Correction to This Article
A December 20 article about the political climate in Ethiopia provided an incorrect political affiliation for Beyene Petros. He is a member of the opposition group Union of Ethiopian Democratic Forces, not the Coalition for Unity and Democracy. The article also misstated the background of Haile Miriam Yacob. He helped the United Nations settle a border dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon, not Ethiopia and Eritrea.

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Many in Ethiopia See Premier's Talk of War As Ploy to Tighten Grip

By Stephanie McCrummen

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia — War or no war with Somalia, Mulunesh Abebayhu wants out. Out of her teaching job, where Ethiopian security forces constantly harass her because of her political views. Out of this city, where hundreds of protesters were killed by police bullets after disputed elections last year. And, if she can manage, out of this country that she believes has plunged into the abyss of dictatorship at the hands of its prime minister, Meles Zenawi, a staunch ally of the United States in the vulnerable Horn of Africa.

"He confuses the Westerners so that he can keep ruling," said Abebayhu, 54, an opposition member arrested along with an estimated 30,000 others in the sweeping post-election crackdown last year. "Our party does not believe in this war. Our priority is to eradicate poverty, not go to war. Meles knows this war is a way for his system to survive."

As Ethiopia and Somalia's Islamic Courts movement inch closer each day to all-out conflict, a widespread view among people here in the capital is that Meles is using the conflict to distract people from a vast array of internal problems and to justify further repression of opposition groups, including ethnic Somalis in Ethiopia.

In particular, opponents of war say he is playing up the claim that there are al-Qaeda operatives within the Islamic Courts in order to maintain the support of the U.S. government, which relies on a steady flow of Ethiopian intelligence that some regional analysts say is of dubious value.

A recent attempt by Congress to sanction the Ethiopian government for widespread human rights violations failed after former Republican House leader Richard K. Armey (R-Tex.), lobbying on behalf of the Ethiopian government, argued that the United States needs Ethiopia in order to fight terrorism.

"We don't know why the Americans let them get away with it," said Abebayhu, who was denied her request for a U.S. visa and who said she receives death threats regularly.

Meanwhile, Meles has become so disliked in the city that people compare him unfavorably to the former dictator known as "the Butcher of Addis Ababa," Mengistu Haile Mariam, who was convicted last week of genocide after a trial lasting 12 years.

Around Victory Square, one of many roundabouts in this city of a thousand cafes and tin-patch markets, passersby offered opinions similar to that of Nemera Bersisa, 35, a record-keeper on his way home from work.

"I believe the Dergue regime is better than this one, even if they killed people," he said, referring to Mengistu's rule. "This regime is democratic only in words. They kill people without any law, and they arrest people without a reason. This government is trying to stay in power by using different mechanisms, like claiming the Somalis are invading. But this is not the case. Meles is trying to externalize his problems."

And those problems are vast.

After 12 years in power, Meles presides over a nation that still does not produce enough food to feed its own people, relying on the U.N. World Food Program to supplement struggling farmers. The number of people infected with HIV is rising every year: At least 500,000 Ethiopians are living with the virus now, according to government figures. At least half of the population lives on less than $1 a day, which is not enough to buy a single meal.

A smattering of new skyscrapers have gone up in Addis Ababa lately, and in recent years, the gaudy Sheraton Hotel was built, a fortified palace of marble and brass and $100 Scotch set amid a rusting neighborhood of leaning, one-room shacks. Locals call it Paradise in Hell.

Last year's elections began with high hopes and degenerated into a bloodbath. Opposition groups, who made significant gains but did not win a majority according to the national election board, accused the government of rigging the tally and flooded the streets to challenge the results. During the rallies in May and November last year, unarmed protesters were sprayed with bullets while others were hunted down, killed inside their homes and in their gardens, in front of children and neighbors.

Though the official government report released in October listed 197 demonstrators killed, some members of the government's own commission and human rights groups have estimated that the number could be as high as 600. Seven police officers were killed.

Since then, the mood around the capital has been grim.

"After the elections, the government is ruling Ethiopia by military force and propaganda, we all know that," Bersisa said. "We're dead after the election."

While most of the 30,000 prisoners taken after the election have been released, several hundred opposition leaders remain in jail, including the elected mayor of Addis Ababa, Birhanu Nega, who was a professor in the United States, and Haile Miriam Yacob, who served on the U.N. commission settling a border dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Four private newspapers have been shut down. A reporter for the Associated Press was expelled. And random arrests on the streets of Addis Ababa continue daily, people say.

Residents of a largely Ethiopian Somali neighborhood called Rwanda say that government security forces have been rounding up people who refuse to swear allegiance to Meles' ruling party, a charge the government denied.

"Their main target is Ethiopian Somalis," said Reagan Dawale, 30, who left his home in the Somali region of Ethiopia because of the tense atmosphere there, only to find a similar situation in the capital.

In a recent interview, Meles, a former Marxist guerrilla who shed his fatigues for tailored suits when he took power in a 1991 coup, referred to the opposition as leading an "insurrection" intent on overthrowing the government by violent means, a charge opposition leaders deny.

Meles has introduced a few words into the Ethiopian vocabulary. Someone who is out of line is a "fendata." Dissatisfied, unemployed workers who must be controlled are the "adegnabozene." A "bichameberat" is a person who has crossed into the danger zone.

Meles said he retains U.S. support when it comes to defending Ethiopia against the Islamic Courts movement, which now controls much of Somalia, including Mogadishu, the capital. Meles said the Islamic Courts have already attacked Ethiopia by arming secessionist Ethiopian Somali groups in the Ogaden region along the Somali border, a claim opposition leaders believe is both exaggerated and hardly a justification for war.

"Our argument is that all the governments we've known since 1960 say they want the Ogaden," said Beyene Petros, leader of the main opposition group, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy, referring to Somalia.

The Islamic Courts say it is the Ethiopians that have invaded Somalia. While Meles has repeatedly denied having troops there, the United Nations and regional diplomats estimate that at least 8,000 Ethiopian soldiers are in Somalia, backing the weak and divided transitional government.

Petros said Meles is poised to make precisely the same miscalculation in the Horn of Africa that critics say the United States made in invading Iraq: that a vastly superior military force can crush an ideologically driven guerrilla campaign.

"We should defend our borders, but I don't believe in a hot-pursuit campaign inside of Somalia," Petros said. "And I don't think this war is going to change the hearts of the Ethiopian people."

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