Online Event

“Restoring Humanitarian Access in Ethiopia”

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FEATURING:
Jan Egeland,
Secretary General, Norwegian Refugee Council

Catherine Wiesner,
Head of External Engagement, UNHCR Regional Bureau for East Africa, Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes

Daniel Bekele,
Chief Commissioner, Ethiopian Human Rights Commission

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Good morning. My name is Judd Devermont. I’m the director of the Africa Program for the Center for Strategic and International Studies. And it is my pleasure to welcome you to this urgent conversion, Restoring Humanitarian Access in Ethiopia. This is a joint event with CSIS’s Humanitarian Agenda program.

As our esteemed panelists will stress, there is a desperate and tragic crisis unfolding in the Tigray region. There is some 2 million people displaced, some 60,000 refugees in Sudan. Despite some modest improvements in the response the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs on Friday said, “ongoing insecurity, bureaucratic obstacles, and the presence of various armed groups are hampering the humanitarians’ ability to deliver assistance. The situation will almost certainly worsen without a strong response from the international community and from stakeholders in the region.

I should say that the top, this is our second event in as many months on Ethiopia. And please stay tuned for future programming. We want to spotlight the various dimensions of this crisis, including the shocking humanitarian rights abuses, insecurity in the rest of the country, and increasing signs that it will be difficult, if not impossible, to hold free and fair elections under these conditions.

But first, let me tell you what this event is not about today. We’re not going to spend a whole lot of time discussing who is to blame for the start of the conflict between the government and the Tigre – the former ruling party, the TPLF. To be sure, there’s a long of blame and finger-pointing going around. You can just go on Twitter if you’re interested in looking at the blame game. But our goal today is to focus on the millions of people in dire need of critical assistance.

We’re also not going to obsess over technical challenge. There are some, to be sure, but this is a political will problem. After all, this is a region that has a long history of dealing with famine, and conflict, and displacement. The government, the TPLF, and the international community know how to respond to these sorts of challenges. I believe the muscle memory really does exist, and it’s possible to deliver assistance across battlelines and across borders.

And lastly, as I said earlier, we’re probably not going to have enough time to touch about the other facets of this crisis, but I want to make it abundantly clear that solving the humanitarian issues is one of several urgent tasks ahead of the international community and Ethiopian stakeholders. It has to be tackled first because of the urgency and because there shouldn’t be any disagreement between combatants or the international community – including U.N. Security Council members – that humanitarian assistance has to be restored.
I want to encourage everyone to see this as the first and necessary step to stop the human rights abuses and atrocities, including the widespread use of rape. This has to stop, and the international community should start investigating and preparing to hold parties accountable for any atrocities committed. It’s the first step to negotiating a ceasefire and opening dialogue between the belligerents. Indeed, this is one of the preconditions on the table.

It’s also the first step, or arguably a concurrent step, to talk about the role of Eritreans in this conflict, the escalating border dispute with Sudan, and ethnic militias that are sowing violence in Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz, the fighting in Oromia, and the frictions on the Somalia foreign – Oromo-Somali borders. Lastly, it’s the first step to talk about the scheduled elections for later this summer. It’s very hard to envision free and fair elections under these conditions.

So our panelists have a crucial task ahead of them. We need to hear what’s happening on the ground. We don’t need any spin. We just need to focus on what are the steps we need to take to address this devastating crisis. And we couldn’t be more fortunate to have three people here who really know firsthand what’s happening, and they bring a tremendous amount of experience and expertise to the table.

We will be joined today by Daniel Bekele. He is the chief commissioner of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. He was the executive director for Human Rights Watch Africa Division and worked as a senior advisor at Amnesty International. Daniel has also served time as the research and policy director of ActionAid.

Jan Egeland is the secretary general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, where he oversees the work of the humanitarian organization in more than 30 countries affected by conflict and disaster. From 2011 to 2013, Jan served as the European director at Human Rights Watch. He was appointed special advisor to the U.N. General Assembly — excuse me — special advisor to U.N. General Secretary for Conflict Prevention and Resolution from 2006 to 2008.

And finally, Catherine Wiesner is the head of external engagement at the UNHCR Regional Bureau for East, Horn of Africa, and (the) Great Lakes. She was previously the deputy assistant secretary at the State Department’s Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration. Earlier she served as the principal director to the deputy assistant secretary of defense for African Affairs at the Pentagon.

The discussion is going to be moderated by my colleague Jake Kurtzer, who’s the director of the Humanitarian Agenda at CSIS. Jake, let me hand it over to you.
Jacob Kurtzer: Thank you, Judd, for that introduction and for our panelists for being here.

Daniel, I want to start with you. Judd in his opening comment laid out the top lines of an urgent human rights and humanitarian crisis. So from your perspective at the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission what needs to happen today to restore the safety and protection of the civilians living in Tigray?

Daniel Bekele: Sure. Thanks, Jake.

The whole situation really had led to some major humanitarian situation, including civilian casualties, you know, deaths and bodily injury of lots of people, and the internal displacement, and refugees being dispersed, and destruction of infrastructure, damage of infrastructure, interruption of social services, and the collapse of the regional government as it were, which has created a massive vacuum in terms of social services and security. So all of this speaks to a lot of things that need to happen in Tigray region.

But let me emphasize for you all only some three important points from my perspective. One is the need to reestablish local-level administration in a way that the local-level administration would be to resume social services and provide security services to people in communities in Tigray region. As I said, you know, it’s a massive vacuum because regional government practically collapsed in its entirety following the war situation. So reestablishing local administration is the first thing.

And second thing, from my perspective, is the need to end the restriction on media access in the region. You know, access to information and free flow of information is even more critically needed in time of emergencies and crisis such as this. But there seems to be a feeling that, you know, given the humanitarian needs, and the crisis, and the emergency nature of the situation, and the nature of the security operation on the ground as we speak, there’s probably not sufficient appreciation of the importance of media access. But I would really like to emphasize that opening up media access both for local and international journalists is an important step forward necessary.

The third point I would say is the – is ensuring access for humanitarian assistance. And as Judd said in his opening remark, there’s quite a – in my view, quite a substantial improvement of humanitarian assistance and access to several parts of Tigray region. But there are still partly bureaucratic and partly political hurdles to what is – you know, which somehow continue to impede the desired level of humanitarian access and assistance. So if we have to provide appropriate protection for safety for particularly civilians throughout the region, I would say, you know, the three points about reestablishing local administration and allowing media
access, and allowing an improved humanitarian access and assistance would be a critical step forward in the right direction.

Jacob Kurtzer: Thank you, Daniel. You laid out three important steps for the totality of the region.

But I want to turn to you now, Catherine, and think about a population of particular concern for UNHCR. So from your perspective, what are the top priorities to meet the humanitarian needs in the region. And particularly thinking about the refugee population, both within Ethiopia but also crossing into Sudan, what are your priority needs when you look at the picture today?

Catherine Wiesner: Thank you.

Yeah, so exactly as Judd was saying at the outset, I mean, we have a few different populations. There are the – there’s the at-large Ethiopian population in Tigray, which was estimated at 5-6 million, 1 million of whom were already receiving aid before the conflict started. We have the 60,000 Ethiopians who have displaced across the border to Sudan. And that’s a huge part of the response from UNHCR’s perspective. And then we have refugees also from Eritrea, who have been hosted in Tigray for some time. We have about 100,000 who have been registered in the region in 2019, about half of them residing in four camps.

So I think in terms of – if I start with Ethiopia, reaching these populations – the first challenge is access. That's the title of this. And the associated – different issue, but associated issue of insecurity. So for the Eritrean refugee population, who were entirely dependent on humanitarian aid, this was a situation of pretty extreme angst for us, to completely lose contact with them for many, many weeks and to not be able to provide any basic assistance of services in the camp. Norwegian Refugee Camps was one of our partners in that endeavor.

We were happy in December when the World Food Programme was able to deliver food to two of the camps and when we and partners were able to reestablish our presence there in January. But the other two camps, Shimelba and Hitsats, are – is a situation that you’ve heard our high commissioner speak out about with a great deal of concern about the various reports of attacks on those camps, killings that have taken place, and of forced return to Eritrea by Eritrean forces. This is part of what we’ve said on the public record in terms of the reports coming in.

We remain with no access whatsoever to those two locations, but there is the satellite imagery which shows the more or less full destruction at this point of those two camps. So the concern of Filippo Grandi when he was recently in Ethiopia – one of the main priorities was to express to the government the concern of UNHCR about their responsibility to protect this
group of people, about the abuses that have been reported and, really now today, the urgency of being able to locate, access, and assist those who have been dispersed from those two camps.

I will say that since that since that – since that mission – and he did receive assurances from the government that that would happen, that that would happen in a matter of weeks. Shire is our office which is closest to those locations where we believe the refugees have been dispersed – those who have not made it out to other areas. And actually, at the end of last week insecurity returned and we’ve had national staff in that office throughout. We haven’t had international staff there since November. We were hoping to send them this week. We actually have just asked our national staff to go shelter at home for a few days due to the situation that’s there. So that insecurity continues to be a constraint.

Overall, there has been some progress, as noted, particularly in the last few weeks after the visits of high-level U.N. officials. There have been more international personnel who have gotten the permission to return to Tigray. And most of them to Mekelle so far, but I think it’s still very important because it then allows us to bring the decision-making about humanitarian access and where people go on a daily basis closer to the situation.

And I think this is another point that my high commissioner was really stressing, is that the United Nations provides humanitarian assistance in many insecure locations around the world. We have systems for doing that. We have civil-military coordination. And if we can kind of reestablish a presence then we can start to work together with the government and the military actors on a daily basis to figure out where we can safely assist people.

I would say the top priorities, certainly food is at the top. You know, people were displaced during the – right at the beginning of harvest time. Food was already affected by the locust situation in the region. And then in terms of internal displacement within Tigray, we don’t really have good numbers at all. There’s estimates in the hundreds of thousands. We are aware of a number of collective centers where people are living in pretty bad conditions. Some of them are in schools, in other public buildings. But then there’s whole swaths of the country – whole areas, rural areas, where nobody has had access. And we don’t actually really know the needs.

So our priority, in addition to being part of that response for the internally displaced, is to continue to provide assistance in the two refugee camps where we have access for Eritreans. We’re starting to see some of those who were dispersed from the other two camps that have been destroyed moving. And we’ve received already more than 5,000. And we are working to accommodate them quickly. But this is soon going to be actually another crisis because the land is not – is not there. We don’t have enough shelter. But mostly we don’t have the space. And we need to really work with the
government to identify what is the safe location where we can now help these people?

I'll just say quickly also, in terms of priorities in those camps, food, water, health, of course, came first. But this is a population that has always had a high number of unaccompanied children coming from Eritrea. So there's a whole host of protection concerns that existed before, where we're reestablishing contact with those young people and their caregivers, and then you have all of these reports now of sexual violence and new concerns. That really our priority, while others are doing the reporting, is to really focus on the fact that survivor – that services should be available for survivors.

Sudan, very quickly, the priority has –

**Jacob Kurtzer:** Hey, Catherine, let me stop you there – let me stop you there because Daniel mentioned the need for access for information. And you talked about the same thing, that some of the areas under your concern you haven't been able to access. You're drawing inference from satellite footage. So I want to – I want to turn to Jan briefly. You said that in all your years as an aid worker you've rarely seen a humanitarian response so impeded and unable to deliver. So can you talk us through what are the main challenges for an organization like NRC, which works in 30 very complicated environments around the world, which works – as Catherine mentioned – in areas where insecurity is present. What are the challenges here? Why is humanitarian aid so obstructed in this context?

**Jan Egeland:** Well, I don’t really know because, listen, Ethiopia is a place that has generously hosted hundreds and hundreds of thousands of refugees for very many years in many parts of the country, including Tigray. This is a place where we have operated in bad and good days. We had 100 staff in Tigray when the fighting started. We were helping, you know, 25,000 refugees. Catherine of UNHRC detailed whom then are. And then we’re cut off. We couldn’t move back. We lost contact with our 100 staff. We had to – we were confined to receiving people in Sudan. I went there myself in – at the end of November, to the Sudanese Ethiopian border, and heard harrowing tales from the people who fled across the border – massacres, killings, horrors really. I mean, these people did not flee because they wanted to. They fled for their lives.

And then to be denied the most basic of things – which is access. Without humanitarians having access, we cannot help civilians in their hour of greatest need. Why would they do that? I don’t know. Is it to – I don’t know, is it to hide things? Is it because they don’t want us to be there to see what is happening? Has it improved? Yeah, to a certain degree. But listen, I read a lot about the 53 visas. We got one. And that was to a person who already was in Tigray, I mean, in this camp in the south, which is easy to access. There is still no access beyond the main roads, the capital, Mekelle.
To certain central areas there is access. Beyond that where there was frightening, terrible suffering, starvation, we still cannot go. And it’s a shame really. We cannot accept it.

I want to stay with you, Jan, because there’s been a lot of criticism and a lot of commentary on the access challenges that are imposed on aid organizations by various parties. But you’ve also been critical of the aid sector itself in this crisis. What steps – I mean, you have an extensive career working in humanitarian issues with NRC, with OCHA, with various others. So what steps do you think the aid community, the humanitarian agencies themselves – NGOs, U.N. and otherwise – should take to ensure a coordinated and rapid response to the crisis, if access improves?

Well, if it improved, to have them go to where the needs are the greatest. The problem has been, I think, that we haven’t really called a spade a spade. You know, there’s been some improvements, maybe it’s better next week, maybe there is a reason we’re not going, and so on. Call a spade a spade. We were denied access for month after month after month when women and children were bleeding, when there was massacres and so on. And there was a lot – a lot of bad stuff happening from a lot of armed men.

So this – and of course, we need also to recognize Ethiopia has been, and is still, extremely, you know, generous to refugees. It’s a place that is extremely efficient in helping people. I mean, we’re Americans and Europeans here, a lot of us. Ethiopia has been much more generous than we have been in Europe and North America, of late. So – but it doesn’t mean that we have to excuse when we see horrible suffering happening while we are sitting and observing from a distance. We do – still do not know what’s happening in Tigray in many parts. We know it’s really bad. We do not know how bad it is up until this day.

Thanks, Jan.

I want to come back to you, Daniel, because we – with Catherine and Jan we’ve talked a little bit about, you know, external organizations and the challenges they face. But you’re based in-country. So, you know, for our audience in Washington, can you tell us a little bit about what work the Human Rights Commission is doing now to advocate on the humanitarian access questions, and how that works either hand-in-hand or as a separate line from the work that the international organizations are doing?

Sure. Thanks, Jake.

Yeah, this has been one of our advocacy points from very early on, at the start of the war situation in Tigray region. We’ve been pressing with a message for humanitarian assistance and humanitarian access from the very early days of November. We have both a private and a public advocacy engagement. And we engage with government at the highest level. And
we’ve been very clear from the start of the conflict that the national humanitarian law and international human rights law is applicable here, as well as the international refugee law as well. Because as my other colleagues mentioned, you know, Tigray is a host to several thousand of – tens of thousands of refugees, as Ethiopia is a host to hundreds of thousands of refugees. So there is an implication to both civilian population as well as the to the refugees.

And one of our advocacy message from very early on was on the need for civilian protection, on the need of both – on not just the need, but also the legal responsibility of all parties to the conflict to comply with the international humanitarian law applicable under the situation, and making sure that civilians have access to basic necessities and needs has been one of our important advocacy message. And I would just add that as part of that advocacy message one of the messages has also been on the establishment of a humanitarian assistance desk at the level of the federal government, and the need for better civilian and military coordination to ensure that the humanitarian assistance better reaches the people in need.

I do understand that there has been a bit of disagreement among the international humanitarian agencies and the government on how best this can be coordinated. But in my view, it is one of – it’s a situation which basically requires better civilian-military coordination. And this is not the first conflict situation where humanitarian assistance needs to be delivered to people in need of the assistance. So, you know, better coordination of the operation would be – would be useful. And we’ve been pressing on that advocacy message.

Jacob Kurtzer: Thanks. I’m going to turn back to Catherine here, because we’ve heard from Jan and now from Daniel about this – both the government having a history of being able to respond and having this capacity. So the civil-military coordination issue. So I’m wondering if you have anything you want to reflect on that. But and then secondly, I cut you off earlier when you were starting to talk about Sudan. So I’d love it if you could take us back there, and a little bit about what you’re seeing in terms of the needs and the challenges to respond either from the Sudan side or cross-border to this humanitarian crisis.

Catherine Wiesner: Thanks. I think, you know, on this issue of civil-military coordination and that aspect, I think it’s critical. You know, the initial narrative was this is an operation that will conclude quickly and then we’ll be able to go back and put everything, you know, back in order again. And here we are more than three months on and we’re still seeing insecurity in many different locations.

So I think that that’s what – that’s the understanding that we all need to reach now, that we’re dealing with the need to develop – to deliver a massive relief operation in a still-somewhat-insecure environment. And
that all the actors have to be committed to that before the situation gets completely out of control and difficult to bring back from the brink for civilians. So I think, you know, while the government has the responsibility to ensure security of all the international humanitarian actors – that’s very clear, I know they take it seriously – that cannot be a façade for just continuing to deny access. So that’s what I would say there.

On the regional response, I think it’s important to note that Sudan and also Djibouti in the small way in which they’ve been involved, you know, regional, neighboring governments have really done the right thing in keeping their borders open to refugees. So Sudan has kept its border open throughout. At one point there were more than 1,000 people arriving a day. That number has gone down significantly to just kind of dozens arriving a day. But it’s been a real challenge to launch the relief effort there in basically a very remote part of the country. So getting staff, supplies, maneuvering where the roads aren’t even clear, identifying locations where we could move people away from the border, all of that has been difficult.

And that’s actually really our priority today, is to continue to move people as quickly as possible away from the border. That’s very much due to the increasing tension on the border. So however that – you know, the conflict inside Tigray has led to this tension on the Sudan-Ethiopia border, that’s a direct threat to the refugees there and to the aid operation there. We always try to move refugees away from the border, but that’s become more urgent. And then we also have the raining season coming in May, which makes large parts of that area also inaccessible. So those are kind of the dual issues that we’re contending within Sudan.

And as I noted just quickly, you know, in Djibouti we put in place some preparations. Not very many people have crossed the border, but the government has been very good about also registering Tigrayans who found themselves in Djibouti and couldn’t go back home, to provide them – to provide them with protection there. Yeah.

Jacob Kurtzer: Thanks. I want to turn to you, Jan, and then I’m going to come to you, Judd, for – because I want to start – we’ve, I think, captured effectively, you know, the urgent human crisis that’s happening on the ground. And I think we have a fairly clear picture of some of the obstacles. But, Jan, NRC facilities that had been set up were recently attacked by unknown militants. And I want to start to look at solutions or actions the international community can take. How do you, as a humanitarian organization, you know, respond when there’s an attack on humanitarian infrastructure? And what do you think – what steps can be taken to prevent future attacks, either on your own or in consultation with donors and other international actors?

Jan Egeland: I mean, it’s true that it was heartbreaking to see that buildings we put up at great effort in the Shimelba and Hitsats camps are destroyed. We can see it on satellite. But we cannot go there in person to inspect. And more
importantly – I mean, buildings can be rebuilt. But there was fighting in the refugee camps. These were Eritrean refugees that came to Ethiopia because it was safe. Then armed men coming into the camp, shooting at will, burning the buildings, and then now we don’t know – we know, and Catherine you mentioned, that a few thousand we have accounted for. Many, many thousands we cannot even account for me.

That’s the most important thing. These are human lives. These are vulnerable refugees. We were supposed to be there. In their hour of greatest need we were prevented from going there. Our own staff had to flee for their life. So it’s as graphic as that really. And what should be done? Listen, the diplomatic community should really wake up and really make it clear that there is no alternative to unimpeded access for the humanitarians. I like Daniel Bekele’s idea of a sort of one-stop shop for humanitarians to go to, but often those places become bottlenecks. A lot of applications, a lot of bureaucracies, and so on. Basically there should now be, in my view, an order saying: These reputable international organizations – UNCHR, NRC, all of the other international NGOs, Ethiopian Red Cross, et cetera – can go, will not be stopped. And you can negotiate then also access yourself to the opposition-held areas.

We’ve done that a million times. And NRC is in opposition-controlled areas all over the world. We have – we’re in eight provinces that are virtually held by the Taliban in Afghanistan. I have crossed a million cross lines myself, some of them with Catherine here present, in the old days. We can do it. We’re held back. And one of the things that’s happening is, of course, the federal government says you can go, the local government says no you cannot. Then the local government says, but these people can go. Then the federal government says, no, you cannot really. We need blanket access. We have no time to lose, really.

Jacob Kurtzer: Thanks. We have a question from the audience that I want our panelists to think about while I put the next question to Judd, which is the suggestion of a special rapporteur for the Human Rights Council to access, you know, what’s happened and ensuring that they have a proper mandate. And if that’s something that you can – you can support.

What it speaks to, I think, is the recognition in the United States and the U.N. and elsewhere in the world of the urgency of this crisis. And recently last week there was reporting, Judd, that the U.S. government is considering the appointment of a special envoy. This is something you’ve written about as a – you know, and on the one hand it’s an indicator of attention, but it also presents some challenges. So how do you see that decision? What are the pros and cons for the U.S. side to appoint a special envoy for this crisis?

Judd Devermont: Yeah. Thanks, Jake.
My colleague Colin Thomas-Jensen at USIP wrote a piece about two weeks ago on this issue. We wanted to draw from our personal experiences and looking at the history of U.S. envoys to the region. And just putting my cards on the table, I have a lot of reservations about envoys or the proliferation of envoys. But given that we don’t have a U.S. ambassador in Sudan, we can’t have a U.S. Ambassador in Eritrea, our ambassador to Ethiopia is on her way out, and given how urgent the crisis is, there is merit. But let’s talk about how do you get it right.

And this is where I think I’m most concerned about. To get this right, you need to make sure that envoy has access to power. Meaning that he or she speaks for the president or the secretary of state, really can sort of speak on their behalf. You need to make sure that the envoy has a strong relationship with states and with USAID. They’re going to sit probably in the State Department. They have to have those relationships that work. They can’t be confrontational. They can’t be working at cross purposes.

You need to make sure that the envoy really does own the process in the interagency. Not just one of many players but is the – sort of the key person driving meetings, bringing together the U.S. government to address this issue. And these last two I think are really important. First of all, they have to have robust staffing. When people talk about envoys, they think about Richard Holbrooke and he’s going to go negotiate the Balkans. That’s not what envoys often look like in the U.S. government on Africa. They have one, maybe two people that work for them.

So if you’re going to really do this, you need to make sure that they have real staffing so they can do the kind of diplomacy one needs. And I think concurrent with that is having the resources, right? Having actual – some purse strings to be able to push these issues. Otherwise, we’re just talking about symbolism and we’re just trying to show that we can, and not really actually have someone who can push this issue, represent the U.S. government in all of its facets and actually drive towards a conclusion.

Jacob Kurtzer: So thanks, Judd. Thinking about that, I want to come back to this question about, you know, is there merit for people pushing for a special rapporteur at the U.N. level? I want to turn to you, Daniel. You know, as a national human rights body where do you come down on this question? Do you believe that the U.N. should put together a special rapporteur, given the challenges of getting accurate information and having a clear picture of what’s happened and what continues to happen today?

Daniel Bekele: I mean, I – whether it is from the U.N. or Ethiopia’s friends and Ethiopia’s development partners wanting to come and see the situation is an opportunity for them to understand the context and to get a good feel of the situation on the ground. So am not necessarily averse to any of such initiatives. And I – in my view, I welcome them. But I think it’s also very important to keep in mind that any of the international mechanisms are in
principle supposed to be complementing locally led and nationally led initiatives.

And when you have a nationally led initiative which seems to be working – such as my own commission, which is trying to investigate the human rights situation and trying to report on what we are finding to the extent we are able to get access to the places that are accessible. It is – it is important to keep in mind that you – that the international mechanisms are also supposed to be complementing national processes, national mechanisms, and national initiatives.

And, you know, this idea of flying in and flying out quick missions are not really a sustainable way of following up and responding to the needs on the ground. And we have – you know, we have had a lot of experience over the years about the limitations of such kind of initiatives, unless it is designed in a way that it complements national mechanisms and processes. But otherwise, I mean, you know, any initiative from the international community should be welcomed as a good gesture of getting a sense of the context and trying to support the country in the time of – in times of its needs.

Jacob Kurtzer: Thanks, Daniel. And we’ve talked a little bit in some of the earlier questions about the importance of coherence between the Ethiopian government, which has in the past demonstrated some capacity to manage a response like this. So here you’re tying it onto the question of accountability and human rights that an international process needs to be coherent with, you know, an Ethiopian-led process. So I think that’s important.

I want to – I want to turn to Jan and Catherine now, though, on a question about the humanitarian architecture. People have started to talk about things like a declaration of an L3 emergency. Do you think that’s necessary? And what are the pros and cons, you know, for animating the U.N. system in that way, given some of the challenges that already exist on the ground?

Maybe, Catherine, why don’t you go first?

Catherine Wiesner: Sure. The L3 declaration, which mobilizes a system-wide scaleup, I don’t think it’s necessary, per se, but I also don’t think – I wouldn’t write it off. And as I understand it, it’s still under discussion. The reason why I don’t say it’s necessary for sure is that most of the agencies have already actually done a version of scaleup. I mean, we deployed emergency teams, tapped into reserve funding. And so – and the interagency standing committee already – they did appoint a deputy humanitarian coordinator, realizing that the team in country might not be perfectly staffed for this type of response. They sent in civ-mil coordinators with OCHA. They sat in Addis for quite some time.
So I think that’s the challenge, is that even if we make the decision to scale up we still have the access problem. And it’s – I think it’s probably been unclear to the senior leadership whether the declaration of an L3 emergency was going to help or hinder that access problem. But I think with access, we clearly need a massive scaleup. So to the extent that the L3 would push that further, I think it’s fine. But a number of agencies can still choose to do that, and have done.

Jacob Kurtzer: Jan, how do you see that? I mean, having worked in the system, you know, in the U.N. and now at an NGO, I mean, how do you see the scaling up as necessary? Or is it overcomplicating a situation that may be manageable if some of the access challenges are resolved?

Jan Egeland: Well, what I would like to see is an L3 in diplomacy, in advocacy, in – (laughs) – in getting things moving. But it’s true, I mean, there are virtually hundreds and hundreds of humanitarian workers ready and eager to go. There are large fleets of trucks, big warehouses full of the stuff needed in Tigray that have not gone there. Or it’s gone to places like Mekelle, which was spared. There wasn’t fighting in Mekelle. It’s a normal city. But in western and central Tigray there is zero access.

So that’s what I still would like to see, the U.N. providing the leadership that is required by the U.N. to open the door for us, as humanitarians. The U.S. government, the Europeans, the African Union – which is nowhere to be seen – to help have basic access to places. I mean, central and western Tigray, zero access – zero today. And it’s not going to be the 53 visas that help that one. So I think we have to call an L3 of calling a spade a spade, rather than L3 of filling up warehouses that are already filled up, if you get my view.

Jacob Kurtzer: Thanks. Thanks, Jan.

We have – I think it’s indicative of the level of urgency of the crisis and the importance of Ethiopia in the broader picture that we have some 56 questions from the audience, that we will not get to. But many of them have touched on a question of other emergencies or other points of tension in the context.

So I want to come back to you, Judd. In your opening statement you talked a little bit about the broader frame, that Tigray is not the only potential flashpoint in Ethiopia. And so, you know, do you think a broader frame is necessary when looking at Tigray? Or do we have to consider instability in Amhara, Somali, Afar regions as well?

Judd Devermont: I think – no, I think that Tigray is the most severe and most acute crisis in Ethiopia, but it is far from the only crisis. Some of these issues have to do with the inadvertent reforms – or, sort of the reforms of Prime Minister Abiy, which are welcome but have created a lot of stresses inadvertently.
Some of them have to do with the strains of government and the way in which dissidents have been treated. Some of them have to do with the growth of militias and the redistricting or, on the ground, redrawing of borders.

And we do have to look at all of these crises as one, because we’re not going to get to elections where we have fighting in Oromia, where we have Amhara militias in Benishangul fighting, where we have these border disputes. We have to think more broadly about, you know, what was a hopeful message from the prime minister when he came to power in 2018, that I think many of us can agree on. But the challenges right now – this has hit the rocks.

And we can – again, we can spread blame all around all we want, but we have to get to the point where there are many people in Ethiopia who are frustrated, who are becoming disillusioned. And in cases like in Tigray, where they are not able to access humanitarian – you know, get that humanitarian assistance they want. So strongly believe that we have to think more broadly than just Tigray. We have to look at all the challenges that I know that Daniel’s looking at himself. But if we don’t do that, I think we’re going to miss the bigger challenge that this country faces right now in this really critical moment.

Jacob Kurtzer: Thanks, Judd.

I mean, I want to turn to you, Daniel. You know, again, as a representative of the Ethiopian government – or, an Ethiopian institution, can you speak to a little bit about the importance of situating this in a broader context? And then also, I mean, we’ve got a couple questions about the work of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission to date. And earlier you spoke about the importance of dialogue. So what steps are you taking to bring people from all sides together to improve the humanitarian response and create the conditions that would allow for a more effective humanitarian response?

Daniel Bekele: On your point about the broader frame, I think that’s a fair point. And I agree that, you know, Ethiopia’s reform process is facing some serious challenge. But at the same time, it’s encouraging to see that Ethiopia’s top leadership is still committed to the reform agenda, despite the complicated challenge. And part of the problem is also something Ethiopia has inherited from its past, but another part of the problem also emanates from the opening up of political space.

Ethiopia’s new political chapter started by opening up political space and civic space for all Ethiopians across the globe. And you know, I think both good players and bad players have entered into the space. And it has not gone well since the opening up of political space in Ethiopia. But you know, despite the challenge Ethiopia still has an opportunity to continue to build
on the reform process. And it would be important for Ethiopia’s international friends and partners to look at the broader picture, and the importance of the reform agenda, and how the reform process can be supported to continue to build on what Ethiopia has achieved over the last couple of years.

Coming onto your specific question about, you know, the importance of dialogues and conversation for political problems and political disputes, is the right one. But for us as a national human rights institution, that’s not exactly within our mandate, to facilitate political processes. We are mandated with a task of promoting and protection of human rights. And that’s where we largely focus on. But I do understand the importance of a meaningful political dialogue and political process to deal with Ethiopia’s complicated political crisis.

Tigray region is only one of the places where we have political problems, but Ethiopia’s political problems is much more deeper than that. And unfortunately we have seen how violent conflict is unfolding along ethnic lines and religious lines in the past has led to a lot of senseless deaths, destruction, displacement, and massive human rights violations. And a war situation, you know, is definitely ugly. In many of its faces Ethiopia, sadly, is back into such a war situation, unfortunately. But it is not an insurmountable challenge for Ethiopia to be able to continue to build on its reform agenda.

Jacob Kurtzer: Thanks, Daniel. We are starting to run short on time, so I’d like to turn maybe to Catherine and then to Jan for some final thoughts. I mean, Catherine, looking at this humanitarian picture, you know, what – first of all, can you just give us a picture of the funding situation and the deficit or what’s needed? But then can you just broaden the scope a little bit and, from the perspective of UNHCR, you know, any comments for our viewing audience on what’s needed in this moment of time and where we can think about putting our efforts forward?

Catherine Wiesner: Sure. So at the beginning of the crisis the humanitarian community in Ethiopia put out a three-month appeal. It was a quick sort of flash appeal estimating really what they thought the needs would be. And that three-month plan has been about 70 percent funded. But what the – which is not bad. But it was really very initial. And what the whole country team is now working on is the plan for all of 2021. We’re already in February, it’s true, but I think that the hope is that that will be released in the next week or so.

And that is actually the whole humanitarian response plan for Ethiopia, responding to questions about other flash points and other displaced populations in Ethiopia. Indeed, there are about 1.8 million displaced people in other parts of Ethiopia. So that plan covers all of Ethiopia, but will specifically represent the new estimates, based on whatever assessments
we have been able to conduct in the last few months, of people in need in Tigray, and probably a much larger dollar figure for the coming year.

For the interagency response in Sudan, we had a plan that UNHCR put together with 30 partners. It’s about $150 million to take us through June. That has been about 50 percent funded. So the crisis has actually gotten some attention in terms of funding. It’s really just going to come back then to this access issue, and making sure, of course, on our side, that we are as positioned as possible to be able to respond and provide aid every place that’s accessible to us at the scale required and continue to push – I very much agree – at the political level, with the support of all of the key donor governments to our institutions. I support all high-level engagement in that respect to really establish the access that’s needed. I will close on that point. Thanks.

Jacob Kurtzer: Jan, I want to turn to you for sort of final thoughts. I mean, the L3 for diplomacy is great. You know, you’ve been in the system. So, you know, talk us through. What do we need to hear from the secretary-general? What do we need to hear from the Security Council? What do we need to hear from donors to help move this forward?

Jan Egeland: Well, I’m glad we’re discussing Ethiopia and, I mean, not just Trump or European Union’s crisis, or whatever. I mean, Ethiopia is extremely important. It’s a truism, but I mean, one of the most ancient civilizations on Earth. They gave a lot to us, the other civilizations. Now we need to be there for them. And it is a complex country. I was in the southern area, the tribal areas where there was a lot of fighting two years back, in a placed call Dila. I was shocked by the kind of violence that was there among these ethnic communities. And I was shocked by the lack of presence of real support for these people, and the lack of attention to that local conflict.

So Ethiopia needs attention. It needs support. It needs us to be there. It needs to enable us to help them help themselves, make it possible for us to do our job. And then Ethiopia, which has been a – also an area of stability, given all of the horrors of South Sudan, of Somalia, and all of these other places. We need Ethiopia to succeed. We need to be there. So I’m glad you’re – you have to be honored, Jacob and Judd, and get also America to be a little bit interested in the rest of the world, including in Africa. And I will work here with the Europeans.

Jacob Kurtzer: Thank you, Jan. I think you captured it very effectively, the importance is too great, and the needs are too great. And we’ll continue to do our part, but on behalf of Judd and our programs at CSIS, I want to extend our sincere gratitude for you, Jan Egeland from the Norwegian Refugee Council, Catherine Wiesner from UNHCR, and Daniel Bekele from the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission for spending some time with us this morning, and sharing what you know, and giving us some things to think about as we
continue to work on this issue. And thank all of you in the audience for joining us today. And we look forward to working with you as well.

Have a good day.

(END)