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Why Say Who Did What? The Ethiopia Case and the Power of US Atrocity Determinations

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“committed war crimes,” and that the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) and two other forces had “also committed crimes against humanity, including murder, rape and other forms of sexual violence, and persecution.” U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said in October that, in two years of violence, “as many as half a million” people had been killed.

These seemingly contradictory announcements – condemnation for atrocities followed by economic engagement with the same actors who committed those atrocities — are making the human rights community wonder what a U.S. atrocity determination means these days.

Over the past 30 years, the United States has made atrocity determinations for Bosnia and Herzegovina (1993), Rwanda (1994), Iraq (1995 and 2014), Darfur (2004), Myanmar (2021), and China (2021). The public statements of responsibility are intended to galvanize the U.S. response, forever validate the gravest of crimes committed on people because of their race, culture, geographic location, or mere existence, and deter others who would commit such crimes.

When then-Secretary of State Colin Powell [determined](#) in 2004 that genocide was occurring in Sudan’s Darfur region, his declaration catalyzed [U.S. attention and advocacy](#), and new sanctions were adopted against the Sudanese government. Congress approved millions of dollars in humanitarian and human rights assistance for the people of Darfur. The United States abstained rather than veto a United Nations Security Council vote referring the Darfur situation to the International Criminal Court, a court the U.S. had opposed for its own reasons. Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir became politically isolated and came under immense pressure to stop the abuses.

Later, the Obama and Biden administrations followed their atrocity determinations on behalf of the Yazidis in Iraq, the Rohingya in Myanmar, and the Uyghurs in China with a mixture of robust sanctions, scrutiny of supply chains, aid targeted to affected communities, and more resources devoted to supporting justice efforts.

Ethnic Cleansing Continues

Now, the Biden administration statement that the Ethiopian government is not engaged in a pattern of human rights abuses is alarming. Earlier in June, my organization, [Human Rights Watch](#), reported that Amhara regional security forces in Ethiopia’s Western Tigray Zone had continued an [ethnic cleansing campaign](#) against Tigrayans after warring parties to the conflict signed a truce.

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The easing of economic pressure on Ethiopia appears to reflect the Biden administration's belief that peace should be secured with economic investments. But we also know [the country's influential role](#) in the region and on the wider continent is a factor at play. And that is exactly why justice and accountability should be prioritized. The Ethiopian government is responsible for the protection of all civilians in its territory. Whether the Ethiopian federal government is directly supporting state security forces or regional militias, standing by while they continue to commit abuses or throwing their hands up and claiming no blame, they are *still* responsible for stopping the abuses.

“Formally recognizing the atrocities committed by all parties is an essential step to achieving a sustainable peace,” Blinken said at the time of his atrocity determination announcement. “Those most responsible for atrocities, including those in positions of command, must be held accountable.”

On this point, we agree. To date, U.S. atrocity determinations have not come with mandated legal consequences, and the Biden administration is following suit. Nevertheless, they can be powerful if policymakers decide they should be. In the case of Ethiopia, there has been no accountability for [serious human rights abuses, let alone grave crimes](#); little to no access for independent investigators to regions where those crimes did and continue to take place; and a government apparently determined to normalize its engagement with the international community.

Concrete Next Steps to Make it Matter

In his March atrocity determination, Blinken essentially acknowledged that violations hadn't ended, saying, “human rights abuses in northern Ethiopia are significantly down,” not that they had stopped. He should have followed the atrocity determination with efforts to make it matter in concrete ways. He still can.

The State Department should support the justice and accountability that it has promised and that victims and their families have been demanding, including by holding warring parties responsible for their crimes – and that applies to Ethiopian authorities, too. All assistance to people inside Ethiopia should be guided by the atrocity determination. That means development and aid programs from the U.S. Agency for International Development should address the root causes of the killing and the atrocity risks, as well as reform of the weak justice sector. Resources should be directed to what survivors need and want, including access to trauma counseling, psycho-social support, reparations for loss of property and wealth, and training on how to pursue justice in their own domestic context.

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Only by putting these consequences and mechanisms for preventing future violations into action will the Biden administration make atrocity determinations matter. Only by tying U.S. policies to those atrocity determinations will perpetrators in Ethiopia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, and Ukraine get the loud, clear message that the most powerful nation in the world is not only watching, but also acting.

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