

Center for Strategic and International Studies

Online Event

“A New U.S. Policy Toward Africa: A Conversation with Chairman Gregory Meeks and African Activists”

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FEATURING:

Representative Gregory Meeks (D-NY),
Chair, House Foreign Affairs Committee

Rosebell Kagumire,
Ugandan Activist

Tsedale Lemma,
Ethiopian Journalist

CSIS EXPERTS:

Judd Devermont,
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Judd Devermont: Good morning. My name is Judd Devermont. I am the director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and it is my pleasure to welcome back Congressman Gregory Meeks in his new role as chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Chairman Meeks, it's a pleasure to see you again. A lot has changed since the last time we talked. You're not only leading the House Foreign Affairs Committee, but you have the advantage of working within a Democratically-controlled House, a Democratically-controlled Senate, and alongside the new Biden administration. The opportunities, therefore, to reset and reshape Africa policy is considerable, and I'm honored that you're here today to share your thoughts on a new policy towards sub-Saharan Africa.

Before you deliver your opening remarks, I just want to put a couple of points on the board. First, I believe we have to go back to basics. How is the region changing and how should those trends inform our policy? It's a continent whose population will double in size by 2050. Nigeria will be the third-largest country in the world, surpassing the United States. It's a region with significant global sway in the U.N. Security Council, in the U.N. General Assembly, and in other international bodies.

It's a continent that remains committed to democracy, in contrast to the rest of the world where support for democracy is in recession. Now, there's more demand than there is supply, but it's significant nonetheless. There have been 33 peaceful transfers of power since 2015. It will be 34 at the end of this month with Niger's second election – second round of their elections. It's a region that's attracting a lot of attention from U.S. adversaries and U.S. allies. A hundred and fifty new embassies have been built on the continent between 2010 and 2015.

And as I like to point out, what happens in Africa changes the world. The piracy off the Horn of Africa changed the maritime commercial industry. The migration crisis changed European politics, leading to the rise of xenophobic parties. What happened in West Africa with Ebola was the first indication that we needed to change the way we think about global health security. And the fintech revolution in East Africa has made mobile money a major way in which the whole world sends and receives cash.

Now, if you reflect on these trends, I believe they call for a new policy framework towards sub-Saharan Africa. I'm very much looking forward to hearing the chairman's prescriptions, but let me quickly share some of mine.

First, we need to see Africans as strategic partners. We have to engage because there are important issues on the table. The region can't be an afterthought. That means a lot of more personal engagement from the president and from our congressional leaders. It means evolving our diplomatic engagement from urban centers to summits, including reviving the U.S. Africa Leaders Summit. We need to show up.

Second, we have to elevate African voices in global affairs. We should engage and support Africa's multilateral institutions and initiatives, including the Continental

Free Trade Agreement. We need to think of what we do in Africa – whether it's democracy promotion, security assistance, development, and trade and investment – not just as ends; they are ends and they are means. A peaceful and prosperous region will be a strong partner to advance our global agenda, including curbing our adversaries' malign influence and addressing climate change. And we have new tools to do that, from the Development Finance Corporation to the Global Fragility Act.

And finally, we have to have a real dialogue with Africans – with governments, with publics, and our own African diaspora – about our own shortcomings and our own challenges, from George Floyd's murder to the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. That means getting outside of the Beltway, which is something that we do at CSIS through our U.S. – Why Africa Matters to U.S. Cities projects.

Today we're going to touch on all of these issues, but I believe the format of the event today shows how you, Mr. Chairman, are leading by example and setting the stage for a new relationship. After the chairman's opening remarks, I'm going to facilitate a conversation between Congressman Meeks and two of the continent's most influential voices: Rosebell Kagumire and Tsedale Lemma. We're going to discuss the situations in Uganda and Ethiopia, as well as U.S. credibility following the past four years of division and anti-democratic violence.

Now, just one note to our audience. I understand there's a hunger for more robust public conversations about what's happening in both of these countries and there's a desire to provide an outlook for other voices beyond the two that we're showcasing today. I'll simply note that we have been talking about Uganda and Ethiopia for the past two and a half years at CSIS and we'll continue to do so. In fact, we have a separate event at the end of this month on humanitarian access in Ethiopia. But I believe this is the – an important starting point.

All right. My opening remarks are out of the way. The caveats are out of the way. Let me introduce Chairman Meeks, Rosebell, and Tsedale.

Representative Gregory Meeks is the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. He was previously the ranking member of the European and Eurasia Subcommittee; has served as the co-chair of the EU, Colombia, and Brazil Caucuses; and was the vice chair of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee. He's a big promoter of bring attention and investment to Africa over his 12 terms in Congress. He's also a prominent member of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Rosebell Kagumire is a Ugandan journalist, award-winning blogger, pan-African feminist, and a social political commentary. She has expertise in media, human rights, gender, peace, and conflict issues.

And finally, Tsedale Lemma is the founder and editor in chief of the Addis Standard, an English publication that reports critically on domestic and foreign sociopolitical and socioeconomic current affairs issues impacting Ethiopia.

Chairman, thank you again for joining us. The floor is yours.

Rep. Gregory Meeks: Well, thank you very much, Judd. You know, I want to thank you for pulling us together with such a distinguished panel. And I want to thank everyone at CSIS for

making today possible, assembling this panel to bring a special focus to the continent of Africa.

And fortunately, we have this media way of doing it because if we were in New York currently, we're in the middle of a huge snowstorm. So – (laughs) – but this, because we have this forum to have a conversation, we're able to continue.

You know, as chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my goal is to reset the United States relationship with Africa by focusing on shared challenges, expanding people-to-people relationships and exchanges, building partnerships to increase youth participation in the digital workforce, and championing a more robust presence across the continent. Indeed, this relationship is so important to me that we bring back – bring trust on the front burner on the Foreign Affairs Committee, that this focus on Africa is my first public event as chairman of the committee.

And let me give a quick shout-out to my friend and colleague who is chair of the Subcommittee on Africa who we will be working hand in hand on the committee, making sure that we elevate the relationship between the United States and Africa, and – the chairwoman, Karen Bass, who has been a long fighter to bring issues of importance and relationships with the United States of America and the continent of Africa.

Now, Judd, you mentioned that with the Biden administration now at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, and a Democratically-controlled House and Senate, we have an opportunity to redefine America's foreign policy, and to do so in a way that makes it clear that America is back at the table. This is especially true in Africa, which the previous administration spent the last four years viewing only through the prism of competition with China and Russia. The previous administration's focus on great-power competition reduced Africa to a pawn in a great game. And frankly, this approach was insulting because it assumed that Africans lacked any agency for how they affected and were affected by foreign affairs.

And I'm here today to articulate a vision of U.S.-Africa policy in which Africa and Africans are at the forefront of our relationship with the continent, and where our relationship is collaborative and of mutual benefit. After the events of the past four years it has been made clear that the United States has significant work ahead in repairing its moral credibility and reputation. Our ability to advocate abroad for democratic principles – like the peaceful transition of power and equal rights – is made more difficult when we fail to live up to those standards domestically here at home.

And as a result of the United States' struggles with COVID-19 pandemic, widening inequality and police brutality, it is also clear that we do not have all of the answers. We are still endeavoring to build a more perfect union. That work is never complete. And I recognize that we must reengage with the world with humility, and that our ability to advocate for democracy and human rights must start with a commitment to the same values right here at home in the United States of America. You must use this moment of opportunity to approach Africa anew, in a way that transcends traditional domestic and foreign policy, and allow us to collaborate on shared challenges, overcoming the last four years of isolation, by increasing people-to-people exchanges, to promote understanding and shared respect for common values.

On the issue of climate change, which is a shared national security priority, we should force the U.S.-Africa collaboration between elected officials at several levels of government, to share lessons learned on how climate change affects urban planning, access to resources, and more generally, human security. As a presidential candidate President Biden pledged that he would pursue urbanization initiatives to help cities plan for growth in key sectors such as energy access, transportation, and water management. And I look forward to cooperating with the Biden administration to codify an African Urban Development Initiative.

Another opportunity to partner with African countries is on the issue of cultural heritage and preservation. We could even extend to transatlantic connections, to Latin America, and to the Caribbean. Regions that have also sizable diaspora populations. The African Union's agenda of 2063 has a goal that – establishment of a great African museum to preserve and promote African cultural heritage by creating awareness of Africa's vast dynamic and diverse cultural artifacts, and Africa's continuing influence on world cultures in art, in music, in language, and science. This could be an exciting opportunity for collaboration between this effort and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture and the National Museum of African Art.

And there are other ways in which the United States can maximize its soft power advantage. We should explore opportunities to expand cultural collaboration and exchange with the creator and entertainment industries, such as between Hollywood and Nollywood. Building on a budding cross-pollination of music, and between the NBA and the recently established Basketball African League. And beyond the African Growth and Opportunity Act, Power Africa, Prosper Africa of previous administrations, the United States needs to think creatively about its economic relationships with the continent.

As a start, we should wholeheartedly support the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area. We can do this by providing technical assistance to the secretariat supporting trade dispute resolution mechanisms, such as the African Development Bank's African legal support facility and building the capacity of the trade mediation courts based at the regional economic communities. We should also provide technical assistance to reduce the time and cost of cross-border trade, which provides clear potential for collaboration between the United States and African governments, private industries, and the regional economic communities.

Now, in collaboration with African stakeholders, the United States needs to consider what a post-AGOA world would look like. This may include investing in the development of digital infrastructure across the continent, possibly through partnerships between the United States and African technology companies. In order to formalize our support for Africa's emerging technology sector and startup environment we should establish partnerships between the United States and African technology companies, incubators, educational institutions, to build the digital capacity of young Africans.

It is imperative that we focus on the digital and STEM education for African youth to become more integrated participants in the global economy and build workforce for African and foreign companies interested in doing business in

Africa. A digital education or STEM education initiative would target a segment of the population that is too old to be affected by a focus on universal basic education and too young to for YALI or other U.S. exchange programs.

Perhaps the transfer of digital expertise could be facilitated by mid-career professionals, who have spent approximately six months working with African businesses and institutions. Importantly, we've all learned about remote teaching and moving educational content online over the past year. And so there may be an opportunity to build on this to expand American educational institutions' partnerships with and availability to African educational institutions.

Here at home, we also should be leveraging the Africa diaspora and prioritize tapping into the entrepreneurial spirit, expertise, and transnational connections, and facilitating the entry of the small and medium-sized enterprises into African economies. The diaspora, while raised or educated in the United States, maintain familiar connections to the continent. And the United States should be leveraging the immense human capital of this rapidly growing and highly successful population. We should explore opportunities for the United States International Development Finance Corporations to play a more active role here.

Also, America will not be relevant if we're not exercising diplomacy in the appropriate bilateral and multilateral fora. In several U.S. indices on the continent we don't have sufficient State Department, USAID, or Commerce officials on the ground, which leads to natural imbalance, and the Department of Defense is unable to surge personnel to address emergent needs. So as a result, we need to make it a priority to fully staff all civilian populations on the continent, and even explore expanding such positions. In order to ensure that our views are being shaped by perspectives outside of the capital cities, we should open consulates in places like Mombasa, and Kano, and Goma. To help manage the massive influx of foreign assistance and support Sudan's transitional government, we should establish a full USAID mission in Khartoum.

On the multilateral front, one of the things I'm exploring to improve partnership on is transnational challenges, is establishing a dedicated U.S. embassy, country teams for the regional economic communities, separate from the bilateral missions, and staffed by representatives from the State Department, from USAID, the Department of Defense and Commerce Department. These dedicated country teams would be based in the countries that are the seats of the regional economic communities and would coordinate on regional affairs with the country teams, other countries, and the RECs, and the U.S. missions to the African Union and their respective agencies in the United States.

Now, on the matter of regional peace and security, the United States needs to frame its approach to the continent through the lens of democracy, good governance, and human rights. Accordingly, our security partnerships should be with the countries that hold free, fair, and credible elections, and whose security forces do not perpetuate state-sanctioned violence against their citizens. In many countries, there's an opportunity for us to work together to improve civilian oversight of the military, which could include partnership between legislative bodies, civil society organizations, and the media.

We need to take a hard look at the role of the U.S. military on the continent to ensure that their presence is absolutely necessary to prevent direct credible threats to the United States homeland. But we also need to think critically about our approach to regional security challenges. You know, for the past two decades we've had the same security-focused approach to what are fundamentally challenges of human security and limited capacity to deliver government services. So we need to focus on upstream conflict prevention, and learn with the recently passed Global Fragility Act, and fundamentally reframe the manner in which we approach these issues. Ultimately, we should aim to reduce the number of chronically unstable countries by half by the year 2030.

In closing, it's important to emphasize that the United States is not simply developing its approach that it has to the continent in an echo chamber. This session, which is why I'm so thankful to Judd for putting this together, is the start of a conversation I look forward to continuing in the months ahead with African governments, regional organizations, regular citizens, and the diaspora, about the United States' relationship and what it should look like with Africa.

So today, I'm particularly interesting in learning from the two great and distinguished journalists that we have on our panel on how the United States could be a better partner on the issues of democracy, good governance, and human rights. So I want you to know that I'm a listener. Some tell me I'm a good listener. And so I'm listening now. And I welcome the exchange of ideas. Thank you so very much for giving me this time to give some initial thoughts on the relationship and the future of the United States to reshape the relationships of the United States and the continent of Africa. Thank you very much.

Judd Devermont:

Chairman, thank you. That was an incredible vision for the continent. I'm behind all of it. It really rings true on where we need to go. You are both being pragmatic, you have an ambition, but it's also forward thinking. And I have to say that sometimes when I hear others talk about what the Africa policy should be, it's all about restoring what we've lost. Your vision is retaining the best parts of our traditions when it comes to U.S. policy, but going so much more further. So thank you for sharing that. And, again, thank you for this opportunity to practice what we preach and to hear from people on the ground who really understand.

So I'm going to turn very quickly to Rosebell to talk a little bit about Uganda. And so, you Rosebell, and the chairman, can have a dialogue. But I think some of the things he said are exactly appropriate for Uganda, which just concluded a presidential election marred with violence, allegations of fraud. The president's opponent Bobi Wine was held under detention, under house arrest, for days.

I want to hear from you, Rosebell: What does the chairman need to know about what's happening in Uganda? And what does the United States need to do, particularly from his perch at the Congress, to get us to a better place in Uganda?

Rosebell Kagumire:

Thank you. Thank you, Judd. I'm very pleased to be here to share this in conversation with Representative Meeks, the first Black chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. And in an era where we say Black, we are still insisting Black lives matter, and we are here to say that Black lives matter in Africa. And I'm here

to share what's been happening in my country, Uganda, for the past, you know, 35 years, probably.

And I'm glad to be here sharing this platform with my sister Tsedale Lemma. It's not always that African women's voices are put on the forefront on these things that matter, so it's very important that we are here to speak about what our countries and our people are going through and the role of the U.S. in where we are at.

We've just emerged from an election which was the sixth election that our current President Museveni is taking part in and, unfortunately, that the election was held in a blackout. The country was put off the internet a day before the election. Before the election in the capital, Kampala, where I live, helicopters – military helicopters were flying over our heads and we saw tanks rolling in our capital for the first time. Before them, in November over 55 people were murdered in broad daylight by our military in the streets of Kampala. People were protesting in response to the arrest of one of the presidential candidates, Bobi Wine, whom Judd has talked about, who has been – who had been put under house arrest after the election. He's contesting the election results in the Supreme Court and he's – or, they're filing today as we speak.

But speaking on the issue of elections and transition, as a Ugandan woman born – having seen only one regime for 35 years, many people have contested this regime but most often we have seen that many approaches from the West and from the U.S. that our president has been a key partner for the U.S., especially in regional security. But I see it that in investing so much in one strongman to look after your regional security interests that, as Ugandans, we have almost – you have doubled our burden in our democratic struggle because the very – the very military techniques and the very military equipment – (inaudible, technical difficulties) – country – and our country's one of the top military aid receivers from America – is that at the end of the day these arms come back to be – to harm our people.

So the approach of America, of securitization and militarism, in our continent has to end, has to be reduced. We need a new approach. We are a young continent. An average age in Uganda is 19 years old. These young people need an approach, a foreign policy that sees them as equal and sees their future. And their future is not going to be provided by militarism; it's going not to be guaranteed when we have a running regime and it refuses to give us our best shot as – to have our first-ever peaceful power transition since 1962, when Uganda got its independence from the British.

It's very important that the American government takes the voices of Ugandans. Many young people are in jail. They have – ahead of the election many young people were jailed for nothing. We see charges like terrorism, charges like possession of firearms, treason, used to curtail freedom of expression. As a Ugandan, we don't have freedom of – to protest, so you cannot easily know what people's anger looks like when they don't have a right to get in the streets and march peacefully. That has been curtailed. And arresting any opposition person that comes on the scene is part of the greater – is a greater tool that is being used.

I think it's very, very important to highlight that the struggle has not, certainly, begun with Bobi Wine. We had a former presidential candidate, Dr. Kizza Besigye,

spend 42 days under house arrest after the 2016 election, and we did not see that much intervention. I must say that with the recent house arrest of Bobi Wine we have seen a bit of change in the – in the response from the American government.

But we don't need only response when someone is under house arrest. I think we need consistent support of nonviolent efforts in Uganda by Ugandan young people who want their voices to be heard, for political parties to operate in a way that they were meant to operate with the freedom to reach every corner of Uganda, because the last election, every day a presidential candidate was arrested, teargassed, pepper sprayed. All sorts of manhandling and arrests were taking place. So it's very, very important for us. Any other thing that comes, it cannot come without our freedom.

And for a long time, people talk about security and stability, but what is human security when you cannot be able to speak about your aspirations, to speak about what is wrong in a country – when you have a country of 40 million people and a regime that is hellbent on using patronage, that you have 500 parliamentarians who are going to siphon most of the money out of the population? So as much as the American government financial aid is given, I think that these kind of tactics of patronage to keep a regime in power which is a partner of American government, it is very important to highlight that we are losing so much money to a very, very – a government that is not going to be accountable to us. So it's very important to look at those aspects of leadership, democracy, and most – and also important, this happens at a time of a pandemic. We are feeling unsafe at so many levels. People have lost their livelihood, lost their jobs, and yet politically also people feel uncertain about where the direction of the country's going.

So I think the next five years, it's very important to bring President Museveni to offer the country a transition out of this situation we are in because we are headed for a power struggle and Ugandans have really lost their lives so many times often in these power struggles. We have – we have seen different wars. We have been raised in wars. Our parents saw war. So I think that many people are really, really hopeful that we can see a peaceful power transition, and President Museveni is one of the many key people that is in the way of that because he's been on the scene for 35 years. So I think that working in – looking at him as your partner must come with this hard conversation what where is your country going. Your people need an election, not a ritual.

Our election was held – we were held at gunpoint and told to vote, you know, in a power – in a blackout. We don't know what happened in which parts of the country. And the results we are given, very few people trust them. So elections cannot be just a ritual, and people cannot lose hope, and you hope that they – (inaudible). So I think that that is going to be important.

And last thing, I would talk about the – I would talk about the pandemic, where we find ourselves.

Judd Devermont: Rosebell, I want to – I want to make sure that we have time for Tsedale as well, so let give –

Rosebell Kagumire: All right.

Judd Devermont: You've put so much on the table. Let me give Chairman Meeks just a second to respond to it and then we'll go to Tsedale.

But, Chairman, Rosebell said we need more than just responses when an opposition leader is under arrest. You know, she's calling for a rethink of our relationship with President Museveni, thinking past the security relationship as the priority, I think emphasizing what you said about democracy and governance needs to be at the heart of our policy. What is your response? What do you – how do you think about what Rosebell is sharing with you?

Rep. Gregory Meeks: Well, I think that – I love what she said because, you know, change happens when young people – we see the same thing happening in the United States. Young people get tired of the same thing and their voices need to be heard, and you don't use a(n) undemocratic process to silence those voices.

When I look at what was taking place, for example, we know that those voices are now extended through social media, and I guess in 2019 the government imposed a tax on social media and ultimately shut down the internet during the recent election. That's something that we've got to speak up on and we've got to talk about. We can't be silent about that because that's not a democratic process. You know, putting individuals in the opposition in jail prior to the election, that is a, you know, problem.

So I think that the United States is rapidly approaching an inflection point at which we need to think critically about how we can support the will of the Ugandan citizens for an inclusive democracy and partner on good governance and accountability, and not just – you know, before, when you talk about one area, you know, it reminds me of what – the bad policy that the United States did during the Cold War. So it wasn't what was also good for the democratic institutions in Africa; it was just basically (how we're going to deal ?) really a proxy war with the Soviet Union. We can't allow that to happen here. We got to talk about real democracy and, as I said, then create the infrastructure so that the young people have opportunity to lead also and bring forward ideas that's based upon the principles of bringing together.

And also, I think there's a role for us – you know, as I say, I believe in working in multilateral ways so that we can work with the AU, so it's not just the United States alone. I don't believe in the United States alone and the United States only, but we can work with the AU in helping in Uganda and maybe even other countries to strengthen democracy and democratic institutions, and having free and fair elections is what's tremendously important. And I think that the Biden administration, and I know we in Congress and on this committee, will begin to look at it through those lenses.

Judd Devermont: Thanks, Chairman, and we'll look forward to seeing some of the hearings and statements you make as we watch what happens as Bobi Wine does his appeal at the – at the courts and any of the threats that may be posed to the Ugandan people.

I want to shift to Tsedale and talk a little bit about Ethiopia. As many of our viewers know, Ethiopia's reeling from a humanitarian, economic, and political crisis that is most acute in the Tigray region. It has implicated Eritrea in the fighting. There are border clashes with Sudan. The conflict is spreading to other

parts of Ethiopia. And this is really a day-one priority for the Biden administration and a day-one priority for you, sir.

Tsedale, what is happening in Ethiopia? What recommendations do you have for Chairman Meeks and for the U.S. government? I think you're on mute, Tsedale.

Tsedale Lemma: Yeah, sorry. Thank you very much, Judd.

Thank you very much, Representative Gregory, for having this session and being willing to listen to us, and also to assure us that you have your foreign policy priority laser-focused on reengaging again, and particularly Ethiopia and Uganda.

Rosebell said an election took place there in a blackout, and I'm sad to say that a civil war is raging in my country in a blackout. To start from the most pressing, but it's not by any means the only pressing issue Ethiopia is facing today, what we are looking at is a war in Tigray which started 90 days ago as a simple "law enforcement," to borrow the word from the government, but has morphed into a devastating civil war that involved multiple parts – multiple actors, Eritrea being one of them. We are now looking at 4.5 million people food insecure, in need of emergency food assistance, and a continued blockade of humanitarian access that all actors – U.N. actors that are in the country willing to provide humanitarian access are still pleading with the government. We're also looking at more than 2 million people internally displaced, and this is only from Tigray regional state. We do not have the full picture of the number of casualties, but by any measure from information coming out there it's staggering both in terms of civilian casualties and also casualties of our neighbors from all parties.

So in Tigray today, as we are looking into that, it's assuring to see the U.S. government starting to talk about it because initially it even had lent it support for this "law enforcement" measurement against all, you know, experiences in the past. So it's reassuring to see that you would like to deal with that. But what are the priorities when you are – would like to reengage when it comes to Tigray, for the U.S. government? As pressing as it is today, I think – you know, I have – I would like to make three recommendations with regard to Tigray only, and quickly move into what's happening in the rest of the country.

It's important that the U.S. government – it has already made the call. It's very good. It's important that they do – they do pull every leverage available to make sure an immediate withdrawal of Eritrean forces from Tigray. It cannot wait a day. It cannot wait a week. Immediate withdrawal of Eritrean forces because, to use the word from one opposition figure who has given an interview yesterday, they are causing mayhem and they are implicated with a lot of war crimes in there. So if we wanted to talk about access to, you know, humanitarian assistance, it's not going to happen. All information coming out from the region indicates that it is not going to happen with the presence of Eritrean forces having boots on the ground and wreaking havoc – killing, pillaging, raping. They are implicated in many, many crimes that could qualify as crime against humanity and war crimes. So it's important Eritreans pull out of Tigray as soon as possible.

Second priority is an immediate cessation of hostilities. By all information coming so far, hostilities have continued. People are pleading for humanitarian access. But it should be known that in a war, in an area where conflict is still active, talking

about humanitarian access is simply a futile exercise. So an immediate and binding cessation of hostilities, binding for all actors that are involved in this conflict including the Tigray regional state forces, the federal government, forces allied to the Eritrean government, and others which are not confirmed, but these are not the only ones that apparently are involved in this war in Tigray. So immediate cessation of hostilities should be the U.S. government priority to make sure that humanitarian access is distributed in a – in an orderly manner, in a manner to reach out to the people.

Now, when we talk about – the third priority is the humanitarian access, which should have been the first priority, impossible where there is active conflict to conduct a humanitarian assistance. When we talk about humanitarian assistance, we should consider how urgent it is by going back to October/September. You know, with the confrontation between the Tigray regional state and the federal government peaking/climax in September after Tigray regional state held a unilateral election in the region, one of the measures the federal government took was to withhold the distribution of finance to the most vulnerable parts of the community, which we call the PSNP (ph) in that country, which is a direct distribution of cash to the most vulnerable. This scheme has already been withheld by the federal government because they did not want to recognize the newly constituted regional government in Tigray, and one of the means that they were trying to delegitimize the regional government was by withholding this distribution of funding to the most vulnerable, who are using this money to buy their daily bread. So when we talk about the humanitarian crisis today, we must go back to that time where people already did not get their distribution, particularly the most vulnerable ones.

We should also consider other variables. During the conflict, people have run away from their homes, their villages, and are in hiding today. So talking about humanitarian crisis must consider these people who are still in hiding to save their lives. And so we are talking about people who have probably been without their daily – their daily bread for more than 90 days. It is as urgent as that.

So the U.S. government's priority should be on these three one: immediate withdrawal of the Eritrean forces from there, immediate cessation of hostility by all parties involved in this conflict, and an immediate distribution of humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable. Because otherwise, if we just continue things rolling out like this, we might be able to see in a week or two – even already now people dying of starvation on top of people being killed. Extrajudicial killing reports are coming from that area perpetrated by Eritrean forces. This has to be also investigated.

And this leads me to the – to the other priority the U.S. must push, is that an independent investigation must happen as to what exactly took place in Tigray. And I would recommend the U.S. to push for a U.N.-mandated, politically-insulated, and independent investigation of the atrocities that took place because this country has to pick itself up together again and move on as a country. So Tigray and priority for the U.S. government is as I laid it out.

But that is not the only problem Ethiopia is facing today, and that should not be the last one that the U.S. should refocus its engagement. Ethiopia is preparing to host an election – to hold an election, which has already been postponed and has

created a lot of political fissure in the country. But we are headed into a general election which, by all standard in my reading, is going to be a perfect recipe for post-election violence. We are talking about an election in which only a few parties are enthusiastically campaigning. Talking about – we are talking about an election in which thousands of opposition leaders and rank-and-file members, supporters are currently jailed. This is particularly so in the largest regional state, Oromia. Two of the largest opposition parties in Oromia regional state have closed more than 300 offices, regional offices. (There was an ?) office in Addis Ababa, in the capital, shut down by the government.

Their leaders, hundreds of them, jailed, some of them without even trial for seven months, particularly, you know, the Oromo Liberation Army and the Oromo Federalist Congress, I'm talking. These are the two major parties that come from Oromia regional state, the largest regional state, and also an epicenter of the protest that brought in the administration of Abiy Ahmed to power. And we are headed into an election whereby leading opposition agent, thousands of their members, are in prison without trial, many of them. And their leaders also are in prison. What kind of election is this going to be? What is its ramification going to be going forward if this election is to happen under the circumstances? You should refocus on what exactly is going on when it comes to this election.

But other areas of instability in Ethiopia are also continuing. Benishangul regional state, the government has altered, not only securitizing political crisis but also outsourcing its monopoly on violence to vigilante groups, which is a very, very dangerous approach, as we see. The government's response to continuing killing of civilians by armed groups in the regional state is to arm civilians back there. This has to be paid a very close attention. It is not a way out. Militarizing the political space in the country has peaked – its peak with the war in Tigray, but it has been going on previously before the war in Tigray broke out.

So the U.S. is looking at a country that is really slowly tearing itself apart, and talking about, you know, ensuring democratic elections, and having a partner to tango with. What kind of partner are you having is a country – most unstable form of it in its history – its contemporary history, so far. So you should refocus, and laser focused, on what you are facing when it comes to the Ethiopian government. It's very important. And we are happy that the Biden administration is paying attention to that, but more attention should be paid because Ethiopia is the country that your administration would not like to have – tear itself apart, as a partner in the whole of Africa. Thank you.

Judd Devermont:

Tsedale, thank you so much for your analysis and for the imperative of responding to Ethiopia.

Chairman Meeks, we all had so much hope at the beginning of Prime Minister Abiy's government. That's why he got the Nobel Peace Prize. You know, he's – what he laid out for Ethiopia is what – are important reforms. But now, as Tsedale says, the country's tearing itself apart. There's desperate need to respond to the humanitarian crisis in Tigray, to get the other forces, and particularly Eritrea out, and to make sure that there can actually be a credible free and fair election. What is your response, sir? What do you think that you, from the Congress, can do?

Rep. Gregory Meeks: So, the first thing is – and what she said that I think is extremely important, you can't allow all this to be – what's going on – to be blacked out from the United States and the rest of the world. We got to lift the blackout. You got to raise the – you know, the profile of what's going on. We got to talk about it. We got to make sure that the United States, and my committee, that we have hearings and we bring the appropriate people in so that we can expose and talk about what's going on. And we are fortunate that the Biden administration the U.N. has appointed Linda Thomas-Greenfield to be our U.N. ambassador, who is very well-versed on the continent, and so that we can raise these issues within the United Nations also of bringing together.

So we got to pay attention, because what happens oftentimes when you see the crises that we have, you know, which got a lot of attention, you're right. When the prime minister was put in place, I too had high hopes. And so there was attention there, attention that things were going to change. He got the Nobel Peace Prize. It hasn't happened. So we've got to have voices that talk about what is in fact taking place there right now. You got to make sure – you just can't have an election without making sure that the foundation is laid for a free and fair election. So there has to be a priority with working with all the stakeholders in Ethiopia to get the political transition back on track.

Otherwise, you'll have an election that's not free and fair, if you don't have the foundations set in the beginning. And making sure – I heard you say only a few parties are participating. We need to get everyone feeling comfortable that they can participate in the elections in the country, so that thereby, you know, people will have confidence in the election. And clearly you can't allow the human rights and the humanitarian damage to continue. You know, I know that the government of Ethiopia has refused, as indicated, requests for unrestricted humanitarian access throughout the region. That's got to change. People are going hungry – kids, women, and children. That can't happen. So there's got to be a collective effort.

And the United States should be able to utilize – you know, this is what I call the leadership of the United States – our bully pulpit to also help organize other countries to focus and put the pressure on the government to make sure, before anything else, that humanitarian access throughout the region must happen immediately. Immediately! And some of the reason that the blackout occurs, from what my understanding is and from Ms. Lemma, is that journalists, for example, are not allowed to access the conflicted area. So we got to make sure that that happens. And I do believe her statements are absolutely correct, in that an independent investigation into human rights abuses has to occur immediately. And we need an immediate cessation of violence and conflict while they're in that area.

So we got to bring attention to it. We got to put a spotlight on it. Our committee will do just that – both from the subcommittee, I've talked to Congresswoman Karen Bass. I know that it's on her front burner. She's watching what's going on, on a regular basis. And we would then also put a spotlight on it from the perspective of the entire committee so that they know that we're watching, and not only are we watching we're going to be organizing in a multilateral way folks to make sure that this kind of crisis of humanitarian significance stops, and we can

put in place the foundation for a free and fair election coming up later this year. And I look forward to working with you in that regard.

Judd Devermont:

Chairman, thank you so much. Rosebell, thank you. Tsedale, thank you. This is exactly what the U.S. government needs to do – to listen and then engage humbly. I'm very optimistic about our government's new approach to the region, really exemplified by the chairman's comments and opening remarks and then the tenor of today's discussion.

I just want our listeners and viewers to know that we've got a number of events planned for this month to talk about the new U.S. policy towards Africa, as well as what's happening in Ethiopia. On February 9th we will have an event on why Africa matters to U.S. cities, looking at U.S. diplomacy under President Biden. We'll have representatives from the private sector, as well as the U.S. government, as well as diaspora communities. On February 12th, we will have a conversation with some of the continent's leading think tanks – the Center for Democracy and Development in Nigeria, the Institute for Global Dialogue in South Africa, and the African Centre for the Study of the United States at Wits University in South Africa – to share their recommendations. And then as I noted, at the end of the month we'll have an event on Ethiopia and the humanitarian access.

So I hope you'll join us. I hope you'll continue to engage. Thanks again to our speakers, to the chairman. This has been a phenomenal event, and a great start to the new year. Thank you.

(END)