**John Torpey** 00:06

Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies that brings scholarly and diplomatic expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. My name is John Torpey, and I'm director of the Ralph Bunche Institute at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

**John Torpey** 00:26

Today we examine the military conflict and humanitarian crisis in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. In order to explore that issue, we're fortunate to have with us today Brita Wagener, who served as Ambassador of Germany to Ethiopia and the African Union during 2017-2020. She returned to Germany in mid-2020. Before that, she was German Consul General in New York, from 2014 to 2017, where I had the privilege to get to know her. She was before that Ambassador of Germany to Iraq from 2012 to 2014, and Consul General in Istanbul, Turkey, during 2009 to 2012. She had a number of diplomatic and governmental postings prior to those tours, and graduated with a law degree from the University of Bonn in 1978. Thank you so much for taking the time to be with us, Ambassador Brita Wagener.

**John Torpey** 01:31

So we're hearing and reading reports of very serious violence and starvation in the Tigray region, which is in the northern part of Ethiopia, and just south of Eritrea, which itself, of course, just recently became a separate state. Could you please start us off by describing this situation in the Tigray at present?

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 01:53

Well, thank you very much, John, it's a pleasure being with you. Thank you for having me on this a bit complicated topic. First of all, let me point out Ethiopia is a very complex country with about 80 ethnic groups and languages and a history of, well, ethnic conflict.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 02:18

So you were mentioning the violent conflict that broke out at the beginning of November last year. The military operation led by the central Ethiopian Defence Forces started after the regional forces from Tigray attacked the Northern Command of the Ethiopian defense forces.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 02:54

Prime Minister Abiy, who ordered that operation, calls it a law and order operation, meaning to restore, as he says, law and order and to implement the legal order. But it's coming more and more to light that it's not only Ethiopian defense forces that are involved, but also Eritrean troops that are present in Tigray; nobody really knows how many. And militias from a neighboring regional state; from the Amhara regional state. And there has been a long history of conflict also between the Amharas and the Tigrays.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 03:39

I have to say that the information situation is still very difficult. This all happened after complete communication cut off. Tigray has been cut off for weeks; nobody was able to get in and to get information out. All telephone lines were blocked, the internet was cut off. So it was very difficult to know what was really going on. We always had the so-called propaganda from both sides and it was difficult to really find out what was the reality.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 04:17

Then the central forces claimed that the operation was over. When they took over Mek'ele, which is the capital of the region of Tigray at the end of November, the federal government and others said they were beginning to reconstruct and there was not much damage among civilians done anyhow. But we all know, and this is very clear, [that] even with a difficult information situation, that the fighting goes on.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 04:52

And hundred-thousands are displaced within Tigray. They were fleeing the battles. There are about 60,000 refugees who went to Sudan. And as I said, Eritrean forces and Amhara militias are fighting the Tigrayan Defense Forces, the regional forces, as they have probably partly withdrawn into the bushes; into the bush. They have a long history of fighting in the civil war in the end of the 80s, or in the 80s, when they were fighting the communist regime and others. So the Tigrayans, and it's called the TPLF (the Tigray People's Liberation Front) have a long history of freedom fighting.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 06:07

So the TPLF forces are hiding probably somewhere. But there are also young people -- that's what I just heard recently -- young people who are not affiliated to the TPLF itself, who are ready to fight and who are hiding.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 06:25

The situation in the region is quite dramatic; killing, looting, rape. The federal government has admitted that there were lots of gender based violence and rape going on. The federal president has visited Mek'ele and had met with victims. There are massacres, which start to being investigated. But each side is claiming that the other part is responsible. And that's why there are lots of demands for an impartial international investigation. But the government is, for the time being, of course, not willing to accept that.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 07:17

What is very worrying, it seems to me is that it's not really confined to Tigray, but that there is a racial profiling against Tigrayans going on all over Ethiopia, where there were lots of Tigrayans living outside of Tigray. As Ethiopia is one country with federal regions, but there were lots of Tigrayans living in Addis, for example, and they were harassed by the Administration. They were hindered to leave the country and things like this. They were harassed by the tax authorities and so on.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 08:02

So this adds to a lot of ongoing ethnic problems in the country already. And with the displacement in the region and the destruction of a lot of infrastructure, there is a very dire humanitarian situation. There is a lot of information about people starving, because it seems that, soldiers, no one really knows who -- there is a lot of people are claiming that the Eritrean soldiers have burned harvests and destroyed infrastructure, destroyed hospitals. The farmers have not been able to work in the field. So the probably the next harvest will not yield many results. So people really don't have enough to eat in parts of the countryside. And on top of it, there was a locust problem that they had at the same time.

**John Torpey** 09:25

I was just going to ask. You've given us some numbers, I think you said 60,000, who had fled to Sudan. I wonder whether you could just give us some rough numbers insofar -- I know that the information supply is not very good-- but I mean how many people are being killed? How many people are displaced? How many people are you concerned about starvation?

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 09:50

Being killed? I don't know whether there are already any figures. But this place, it goes into the hundred-thousands within Tigray. So are the internally displaced. And in Tigray the population is about six to seven million people and the humanitarian organizations have given the figures of about half of the population depending on and food aid and assistance.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 10:28

But the problem was that they could get to the people in need. Now, the government is slowly -- the central government is slowly allowing people back in. But humanitarians say that it's still difficult to reach really the people partly also because there is still fighting going on. They are letting people in, for example, there has been just a group of ambassadors from Addis visiting Tigray, but mainly Mek'ele. I think the capital, where humanitarians can go in again, and journalists, international journalists have also been allowed. But there has been a backlash also on that because local correspondents, stringers of those international correspondents, have been arrested, for example.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 11:22

So the situation, as far as the human rights situation, as far as the humanitarian situation is concerned, is very serious. And it is serious also that the international community is hardly taking notice of it. I mean, it started with the new American administration; they are taking a closer look. The EU does, but everybody was pretty reluctant because the information was so difficult to get to assert what was really going on on the ground.

**John Torpey** 12:01

You've hinted a little bit at some of the history here, that the history goes back before November 4, when the current episode began. Maybe you could tell us a little bit more about that. And you mentioned that there were 88 ethnic groups and/or languages. It sounds like a pretty complicated place. So maybe you could just review for those of us who are not that familiar with Ethiopia and Eritrea now, what the background is historically?

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 12:32

Yeah. Since the beginning of the 90s, when the communist regime was abolished, the TPLF --that means a Tigrayan organization-- was dominating the political setup in Ethiopia. They governed the country in a quite authoritarian manner. A lot of other ethnic groups felt marginalized and alienated. So, how did they govern? They had the key positions in government, but also in all these security operators like the army, the police, the intelligence services.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 13:27

That is also why among the other ethnic groups, the TPLF which became kind of a political, not, not kind of, which became a political party, was not very much liked among the other ethnic groups in Ethiopia. And that was also one of the reasons why, after a lot of unrest in the country, in 2018, Prime Minister Abiy came to power. He belongs to the majority ethnic group of the country, of the Oromos. And it was mainly the Oromo youngsters who brought him to office and whose expectations about his governance was very very high.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 14:23

Prime Minister Abiy really introduced a lot and a big number of reforms at the beginning. It looked very positive. He was inviting the exiled opposition to come back, he was releasing political prisoners. A number of legislation was changed, like the law that governs the activities of non-governmental organizations. So it looked very positive. And then in 2008, still also in 2018, he reached out to Eritrea; to President Isaias, for peace --the two countries had been living in a kind of a state of non-peace/non-war since 2000 after a hot war between 1998 and 2000.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 15:19

So, things looked really good. But the TPLF, the political representation of Tigray, was very suspicious of what he was doing. They feared that he wanted to change the ethnic federalism, which the constitution laid down and to establish a rather authoritarian unitary state where they would lose more power even. The Tigrayans, the TPLF was the force that lost most with Abiy coming to power and all the changes that came with it.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 16:04

And then in 2019, I guess end of 2019, Prime Minister Abiy also changed the party system. Until then, it were federal parties from different regions who formed kind of a coalition who was running the government. And Abiy, set up a unitarian party; the Prosperity Party, where a lot of those regional parties merged in it, but the TPLF always refused to go along.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 16:45

So that was one of the first very open clashes between Abiy and the and the forces of the TPLF, the political elite of Tigray. So they didn't go along. They, by the way, did not appreciate Abiy's political course at all. I've met people, I mean, leaders in Tigray who were very outspoken that Abiy was not able to lead the country and to do what was necessary.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 17:17

And then the tensions between the central government and the TPLF really escalated when Abiy postponed the elections, which should have taken place in 2020. They were supposed to be in May, then they postponed them until August. But then, pretending that due to COVID, he postponed them indefinitely. Now it seems that they are supposed to happen in June of this year, but we don't know yet.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 17:58

So this was not accepted by the the TPLF. They then said, "Well, if you don't hold elections then - because the term of the government and the parliament expired - your government is illegitimate". And they organized their own regional elections, which Abiy said were unconstitutional, but they went ahead, nevertheless. But then Prime Minister Abiy said the government that came out the regional government, that came out of those elections, was illegitimate.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 18:34

So it escalated step by step. There were a lot of rumors going on already in 2019 that the Tigrayans were arming militias, but also that the Amharas were arming militias and training militias who had border issues with Tigray. And a long standing tension also between the two ethnic groups. So Tigray felt sandwiched, in a way, between the federal government in Addis and Eritrea.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 19:12

And this is sometimes difficult to understand for people. Because, ethnically, the majority of the Eritreans and Tigrayans are the same people. But after Eritrea became independent in 1993, very soon, the relationship turned sour. And there were various issues. But people also say there was a very clear, a very personal enmity between the then Prime Minister of Ethiopia Meles Zenawi who was a Tigrayan, of course, who was the leader of the TPLF, and president Isaias from Eritrea. That broke out into a hot war in 1998 with a big number of casualties; nobody really knows the [exact] figures [but they] vary from 50,000 to 300,000 who lost their lives in that war.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 20:21

Then there was a kind of a peace agreement also regulating border issues between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which is Tigray, because almost the whole border is with Tigray. So this this peace agreement was never really honored by the by the Ethiopians, they would have to give back territory along the border and other things.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 20:52

And then all of a sudden in 2018, Prime Minister Abiy reached out to President Isaias and said: "Well, I am ready to to accept that peace agreement". And they signed kind of a peace agreement, which was not never very substantial. But the borders were opened; it was I think in September 2018 the borders were open. Telecommunication was reintroduced. Flights were resumed and diplomatic relations were resumed. And that was a huge euphoria in both countries, because people who hadn't met for decades, could finally meet again.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 21:36

But then this did not really last very long; the borders were closed again, while telephone lines were still open. But because Eritrea is a very, very dictatorial regime, they cannot just take a plane. They need a permit, they don't get a permit. That's why there are lots of refugees from Eritrea, also in Ethiopia, but also leaving for Western countries.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 22:09

So the old rivalry between Tigray and Eritrea was back. Tigray felt left out in this outreach by Abiy towards the Eritreans; they have never been consulted, even though they are the neighbor and they had a very difficult relationship with the Eritreans and with President Isaias in particular. And on the other hand, it was very clear that what President Isaias expected when he accepted this offer of Prime Minister Abiy to make peace was that Ethiopia would finish the TPLF, which really was his archenemy. And that's obviously a little bit of what's happening now.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 23:02

And that that's the reason why the Eritreians are so heavily involved, it's difficult to understand why, but this goes back to the war in between 1998 and 2000. And all that came after it. So that makes it, also with Sudan, and Eritrea involved, it makes it kind of an international conflict.

**John Torpey** 23:27

Right. Well, that leads to the question that I really wanted to ask now. And it's all the more relevant since I see that you were also Ambassador to the African Union, which I didn't really realize that was also part of your portfolio. So, the question basically is: What can international organizations do here? And to what extent is it an international conflict that they have sort of the right to get involved in? I mean, the African Union, I gather, there's been the adoption of a sort of non-indifference principle, which is somewhat similar to the notion of the Responsibility to Protect. Is there a kind of role for the African Union or the Security Council of the United Nations?

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 24:18

Well, first of all, I definitely think that it is not just a domestic issue. I mean, the Government of Prime Minister Abiy claims that. But, as I said, Sudan --and it's not only that refugees have have fled to Sudan-- but they're also there. There is fighting over the border between Sudan and Tigray and that has aggravated since the military operation in Tigray because the Sudanese --well, it's very difficult also there to know-- but probably the Sudanese felt the opportunity to enter, the forces, to enter territory, which is claimed by both sides because the Ethiopian forces had moved to Tigray, because they were needed there. So this created kind of a vacuum which the Sudanese, it seems that the Sudanese took the opportunity to go in.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 25:25

So there is conflict lingering between Sudan and Ethiopia. And this has been aggravated by the conflict. Eritrea, I already mentioned that they have troops on the ground, and it seems to have massively troops on the ground. And there are lots of information which makes us believe that there are committed crimes against humanity, and maybe kind of war crimes.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 26:00

So this all justifies activities of the international community, and according to my view, even of the Security Council of the United Nations. But I think for very general reasons and considerations, this would be very difficult, because probably the Chinese and the Russians would never agree. They would say it is a domestic affair, and the international community should not get involved. The African Union has been very low key also, this is for me, personally, a big disappointment, because they have a whole department which has been merged within the political department. They now have a big department on peace and security in the African Union.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 26:52

And well, according to me, they should try to help and to engage in that conflict. But they have hardly done [it]. At the very beginning, in 2020, it was still South Africa that was holding the presidency of the African Union. And President Ramaphosa nominated three special envoys, all senior African leaders, to look into the matter to go to Ethiopia. And they were received by Prime Minister Abiy, but they were not allowed to travel in the country.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 27:37

And nothing came out of that initiative, which by the way, the president of Ethiopia had agreed upon with President Ramaphosa from South Africa. So also for her [the president of Ethiopia], I think it was quite a blow that Abiy did not really engage with them. According to what I've read or heard is that she just explained the situation to them. So he told them what was going on. And they were not not really in a position to investigate or to question his [Abiy's] point of view.

**John Torpey** 28:01

So it occurs to me to ask. You're no longer in this position, so maybe you're a bit freer to speak. But what does an ambassador do in a situation like this? You can't surely be seen as meddling in the internal affairs of the country to which you are posted. So what can you do?

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 28:24

Well, as an ambassador, as I said, a big group of ambassadors have traveled to Tigray but only after, of course, the central government has allowed them to travel and probably they organized their program. I don't know whom they have been able to meet. But at least they have still said: "well, the fighting has to stop, the human rights violations have to stop and humanitarian assistance has to get in." That's at least what I just read. I think this visit was yesterday or day before yesterday. That's what they said.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 29:09

On the other hand, the European Union, I think has stopped assistance to the Ethiopians for some time. I don't know whether this is still upheld or whether there has been any arrangement because there was kind of budget support to the Ethiopian government, and I think that has been stopped.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 29:29

I mean, this had all been started with this reform course of Abiy; everybody was so happy when he came to power and introduced all those reforms, which I don't see really moving on because it's not only Tigray that's in a mess. I mean, this is particularly serious, but there's a lot of ethnical tensions going on also among Oromos and among Oromos and other ethnicities, ethnic groups.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 30:01

So even if one would be able to fix this problem that burst out in Tigray, there will be a lot of other things. And I think what really would be necessary, and Germany has been trying to engage in, would be something like a very inclusive national dialogue between various groups and various parties. But now, again, opposition leaders have been imprisoned. Major political leaders who had come back --after Abiy have invited them to come back-- they are now again in prison, journalists are in prison. You have the impression [that] it all started again, what Abiy was supposed to change.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 30:59

And well, as an ambassador, it's not easy. I mean, you can ask questions, or you can talk to people. The Ethiopian Government has been quite aggressive in their public diplomacy. I don't know whether you have seen. I think also the ambassador of Ethiopia to the UN has issued statements. I think, the ambassador to Washington, I'm not sure. But clearly, the ambassador to the European Union, has issued quite strong statements saying: "well, this is all false". There was an article in The Guardian saying that the Ethiopians were using famine and starvation as a weapon in the conflict. And they reacted very strongly to that.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 31:45

So as an ambassador in the country, you would one still to stay in contact. So it's difficult to how far you can go. But you can still ask questions. I mean, go and see the people in government and ask questions.

**John Torpey** 32:00

Right. So you've mentioned, you know, extensively, Mr. Abiy. But I don't think we've mentioned that he -- not very long ago, not long before all this started -- was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. I guess there are some suggestions and things that I've read to the effect that this gave him a certain sense of entitlement, as we might say, and a certain sense of being above certain kinds of constraints.

**John Torpey** 32:33

And I guess, first of all, I wonder about that. To what extent did the conferral of the Nobel Peace Prize kind of ended up effectively being a kind of an international meddling in this situation? And I also wonder whether there's a certain analogy to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar. That is to say, this person was seen as the reformer, this person was seen as the person who was going to set everything right. And then, developments developed in such a way that the bloom came off the rose, so to speak. So, I wonder, what you would say about that?

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 33:16

Well, I think in any case, it should not have given him any kind of idea that he was above respect for human rights and so on, on the contrary. So he would have to feel obliged to respect international law and human rights. But that's obviously not what has happened. I don't think that the fact that he got the Nobel Peace Prize has really encouraged him to do what he did. I think he would have done it anyway, this way or that way.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 34:00

Personally, I think, as you mentioned, this prize was bestowed upon him far too early. But we were all so happy to have these good news from Africa: an African country that was reforming without bloodshed, embarking on a way to democracy and that's how it looked at the beginning. And we were very enthusiastic. We said we have to support him in this course, and to assist Ethiopia in going ahead with these bold reforms.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 34:44

And it came obviously, I mean, ambassadors, I think in in Ethiopia, were not really expecting what was happening. We knew that there was this conflict with Tigray, we didn't know that the former elite in Tigray, the TPLF, what they were up to. Whether in the end they would accept the changes or whether they were gearing up for something. That is what kind of happened and what made Abiy act in this way.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 35:19

But it was also that there were the clashes; the ethnically motivated clashes were increasing all over the country. And for sometimes, there was a lot of internal displacement. And for some time, he was really just denying or not really looking into these issues. And he always said: "Well, this is part of the transition. It's a difficult time", but he was not really taking this seriously.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 35:59

And he was obviously also very soon listening less and less to outsiders. Nobody really knew who his advisors were. There was a lot of changes in his surroundings, in his office. So he was micromanaging a lot of things. He was, for example, developing projects for Addis Ababa. Big urban development projects, which could be very interesting for the city. But it's not really the task of a prime minister to take care of these issues.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 36:41

So I think he did not listen anymore. And I don't know why this came so quickly. I mean, we know that people who start implementing reforms can turn into autocrats or dictators. But with him It happened very, very soon. In 2018, he just came into office; that's two and a half years by now. So it's extremely disappointing. And I don't know exactly who who will be able to turn the situation around.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 37:20

I cannot imagine that the elections that are supposed to be held in June will really change the situation, because some of the opposition parties already said they will not take part. There is one major opposition party, which is also a new party, which is an all Ethiopian Party, which is not based on ethnic belonging. But it is not very clear that this will be kind of sufficient competition for Abiy. And we don't even know whether the elections are going to be fair and transparent. And under the COVID situation, anyhow, it will be difficult.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 38:14

So unless some forces --I don't know whether the Americans together maybe with the Europeans-- will be able to push the government in Ethiopia to hold an inclusive dialogue with all political forces. It will be very difficult. I don't see that Ethiopia will settle soon.

**John Torpey** 38:42

Well, thank you very much for that very informative overview of the very recent dangerous situation in Ethiopia, TPA, and Eritrea. That's it for today's episode of International Horizons. I want to thank Ambassador Brita Wagener for sharing her insights about the conflict.

**John Torpey** 39:05

Remember to subscribe and rate International Horizons on SoundCloud, Spotify and Apple podcasts. I want to thank the Otto and Fran Walter foundation for its support of our Europe-related programming. I also want to thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance and to acknowledge Duncan Mackay for sharing his song International Horizons as the theme music for the show.

**John Torpey** 39:30

This is John Torpey, saying thanks so much for joining us and we look forward to having you with us for the next episode of International Horizons. Thanks again Ambassador Brita Wagener.

**Ambassador Brita Wagener** 39:41

Thank you so much. And thank you for taking up with this topic.