



August 4, 2021

The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas
Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Nebraska Avenue Complex
3801 Nebraska Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20395

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
Harry S. Truman Building
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

RE: REQUEST FOR NEW 18-MONTH DESIGNATION OF TPS FOR ETHIOPIA

Dear Secretary Mayorkas and Secretary Blinken:

The below 84 organizations request an immediate 18-month designation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Ethiopia. Escalating violence and the devolving humanitarian crisis brought on by conflict make safe return to Ethiopia impossible at this time. President Biden has stated, “[I am] deeply concerned by the escalating violence and the hardening of regional and ethnic divisions in multiple parts of Ethiopia,” with regard to the devolving crisis.¹ Despite the July 2021 announcement of the withdrawal of Ethiopian government forces from the Tigray region, a rejected ceasefire from Tigrayan leaders and persistent famine allude to a worsening humanitarian crisis with little hope of political reconciliation or relief for starving populations.² Looming famine conditions, latent tensions threatening to resurface in ethnically divisive regions, and reverberations of recurring conflict between the government and society warrant TPS for Ethiopia.

Additionally, we raise racial equity concerns towards DHS’s inaction on new TPS designations for countries with majority Black populations, including Mauritania, Cameroon, and the Bahamas. President Biden’s commitment to advance racial equity across America must include Black immigrants, including TPS designations for countries like Ethiopia. Importantly, as a blanket protection, TPS fills in the gaps for those who may have slipped through the cracks of the asylum system, making designations particularly essential to protect Black immigrants who are affected by systemic racism in the U.S. asylum system.

I. Ethiopia’s Ongoing and Devolving Armed Conflict Makes Safe Return Impossible

Ethiopia has experienced a flare up of civil unrest and violence since the end of 2020. In November 2020, fighting between the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front Regional Security Force (TPLF) resulted in widespread reports of human rights abuse in the northern Tigray region.³ There are numerous reports of attacks against civilians included: unlawful or arbitrary killings by security forces and private entities; forced disappearances by unnamed armed groups; torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or

¹ *Statement by President Joe Biden on the Crisis in Ethiopia*, The White House, May 26, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/26/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-the-crisis-in-ethiopia/>.

² International Crisis Group, “As Ethiopian Troops Exit Tigray, Time to Focus on Relief,” July 2021.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/ethiopian-troops-exit-tigray-time-focus-relief>

³ *2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ethiopia*, U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, March 30, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ethiopia/>.

degrading treatment or punishment by the government, including a high incidence of gender-based violence such as rape and assault, and more.⁴ Civilians find themselves caught between violence from multiple actors, including government security forces, paramilitary groups, and rebel forces.⁵ Forces committing human rights violations have been allowed to act with impunity, with the government failing to prosecute or effectively act to stop the violence.⁶

Since January 2020, government security forces, including ENDF and Oromia regional police forces, have carried out counterinsurgency operations in western and southern Oromia region.⁷ There are widespread reports of extrajudicial killings, mass arrests and detentions, and government violence against ethnic Oromo civilians, accused of supporting the armed rebel group the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA). Protests also broke out in eastern Oromia in response to the continued detention of prominent Oromo opposition leaders.⁸ Security forces arrested, beat, and used excessive force against protesters, and reportedly killed over 40 people.⁹ The Ethiopian government has instituted phone and internet communication blackouts as well as restrictions on air and road access.¹⁰ As of 2020, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) released a report concluding that there were more than 1.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country, with the conflict being the primary cause of displacement.¹¹

As the situation continues to devolve, there is simply nowhere left to go for citizens to escape the fighting. The U.S. State Department has issued travel advisories for ten regions of the country, which borders every country surrounding Ethiopia. Areas include the Tigray, Amhara, and Afar regions, as well as others that are high-risk due to “terrorism, landmines, crime, kidnapping, armed conflict, and civil unrest.”¹² There is even conflict in the capital, Addis Ababa. An attack on journalist Abebe Bayu highlights the stress on the press and press freedoms in the country.¹³ Further, last year’s murder of popular Oromo artist and political activist Hachalu Hundessa sparked additional protests and unrest.¹⁴ Ethnic and communal violence is central in Ethiopia’s ongoing conflict. Longstanding unresolved grievances and increasing polarization lead to deadly conflict between Amhara and Oromo groups.¹⁵ Afar and Somali communities also routinely clash over border demarcations and access to land and resources, claiming civilian lives in the process.¹⁶

II. Famine Caused by Conflict and Natural Disaster Makes Safe Return Impossible

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kenneth Roth, *Ethiopia: Events of 2020*, Human Rights Watch, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/ethiopia#>.

⁸ *Ethiopia: Opposition Figures Held Without Charge - Police Deny Lawyers, Relatives Access; Ignore Bail Orders*, Human Rights Watch, August 15, 2021,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/15/ethiopia-opposition-figures-held-without-charge>.

⁹ Kenneth Roth, *Ethiopia*.

¹⁰ OCHA Ethiopia, *Humanitarian Access Situation Report*, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, June 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ocha_access_200724_situation_report_april_june_final.pdf.

¹¹ *2020 Country Reports*.

¹² OCHA Ethiopia, *Humanitarian Access Situation Report*, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, June 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ocha_access_200724_situation_report_april_june_final.pdf.

¹³ “Ethiopian journalist Abebe Bayu abducted and assaulted by unidentified men,” Committee to Protect Journalists, July 1, 2021, <https://cpj.org/2021/07/ethiopian-journalist-abebe-bayu-abducted-and-assaulted-by-unidentified-men/>.

¹⁴ Jason Burke and Zecharias Zelalem, “Ethiopia falls into violence a year after leader’s Nobel peace prize win,” *The Guardian*, August 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/29/ethiopia-falls-into-violence-a-year-after-leaders-nobel-peace-prize-win>

¹⁵ Kenneth Roth, *Ethiopia*.

¹⁶ “One Person Killed, Seven Wounded During Gunfire in Dire Dawa City,” *Ezega News*, January 22, 2020, <https://www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/7675/One-Person-Killed-Seven-Wounded-During-Gunfire-in-Dire-Dawa-City>.

According to the United Nations, more than 350,000 people in Ethiopia's war-torn Tigray are experiencing "catastrophic" famine, with millions more at risk.¹⁷ Over 60 percent of the population, more than 5.5 million people, grapple with high levels of acute food insecurity in Tigray and the neighboring districts of Amhara and Afar. The UN World Food Programme states that of these, two million people are suffering from high malnutrition that could turn to starvation.¹⁸ Conflict is the key cause of acute food insecurity in Tigray and has led to massive population displacement, destruction of livelihoods and critical infrastructure, and loss of employment; it has also limited access to markets.¹⁹

According to the IOM, drought is currently the second-largest cause of displacement in Ethiopia. In addition to conflict, droughts displaced 351,062 persons, followed by seasonal floods (104,696) and flash floods (50,093).²⁰ The United Nations and the Ethiopian government have helped about two million people in recent months in northern Ethiopia, mainly in government-controlled areas. However, in places controlled by non-governmental militia groups, it is extremely difficult to deliver aid.²¹

President Biden cited the UN Office of Humanitarian Affairs' warning that Ethiopia could experience its first famine since the 1980s because of this protracted conflict. He stated, "all parties, in particular the Ethiopian and Eritrean forces, must allow immediate, unimpeded humanitarian access to the region in order to prevent widespread famine."²²

Beyond food insecurity, nearly 70 percent of health facilities in Ethiopia's conflict-hit northern region of Tigray have been vandalized and equipment looted.²³ Only 13 percent of 106 facilities that teams from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) visited between December 2020 and early March were operating normally. MSF also suffered the loss of three employees when they were killed by unknown assailants in the Tigray region, demonstrating the danger aid agencies are experiencing.²⁴ Further, border shutdowns due to the coronavirus pandemic have negatively impacted Ethiopia's economy. The economy, already overstretched by the ongoing desert locust infestation, crop loss, ethnic tension, and debt distress, has lost over US \$190 million because of the pandemic.²⁵

This cascade of major crises has also thrown elections into disarray, leaving millions unable to vote. "The boycott of the elections by opposition parties, the detention of vocal political leaders, and the ongoing violence underscore the need to launch an inclusive effort to build a national consensus on the governance of Ethiopia that preserves the sovereignty and unity of the state and strengthens the constitutional order," stated Secretary of State Blinken.²⁶ While the United States stands ready to assist Ethiopia, electoral injustices will likely contribute to ongoing violence and famine.

¹⁷ "UN agencies concerned by looming famine in northern Ethiopia, call for urgent life-saving action to avert it," World Food Programme, June 10, 2021,

<https://www.wfp.org/news/un-agencies-concerned-looming-famine-northern-ethiopia-call-urgent-life-saving-action-avert-it>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *2020 Country Reports*.

²¹ Edith Lederer, "UN: Famine is imminent in Ethiopia's embattled Tigray region," AP News, June 5, 2021,

<https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-africa-ethiopia-famine-business-242450fa4a93719809688f83ecb9b2ac>.

²² *Statement by President Joe Biden*.

²³ "People left with few healthcare options in Tigray as facilities looted, destroyed," Médecins Sans Frontières, March 15, 2021,

<https://www.msf.org/health-facilities-targeted-tigray-region-ethiopia>.

²⁴ Duncan Miriri, "Three MSF employees killed in Ethiopia's Tigray, aid agency says," Reuters, June 25, 2021.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/three-msf-employees-killed-ethiopia-tigray-aid-agency-says-2021-06-25/>

²⁵ "Is Ethiopia headed for a multifaceted crisis?" *The Economist*, March 27, 2020,

<http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1219274305>.

²⁶ *Statement by Antony J. Blinken on Building a Stronger Democracy in Ethiopia*, U.S. Department of State, June 25, 2021,

<https://www.state.gov/building-a-stronger-democracy-in-ethiopia/>.

III. Conclusion

Protecting Ethiopians, the second largest community of Africans in the United States, from return to untenable conditions is a vital statement to Ethiopia and our allies that our nation is restoring its commitment to human rights, globally and at home.²⁷ In addition, like many TPS holders, Ethiopians have served as essential workers during the pandemic, contributing to the economy and enriching U.S. communities.

We are calling on you to provide an 18-month TPS designation for Ethiopia, to publish a Federal Register Notice, and to launch a public information campaign to notify the impacted community of the decision and any actions they must take. We urge you not only to immediately designate protection for Ethiopia, but to implement that decision in a way that honors the dignity and humanity of the Ethiopian community in the United States. Please contact Mustafa Jumale, Co-Founder of the Black Immigrant Collective and Immigration Policy Manager of the Brooklyn Community Bail Fund at mustafajumale@gmail.com, Denise Bell, Researcher for Refugee and Migrant Rights at Amnesty International USA at dbell@aiusa.org, and Lisa Parisio, Advocacy Director at Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. at lparisio@cliniclegal.org with any questions or to arrange for stakeholder engagement. Thank you.

Sincerely,

National

Advocacy Network for Africa (AdnA)
American Friends Service Committee
Amnesty International, USA
Alianza Americas
America's Voice
Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC
Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies
Center for Victims of Torture
Church World Service
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Provinces
Disciples Immigration Legal Counsel
Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC)
Generous Heart Sangha
Haitian Bridge Alliance
HIAS
Human Rights First
Immigration Hub
Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center
Justice Action Center
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
NAACP
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Asian Pacific American Families Against Substance Abuse
National Association for Community College Entrepreneurship (NACCE)
National Council of Churches USA
National Health Law Program
National Immigrant Justice Center

²⁷ Monica Anderson, "African immigrant population in U.S. steadily climbs," Pew Research Center, February 14, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/14/african-immigrant-population-in-u-s-steadily-climbs/>.

National Network for Arab American Communities (NNAAC)
National Network for Immigrant & Refugee Rights
National Partnership for New Americans
Northeastern University School of Law Immigrant Justice Clinic
North American Climate, Conservation and Environment (NACCE)
Path With Heart
Provincial Council Clerics of St. Viator
Sisters of Charity, BVM
TASSC International
The Episcopal Church
The Advocates for Human Rights
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
United Church of Christ
United Stateless
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI)
Win Without War

State/Local

American Civic Association
Arkansas Immigrant Defense
Asylee Women Enterprise
Boston University International Human Rights Clinic
Black Immigrant Collective (BIC)
Brooklyn Community Bail Fund (BCBF)
Caminando Juntos - Presentation Sisters Hispanic Ministry
Catholic Charities Tompkins Tioga
Central American Resource Center -- CARECEN SF
Church of the Ascension
Church of Our Saviour/La Iglesia de Nuestro Salvador
Church Women United in New York State
Connecticut Shoreline Indivisible
Friends of Broward Detainees
Greater Cleveland Immigrant Support Network
Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights
Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project
Jewish Voice for Peace, Atlanta Chapter
Law Office of Helen Lawrence
LUCHA Ministries, Inc.
Migrant and Immigrant Community Action Project
Mississippi Center for Justice
New Hope Immigration Legal Services at New Hope Free Methodist Church, Rochester, NY
NH Conference United Church of Christ Immigrant and Refugee Support Group
Ohio Immigrant Alliance
Pennsylvania Council of Churches
Refugee Support Network
Rosie's Place
Sisters of Charity of Nazareth Western Province Leadership
Sisters of Charity of Nazareth Congregational Leadership
Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, LA
Sisters and Brothers of Immigrants
The Compassionate Justice Program

The Legal Project
True Alliance Center Inc
United African Organization
Ventura County Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice
WESPAC Foundation, Inc.
Westchester Jewish Coalition for Immigration
Yemeni American Merchants Association