 2005:A bombshell and turning point?, in

Vol.32 No.104/5 of the Review of African Political Economy (Jun/Sep 2005: pp 466-473);

For a detailed account of how such puppet parties (PDOs) have functioned in Ethiopia’s Somali region see:

T. Hagmann, Beyond clannishness and colonialism: understanding political disorder in Ethiopia’s Somali region, 1991-2004, in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 43, 4 (2005), pp. 509-536

12. Africa Confidential, vol.46, no.23, 18 November 2005, Ethiopia – Transition starts here

13. Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Ethiopia Country report, Outlook for 2006-07, January 6th, 2006;

With regard to the uncertainly, how the divisions amongst the opposition parties will be resolved and if under a clear democratic agenda, perhaps as suggested by Samatar, remains of critical importance.

14. It is perhaps worth noting that Dubai Ports, the firm that was set to take over operations of some US ports, runs the show in Djibouti. Also, who can say for sure if US intelligence personnel is or isn’t present/involved at any of he countless, remote detention sites in Ethiopia?

15. Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Djibouti Country Report, Outlook for 2006-07, February 1st, 2006;

16 see endnote 11

© 2006 Glenn Brigaldino

[This article was first published at: www.towardfreedom.com]