



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

ADJOURNMENT

Ethiopia: Ogaden Community

SPEECH

Thursday, 17 June 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Keenan, Michael, MP

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Mr KEENAN (Stirling) (12.36 pm)—Last week I had a lot of constituent meetings in my electorate and I want to raise one in particular in the House today. I was met by representatives of the Ogaden Community Association of Western Australia. My electorate of Stirling is extremely diverse. It is the most multicultural part of Western Australia. We also get the largest number of humanitarian arrivals of any seat, with the exception of another in New South Wales.

The concerns expressed to me by the Ogaden community were grave concerns about the human rights situation within their homeland. The Ogaden region is actually known as the Somali state—the Somali provincial government—within Ethiopia. It is at the crossroads of what is a pretty benighted area that has been subject to very serious civil and international conflict. There is conflict with the states that border Ethiopia—Eritrea and Somalia—and there is civil conflict within Ethiopia itself. The result is that this is an incredibly poor and disadvantaged part of Ethiopia, which is of course quite a poor and disadvantaged country. But the Ogaden region has particular difficulties.

The representatives of the Ogaden community said to me that what is happening there, through the Ethiopian government, is very similar to what is happening in the Darfur region of the Sudan. Of course, people here would be very familiar with that conflict, whereas the conflict in the Ogaden region is not as widely known. I listened very carefully to what my constituents had to say. They are very concerned about relatives and friends that they have back in their homeland. It is very difficult to communicate with people there. But the reports that they are getting of murder, rape, extensive sexual violence against women and burning down of their villages are greatly concerning to me. I gave them an undertaking that I would raise this matter in the Australian parliament and also raise it with the foreign minister, because Ethiopia is in receipt of a significant amount of Australian aid. Clearly, the Australian government has every right to express human rights concerns to the Ethiopian government. I will be separately contacting the foreign minister to urge him to do this, and I am sure he will.

Following that meeting I went back and checked on the veracity of the claims that were put to me by representatives of the community. There is plenty of evidence from international organisations, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, that what was put to me about what is happening in the Ogaden region is certainly true. The military forces of the Ethiopian government are engaged in a campaign against the local separatist movement. That separatist movement is quite a brutal movement. There is plenty of blame to go around. Regardless of that, the treatment that the Ogaden people have been subject to at the hands of the Ethiopian military is incredibly disturbing. The Ethiopian government does not allow much access to that region by international organisations. Indeed, the Red Cross was actually expelled from there. It is pretty serious for a government to expel the International Committee of the Red Cross. When they do things like that, they are clearly trying to avoid scrutiny by the international community.

The reports are that the Ethiopian military, in their campaign in pursuit of the Ogaden National Liberation Front, will go into villages and tell the villagers that they need to abandon their village. If that is not done, they will return within a couple of days and burn that village down. They will also afflict quite horrendous treatment on the local people.

The Australian government, particularly as a donor to the Ethiopian government, needs to use all its good offices to say that the international community does have an interest in what is going on in that region, that we are watching and that we do not believe that what is happening there is acceptable. We should use all our good offices both as a government and as a parliament to highlight that. I congratulate members of the Ogaden community who have come to see me to raise my awareness of what is a very little understood conflict. I give them my undertaking that I will use all of my best efforts to highlight what is going on in their homeland.