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Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary (Part I)

1. (C) The Harar regional state faces an acute water shortage and receives ninety percent of its budget from a federal subsidy, severely constraining development, the Harar Regional President told PolOff during PolOff's December 10-12 visit to Harar and Dire Dawa to assess political and economic conditions. The Harar government is jointly administered by the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic



Front's (EPRDF's) allied Harari National League (HNL) and EPRDF proxy Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), which have overcome post-2005 inter-party tensions through their shared commitment to the EPRDF's development agenda, Harari officials said. Dire Dawa has a diversified economy with trade and light manufacturing, but still needs to develop better water resources, a Dire Dawa official said. Although Harari and Dire Dawa officials insisted that both cities permit opposition parties to conduct normal political activities, an opposition party representative told PolOff that OPDO cadres have prevented their parties from opening an office in Harar and Dire Dawa. End Part I Summary.

2. (C) From December 10-12, PolOff traveled to Harar and Dire Dawa to assess political and economic conditions. On December 10, in Harar, PolOff met separately with the Harar Regional State President Murad Abdul Hadi (ethnic Harari), the Harar Regional State Vice President Regassa Kefelew (ethnic Oromo), Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council of Harar head Sheik Ibrahim Abdurahman Sherif (plus one), and a representative of the mainstream opposition Oromo People's Congress (OPC). On December 11, PolOff traveled to Dire Dawa and met separately with an administrator with the Dire Dawa City Special Administration, Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council of Dire Dawa head Sheik Muktar (plus three), a representative of the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP) (septel and two representatives of the mainstream opposition All Ethiopia Unity Party (AEUP).

Harar's Joint Administration

3. (C) Harar Regional President Murad, of the EPRDF allied party the HNL, said that Harar is administered by both the HNL and OPDO. Ethnic Hararis, numbering fewer than 10,000, comprise only a fraction of the regional state's population, which is predominantly Oromo. The regional state has just under 200,000 people in six urban and three rural kebeles. Murad said that tensions arose between the HNL and OPDO during the 2005 national elections over OPDO efforts to move Harar under the jurisdiction of Oromiya. The move did not occur, Murad said, and "differences have subsequently been resolved through dialogue." "(The EPRDF's policy of) ethnic federalism brings some unity and trust," Murad added, "as both parties work to support the aims of different nations and nationalities." Murad noted that "Ethiopia still needs national consensus. Democratic culture takes time. Ethiopia has a huge, uneducated population. We need to show we are one culture, one nation." Separately, Harar Regional Government Vice President Ragassa, of the OPDO, remarked that cooperation between the HNL and OPDO has progressed since 2005 because "neither party has any great differences with EPRDF policies."

Federal Subsidies and Acute Water Shortages



4. (SBU) Murad said that ninety percent of Harar's budget derives from federal subsidies and that the regional state is currently operating at a deficit, with no money for vital infrastructure. There is little or no manufacturing, and government revenues are collected primarily from a brewery, several hotels, six or seven "financial/insurance companies," and fees from a number of educational institutions (colleges and high schools). "We are trying to extend the tax base to include more of the informal sector," he added. A chat (qat) tariff generates approximately 30 million birr (USD three million) per year. Harar has a rich history and is a holy

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city of Islam, but the regional state has done little to develop infrastructure to support robust tourism. Murad said that his government has reached out to Diaspora Hararis to pursue investment in tourism and other sectors. Separately, Ragassa defended the EPRDF's overall development record, arguing that "development is a challenge but you can see the differences over the past five years, especially with the increase in paved roads and buildings." Both Murad and Ragassa described Harar's greatest economic challenge as an "acute" water shortage." Murad noted that the city hopes to receive piped water from bore holes in Dire Dawa by sometime in 2009, but currently his government provides tankard water to both commercial entities and private residences "to prevent economic collapse." Private taps receive tankard water two or three times a week, Murad said. Harar has scant irrigation to increase yields in mangos, coffee and other cash crops. "Most of the shallow wells in Harar do not work," Murad lamented, adding that "all the rural rivers are now dry, and most of our rural kebeles are dry."

Dire Dawa's More Diversified Economy

5. (SBU) Like Harar, Dire Dawa also faces water shortages. According to a Dire Dawa administrator, Dire Dawa has plentiful underground aquifers, but still has not adequately tapped these resources. However, Dire Dawa has a far more diversified economy than Harar and is a regional trade and manufacturing center. The town produces textiles, cement, and meat packing, and also has a Coke bottler. Dire Dawa has taken steps to legalize the informal sector and the "Taiwan" market, which Poloff visited, is flush with clothing, shoes and other items from China, largely imported via Djibouti. Chat is a significant foreign exchange earner, although the administrator insisted it is not replacing coffee crops because coffee "is a specialty product grown by several large farms" and also insisted that the use of chat is "cultural and does not disrupt work."



Conflicting Views On Prospects for Democracy

6. (C) Both Murad and Ragassa insisted that opposition parties have offices and can conduct their activities freely in Harar. In contrast, an Oromo People's Congress (OPC) representative based in Harar separately said that OPC's office in Harar has been closed since 2005 and remains closed. According to the OPC representative, the National Electoral Board (NEB) granted a permit for the office to reopen in advance of the April 2008 local elections, but OPDO cadres threatened prospective landlords with arson and OPC has been unable to rent office space. The OPC representative, an elected Oromiya regional parliamentarian who attends college in Harar, said that his college administration suspended him and threatened him with expulsion for his political affiliation. He added that local authorities detain him whenever he seeks to visit his constituents in Oromiya. In Harar, the OPC representative said, OPC seeks to form a network of supporters in rural areas and relies on word of mouth to establish contacts with potential OPC sympathizers. OPC has no money for recruitment and the representative said he sustains himself with family support and manual labor. OPDO attempts to thwart support for OPC and opposition parties through cash and employment incentives for those who reject opposition parties, our contact said, adding that the "OPDO is hated in Harar."

7. (C) No opposition parties took any seats in Harar in the April 2008, local elections and the OPC representative said he is pessimistic about prospects for democratic gains in the 2010 national elections, emphasizing that "Ethiopia has become a police state. (Opposition parties) cannot organize, compete in, or win elections." Still, he vowed OPC would not "cut and run," insisting that "if we educate the people now, maybe later we can achieve our goals. There is still a great deal of pent up anger toward the EPRDF." The OPC representative was somewhat more optimistic about prospects for the emergence of a coalition of mainstream political opposition parties through the Forum for Democratic Development (the Forum), noting that "the Forum could pose a legitimate challenge to the EPRDF, especially if the Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) party joins." Offering the

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ruling party's view, Harar Regional Vice President Ragassa said that he believes OPDO and HNL will be well-positioned for the 2010 national elections because "the EPRDF (and allied parties) knows its comparative advantage is development and that the party has shown results. The (opposition) Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) took more than fifty percent of the vote in Harar city, while the



EPRDF took the countryside in 2005. So the EPRDF has learned not to make any assumptions and now makes sure everyone knows of the party's (development) accomplishments." Ragassa insisted that the EPRDF is pursuing democracy seriously, emphasizing "Democracy is a must: the Ethiopian state cannot be sustained without it. Look at Mugabe: you cannot sustain yourself eliminating and suppressing people."

8. (C) Dire Dawa's administration is shared by the EPRDF and EPRDF-ally, the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP), according to a Dire Dawa administrator, who insisted that, while only the OPDO and the SPDP participated substantially in the April 2008, local elections, opposition parties are already preparing for the 2010 national elections without interference from the Dire Dawa administration. "The All Ethiopia Unity Party (AEUP) has an office and is preparing," the administrator said, "as does UDJ. This is a fair competition. All local opposition parties participated in the recent local election, but none won any seats because they received only minimal votes." As in Harar, a separate meeting with mainstream opposition representatives revealed a sharply contrasting perspective. AEUP representatives said their office remains closed at the behest of the EPRDF. "This government is so vengeful, and is working thoroughly and maliciously to dismantle the opposition," one AEUP representative told us, adding that "the EPRDF is a wounded animal and knows it would not survive a free and fair election. All vocal opponents are removed from their jobs. You can't have an election if you can't meet with your constituents. But the EPRDF does not want any opponents. There will be no genuine elections."

9. (C) The AEUP representatives were likewise sharply critical of the United States' support for the Ethiopian government. "There is a misperception that the Ethiopian government is strong because of state security," one representative said, arguing "it is not. There is no support from the people. People are members because they get paid. We have seen stronger governments fall. We know the United States knows the EPRDF is repressive and does not respect freedom and democracy, but we don't understand why you prop up this government and criticize others. There is no difference between (Ethiopian Prime Minister) Meles and (Zimbabwean President) Mugabe except the scale of their policies, and of course Meles cooperates in the war on terror. But America should know that Meles is not dependable; the Ethiopian people are dependable. Meles will not be there forever. You have to deal with the Ethiopian people. It does not make sense to prop up this government at the expense of the Ethiopian people. Our fear is that, without democracy, the country will implode. Yet when governments like this are about to collapse, the West gives them a glucose injection. Are you the enemy of the Ethiopian people?" Asked about AEUP's plans in Dire Dawa for the 2010 national elections, the AEUP representatives responded that



the party would participate only if the National Electoral Board is reconstituted to be more free and fair and transparent, and if "the police and state security stay out." The representatives said AEUP is debating whether to join the Forum for Democratic Dialogue (septel), but noted that "our minimum condition is the unity of Ethiopia. We don't support ethnic parties or agendas."

OLF Elders Process Dismissed

10. (C) Both Ragassa and the OPC representative downplayed recent moves by the Ethiopian Government (GoE) to permit the banned Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) to seek reconciliation with the GoE through an "elders" process (reftel). Ragassa said "the OLF is an idea, not a party. Reconciliation is not a big deal for us. If OLF's genuine leaders returned to Ethiopia, then the (anti-EPRDF) propagandists would deny the returnees are the 'real' OLF leaders. (Former OLF leader) Ababiya Abajobir returned but the idea of OLF persists." The

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OPC representative was equally dismissive of the recent elders initiatives. "It makes me sick," he said, "to see individuals such as Ababiya attempt to negotiate on behalf of the OLF. The Oromo people know (Ababiya and others like him) are spent forces and offer nothing. Every time an election approaches, the government raises the prospect of dialogue to sap the morale of the OLF fighters in the bush. It is like the boy who cried wolf. Nothing ever comes of it. The OLF old guard is not politically viable anymore."

YAMAMOTO

