

Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability

Remarks

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SECRETARY BLINKEN: Well, good evening, everyone. It is great to be back in Africa, but also to make my first appearance to Ethiopia as Secretary of State.

I'm here in Ethiopia – and then on to Niger – to reaffirm the pledge that President Biden made at the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit late last year. As he put it, the United States is “all in on Africa, and all in with Africa.” That means the United States is committed to deep, responsive, and genuine partnerships on the continent, because we believe we can only solve shared challenges – and deliver on the fundamental aspirations of our people – if we work together.

One way we're doing that is making good on the commitment that we've made to help partners in Africa deal with the huge challenge of food insecurity. Last year, 140 million people in Africa suffered from acute food insecurity – a crisis exacerbated by COVID-19, by climate change, by conflict. This led to shortfalls in commodities, fertilizer, and fuel, all of which spiked prices and created supply chain disruptions. To meet that challenge, the United States has invested \$13.5 billion last year to reduce acute and chronic hunger worldwide, largely in Africa.

At the same time, together with African countries, we're supporting immediate interventions like the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which has brought Ukrainian grain to countries across Africa as well as lowering prices around the world.

Over 4 million metric tons of wheat have gone directly to developing countries as a result of that initiative – that is the equivalent of 8 billion loaves of bread. Millions rely on the Black Sea Grain Initiative. It cannot be allowed to lapse.

But we've also heard loudly and clearly from African partners that emergency aid cannot be the only solution. So we're investing in sustainable, long-term African food production – working with our African partners on innovative solutions that will ensure that Africa not only meets needs on the continent but can become a supplier for the rest of the world.

Today, American and African scientists are collaborating to devise climate-resilient, nutritious crops. We're working on international efforts to significantly increase yields in Africa, including by mapping and improving the quality of topsoil. We're employing satellite photography technology to discover new water resources – as we recently did in Niger, where five new aquifers have been found, containing over 600 billion cubic meters of accessible water. And we're harnessing public sector financing tools to unlock private sector investment that will expand infrastructure, agribusiness, and trade.

Tomorrow, I'll have an opportunity to meet with AU Chairman Faki to discuss the partnership between the United States and the African Union. We'll talk about how the United States can help the AU realize its Agenda 2063 to build an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa. And how the United States can best support the AU's regional economic integration goals as the African Continental Free Trade Area gets up and running. And this is something that's going to make a huge difference as African economies become increasingly integrated, that will increase trade and investment among them, but it will also attract even more investment and trade outside of Africa. We have had to date in Africa the abnormal situation where African countries are doing more trade and investment with

countries outside of the continent than they do among themselves. When the free trade area gets up and running, that will change and I think it will be a very powerful tool for economic growth. I'll also convey our continued support for African representation in multilateral institutions, to include the United Nations Security Council and the G20.

African-led solutions are increasingly making the difference on the challenges of the 21st century. One of the most powerful testaments to the importance of African leadership has been the November 2nd Cessation of Hostilities Agreement to end the conflict and suffering in northern Ethiopia.

The conflict was absolutely devastating. Hundreds of thousands killed. Widespread sexual violence against women. Millions forced to flee their homes. Many left in need of food and shelter, medicine. Hospitals, schools, and businesses were shelled and destroyed.

The Cessation of Hostilities Agreement is a major achievement and step forward, saving lives and changing lives. The guns are silent.

As the fighting has stopped, human rights violations declined. Humanitarian assistance is flowing, finally reaching nearly all communities in need, services are being restored in the Tigray Region, the TPLF is disarming, Eritrean and other non-federal forces are departing. The dedicated diplomacy of the mediators from the African Union, from Kenya, from South Africa, supported by the United States, was essential to securing this agreement. And the AU monitoring mechanism is a key to its full implementation.

Prime Minister Abiy and the Ethiopian federal government and Tigrayan regional leaders should be commended for reaching this agreement and the significant progress in delivering on their commitments. These efforts have created the foundation to rebuild the communities that have suffered so in Tigray, Amhara, and the Afar regions. They need the help and support.

I strongly urged the inclusion as well of women in decision-making roles as the agreement is implemented – especially in light of gender-based violence that was perpetrated during the conflict.

Today, I first met with Prime Minister Abiy, and then with the signatories to the agreement – the heads of delegation of the Government of Ethiopia and the TPLF – to underscore our support for peace as well as the dividends it can yield. And those dividends are important. People need to see that peace brings concrete dividends in their lives. That starts, of course, with the cessation of violence, but we want to build positive things on top of that.

We welcome the commitments that the parties have made to acknowledging the atrocities committed and their devastating consequences. For our part, the United States acknowledges the human rights violations and repression committed during the past three decades – actions which sowed the seeds of future conflict. We and others were insufficiently vocal about those abuses in the past.

Recognizing the atrocities committed by all parties is an essential step to achieving a sustainable peace. We urge Ethiopians to follow through on their commitments to each other to implement an inclusive and comprehensive transitional justice process that includes both reconciliation and accountability. Overcoming poisonous grievances and ethnic divisions is the only way to break the cycle of political and ethnic violence in the north, in Oromia, or anywhere else. As a partner in that effort, the United States is providing both technical and financial support.

Building lasting peace is being made more complicated by the acute economic challenges that Ethiopia faces resulting from the conflict, resulting from drought, resulting from food insecurity.

As I conveyed to Prime Minister Abiy, the United States – as Ethiopia's largest bilateral donor, providing over \$3 billion in humanitarian assistance since 2020 – we will continue to be there for Ethiopians.

We'll keep partnering on food security. Today I announced an additional \$331 million in emergency food and humanitarian assistance that will reach millions of people, millions of Ethiopians affected by conflict, affected by drought.

We'll keep working together on public health, building on our many years of partnership to combat HIV/AIDS, and continue to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure that we're all prepared for future pandemics.

We'll continue to support Ethiopia's economic development, investing hundreds of millions in health, economic growth, education, democracy, and food security every year.

And we'll continue to support migrants and refugees, and victims of human rights abuse.

In all (inaudible), our mission is to build a strong partnership between the United States and Ethiopia that ensures we can meet the aspirations of (inaudible).

So I look forward to an important week of engagement with our partners on the continent, including the engagements that we had today, building on a stretch of high-level visits from the administration since the Africa Leaders Summit: Treasury Secretary Yellen, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield, First Lady Dr. Biden, and soon Vice President Harris, as she visits Ghana, Tanzania, and Zambia later this month.

So with that, happy to take some questions.

MR PATEL: We'll first go to Daphne Psaledakis with Reuters.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. There's been reports of continued atrocities since the November ceasefire. Eritrean troops still remain in border areas, and Fano Amhara militia still remain in western Tigray. Are you concerned that (inaudible)? It's not working.

SECRETARY BLINKEN: I got you.

QUESTION: Okay. Are you concerned that reported continued rapes and the presence of these troops could impede an effective implementation of the deal? And what do you need to see from Ethiopia in terms of addressing accusations of atrocities during the conflict to reinstate AGOA trade benefits?

SECRETARY BLINKEN: Thank you very much. As I said, what we've seen since the agreement was reached (inaudible) has been very significant progress on all the necessary lines of effort and necessary commitments, and by and large the guns are silent, humanitarian assistance is flowing, services are being restored. We've seen the TPLF disarm its heavy weapons. And we are seeing external forces moving out of Tigray, to include the Eritreans. It's not a – it's not complete. It's a process. But we continue to see significant movement in the right direction to fulfilling the commitments that were made in the agreement.

As to human rights concerns and abuses, I just had an opportunity to meet with human rights advocates and experts a short while ago here in Addis, and these are people who are themselves present or their organizations are present in Tigray, and this includes the United Nations. And what they reported to me is a very significant drop in human rights violations and abuses in Tigray. We've also heard that from other sources. That doesn't mean that they've been eliminated, and indeed, we are – we strongly urge all parties to the conflict to do everything possible to ensure that they cease entirely. But again, we've seen what was described to me by independent experts as a very significant diminution in human rights violations.

With regard to our own engagement and assistance as the work continues, as this process of implementing the agreement continues, to include making sure that there are no ongoing, proceeding

violations of human rights, to include making sure that the transitional justice process is stood up and moving forward in an inclusive and credible way, then our own ability to continue to move forward on our engagement with Ethiopia – to include economic engagement – will also move forward.

MR PATEL: Let's next go to Million Beyene with The Addis Standard.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. Recently (inaudible) and that is the State Department has shelved a (inaudible) designating violent human rights violations in Tigray as genocide, and why is that shelved? And is there any (inaudible)? Thank you very much.

And (inaudible) campaign to (inaudible)? And will they discuss (inaudible) principles? I mean for the human rights and protect the UN investigation, the UN investigator's office (inaudible). Thank you.

SECRETARY BLINKEN: Thank you. I appreciate it. Let me make sure I got your question correct (inaudible). I think I did.

First, let me be clear that the United States, first of all, has regularly spoken out about human rights violations and abuses committed against civilians and has called for accountability for those responsible. A year ago I addressed this myself when I said that all parties to the conflict had committed atrocities. Significantly, the signatories to the cessation of hostilities agreement acknowledged the atrocities committed and the devastating impact that they've had. And as I've said, we're very focused on making sure that that's stopped and ceases.

The reports that we have including just today from experts in the field show a very significant drop in human rights violations in Tigray. That's significant and important, but obviously we want to see it get to – as in anyplace else – get to zero and that all parties remain committed to not engaging in any kind of abuse.

Going forward, what's very important is something else I mentioned: the commitment that exists to a process of transitional justice, and that includes both reconciliation and accountability. And what I heard today from everyone I spoke to was a commitment to that process. So we will be watching that as it moves forward, and this is something, again, that's vital not just for us or for any other country. It's first and foremost vital to all Ethiopians, because having that kind of transitional justice, building reconciliation, though, and building accountability, is the only way, in our judgment, to make sure that the peace that's been achieved in Tigray is sustained. Getting at grievances, getting to justice, bringing people together – that is the way to make sure that peace lasts and that people can move on with their lives and the country can really move forward. That's what we're looking at. Thank you.

MR PATEL: Let's next go to Iain Marlow with Bloomberg.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. I'm wondering if I can get your reaction – these are sort of two broader questions – wondering if I can get your reaction to the U.S.-Russia drone collision. I'm just wondering what you make of Russia's motives here, their statements about the U.S. being directly involved in combat operations and the Russians potentially wanting to retrieve the debris. I'm just wondering if there's a risk here that this widens the war further.

And second, just on the recent Iran-Saudi agreement that was brokered in part by China, do you view this as a sign of China sort of striding more confidently onto the diplomatic world stage sort of post-COVID isolation? Is that – especially combined with their Ukraine peace proposal and the foreign minister's recent comments about U.S. containment, is this a worry? Is this sort of new posture a worry for the U.S.? Thank you.

SECRETARY BLINKEN: Thank you. First, with regard to the drone, the incident is being investigated and we'll look to that investigation to draw any conclusions about what the intent might be – might have been, what the actions were. Of course, we'll be in close coordination with allies and

partners at the conclusion of the investigation. I can't speak at this point to the motive or to intent. But what I can say very clearly is this was a reckless and unsafe action. But we'll let the investigation proceed.

With regard to the agreement reached between Saudi Arabia and Iran with China's involvement, from our perspective, anything that can help reduce tensions, avoid conflict, and curb in any way dangerous or destabilizing actions by Iran is a good thing. And as you know, in this particular case, the Saudis and the Iranians have been talking for some time going back a couple of years, including in Baghdad and in Oman. And to the extent that China facilitated conclusion of this agreement to restore diplomatic relations, that's a good thing. And I think it's valuable that countries, where they can, take action, take responsibility for advancing security, for advancing peaceful relations. And if this agreement actually bears out, and particularly if Iran follows through on the commitments that it's apparently made, again, that would be positive.

MR PATEL: Final question, Bilal Abdulmalik, Ethiopian Press Agency.

QUESTION: Thank you. Many Ethiopians believe that U.S. decision to revoke Ethiopia's privilege for AGOA is a politically motivated one. And after such progress, the U.S. still hasn't shown an interest to reverse the decision (inaudible).

SECRETARY BLINKEN: Thank you. So as you know, the United States suspended Ethiopia from the AGOA trade preference program effective January last year, 2022, due to gross violations of internationally recognized human rights. And we did this as required by law. It's in law and we follow the law. Ethiopia has clear benchmarks for a pathway toward reinstatement. The administration will continue to work closely with the government to achieve that objective, which we share. And as I noted earlier, with the cessation of hostilities agreement, and particularly with its implementation, that's extremely important in moving down that path, and my hope and expectation is that will continue.

Just for your information, the AGOA program itself is actually administered by the U.S. Trade Representative, and what they do is they have an annual review that brings together other parts of our government, looking at the eligibility requirements. But there will be that process. We'll participate. We actually hosted a ministerial meeting of AGOA during the Africa Leaders Summit in December, and we're very much looking forward to planning AGOA (inaudible) next year.

But the bottom line is certainly we share the aspiration of Ethiopia returning to AGOA. And as it continues to implement the cessation of hostilities agreement, it will – it's clearly moving in the right direction.

MR PATEL: Thank you, everyone. Thanks, everybody.