

Congressional Record Statement of Senator Russ Feingold
On the Political Crisis in Ethiopia

March 3, 2008

Mr. President, I rise today to discuss the political situation in Ethiopia. The US-Ethiopian partnership is an incredibly important one – perhaps one of the more significant on the continent given not only our longstanding history but also the increasingly strategic nature of our cooperation in recent years. Ethiopia sits on the Horn of Africa – perhaps one of the roughest neighborhoods in the world, with Somalia a failed state and likely safe haven for terrorists, Eritrea an inaccessible authoritarian regime that exacerbates conflicts throughout the region, Sudan a genocidal regime, and now Kenya descending into crisis. By contrast, Ethiopia seems relatively stable with its growing economy and robust poverty reduction programs.

Indeed, one look at the deteriorating situation on the Horn of Africa and it is clear just how essential our relationship with Ethiopia really is. Unfortunately, the Bush Administration's approach to strengthening and building bilateral ties with Ethiopia has been short-sighted and narrow. As in other parts of the world, the Administration's counter-terrorism agenda dominates the relationship, while poor governance and human rights concerns get a pass.

Mr. President, genuine democratic progress in Ethiopia is essential if we are to have a healthy and positive bilateral relationship. We can not allow a myopic focus on one element of security to obscure our understanding of what is really occurring in Ethiopia. Rather than place our support in one man, we must invest in Ethiopia's institutions and its people to create a stable, sustainable political system. As we are seeing right now in Kenya, political repression breeds deep-seated resentment, which can have destructive and far-reaching consequences. The United States and the

international community can not support one policy objective at the expense of all others. To do so not only hurts the credibility of America and the viability of our democratic message, but it severely jeopardizes our national security.

Mr. President, I am seriously concerned about the direction Ethiopia is headed – because according to many credible accounts, the political crisis that has been quietly growing and deepening over the past few years may be coming to a head. For years, faced with calls for political or economic reforms, the Ethiopian government has displayed a troubling tendency to react with alarmingly oppressive and disproportionate tactics.

For example, Mr. President, in 2003, we received reports of massacres of civilians in the Gambella region of Ethiopia, which touched off a wave of violence and destruction that has yet to truly loosen its grip on the region. At that time, hundreds of lives were lost, tens of thousands were displaced, and many homes, schools, and businesses throughout the area were destroyed. Credible observers agree that Ethiopian security forces were heavily involved in some of the most serious abuses and more than 5 years later no one has been held accountable and there have been no reparations.

The national elections held in May 2005 were a severe step back for Ethiopia's democratic progress. In advance of the elections, the Ethiopian Government expelled representatives of the three democracy-promotion organizations supported by USAID to assist the Ethiopian election commission, facilitate dialogue among political parties and election authorities, train pollwatchers, and assist civil society in the creation of a code of conduct. This expulsion was the first time in 20 years that a government has rejected such assistance, and the organizations have still not returned to Ethiopia because they do not feel an environment exists where they can truly undertake their objectives.

Despite massive controversy surrounding the polls, it is notable that opposition parties still won an unprecedented number of parliamentary seats. Their pursuit of transparency and democracy was again thwarted, however, when they tried to register their concerns about the election process. In one incident, peaceful demonstrations by opposition members and their supporters in Ethiopia's capital of Addis Ababa were met with disproportionate and lethal force that killed more than 30 people and injured over 100. In another incident, the Ethiopian government arrested thousands of peacefully protesting citizens who took to the streets in support of the opposition.

The systemic nature of this crackdown was revealed in credible reports coming from the Oromia and Amhara regions that federal police were unacceptably threatening, beating and detaining opposition supporters. Indeed, international human rights groups documented that regional authorities were exaggerating their concerns about armed insurgency and "terrorism" to try to justify the torture, imprisonment and sustained harassment of critics and even ordinary citizens.

This tendency to portray political dissent as extremist uprisings has been repeated more recently with regards to what is being characterized by some as a brutal counterinsurgency operation led by Ethiopia's military in the Ogaden, a long-neglected region that borders Somalia. Certainly I recognize the serious security concerns in this region, made worse by the porous borders of the failed state just a stone's throw away.

But it is precisely because Ethiopia is our partner in the fight against al Qaeda, its affiliates and allies, Mr. President, that I am so concerned about what I understand to be a massive military crackdown that does not differentiate between rebel groups and civilians. While I am sure there are few clean hands when it comes to fighting in the Ogaden region, the reports I have received about the Ethiopian government's illicit military tactics and

human rights violations are of great concern.

I have been hearing similar reports of egregious human rights abuses being committed in Somalia, about which I am gravely concerned. When I visited Ethiopia just over a year, I urged the Prime Minister not to send his troops into Somalia because I thought it might make instability there worse, not better. Tragically, more than a year later, it seems my worst fears have been realized as tens of thousands of people have fled their homes, humanitarian access is at an all time low, and there are numerous reports of increasing brutality towards civilians caught in the crossfire. In the interest of its own domestic security, Ethiopia is contributing to increased regional instability.

Mr. President, what troubles me most is that the reports of Ethiopia's military coming out of the Ogaden and Mogadishu join a long list of increasingly repressive actions taken by the Ethiopian government. The Bush Administration must not turn a blind eye to the aggressive – and recurring – tactics being utilized by one of our key allies to stifle dissent.

I certainly welcome the role the Bush Administration has played in helping to secure the release of many -- although not all -- of the individuals thrown in jail in the aftermath of the 2005 elections. I welcome the Embassy's engagement with opposition members and their efforts to encourage Ethiopian officials to create more political space for alternative views, independent media, and civil society. These are all important steps Mr. President, but they do not go far enough.

The Administration's efforts at backroom diplomacy, Mr. President, are not working. I understand and respect the value of quiet diplomacy, but sometimes we reach the point where such a strategy is rendered ineffective – when private rhetorical commitments are repeatedly broken by unacceptable public actions. For example, recent reports that the Ethiopian government is jamming our Voice of America radio broadcasts should be

condemned in no uncertain terms, not shrugged off.

The Bush administration must live up to its own rhetoric in promoting democracy and human rights by making it clear that we do not – and will not -- tolerant the Ethiopian government's abuses and illegal behavior. It must demonstrate that there are consequences for the repressive and often brutal tactics employed by the Ethiopian government, which are moving Ethiopia farther away from – not closer to – the goal of becoming a legitimate democracy and are increasingly a source of regional instability.

Mr. President, I'm afraid that the failure of this Administration to acknowledge the internal crisis in Ethiopia is emblematic of its narrow-minded agenda, which will have repercussions for years to come if not addressed immediately. Worse yet, without a balanced US policy that addresses both short- and long-term challenges to stability in Ethiopia, we run the risk of contributing to the groundswell of proxy wars rippling across the Horn – whether in Somalia, eastern Sudan, or even the Ogaden region. And those wars, in turn, by contributing to greater insecurity on the Horn and providing opportunities for forces that oppose U.S. interests, pose a direct threat to our own national security as well.

I yield the floor.