



Protocol of the Afrika Club (online meeting) held on Wednesday, 16th December, 2020

Online Round Table

Ethiopia.

When the guns roar, the voices of peace can hardly be heard

With input from:

Andreas Melan, Austrian Foreign Ministry, Head of the Africa Department, former Austrian Ambassador to Ethiopia

Mihret Kebede, Ph.D. Candidate at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Co-organiser Addis Video Art Festival

Adham Hamed, Coordinator of the University Partnership Hamaraya and Innsbruck, Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation

Hailu Yazachew, Ethiopian Diaspora Activist, Founder of SITOTA (Amharic, means: present, gift)

Gerald Hainzl, Researcher at the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management (IFK), National Defence Academy

Moderation: Franz Schmidjell (VIDC)

Protocol: Marlène Perronet

Previous protocols: www.vidc.org/themen/afrika/afrika-club/protokolle

The Afrika Club is a joint initiative of Radio Afrika TV (RATV), the Association of African Students in Austria (VAS Österreich), the Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC) and Ambassador Georg Lennkh.



Franz Schmidjell (VIDC) welcomed the participants and introduced the topic of the round table: “Ethiopia. When the guns roar, the voices of peace can hardly be heard”, commenting on its title’s pathetic first aspect: today, we shouldn’t speak about all the war reports which are in all the national and international media but learn more about local peace initiatives, solidarity activities by diaspora networks and the attempts on a political level for conflict resolution. The online meeting therefore would consist of two parts: 1. civil society based initiatives, 2. political-institutional level.

Adham Hamed is the coordinator of the university partnership between the University of Hamaraya and the University of Innsbruck. He is a lecturer-researcher in Innsbruck. Mr. Hamed has been working in a peer project with a partner university in Eastern Ethiopia in the past 3 years, a project that has just come to its closure last November. Within this context, they have been developing capacities for development studies, with another university that had the project lead. The results are a Master curriculum and a PhD curriculum. Now, they plan to found a department for peace and development studies. At the beginning, a curriculum was found that was more or less very strongly following the example of Bradford University, UK. One of the first achievements was to develop a new curriculum, where the local forms of knowledge would be used. During this process, they have seen major advances in this field, especially the peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, but at the same time an increasing of ethnopolitical tensions during the past 2–3 years. Ethnonationalism being clearly on the rise, this leads to the question: what adequate response could be given? The perception of Mr. Hamed was, that the civil society could bring the opportunity of a dialog on local levels, on national levels, etc. As a closing sentence, Mr. Hamed stated that his perception in this current Tigray crisis is, that there is a very strong emphasis on the question of how conventional track one diplomacy could facilitate dialog in a way and there is a very strong hesitation from the side of the Ethiopian government of having any kind of foreign interference. So, it’s very difficult to at least formally open these channels. It is difficult to facilitate a diplomatic effort on a track one level. A dialog could be facilitated more easily.

Mihret Kebede was asked what role the arts sector has in the Ethiopian society – especially in terms of building and bridging this ethnicity gap. Emphasizing her remarks with a power point presentation, Mrs. Kebede introduced several projects she has been working on as a visual artist and from her personal perspective. As background information on the diaspora community, Mrs. Kebede reminded us that more than 2,5 million Ethiopians live abroad; sending billions in remittances; that the Diaspora has been actively involved in organizing and leading online campaigns for years. Then, Mrs. Kebede presented a few artistic practices as platforms to connect people at home and in the Diaspora: the “Slow Marathon project” (2012); “Poetry and Jazz collaboration with Studio Olafur Eliasson” (2012 to present); “CultureXchange Ethiopia Austria arts and cultural exchange program” (2019); “Shamrock international female poet festival with Tobiya poetic Jazz” (Munich, 2020). Mrs. Kebede stated she believes in artistic practices and engagements bringing peace and dialog between people while political decisions sometimes divide them. She introduced some arts



and social media platforms playing roles in the peace building and reconciliation effort. For the individuals, she named her collaborators Yohanes Molla (poet and IT expert); Seble Assefa (lawyer); herself (artist, poet). For the groups and initiatives that she is a member of, “Book for all”; “Network against hate speech”; “The Yellow Movement AAU”; “Hakim”. She mentioned a few platforms: artistic (“Tobiya Poetic Jazz”, “Fendika Cultural Center”) and media (Asham TV, Arts TV). “Network against hate-speech” is a Facebook Group created, following the conflict, against false information and hate speech.

The next speaker was **Hailu Yazachew**. He was asked about the Ethiopian diaspora in Europe, and in particular in Austria. Mr. Yazachew started by explaining how vast the chapter of Ethiopian diaspora in Europe is. First, Europe means countries like UK, Italy, Germany or Switzerland. In terms of numbers, the Ethiopian diaspora in Austria is much smaller (appr. 1.300 people). The Ethiopian diaspora itself is split in ethnic, linguistic, political, religious, even generational parts. Himself living in Austria for 30 years, he has been feeling the gap between people. There is no such thing as a single, unified, homogeneous Ethiopian diaspora. Besides, not everyone is participating in the diaspora networks. They would rather focus on a community support, like helping asylum seekers or organizing cultural and social events (festivals, sports events, etc.).

The relationships between the Ethiopian authorities and the diaspora groups are characterized by mutual skepticism and distrust. The government is more interested in economical support and is worried that these groups are likely to support opposition parties. There are major political oppositional diaspora groups in Europe, most of them are in the UK, Italy or Germany, but not in Austria.

After this first part, some questions were taken. The speakers were asked how they feel personally and how they are concerned by the growing tensions in Ethiopia in the last months. Another participant stated that the question of Tigray is not new but has been around for years. One would wonder what the price of peace is. He asked Mr. Hamed in particular: “When it comes to the issue of peace making, the local ownership is the key. Do you think that the ground is conducive for a dialog? What is the role of the diaspora?”

Mr. Hamed mentioned that he was personally very much concerned by what happened in Ethiopia during the past months, in particular the humanitarian consequences. 40.000 to 50.000 refugees are struggling for survival in post-flood Sudan. The international community will be confronted with a humanitarian crisis. He was not working in the Tigray but in the Eastern part of Ethiopia, where he could feel a growing, alarming hate speech and ethno-political based violence. His personal concern is that this country is in a circle of violence that is accelerating faster and faster. He agrees that the Tigray conflict is not new. We have seen the consequences of the rapid shift after a party left the power. We have seen attempts to trial people for corruption. Another danger is the creation of historical memory through a singular narrative. The debate about the necessity of war to bring actors to the table of dialog is very difficult. This debate is very cynical. 2.3 million children are at risk according to UNICEF.



Youssouf Diakite asked by chat: “Ethiopia plays a key role in Africa: in terms of a role model and due to the fact that the AU headquarters is in Addis. As we know, Austria is very engaged with Ethiopia at the academia level. How can we leverage on the collaboration between universities to develop a great conflict resolution solution and peace building strategy? And how could teaming play a big role in that?”

Franz Schmidjell introduced the second round of interventions with **Andreas Melan** and **Gerald Hainzl**.

Andreas Melan reminded us that it is very difficult to get precise information about what is going on, because the Ethiopian government made access to the Tigray region very difficult. But we know that the fighting is not over. There is still fighting with the TPLF in several parts of the province, and what we don't know but fear is that it could become a guerilla, that the conflict would endanger peace and stability not only in Ethiopia but in the Horn of Africa. Who are the players for an international and regional mediation? The African Union, among others in Africa. Then, if accepted by the Ethiopian government, some actors could do the job. There is a special representative in the EU. But the Ethiopian government strictly denied any international interference, claiming it is an internal conflict. There are several issues: the actions of the Ethiopian Military forces in refugee camps; in Sudan, refugees are fleeing across the border, which is a no man's land and controlled by organized crime groups; in Somalia, where there was already an instable peace. The Ethiopian forces there had to be pulled out to be relocated in Tigray, which creates a vacuum, which means more instability, organized crime and terrorism. There is plenty of need for international mediation.

Mr. Melan's second point was the humanitarian crisis, already mentioned by the other speakers; there international displaced people (up to 100.000 internal displaced people (IDPs)). When the international organizations cannot go in, like in the Tigray province, these people and especially the children will suffer. There has been an agreement concluded between the Ethiopian Government and the United Nations, but it is still not working.

The third point is that we already have to think about the post conflict time. We know the roots for this conflict are multiple, ethnic segregation, mutual hate, etc. The question is: what can we offer to support the post conflict period / conflict resolution time?

Franz Schmidjell thanked Mr. Melan and posed a question regarding his last point: “If you had a wish, how could Austria contribute towards these three points?”

Andreas Melan answered that Austria could support Ethiopia in the post conflict time. In Austria, we have an expertise and can offer a lot in conflict resolution, peacemaking, peace building, etc. But in the case of Ethiopia, the problem is so deep-rooted, it already starts with the constitution, the federal borders. What we need is a way to bring people together, find what constitutes a common identity and overcome these ethnic qualifications. Now we think of formulating ideas and projects within the existing cooperation with Ethiopia and concentrate on the post-conflict time.



Gerald Hainzl agrees with what has been said earlier, although he thinks it is a bit too early to think about which initiatives could be taken in the future. We don't have very good information about the region. His concern was that there is a lot of external influence (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates etc.) He agrees with Ambassador Melan that the overall the security situation in the whole region might deteriorate next year. It is quite hard for external mediators and facilitators as long as the prime minister doesn't accept outside assistance. Unfortunately, there is no sign that he may change his position and allow this external assistance.

According to Mr. Hainzl, three scenarios are foreseen: Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed could bring the Tigray region more under the control of the central government and demonstrate that he would "win" the war. The problem is that the TPLF would not acknowledge it. The second scenario would be, as already mentioned by Ambassador Melan, that the TPLF would put more pressure on the prime minister (e. g. a form of guerilla warfare). The worst case would be that the neighboring countries would be more and more involved in the conflict: Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia. It is very hard to see a possibility to really assist Ethiopia at the moment or in the upcoming weeks.

Franz Schmidjell reminded us that this year, we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the UN resolution 1325. It is about strengthening women's participation in peace processes and ensuring their protection from conflict related and gender-based violence.

Mihret Kebede addressed a question to Mr. Melan: "When you say that we are willing to give some support for the post conflict, are you referring to the country, to the government or to the people?". Another question was: "How are you eager to support local initiatives, diaspora initiatives?" As a conclusion, Mrs. Kebede addressed Mr. Schmidjell's question about the UN resolution 1325 to Ambassador Melan.

Another question was addressed to Andreas Melan: "Mediation yes, but between which parties?"

Andreas Melan started with Mrs. Kebede's questions: When he said they were trying to think about how to contribute in the post conflict time in Ethiopia, he was referring to the Austrian Development Cooperation, which has been active in Ethiopia for decades, which is very much integrated and has a lot of experience. Of course, they had to work with the government, but they worked in the provinces, in key regions, also with civil society, NGOs, and they need to reach out to the people themselves. Mr. Melan would not go into detail because it is not his competence.

Of course, there is no doubt women are very important. To include women and to have women in the peace-making process is normally very successful. The question of mediation needs the acceptance by each party. Prime Minister Abiy has totally rejected any contact, so they cannot imagine any mediation between these two parties.

Hailu Yazachew comments on the problem with the ethnic federal constitution raised by Mr. Melan and agrees it is a huge problem.



Adham Hamed reacted to the question of international mediation. This is showing us how strong the polarization is. International mediation is not particularly welcome at this point, which is a challenge for ongoing efforts by the international community. He agreed with lots of points Ambassador Melan has said. This leads to the question of the future of the academic cooperation: this is where significant potentials for conflict transformation lie, not just in academia. What we can recognize is on track one: dialogue is blocked and the stakes are just too high to see some tangible results. But if we think about track two, track three levels, he thinks that there is a potential for dialogue. Austria has a long history of academic cooperation with universities across Ethiopia. Their topic was peace and conflicts studies, explicitly but always bearing in mind the question of how universities can have an impact on a larger level of society. Mr. Hamed mentioned the importance of resolution 1325, as mentioned above.

Franz Schmidjell introduced **Million Berhe**, who wanted to add two things. First, she agreed with what Ambassador Melan said. This is not just an internal conflict. As an Eritrean, Mrs. Berthe has a lot of connections in Ethiopia. There are conflicts going on beyond the borders of Ethiopia. Second, the elements of an ethnic issue have been blooming for so many years, as everybody has said, and she thinks that going forward, what this conflict has shown, is that Ethiopia is not a homogenous country. The problem of the TPLF is not going to go away even if this war ends. Furthermore, the TPLF will have inspired other groups. Her last remark was, considering the post conflict times, the religious question should be addressed. Religious institutions are very important in the context of Ethiopia, which is a very religious country. They will also play a big role in bringing peace in Ethiopia.

Georg Lennkh reacted to the idea of a “racist constitution” brought by Mr. Yazachew. He doesn’t think that mentioning ethnic groups is necessarily racist. For instance, the Burundi constitution is built on ethnic quarters and it has worked, at least for some time.

Franz Schmidjell thanked the contributors, the participants and Mrs. Irene Hochauer Kpoda for the technical support. He introduced the upcoming event in January or February 2021 about the Somali Diaspora Engagement in Austria.