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U.S. Policy in the Horn of Africa

James Swan, Deputy US Assistant Secretary for African Affairs

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Good afternoon, and thank you, professor for inviting me to join you in Kalamazoo. I am pleased to have this opportunity to discuss U.S. policy and engagement in the Horn of Africa. You have assembled an impressive and distinguished group of panelists for this important conference.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

As all of you know, the Horn of Africa is a rough neighborhood. At least one conflict – and frequently more – has raged in the region continuously since 1960. Inter-state conventional wars. Guerrilla-style liberation struggles. Coups. Revolutions. The Horn has seen them all. It is also a region that has suffered historically from poor governance -- from the brutal excesses of Ethiopia's Derg, to authoritarian one-party systems in much of the region until the 1990s, to the lawlessness of the failed state of Somalia after the fall of Siad Barre. Winner-take-all politics and violent regime change have been the norm. And this historically unstable political and security climate has been a profound impediment to economic development.

The Horn ranks near the bottom in the world – and indeed below the rest of Africa - on Human Development indicators. The region is ecologically and economically fragile. Its peoples face the challenges of overwhelming dependence on rain-fed agriculture, as regular droughts trigger cyclical famines. Yet, despite these longstanding challenges, in most of the region we see signs of progress. Djibouti has held peaceful elections; its port has become an economic hub; and the government has become a partner in counterterrorism efforts. Somalia's Transitional Federal Government offers the best hope for peace and stability in the last 20 years. Ethiopia has made progress on democratic governance with the release of political party detainees and parliamentary discussions on electoral and media reform.

Kenya, which has been spared the conflicts that have impeded the development of its neighbors, has become an economic powerhouse, has made tremendous strides to consolidate democracy, and plays a lead role in complex regional peace initiatives. Moreover, all of these countries and governments are increasingly close partners of the United States in the Horn of Africa.

The glaring exception to this favorable story is of course Eritrea, which openly abuses its population and serves as a destabilizing force in the region. I'll come to that later. While progress is fitful, and additional diplomatic and aid resources will be necessary to sustain success, the overall trajectory of the Horn is positive.

In keeping with Secretary Rice's concept of Transformational Diplomacy, United States government policy in the region focuses on partnership, while promoting regional stability and security, strengthening democratic processes and institutions, fostering economic growth, expanding the scope and quality of basic services, and responding to the humanitarian needs of vulnerable populations.

The Horn is a region where Muslims and Christians coexist and intermingle, and where the cultures of ancient Ethiopia, of traditional Africa, and of the Arab-influenced coastal regions have combined in different ways to create unique national and regional identities. It is a region in which all of our Embassies and their officers are working to demonstrate our respect for different faith traditions and to promote our commitment to religious tolerance, political rights, and gender equality.

While our Embassies are the U.S. Government's principal platforms for promoting effective cooperation, governance reform and sustainable development, we also have a great asset in the Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa in Djibouti. This U.S. military initiative provides a vehicle for outreach to vulnerable communities in the region and for contributing to the professionalization and effectiveness of armed forces in the Horn.

So let me now discuss current developments and some of the key U.S. interests and policies in each of the countries of the Horn.

DJIBOUTI

I'll begin with Djibouti – which rarely gets top billing in a discussion of the Horn, but will today -- and then move clockwise through the region. Djibouti, which celebrated the 30th anniversary of its independence in June, in many ways epitomizes both the progress and the challenges we see on the Horn.

With the end of the conflict with the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD) in the 1990s, and the return of the Front's leader to Djibouti in 2000, Djibouti has moved beyond violent conflict. General elections in 1999 and 2003 were orderly and peaceful, despite a boycott by the major opposition coalition. Some opposition members are represented in local and regional councils. More needs to be done to open up political space and ensure that all citizens have a voice in government decisions. But the transition from armed combat to political competition is a positive step.

On the economic front, Djibouti remains a poor country with per capita income below \$1000. Yet it has a vision for development of its key assets – its port and strategic location along major sea-transport routes. Port tonnage – which tripled after the 1998 Eritrea-Ethiopia border war which cut access to Assab – has increase 30 percent per year between 2002 and 2004 under new management of Djibouti port. And Djibouti aspires to become an international hub for transit cargo serving not only the horn of Africa hinterland, but a much wider worldwide clientele.

The United States, which has long had good relations with Djibouti, has seen this partnership further deepen in recent years. Since 2002, Djibouti has hosted the only permanent U.S. military base in sub-Saharan Africa, (CJFF-HOA)... We also value Djibouti's diplomatic role in the region, as a bridge among other countries in the Horn and between African and Arab states.

So in Djibouti, we see a country that has ended a protracted violent conflict, begun important steps toward greater political openness, developed a vision for its economic future, and engaged in a close partnership with the United States.

SOMALIA

Now let me turn to Somalia – a country that, for all its problems, has perhaps the best opportunity in nearly two decades to overcome its status as a failed state. Somalia is a priority for the United States in Africa. U.S. policy is designed to promote stability in Somalia – including by preventing Somalia from again becoming a safehaven for terrorists, as it was under the Council of Islamic Courts – to support humanitarian and development needs, and to foster inclusive democratic institutions.

The key to Somalia's success will be national reconciliation to ensure inclusive representation in the Transitional Federal Institutions and in the organizations that will prepare the way for election of a permanent government in 2009, as called for by the Transitional Federal Charter.

The National Reconciliation Congress, which opened in Mogadishu on July 15 and is still ongoing, provides an opportunity for all Somalis to achieve suitable representation in the TFIs and formulate a roadmap for the remainder of the transitional period, in the run-up to national elections in 2009. In support of the National Reconciliation Congress, the United States has provided financial assistance of \$1.25 million, in coordination with other international donors. Our Ambassador in Nairobi and our Special Envoy for Somalia are in frequent contact with congress organizer Ali Mahdi Mohamed, with Transitional Federal Government leaders, with clan elders, with civil society leaders, and a wide array of other stakeholders to encourage support for this process.

We believe it is important for the Somali people to focus on the future, moving forward in the transitional political process as envisioned by the Charter, rather than focusing only on the current composition of the Transitional Federal Government and Institutions. While imperfect, the Transitional Federal Institutions provide a framework for achieving the objectives outlined in the Charter and the formation of representative governance institutions following the transitional process. We are steering clear from Somali politics and focusing on a clear message of inclusion and accommodation to all actors in Somalia.

To help stabilize Somalia and create conditions for national reconciliation, the United States strongly supports the African Union's peace support mission in Somalia. The mission currently has a lead contingent of approximately 1,600 Ugandan troops deployed as part of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

At the beginning of the year, the United States identified \$19.6 million to assist AMISOM forces. Approximately \$10 million was used to provide equipment and airlift to assist the deployment of Uganda's AMISOM contingent. Congress subsequently appropriated a further \$40 million in funding to support AMISOM.

AMISOM is important not only to help create conditions for national reconciliation, but also to permit the reduction in presence of Ethiopian forces and their eventual departure. We, the Somalis, and the Ethiopians themselves recognize that an Ethiopian military presence is not a long-term solution to insecurity in Somalia. For there to be lasting security, there must be political dialogue and accommodation among Somalis, improvements in Somali government capacity, and training and deployment of a competent and respected Somali security force.

The United States is the largest bilateral donor of humanitarian assistance to Somalia, and has provided more than \$102 million in humanitarian and development assistance this year. We also coordinate closely with other international partners diplomatically and on our international assistance programs. We were founding members of the International Contact Group on Somalia in June 2006, and also are active in the International Advisory Committee for the National Reconciliation Congress (NRC).

In short, there is an international consensus that we must seize this moment of opportunity in Somalia. The United States is a leader on both the diplomatic front and in our humanitarian and economic response.

KENYA

Next let me say just a few words about Kenya, which is not always discussed as part of the Horn of Africa, but lies on its southern edge and is an important regional player. Nairobi hosts the largest U.S. diplomatic mission in Sub-Saharan Africa, and we cooperate with the Kenyans on a wide array of both bilateral and regional programs. Our bilateral assistance program is more than \$500 million in 2007. Total resource flows from the U.S. to Kenya each year from all public and private sources amount to about \$1.5 billion.

Kenya's peaceful, credible democratic elections in 2002 represented an important step on Kenya's path to becoming a fully functional democracy. The next elections, scheduled for December 2007 offer an opportunity to consolidate those gains.

The U.S. is providing election-related training to civil society organizations, political parties, and youth and women candidates, as well as supporting the work of the Electoral Commission of Kenya to ensure that these elections are free, fair, and transparent.

Kenya is beginning to enjoy the fruits of its enviable regional reputation for stability, openness, and tolerance. Economic growth has increased to more than 6 percent in recent years, as Kenya capitalizes on its role as a major regional hub. While important challenges remain – specifically in combating corruption, moving away from tribalism, and promoting gender equity – there is a palpable sense of energy and optimism among the Kenyan people. Kenya is clearly a country on the move in a positive direction.

We have worked closely with the Kenyans diplomatically on the North-South peace agreement in Sudan and on Somalia issues, through the International Contact Group as well as bilaterally. In its capacity as President of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Kenya continues to occupy a leadership role in promoting peace and stability in the Horn of Africa. We look forward to continued close partnership.

ETHIOPIA

Now, Ethiopia, which has been the subject of your conference. With more than 70 million people, bordering all of the other Horn countries, Ethiopia is the giant of the region. Ethiopia is an important strategic partner for the United States in the Horn of Africa. We collaborate on a wide range of development objectives and in efforts to promote regional stability. We share a commitment to address threats by transnational extremist groups.

We are also eager to see progress in democratic institutions. As you know, the run-up to the May 2005 national elections was the most open, free, and competitive political campaign period in all of Ethiopian history. Never before had opposition candidates had so much access to coveted constituencies and the ability to convene rallies and openly campaign against ruling party opponents.

Opposition candidates' access to the press, including state-owned and operated media, was unprecedented. Never before had the electorate seen live, televised debates between government Ministers and their opposition challengers.

Unfortunately, this spirit was lost in the contentious aftermath of the vote, in bloody confrontations in the streets, in detention of political leaders, and in strident and uncompromising positions that for too long dominated the political leadership. As we consider the democratic challenges facing Ethiopia today, we recognize that sentiment has been so bitter precisely because of the heightened expectations prompted by two decades of political reform.

With the release of 38 detainees, and anticipated release of the remaining Coalition for Unity and Democracy leadership, and anticipated release of the remaining CUD leadership, following lengthy mediation by respected elders, Ethiopia's political leaders have committed themselves to a new collaborative relationship for the good of the country. In Addis Ababa, U.S. foreign assistance programs are bringing together leaders from across the political spectrum to address critical questions of national governance and the future of the country, build the capacity of parliament, and bolster judicial independence.

We are again seeing a cautious, yet engaged host of political parties that are committed to institutionalizing the advances of March and April 2005. That ruling and opposition parties today gather around the negotiating table to debate the relative merits of reforms of democratic institutions is extremely positive.

We must all encourage this process. As stakeholders in Ethiopia's stability, democracy, and prosperity – we urge all parties to remain engaged, so that we can regain the advances of early 2005 and build upon them for the people of Ethiopia.

Meanwhile, we continue a robust program of U.S. humanitarian and development assistance for Ethiopia. We have contributed more than \$160 million in humanitarian assistance this year to help the Ethiopian people break the cycle of famine and mitigate the impact of drought and natural disasters. With over \$300 million in assistance to the health care system in Ethiopia this year alone, we help ensure that clinics reach into previously underserved regions including Afar and the Ogaden.

With respect to the Ogaden, we are concerned that insecurity and impediments to commercial sales of commodities put the population of this fragile region at further risk. We are currently working with the government to ensure that humanitarian assistance and the more important commercial shipments can flow to the Ogaden. We note that rains have been relatively good this year, which should ease the economic hardship faced by the pastoralist population.

In conflict-prone areas, U.S. programs bring together representatives from diverse communities during periods of calm, in order to build bridges of understanding and prevent potential conflicts from erupting. We are working with local administrations to build their capacity to govern for the people and to promote transparency. We are working with the Ethiopian military to transform that organization into a professional and apolitical defense force for the nation. The challenges are many, but the objectives merit the tremendous scope of the resources, time, and commitment that we have focused on them. We are confident that through partnership with local stakeholders, together we will contribute to making Ethiopia more secure, more democratic, and more prosperous for the next generation.

A STEP BACKWARD: ERITREA

Now, let me turn to Eritrea. While the rest of the Horn of Africa is making political, economic, and social advances and seizing opportunities -- albeit with periodic important setbacks -- the opposite is true for Eritrea.

Eritrea has experienced economic decline and a lack of freedoms, for the press and political expression. There is widespread and arbitrary conscription. The government has worked to destabilize its neighbors, including Ethiopia and Somalia.

Given the American penchant for supporting the underdog, it is disheartening to see what has become of Eritrea in the 14 years since it gained independence and produced a praiseworthy constitution. President Isaias Afwerki has become increasingly tyrannical and megalomaniacal. He has actively sought to destabilize the Horn, fueling regional insurgencies and supporting groups affiliated with terrorists.

Eritrean Government policies have also choked the Eritrean economy and consolidated political power among a small cadre of cronies, who are distinguished only by their unwavering loyalty to the President.

The government has actively blocked humanitarian assistance from international donors. It initiated the border war with Ethiopia that cost tens of thousands of lives.

The Eritrean Government has fabricated a national mythology by demonizing neighboring Ethiopia, for the central purpose of garnering complete compliance with his autocratic domestic policies. By channeling Eritreans' patriotism into hostility toward Ethiopia, the government ensures that [it] can rule as it likes, without public opposition. Democracy and economic opportunity remain purely theoretical concepts for the people of Eritrea.

As you know, the reality is atrocious. Youth are sent to camps for indoctrination. Citizens in the prime of their lives are forced into national service; anyone who refuses is beaten. If you flee, your family is imprisoned. Those who fail to espouse officially sanctioned opinions languish in metal shipping containers.

As in the former Soviet Union, the Eritrean government controls both the message and the medium. There are no opposition political parties, no non-governmental organizations, no private media. Any senior government official who dares to speak out puts himself at risk. The brave individuals known as the G-15, who challenged Eritrea's path back in the spring of 2001, are missing.

Elsewhere in the region, Eritrea has chosen to support extremist elements, including the al-Qaida affiliated al Shabaab militia in Somalia, in an effort to undermine the political process. While the rest of the region and the international community have united behind a common strategy for achieving lasting peace and stability in Somalia, Eritrea has opted to support terrorists and spoilers while encouraging continued violence. There is no justification for such actions. The ruling cabal is – to our great regret -- leading Eritrea along the path toward increased domestic repression and hardship, and regional and international isolation.

BOUNDARY DISPUTE

Since the border dispute with Ethiopia serves as the pretext for Eritrea's domestic authoritarianism, let me say a final few words about how the U.S. sees this issue. This impasse has been a long-festering flashpoint between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and it is of course symptomatic of deeper divisions between the two countries. The Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) issued its delimitation decision in 2002. Yet, the two parties have still not cooperated on demarcation of the boundary. Both appear comfortable with the status quo. Ethiopia avoids painful domestic political decisions, while Eritrea uses the unresolved issue to goad Ethiopia and deflect attention from a deteriorating domestic situation.

The United States government fully supports the “final and binding” decisions of the EEBC and has consistently called on both parties to cooperate with the EEBC and meet their commitments in the Algiers Agreements. We work closely with the other Witnesses to the Algiers Agreements -- including Algeria, the African Union, the European Union, and the United Nations -- and other interested governments.

The level of urgency has increased, as the situation has recently deteriorated. Both parties remain wedded to their positions and may have hardened them. Eritrea has moved about 4,000 troops along with supporting artillery and armor into the Temporary Security Zone (TSZ), a buffer zone between the parties, and restricted the activities of UNMEE, a UN peacekeeping force. Eritrea maintains a further 120,000 troops in the vicinity, while Ethiopia has deployed about 100,000 troops along the border.

We believe it is essential for the parties to discuss directly how to implement a workable boundary regime, consistent with the decisions of the EEBC, and to address the fundamental issues that divide them. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has offered to engage the parties, and we support his initiative. The Ethiopian Government has agreed to participate in this initiative, and we urge the Eritrean government to do so as well. We will continue our efforts and support those of others to resolve this issue and remove one flash point in an already unstable region and bring the parties closer to a normalized relationship.

So, in conclusion, this is a tough neighborhood, economically fragile, with a history of violent conflict and of uncompromising politics. Huge challenges remain. Yet, overall, there is reason to be hopeful about the Horn. Progress may not be uniform, but with the exception of Eritrea, we are working in partnership with local governments toward a more peaceful and prosperous Horn of Africa.

Thank you again for inviting me to join you today, and I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.