

# Secretary Blinken's Travel to Ethiopia and Niger

**NED PRICE, DEPARTMENT SPOKESPERSON**

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Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will travel to Ethiopia and Niger March 14-17, 2023. On March 15, the Secretary will visit Addis Ababa, Ethiopia where he will discuss implementation of the cessation of hostilities agreement to advance peace and promote transitional justice in northern Ethiopia. He will also meet humanitarian partners and civil society actors to discuss humanitarian assistance delivery, food security, and human rights.

While there, the Secretary will also meet with African Union Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat to discuss shared global and regional priorities and follow up on commitments from the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit regarding food security, climate and a just energy transition, the African diaspora, and global health. The Secretary will underscore U.S. support for African permanent representation in multilateral bodies.

In the first ever visit to Niger by a U.S. Secretary of State, on March 16, Secretary Blinken will meet President Mohamed Bazoum and Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massaoudou in Niamey. He will discuss ways to advance the U.S.-Niger partnership on diplomacy, democracy, development, and defense. Secretary Blinken will also engage youths from Niger's conflict zones, who have completed the Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration, and Reconciliation (DDRR) program, to learn about their contributions to peace in Niger. The Secretary will also further U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit collaboration related to global and regional peace, security, and governance, and the climate crisis.

## **Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Molly Phee On the Secretary's Upcoming Travel to Ethiopia and Niger**

Special Briefing  
Office of the Spokesperson  
Via Teleconference  
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**MR TEK:** Hi, good morning everybody. Welcome to today's call previewing Secretary Blinken's travel to Niger and Ethiopia. Just as a reminder, today's call is on the record and embargoed until its conclusion. And joining us today is Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee. I'll now turn the floor over to Assistant Secretary Phee for opening remarks, and then we're happy to take a few of your questions. AS Phee, over to you.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY PHEE:** Thanks, Nate, very much, and hello and good morning or good afternoon depending on where you're calling from. We're really excited about this trip. It's a piece of the partnership scene that we so successfully highlighted in December when President Biden and his cabinet hosted the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit. You'll be seeing this as the year of travel of U.S. officials to Africa. We've already seen the First Lady and the Treasury Secretary as well as Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield on the continent, and I expect to see many more leaders of the administration visiting to deepen and expand our partnerships, and that's what the Secretary's trip is designed to do as well.

In Ethiopia, the Secretary has been devoted since he assumed office to finding a way to restore peace and stability. You know the United States played a critical role in facilitating the engagement last fall by Kenya, South Africa, and the AU to help the parties reach an end to the fighting – the cessation of hostilities signed in Pretoria on November 2nd of last year. So this visit will be part of our ongoing and dynamic engagement with the Ethiopians to help consolidate that peace.

He will also have the chance to meet AU Chairperson Moussa Faki, again, to follow up on a lot of the discussions that took place last December. And we particularly want to continue the dialogue on how to raise the African voice in international institutions, whether that's at the Security Council, at the G20, or reforming the MDBs dialogue that Secretary Yellen has taken point on for the administration.

We're also thrilled that Secretary Blinken will be the first American secretary of state to visit Niger. As you all know, Niger is an important partner. We admire greatly their devotion to democracy, to skillful management of the difficult terrorist environment in the Sahel, and we're looking forward to discussions with those leaders and as well as with some folks who've gone through their really remarkable DDR program.

So let me stop there, Nate, and open up for questions. But I think it'll be a great trip addressing important themes and findings ways to, again, deepen and expand our engagement with our African partners.

**MR TEK:** Fantastic. Hey, Brian (ph), could you just please repeat the instructions for posing a questions?

**OPERATOR:** Of course. And ladies and gentlemen, if you wish to ask a question, please press 1 then 0 on your telephone keypad. You may withdraw your question at any time by repeating the 1 then 0 command. Once again, if you have a question, please press 1 then 0 at this time.

**MR TEK:** Great, thanks so much. Could we please go to the line of Shaun Tandon from the AFP?

**QUESTION:** Thanks for doing this call. I wanted to ask you a little bit about the Ethiopia stuff. I asked a similar question to the Secretary after the U.S.-Africa summit. But the relationship with Ethiopia – I mean, do you find that it's back to normal in a sense, I mean after the Pretoria agreement? How normal do you think relations are right now with Prime Minister Abiy? And as part of that, the AGOA agreement – is that going to be something that's going to be discussed or some type of trade relationship? And a bit broadly, I guess, are there incentives that you're going to offer for Ethiopia to move forward with the Pretoria agreement? Thanks.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY PHEE:** Thanks. I'm not sure I would use the phrase back to normal. The conflict that Ethiopia just endured was earthshattering, right. It involved terrible atrocities by all parties and was extremely disruptive to the country's stability and to its economy, which is also facing historic drought conditions.

So what we're looking to do is refashion our engagement with Ethiopia. You know historically we've had a strong partnership with Ethiopia. They've played an important role in development of their own citizens as well as engaged responsibly by and large in the region, and we would like to be able to have a partnership that's commensurate with their size and influence and with our interests and commitment to Africa.

But to put that relationship in a forward trajectory, we will continue to need steps by Ethiopia to help break the cycle of ethnic political violence that has set the country back for so many decades, including most acutely in this recent conflict.

So I anticipate there will – again, as you know, Prime Minister Abiy was – and his team were here for the Africa Leaders Summit, where he had good conversations both with Secretary Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. The Secretary is in frequent contact, as are other officials in the administration, with the Ethiopians.

So I view this visit as an opportunity, again, to recognize the leadership shown by everyone involved in ending the fighting and in implementing the cessation of hostilities agreement and to talk about the U.S. role in fostering a positive new trajectory for the country.

**MR TEK:** Thanks so much. Could we please go to John Hudson from *The Washington Post*?

**QUESTION:** Appreciate this. I just wanted to ask: Is Secretary Blinken going – during his stop in Niger, is he going to visit Air Base 201, which obviously has U.S. personnel who work there and also has the MQ-9 Reaper drone?

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY PHEE:** That's not my expectation, but I wouldn't – I'm not in a position on this kind of call to discuss U.S. military operations in Niger.

**MR TEK:** Thanks so much. Could we go to Jennifer Hansler from CNN?

**QUESTION:** Thanks for doing this. Will Secretary Blinken meet with Prime Minister Abiy while he is in Addis, and does he intend to meet with any Tigrayan officials while he is in Ethiopia? And is there any chance he goes to Mek'ele as well? Thank you.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY PHEE:** Hi. Yeah, absolutely I expect he'll meet the leadership of both the Ethiopian Government and the Tigrayans. I do not expect a stop in Mek'ele, though.

**MR TEK:** Thank you. Can we go to Pearl Matibe?

**QUESTION:** Thank you so much, Assistant Secretary Molly Phee, for doing this today. My question is: Could you please just speak to why specifically is Secretary Blinken the one to be going to Niger and to Ethiopia himself as opposed to sending somebody else from State, for example? And who else is going to be in this delegation? Will Ambassador Carson be in his delegation? Could you

speak to who will be accompanying him? And the security piece in Niger is really important; maybe if you could add anything extra on that, I'd appreciate it.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY PHEE:** Thanks, Pearl. You may be aware that Ambassador Carson joined me recently to a visit to the African Union summit. We were also joined by Dr. John Nkengasong, who leads health security for the State Department, and a team both from State and USAID that deals with food security. And we had conversations with our African partners, including Ethiopia, about those issues. So I'm a little bit perplexed by a question about why the Secretary of State would travel. That's what he does. And so we're excited for him to have the opportunity to visit both countries and see for himself the conditions on the ground, including in Niger.

Niger is one of our most important partners on the continent in terms of security cooperation. They deal with a very difficult threat from JNIM and from ISIS-WA, and they are an important leader in the region showing that democracy and having an inclusive political system is an important way forward in confronting that kind of terrorism challenge.

**QUESTION:** Yes, thank you so much. I just wanted to clarify the —

**MR TEK:** Sorry, we – unfortunately, we have to move on to another questioner, but we'll be sure to keep in touch with you, Pearl. Can we please go to the line of Daphne from – Psaledakis from Reuters?

**QUESTION:** Hi, thank you so much for doing this. Humanitarians and diplomats say that Eritrean troops remain in several border areas while militia from Amhara still occupy large swaths of territory in contested areas of western and southern Tigray. What information do you have about the status of Eritrean troops and Amhara militia present, and how does Blinken plan to address this during his visit? Thank you.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY PHEE:** Thanks very much. First of all, this has been an issue that the Secretary has raised repeatedly in prior engagements with the Ethiopian Government. Our understanding, which has been verified by the African Union Monitoring and Verification Mechanism that was established by the cessation of hostilities agreement is that fighting has ceased in northern Tigray and that by and large Eritrean troops have withdrawn from the area. So we continue to discuss that matter, but that's our understanding.

We also have seen an important resumption of humanitarian assistance into the north to all the conflict-affected communities and the resumption of services in Tigray which were so devastatingly suspended for so long.

**MR TEK:** Great, thanks so much. Unfortunately, that's all the time we have for this call, but I want to thank the assistant secretary again for joining us. And that concludes today's call. As a reminder, today's call was on background and the embargo has now been lifted. Oh sorry – oh, I'm sorry, apologies. On the record. The call was on the record. And I want to thank everyone for joining us. The embargo is now lifted. Thanks so much. Take care, everybody.