Author’s Note: The following is a true and correct copy of my letter to USAID Administrator Gayle E. Smith dated March 16, 2016, and the response I received from T.C. Cooper, Assistant Administrator, USAID Bureau for Legislative and Public Affairs dated April 7, 2016.

My letter questions recent statements made by Ms. Smith regarding the famine in Ethiopia and solicits factual and policy clarifications.

Mr. Cooper’s letter is non-responsive to my inquiries and ignores specific factual and policy issues I have raised with the Administrator.

It is a matter of public record that I have fiercely opposed Ms. Smith’s confirmation to become USAID Administrator. But as a true-blue constitutionalist, I acknowledge and respect the Senate’s vote to confirm Ms. Smith despite my personal opposition.

My inquiry letter is guided purely by my concerns as an American citizen and taxpayer, and not by any residual personal animus from the confirmation process.

In one of my first commentaries opposing Ms. Smith’s confirmation, I promised, “We will use every legal means available to us under American law to question Smith’s official actions and decisions…” The fundamental purpose of my inquiry letter is to hold USAID accountable in its use of American tax dollars in a country whose “government” has a proven history of “using aid as a weapon of oppression” and as an insidious tool of corruption.

Our inquiry shall continue.

The letter

March 16, 2016

Ms. Gayle E. Smith
Administrator
United States Agency for International Development
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20523

By U.S. Mail Certified

Dear Ms. Smith:
I am writing to follow up on your March 3, 2016 interview with James Kirby in which you discussed “new measures” aimed at addressing the “drought” in Ethiopia.

Before I get into the gravamen of my letter and in the interest of full disclosure, I should like to state at the outset that I am one of the individuals who fiercely opposed your appointment to head USAID.

I came out against your confirmation in my op-ed in The Hill on May 12, 2015. I have also expressed my opposition in a variety of other advocacy forms and forums including on my own website.

My opposition to your confirmation was based on three factors. First, I believe your record in promoting and supporting democracy, freedom and human rights in Africa is poor. Second, I believe your unwavering support for African dictators for the past three decades has been detrimental to the welfare of Africans. Third, I disagree with your approach to U.S. foreign policy in Africa, which I believe treats Africans as welfare aid recipients who must be perpetually tethered to the pockets of hard-working American taxpayers.

I am making the foregoing disclosures not to rehash my past opposition, but to contextualize the instant inquiry letter.

In your interview with John Kirby on March 3, 2016 concerning “what USAID is doing to mitigate the effects of drought in Ethiopia”, you made a number of observations which surprised, confused and bewildered me.

First, in your interview comments, you appeared to strongly suggest that the current “drought” in Ethiopia is solely the result of “this phenomenon called El Nino, which is striking hard at a number of parts of the world, nowhere harder than in Ethiopia.”

I found your remark quite jarring as it suggests that Ethiopia is being singled out and struck harder than any other country on the planet as a manifestation of divine curse and wrath.

I trembled as I contemplated your remark and the possibility that the Black Horseman of the Apocalypse has been sent to visit Ethiopia on a divine mission of retribution not meted out to any other country.

Why is “El Nino” “striking Ethiopia harder than any other country” on the planet?

Second, in your remarks you mentioned absolutely nothing about the role of poor governance, lack of planning and organization by the ruling regime in Ethiopia as even a partial proximate or actual cause for the “drought”. You also made no mention of the manifestly poor response to the human costs of the drought despite advance warning by your own Famine Early Warning System. Do you believe that poor governance and planning are at least aggravating factors in the causation, spread and/or persistence of the current “drought” in Ethiopia? Has your agency inquired and come to any conclusions concerning the fact that the absence of good governance, bureaucratic incompetence and corruption in the ruling regime in Ethiopia have contributed to the “drought” or consequences of the “drought”?

Third, you stated that the “United States has, to date, provided over $500 million” and “deploy[ed] what [is] call[ed] a disaster assistance response team.” You also indicated the U.S. is “prepared to look at more” than $500 million.

The sum of $500 million is undoubtedly a considerable amount of money. As an American taxpayer, I feel the sting of such generous almsgiving.

My concern has to do with corruption in the expenditure of the $500 million. As you may be aware, the ruling regime in Ethiopia has been accused of misappropriating, stealing and converting humanitarian assistance for political purposes (e.g. buy votes) and corruption.

I refer to Human Rights Watch’s report, “Ethiopia: Aid as a Weapon”. That report documents,
“Ethiopia’s repressive government has put foreign aid to a sinister purpose, with officials in Ethiopia’s ruling party using their power to give or deny financial assistance to citizens based on their political affiliation.”

I believe you may also be aware of the conclusions of the USAID’s Office of Inspector General which concluded (p. 26, also Appendix 1):

… [W]e could not determine the extent of that contribution because of weaknesses in the mission’s performance management and reporting system. Moreover, the audit could not determine whether the results reported in USAID/Ethiopia’s performance plan and report were valid, because mission staff could neither explain how the results had been derived nor provide support for those reported results.

What safeguards, if any, are in place to ensure the ruling regime will not put any of the $500 million to political purposes?

What accountability processes are in place to ensure the prevention of corruption in the administration of the aforementioned assistance in Ethiopia? How much of the $500 million is provided to the ruling regime in Ethiopia in the form of discretionary or non-discretionary expenditures?

Fourth, I am completely shocked by your remark, “You get into a worst-case scenario if they’re forced to sell their land or abandon their land for temporary employment.”

With all due respect, are you aware that the “government” owns all land in Ethiopia? Are you aware that Ethiopian farmers cannot sell the land by law? Is it possible you may have confused Ethiopia with some other country where full private ownership in land is permitted?

Fifth, as you may be aware, “land-grabbing” facilitated by the ruling regime has been alleged as the principal cause of recent uprising throughout the country. For a number of years, various informed commentators have suggested that the “government[‘s] leasing [of] fertile land to foreign investors” is partially to blame for famine and food insecurity in the country. What do you believe to be the consequences of foreign investors leasing large swaths of fertile land on Ethiopia’s food sufficiency and mitigation of food deficits? Do you believe there is any causal relationship between landlessness and the incidence and severity of famine in Ethiopia?

Sixth, you stated, “We are moving earlier in this case because we have found that there is real alignment between donors, NGOs, the government, and UN agencies that if we move very, very, very quickly, we can avert the worst impacts of this drought.” What exactly is the “real alignment” between donors and the other elements of the humanitarian communities? Was it the absence of “real alignment” between donors, NGO’s, etc., in the past which has undermined rapid response to “avert the worst impact of droughts”?

Seventh, you stated that the “[Ethiopian] government has actually put forth a fair amount of money. As I recall – and don’t quote me on this; I think you should ask them for the number – they were, I think 350, 400 – [Interviewer: 1.2 billion is what they said.] No, no, no. Well, maybe. Maybe. That may be their number. I’m aware of the last announcement they made when I was there, which was significant. I think what is significant here is the government is responding and they are putting money into the mix and doing their equivalent of kind of an emergency request and adding money to the budget. But I would refer to them for the exact numbers.”

You added, “I think what is significant here is the government is responding and they are putting money into the mix and doing their equivalent of kind of an emergency request and adding money to the budget.”

I should be glad to be corrected but the Ethiopian “government” has made no public statement regarding its contribution of “1.2 billion” “into the mix”. Is that 1.2 billion USD, Ethiopian birr or some other currency?
The “Ethiopian National Risk Management Coordination Commission” in December 2015 announced that “1.2 billion USD is required to cope with the current drought that affected over 10 million fellow citizens.”

Bandying around the “1.2 billion” figure without empirical support could seriously mislead the Ethiopian public and ultimately undermine the credibility of USAID. It may be helpful if USAID were to issue a clarification on this issue.

Nonetheless, the core question is exactly how much money in USD or birr the Ethiopian “government” is putting “into the mix and doing their equivalent of kind of an emergency request”. Could you share that piece of information?

Eight, I am shocked by your statement: “Now, I don’t want to underestimate the fact that it’s already having impact. There have been losses to livestock. There are signs and growing signs of malnutrition. We are at risk of poor farmers invoking coping mechanisms and thus becoming poorer and more vulnerable over time. But again, the important thing here is this is almost an act of emergency prevention.”

You also stated, “Because, as you all know very well, what too often happens is we wait until the newspapers and the televisions are littered with images of starving children. In this case, there is a great deal of human suffering now, but we think it’s more prudent to get ahead of it.”

Your remark strongly suggests the only “losses” to date are livestock.

Media reports are currently headlining, “Ethiopia hit by worst drought in five decades”.

It is well-established that in the 1984-85 “drought’, 32 years ago, hundreds of thousands of people died as a result of famine.

It is also established that in the 1973-74 “drought”, 42 years ago, hundreds of thousands of people died as a result of famine.

I am completely bewildered by your exclusive reference to livestock “losses” and not even mention any losses of human life in Ethiopia in 2016 when Ethiopia is hit by the “worst drought in five decades”.

Has USAID surveyed for human losses in the current “drought”? If so, what are the losses in human life?

Ninth, you stated in your interview that, “We are challenging the world not just to respond to human suffering, but to respond quickly enough to prevent something even worse.”

Pardon me for being confused. What could be “something worse” than the “worst drought in 50 years”? What could be worse than the “biblical famine” of 1973-74 or the cataclysmic famine of 1984-85?

Do you believe you have a moral obligation to tell the Ethiopian people that there is “something worse” than the “worst drought in 50 years” possibly in store for them in 2016?

Tenth, in your interview you also touted the “considerable progress [in Ethiopia] of something called the Productive Safety Net Program... where through harvesting small amounts of water that can be used for livestock, for people and for agriculture they can build a buffer so that when people face things like drought...”

I am encouraged by your remark that “We and our partners always have in place robust monitoring systems to make sure that it gets where it needs to go.”

As you may be aware, Human Rights Watch and others have reported (pp. 75-78) that the Development Assistance Group, of which USAID is a part, has resorted to willful ignorance to well-
founded allegations of “politicization” of the Productive Safety Net Program. There are some informants who allege nothing has changed in the politicization of that program over the past six years.

In your claim of “considerable progress” in the Productive Safety Net Program, what do you consider to be “progress” and what are you criteria for measuring progress? What safeguards are in place to prevent future “politicization” of the Productive Safety Net Program by the ruling regime in Ethiopia? What are the specific “robust monitoring systems” you mentioned were in place “to make sure that it gets where it needs to go”?

Eleventh, you stated that “in the case of Ethiopia, we are constantly looking at the numbers to try to determine are we staying at 10 or are we moving to 11 or are we getting ahead and moving down. So that’s an iterative process that’s done on a regular basis.”

I take it the “10” and “11” refer to millions of people “affected by the drought”. Your comments are not clear to me. Are you suggesting that you have a margin of a million people to determine if the drought situation is turning into a famine situation? What is the significance of staying at the 10 million magic number in quantifying the number of people affected by the “drought”?

I have no illusions that you will respond to my inquiry given my fierce opposition to your nomination. By the same token, I would not be surprised if you felt my inquiry is not made in good faith.

I should like to suggest that I am not the only person who has questions about your answers in your recent interview.

Let me assure you that I am writing this letter as an inquiry from a concerned citizen and a taxpayer. I am also writing in the spirit of vigilant citizen engagement in the democratic process in much the same way the U.S. Supreme Court explained (p.242) the “basic purpose of FOIA [which] is to ensure an informed citizenry, vital to the functioning of a democratic society, needed to check against corruption and to hold the governors accountable to the governed.”

I do not believe in political gamesmanship. I do believe in gathering facts to “hold the governors accountable to the governed.”

I trust you will accept my declaration that my only purpose in writing this letter is to make sure that U.S. humanitarian aid delivered in Ethiopia is put to proper use and in conformance with applicable U.S. laws.

Nonetheless, I hope to raise the questions herein with my considerable readership in Ethiopia and globally.

I shall present your responses to my readers unedited should you find it appropriate to respond.

I shall await for your responses until April 8, 2016.

Sincerely,

Alemayehu (Al) G. Mariam, Ph.D., J.D.
Professor and Attorney at Law

cc:
USAID
Attn: Office of Inspector General
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20523

The reply

April 7, 2016
Alemayehu G. Mariam Attorney at Law
P.O. Box 609
San Bernardino, CA 92402

Dear Mr. Mariam,

Thank you for your letter requesting additional information about our drought response in Ethiopia. We take our responsibility to be effective stewards of taxpayer resources very seriously and rigorously monitor and evaluate programs to push for greater effectiveness. We seek greater transparency and accountability, and would like to respond to your letter.

First, we acknowledge that food shortages and livestock losses related to the drought are having a direct and significant impact on people’s ability to thrive. We have worked with the Government of Ethiopia, the United Nations and other partners to assess needs—outlined in the 2016 Humanitarian Requirements Document (HRD)—and to coordinate an integrated response to save lives. The HRD reports that 10.2 million people are in need of relief food assistance.

USAID leverages its Famine Early Warning System Network to monitor food insecurity using the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), a set of internationally recognized protocols to analyze and classify the severity of food insecurity, and has mobilized a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to provide technical assistance to the Government of Ethiopia, conduct humanitarian assessments, and coordinate relief efforts with partners on the ground. For a complete picture of current conditions in Ethiopia, please refer to: http://www.fews.net/east-africa/ethiopia.

Second, USAID and its partners in Ethiopia put safeguards in place to ensure our assistance reaches those who need it most: the Ethiopian people. Since October 2014, USAID has provided more than $546 million in humanitarian assistance to the people of Ethiopia, including emergency food assistance, safe drinking water, and nutrition and health support. USAID distributes humanitarian assistance through the United Nations and non-governmental organization partners directly to the people. USAID does not provide direct budgetary support to the Government of Ethiopia. We have systems in place to monitor the delivery of aid and our partners are required to immediately report any instances of losses to USAID and the Inspector General.

Third, in response to your question about the Government of Ethiopia’s contribution to the drought response, please be advised that the government has provided $381 million for nutrition, relief food assistance, fodder and seeds.

We welcome your input as we continue to assess and respond to needs in Ethiopia and other El Niño impacted countries. For more information about our efforts and programs in Ethiopia, please visit: https://www.usaid.gov/elnino [3]ethiopia [3a]

Thank you for your continued interest in USAID and our work in Ethiopia.

Sincerely,

(Signed)

T. Charles Cooper Assistant Administrator
Bureau for Legislative and Public Affairs

More than 10 million Ethiopians are currently facing famine in what some media outlets misleadingly describe as “the worst drought in five decades”. But the famine is not a merely a result of drought. It is a governance issue. And the millions of dollars USAID and other donors are sending in humanitarian aid will probably end up in the pockets of the greedy fat cats of Addis.

Category: Food & Health
Country: Burkina Faso

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