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The opposition alleges that security forces killed 80 people in protests over the Addis Ababa and Oromia Integrated Development Master Plan. The government says it is willing to compromise over the development plan, but arrests critical journalists and opposition leaders. Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt agree to implement the March 2014 agreement for the development of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). In the most notable development, consultants will begin binding socio-economic studies of the GERD in February. The United States (US) closes its drone base in Arba Minch. The closure is the result of shifting security priorities rather than deteriorating security coordination between Ethiopia and the US.

Government appears conciliatory following crackdown in the Oromia

Opposition groups allege that security forces have killed up to 80 protesters in the **Oromia Regional State**.¹ The ruling **Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front's (EPRDF)** intolerance for formal opposition structures means there are few alternatives to raising grievances other than through protests. The protests are similar to those in April and May 2014 when security forces allegedly killed dozens of protesters (see *ARC Briefing Ethiopia May 2014*).² However,

"The recent student protests are unprecedented in both their magnitude and scope. As one opposition leader told me at the height of the crisis, it was one of the biggest threats to [stability] in more than two decades of rule."³

The protests have affected "more than 90%" of cities and towns across the Oromia Region,⁴ with the majority of violent incidents concentrated in **Babichi, Jalduu, Gulliso, Gindeberet, and Sululta**.⁵ The trigger for the protests was the attempts of local officials in the **Ginchi** area of the Oromia Region to sell **Ginchi Stadium** and transfer forest land to an investor.⁶ Security forces responded to the protests with force, escalating the violence.⁷ There are no independently verifiable casualty figures. Protesters have burned government buildings, vehicles and businesses in areas near **Addis Ababa**.⁸ Protesters additionally blocked highways and roads in many parts of the Oromia Region in the second half of November and the first half of December.⁹

"Many areas at the time seemed out of the government's control as the government was using helicopters to transport soldiers as all road access was interrupted. Soldiers were deployed as local police forces were overwhelmed with the number of protesters."¹⁰

The cause of the tension is the **Addis Ababa and Oromia Integrated Development Master Plan** that the government first published in May 2014. The plan sets out the government's vision for the

¹ The Guardian, 19 Dec 2015.

² Source, journalist, Addis Ababa

³ Source, journalist, Addis Ababa

⁴ Source, journalist, Addis Ababa

⁵ Source, journalist, Addis Ababa

⁶ Source, journalist, Addis Ababa

⁷ Source, journalist, Addis Ababa

⁸ Source, journalist, Addis Ababa

⁹ Source, journalist, Addis Ababa

¹⁰ Source, journalist, Addis Ababa

growth of Addis Ababa over the next 25 years including the development of manufacturing parks. Current finance minister **Abdulaziz Mohammed** was formerly Oromia Region deputy president, and was heavily involved in developing the plan. Protesters claim that rapidly expanding Addis Ababa will increasingly incorporate areas of Oromia, displace farmers, and undermine the **Oromia Special Zone**. The government has denied that Addis Ababa will assume any Oromia land.

The opposition has linked the protests to wider popular discontent. According to opposition figurehead **Merara Gudina**,

“In addition to the controversy surrounding the planned Addis Ababa master plan, I think the government’s repressive nature is also the main cause for the latest student protests. For me, this is an expression of the youth’s frustration with the government.”¹¹

In a possible indication of the unprecedented magnitude of the protests, the government has proved unusually conciliatory.

“The Ethiopian government has said the development plan will not be implemented if people are against it. This is in many ways uncommon for the Ethiopian government which is often regarded as unflinching for protests and opposition.”¹²

However, authorities are detaining journalists – including **Fikadu Mirkana**, a television presenter with state-owned **Oromia Radio and TV**¹³ – and opposition leaders whom they blame for the violence.¹⁴ This has resulted in suspicion that the government’s conciliatory line is simply a tactic to end the protests. The manufacturing parks at the heart of the development plan, under the control of the state-owned **Industrial Park Development Corp**, are key to the government’s **Growth and Transformation Plan II (GTP II)**.

“The Ethiopian government seemed to have been genuinely alarmed by the level of protests in the Oromia Region, the largest of Ethiopia’s Federal States. It, however, remains to be seen whether officials will succumb to fears of the protests and abandon the idea at all or try another tactic to implement the controversial development plan that they say will enable them to cope with an increasing land demand here [in Addis Ababa].”¹⁵

Tripartite agreement facilitates Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

Ethiopia, **Sudan** and **Egypt** have agreed to implement the March 2014 regional declaration of principles for the development of the \$4.6 billion **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)**. The tripartite committee agreement will facilitate the completion of the 6000 MW GERD, currently scheduled for the second quarter of 2017. Since prime minister **Hailemariam Desalegn** (2012-present), Egyptian president **Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi** (2014- present) and Sudanese president **Omar al Bashir** (1989- present) signed the agreement, the committee has not enacted the principles. The declaration of principles includes priority to downstream countries for electricity generated, and compensation for damage caused.

“The advantage in any river is held by the upstream riparian [Ethiopia]. It is they who have priority on extractions; it is their externalities that flow downstream. At its heart, the dispute has always been inherently economic meaning a political solution was always feasible.”¹⁶

The implementation agreement followed three days of talks between the foreign and water ministers of the three states in **Khartoum** (Sudan).¹⁷ The talks were originally scheduled to last only two days but extended into a third day due to disagreement over the consultants appointed to complete a

¹¹ Source, journalist, Addis Ababa

¹² Source, journalist, Addis Ababa

¹³ BBC, 28 Dec 2015.

¹⁴ BBC, 28 Dec 2015.

¹⁵ Source, journalist, Addis Ababa

¹⁶ Source, academic, UK

¹⁷ Sudan Tribune, 28 Dec 2015.

binding report on the GERD's environmental and social impact. The three riparian states had in April 2014 appointed **France**-based **BRL Ingénierie** and **Netherlands**-based research institute **Deltares** to conduct the study. However, when Deltares withdrew, the parties appointed France-based **Artelia Group** to replace it.¹⁸ Uncertainty over the study hampered the work of the tripartite committee, which had little to show for its efforts in 2015.

The choice of consultant is divisive. The consultant will be responsible for hydrological modelling, the most contentious outstanding issue. Egypt is concerned about the speed with which Ethiopia fills the GERD reservoir, warning that if it does so too quickly, it will have a negative impact on the **Aswan High Dam**, which Egypt depends upon for both electricity generation and irrigation.¹⁹ Egypt has claimed that the Aswan reservoir will decrease 16% as the GERD negatively impacts water flow.²⁰ Ethiopia has said that it will sell cheap electricity to Egypt to offset the impact. However, this would not address Egyptian concerns about the impact of water shortages on the agriculture sector. The original **International Panel of Experts (IPE)** that reported in May 2013 investigated the issue, but acknowledged shortcomings in its own hydrological modeling, and Egypt has largely rejected the IPE findings.²¹ BRL and Artelia will begin their studies in February, and will take between six and 15 months to complete the report.²² A potential problem is that the consultants may report after work on the GERD dam is complete. Ethiopia's original strategy during its disagreements with Egypt over the GERD was to insist that work had progressed too far to allow revisions to its design.²³ This may deter future compromise.

Both Egypt and Ethiopia are demonstrating more conciliatory stances over the GERD than previously under former president **Mohamed Morsi** (2012-2013) when Egyptian pressure resulted in donor governments and international financial institutions withholding financing.²⁴ In March 2014, Egypt resumed attendance of the **World Bank**-backed **Nile Basin Initiative (NBI)** which provides a forum to resolve disputes and secure financing for Nile projects. Nine of the Nile's riparian states formed the NBI in 1999 to facilitate the codification of a treaty covering equitable use and benefit from the river. In May 2010, five upstream states signed a cooperative framework agreement to replace colonial era treaties that allocated Egypt a disproportionate amount of the Nile's waters and allowed it to veto upstream projects that would impact on its "*historical and natural rights*".²⁵ In response, Egypt suspended its participation in the NBI. In addition to Egyptian representatives attending NBI meetings, Sisi in March 2015 addressed the Ethiopian parliament calling for greater cooperation and joint responsibility over shared water supplies.²⁶

Italy-based **Salini Impregilo SpA** is constructing the GERD, which the state-owned **Ethiopian Electric Power (EEP)** will own and operate. In January 2013, state-owned defence company **Metals and Engineering Corp (Metec)** awarded France-based **Euronext Paris**-listed power equipment manufacturer **Alstom SA** a €250m (\$325m) contract for the supply and installation of all electromechanical equipment at the GERD.

United States closes Ethiopia drone base

The **United States (US)** has confirmed the closure of its unmanned aerial vehicle (drone) base in **Arba Minch (Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State)**.²⁷ The closure in September 2015 reflects shifting US security priorities, rather than a change in its relationship with

¹⁸ Sudan Tribune, 28 Dec 2015.

¹⁹ Source, academic, UK

²⁰ Executive Intelligence Review, 10 Oct 2014.

²¹ Source, academic, UK

²² Sudan Tribune, 28 Dec 2015.

²³ Source, academic, UK

²⁴ Source, journalist, Addis Ababa

²⁵ 1929 treaty with Great Britain

²⁶ Al Ahram, 25 Mar 2015.

²⁷ www.defenceweb.co.za

the Ethiopian government, which remains a key regional ally in the **Horn of Africa**. The US upgraded a civilian airport in Arba Minch base in 2011 to fly armed **MQ-9** reaper drones on counterterrorism missions in **Somalia**.²⁸ The drones were under the authority of the **Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)** with a small number of US air force personnel based in Arba Minch.²⁹ Arba Minch is the only drone base in Ethiopia that the Ethiopian government officially acknowledges.³⁰ In public statements, both Ethiopian and US officials say that the Ethiopian government requested the closure of the Arba Minch base.³¹ The closure of the drone base was unexpected. Three months earlier, the **US Air Force** had signed a \$6.7m three-year contract with a local tourist lodge to provide housing for its personnel.³²

However, the closure appears part of a wider US re-evaluation of strategy in the region. In October 2015 the US stopped flying armed drones from **Chabelley Airfield** in **Djibouti**, the base of the **60th Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron**.³³ Though established to carry out flights over Somalia, the squadron was increasingly flying over **Iraq** and **Syria** instead.³⁴ US military aircraft continue to fly from **Camp Lemonnier** in Djibouti, its only official permanent base in **Africa** and headquarters to the **Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa** of the **US Africa Command (Africom)**.³⁵

There is increased pressure on the US to prioritise the deployment of its limited number of drones and drone pilots to combat the **Islamic State** in the **Middle East** and **North Africa**, and – to a lesser extent – **Boko Haram** in **Nigeria** and **Cameroon**.³⁶ US drone strikes targeting the **al Shabaab** leadership achieved a number of successes, notably killing leader **Sheikh Ahmed Godane (Abu Zubayr)** in September 2014. Since then, however, the group has adopted a more devolved system of leadership that requires less communication and makes it harder to target accurate drone strikes.³⁷ The **African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM)** has privately questioned the value of US drone strikes which often triggered al Shabaab retaliatory attacks against AMISOM forces.³⁸

Implications

The government is unlikely to reverse the Addis Ababa and Oromia Integrated Development Master Plan. Key figures close to Hailemariam support it. Finance minister Abdulaziz was heavily involved in its design, while Industrial Park Development Corp chairman **Arkebe Oqubay** is a special advisor to Hailemariam who appointed him state industry minister. The protests are indicative of longer term political risk in Ethiopia, with the EPRDF's unwillingness to usher in political liberalisation increasing the risk of ethnic divisions and social unrest in the medium term.

The regional benefits of the GERD's power exports – especially to Egypt, which is facing an acute power shortage – will ensure that pragmatic cooperation continues until a final agreement is in place. The Ethiopian economy will benefit from GERD exports by 2021, providing a regular source of hard currency.

The closure of the drone base does not indicate a significant change in the relationship between the US and Ethiopia. Ethiopia will remain a key western ally as long as it remains a bulwark against militancy in Somalia. This will continue to shield it from western criticism of its human rights record amid continued crackdowns on opposition journalists and leaders.

²⁸ www.defenceweb.co.za

²⁹ www.defenceweb.co.za

³⁰ www.defenceweb.co.za

³¹ www.defenceweb.co.za

³² WSJ, 4 Jan 2015.

³³ www.defenceweb.co.za

³⁴ www.tomdispatch.com

³⁵ Source, security analyst, US

³⁶ www.defenceweb.co.za

³⁷ Source, security analyst, US

³⁸ Source, security analyst, US

About Africa Risk Consulting:

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