

Ethiopia in an Era of Expanded BRICS: A Brief Look at Ethiopia's Entry and Experience within the Organization

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For citation: Taye, D., Getachew, H., 2024. Ethiopia in an Era of Expanded BRICS: A Brief Look at Ethiopia's Entry and Experience within the Organization. *Contemporary World Economy*, Vol. 2, No 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17323/2949-5776-2024-2-4-43-55>

Keywords: BRICS expansion, Global South, multiple engagement, Ethiopia.

Abstract

It has been one year since Ethiopia was given the opportunity to join BRICS. The 2023 Heads of State Summit in South Africa expanded to incorporate new member countries from Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. This article seeks to examine Ethiopia's interests in terms of joining the club and its experience following integration. After collecting the relevant data through document analysis and interviews, the authors found out that, firstly, Ethiopia joined BRICS after making a foreign policy calculation with regards to its diplomatic goal of the diversification of friendly nations and groupings, as well as amassing investment and trade opportunities. Secondly, within the country, people are divided between those who favor joining the alliance and those who oppose it, though this has never hindered the government from operating within BRICS. Thirdly, within a year, Ethiopia has gained experience of BRICS' internal operation system.

1. Introduction

Ethiopian diplomacy is experiencing a tremendous transformation following the political reform in 2018 which brought forth new political leadership and a new political orientation that emphasized expanding pragmatic engagement with various different countries. The political party in power since 1991, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), had been pressed by the public and members of the party itself to embrace political reform. As a result, a new political leader, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, was elected to lead the party and the nation. He swiftly introduced reforms in the party structure, security apparatus and the mechanism of economic governance. The new political regime that came into power brought about significant change both in terms of domestic and foreign policy. Since then, Ethiopia has embraced economic reforms in a way that has strengthened the role of the private sector in the economy. The incumbent prime minister is also giving adequate attention to the completion of flagship national infrastructure projects. Among the hydropower generation projects, construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the river Nile began at a much faster rate. The Dam, however, has remained a point of controversy in diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Egypt. It has also cast its shadow on Ethiopia's ties with the countries of the West [Taye 2024].

The unprecedented change for post-2018 Ethiopian diplomacy consisted of, among other things, the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The two countries have shared history, culture (religion and language), and extensive boundaries but have been hostile to one another, especially since the 1998–2000 inter-state war. Though the war was concluded by the Algiers peace agreement of 2000, there was no positive development in diplomatic and economic relations since then. It is only after political reform in 2018 that both states managed to establish diplomatic rapprochement [Belachew 2018]. In 2019, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his effort to bring peace between the two nations. A thaw in the relations between the two nations resulted in a critical shift not only in the foreign policy of Ethiopia alone, but it also helped to restructure the nature of relationship amongst the countries of the Horn of Africa.

The encouraging developments in the Horn of Africa were reversed when Ethiopia entered into a civil war, known as the Tigray War, between 2020 and 2022. It was an era in which Ethiopia was largely pressured and sanctioned by countries of the West. In particular, Ethiopia was repeatedly criticized for inviting Eritrean forces to participate in the war; for sabotaging humanitarian assistance efforts; and for gross violation of human rights. Most of those criticisms, diplomatic pressures and exclusions lasted for two years up until a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was signed between the government of Ethiopia and the Tigray fighters in November 2022.

Accession to BRICS is another important recent development in Ethiopia's diplomatic efforts. Ethiopia applied to join the club in 2023 and the Heads of State Summit in South Africa accepted Ethiopia's request. This article is therefore designed to explain the reasons that pushed Ethiopia to join, to examine public attitudes as observed immediately after its membership was accepted, and to briefly assess the experience of Ethiopia within BRICS

in 2024. The relevant data for the article has been collected through interviews with individuals who are experts on Ethiopia's multilateral engagement. Documents such as scenario papers from the Institute of Foreign Affairs and other published materials such as journals, newspapers and government media outlets were also important sources of data.

2. Understanding BRICS

The international governance system and institutions that were constructed after World War II are increasingly seen as not matching the daunting economic, security, and environmental challenges the world is currently facing. Furthermore, these institutional arrangements are accused of lacking legitimacy, effectiveness, and accountability, thereby “generating calls for change” [Hampson & Heinbecker 2011. P. 299]. Moreover, it establishes alternative multilateral arrangements that represent the Global South. Accordingly, since the turn of the early 21st century, political and economic arrangements have evolved parallel to the existing ones. In forging a strategic partnership, the club of Brazil, China, India, Russia, and South Africa can be regarded as one of these patterns. It was in 2001 that Jim O'Neill, a British economist and banker, crafted the term BRIC by predicting the increasing economic dominance of the emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India, and China [Mansfield 2014]. These countries' subsequent meetings at ministerial levels culminated in the inauguration of BRIC in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in June 2009. South Africa's inclusion in the club in April 2011 allowed BRIC to transform into BRICS. Its membership has broadened the hitherto economic cooperation by embracing the developmental need of Johannesburg [Anuoluwapo, Abdul-Wasi and Edwin 2018]. Although all members of the club do not “agree on how the architecture of the global governance should be reshaped” [Daniel & Virk 2014. P. 4], there is a common understanding that the existing institutions of global governance, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) need to be reformed and democratized [Daniel & Virk 2014]. Thus far, the existing international financial architecture “is not designed to deliver the kind of financial support that developing countries need to realize their growth and development ambitions” [United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2023. P. 102], and the stringent conditionality imposed on many states of the Global South to make structural reform. However, these states need to grapple with account deficits. Cognizant of this reality, during the UN General Debate, the Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Mottley, underscored that existing financial frameworks, including institutions, policies, rules, and practices “no longer serve the purpose in the 21st century, served in the 20th century” [United Nations 2022].

Although the arrangement does not have a founding treaty and a secretariat, it has resulted in the establishment of the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB). During its sixth meeting in July 2014, the Bank was founded with the purpose of “mobilizing resources for infrastructure and sustainable development projects in BRICS and other emerging and developing economies” [IBEC 2021]. This helped deepen economic integration and deal with financial and economic governance. Thus far, the NDB is credited for providing “emergency relief funding to China, India, and South Africa” [Muresan 2020. P. 9]. As an effort to further deepen intra-BRICS interactions, multiple initiatives have been

adopted. These initiatives include the BRICS Business Council, the BRICS Think Tanks Council (BTTC), and the BRICS Vaccine Research and Development Center. The BRICS Business Council envisages promoting interaction among the business communities of the member states. The BTTC aims to increase collaboration among the think tanks of the member states. The BRICS Vaccine R&D Center is working to enhance their laboratory capacity. Among the various initiatives, people-to-people exchange among member states enhances the ties that start from the bottom up. With varying degrees of effectiveness, the aforementioned initiatives have been observed to attain the long-term strategy of BRICS. Recently, the BRICS Business Council managed to support women's start-ups and digital financial inclusion projects and discussed the significance of the care economy and opportunities in healthcare and tourism.

Throughout its existence, BRICS has held 16 summits. Its decisions symbolize the collective desires of members of the arrangement to reform global governance and development, emphasizing multipolarity and non-intervention [Gok 2024]. For example, the 16th BRICS summit was held in Kazan, Russia, on 22–24 October 2024, with the theme of “Strengthening Multilateralism for Just Global Development and Security.” Its outcome document reflects the member states’ desire to reform the existing global arrangement [BRICS 2024]. Over time, BRICS has managed to expand its economic and financial cooperation to peace and security, technology, energy, infrastructure, digital economy, healthcare, and green development [Institute for Security and Development Policy 2024]. The arrangement also demonstrates its inclusiveness by incorporating different countries with different political systems, economic development, and population size. Currently, the member states are interested in establishing a fairer international system that represents the voices of the Global South. In its Kazan declaration, they demonstrated commitment “to improving global governance by promoting a more agile, effective, efficient, responsive, representative, legitimate, democratic and accountable international and multilateral system” [BRICS 2024. P. 2]. Nowadays, BRICS is concerned about more than just economic and development. Since its birth, the bloc has been aimed at boosting intra-trade and investment among member states as part of South-South cooperation [Prinsloo 2023]. It also deals with matters pertinent to peace and security, such as commitment to multilateralism and upholding international law, adhering to the UN Charter, reforming the United Nations, including the Security Council, and non-proliferation and disarmament.

Notwithstanding the BRICS countries’ attempts at galvanizing collective efforts to reform existing global governance institutions and help create a fair multilateral order, economic disruptions due to the global pandemic, global inflation, and the conflict in Ukraine, as well as the concomitant rises in the costs of food, fuel, and agricultural inputs and the disruption of trade, have continued to pose challenges to the club’s functioning [Muresan 2023].

3. The expansion of BRICS

The 15th BRICS summit was held in Johannesburg on 22–24 August 2023. It was convened under the title “BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Mutually Accelerated

Growth, Sustainable Development, and Inclusive Multilateralism.” All members, except the Russian Federation, were represented by their heads of state. Different leaders from the Global South also attended the Johannesburg summit, including the African Union, the Arab League, the Maghreb Union, the Organization of Islamic Union, and the United Nations. The summit ended with the signing of the Johannesburg II declaration. The declaration addressed the “partnership for inclusive multilateralism, fostering an environment of peace and development, partnership for mutually accelerated growth and sustainable development, deepening people-to-people exchange and institutional development” [BRICS 2023]. Reports indicated that more than 40 states had demonstrated willingness to join BRICS during its 15th summit [Ashby et al. 2023]. However, only 22 states have formally requested membership [European Parliament 2024]. At the end of the summit, the five members of BRICS decided to increase the club to 11 by admitting six new states: from Africa (Ethiopia and Egypt), the Middle East and the Gulf (the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) and South America (Argentina). Argentina, however, under its new far-right president, Javier Milei, was never willing to join on the grounds that the country’s “foreign policy differs in many aspects from that of the previous government” [European Parliament 2024. P. 4]. Prior to the decision of the 15th BRICS summit, member states did not have similar positions vis-à-vis the expansion of the membership. China had sought an interest in expanding the bloc’s membership with the apparent objective of establishing “a counterpoint to G7” [Ashby et al. 2023], while India viewed the expansion from the vantage point of preserving “its privileged stature as a founding member, advance its claim to leadership as a voice of the Global South” [Ashby et al. 2023]. Another area of difference regarding expansion was the inclusion of Iran. India, Brazil, and South Africa were cautious regarding Iran’s new candidature to the club due to its “anti-Western” stance. Despite the differences in the need and rationality to expand membership, the enlargement of BRICS was made possible for the second time after 13 years. Expansion helps the BRICS countries represent 42 and 36 percent of the world population and global GDP, respectively [Ashby et al. 2023].

Admitting new members into BRICS after January 2024 has had geopolitical and economic implications. Hence, the expansion of the BRICS could be viewed from different angles. Some view the extended BRICS groups as “an anti-Western and anti-colonial alliance” [Jetschgo-Morcillo & Kanter 2024]. Many European countries share this view. Sub-Saharan countries, for example, view the enlargement of BRICS as an alternative to existing economic cooperation and economic development structures constrained by interference and established normative standards. This understanding is embedded among most African nations due to the prevalence of conditionality in securing financial loans.

All members’ decisions to admit six new states into the group share a similar rationality, something that has to do with reform of the international order. Nevertheless, it is important to look at this on a case-by-case basis. For instance, Brazil considered membership enlargement would have the advantage of “achieving a more multilateral and representative global order” [Solanki & Nouwens 2023]. As part of this strategy, Brazil sought to invite Argentina. Reforming the international order aside, Russia considered expanding BRICS as one of the goals of promoting economic relationships among the

BRICS members as well as “to further push for a multipolar world order” [Ashby et al. 2024]. The conflict between Ukraine and Russia has also influenced the latter to look for the expansion of the membership in order to overcome mounting Western diplomatic pressure. In India, the expansion of BRICS could benefit New Delhi by diversifying and strengthening existing partnerships with newly incorporated member states. Similarly to the founding members of BRICS, China is calling for reform of the international order. In doing so, Beijing is advocating for reform of the United Nations Security Council and the Bretton Woods institutions. Broadening the membership base of the BRICS, in the eyes of Beijing’s government, is a means to democratize the existing international order that seemed to lack the Global South’s representation and interests. South Africa also shared the perspective of the Chinese government on the reform of global institutions by broadening the BRICS membership. Nevertheless, the country wants to “change some aspects of the liberal order that is in favor of the developed world while defending a rule-based global order” [Coning 2024].

The new members differ in terms of economic development and political systems. The UAE and the KSA’s admission to the bloc would help reduce the financial constraints of the NDB [Abdelaziz 2023]. On the contrary, Ethiopia and Egypt were interested in joining the club partly because of the economic prospects. While the enlargement of the existing arrangement augments the club’s capacity, the political differences between Addis Ababa and Cairo on the use of their transboundary water resource and the geopolitical rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh may affect the cohesion of the grouping. The admission of new members may cause further stress on the BRICS countries’ efforts to harmonize the existing divergent political, economic, and security objectives.

It is believed that BRICS will continue to serve as an important platform for the Global South. Expansion of the membership would help cultivate a more balanced world order by voicing the concerns and needs of the hitherto marginalized voices of the Global South in different international institutions. An expanded BRICS would contribute much to the discussion on reforming the existing institutions by enhancing cooperation among the member states in the United Nations General Assembly and helping them secure funding sources without strict conditionality [Jetschgo-Morcillo & Kanter 2024]. Furthermore, the group would offer participant states an opportunity to escape from the trend of marginalization from shaping the global order, where no single country or group of countries dominates the system in their favor, and overcoming the domino effect of the downturn of the liberal norm.

4. Factors behind Ethiopia’s decision to join BRICS

The 2023 Heads of State Summit in Johannesburg provided an opportunity for Ethiopia to join BRICS. Weeks before the public announcement concerning its expansion, there was speculation on the possibility of Ethiopia’s admission.¹ A debate on this issue began within the country. One of the key issues had to do with the fact that BRICS has no

¹ The Institute of Foreign Affairs had developed a scenario paper concerning the possible acceptance of Ethiopia into BRICS during May–June 2023. The paper had been presented to researchers and was open for debate and discussion. It examined the diversity of opinions related to BRICS.

clearly stated standards or rules to embrace new members. There was also a nationwide assumption that Ethiopia could not be a potential candidate for BRICS, as it was experiencing a civil war that lasted for two years and experiencing intense diplomatic pressure from the West. That seems to be the reason why Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, while sending a congratulatory message to the public about Ethiopia's acceptance, said that the potential of Ethiopia is better recognized abroad than domestically. He said, "Although Ethiopians might not recognize it, the world has acknowledged the growth" [Fortune 2024].

There is no doubt that the move toward BRICS involved a foreign policy calculation from the Ethiopian side. Yet it is difficult to scrutinize the precise types of interests that existed within the equation. There are still a number of identified causes that led Ethiopia toward BRICS. Economic interest seems to have come ahead of other factors. Ethiopia, with its rapidly growing economy but also a significant development finance gap and debt burden with a "public and publicly guaranteed (PPG) debt stood at 40 percent of GDP at end-June 2023" [IMF 2024, P. 3], wants to benefit from any global arrangement to further develop its economy. Endale (2023) tried to associate this economic cause with a lengthy deal on the restructuring of debt management that Ethiopia was making with international creditors, since it owes billions of dollars. Ethiopia is one of the most highly indebted countries in the world and, to make the situation worse, some of these debts are soon set to mature. The quest for debt restructuring was therefore critical in the deal with international creditors. Ethiopia made a lengthy deal with the Paris Club though without any significant progress in favor of Ethiopia either to extend debt repayment periods or total suspension until it joined BRICS. An official request was also submitted to the Club at its 2023 summit [Endale 2023]. In the same way, Ethiopia requested additional development finance from the IMF and WB since it experienced political reform in 2018. Nevertheless, neither significant financing opportunities nor debt restructuring were on offer up until Ethiopia decided to join BRICS. The lengthy negotiations have led to a further deterioration in the country's domestic economic situation. Ethiopia, like any other rational actor, was looking for alternative financial and investment opportunities available within BRICS.

The anticipated economic benefit through BRICS is one of Ethiopia's biggest hopes. The New Development Bank (NDB) is an evolving financial institution established by the BRICS alliance. If Ethiopia's access to BRICS is supplemented by membership to the NDB, this should provide an additional development finance opportunity. Accession to this bank would not only help Ethiopia to alleviate its financial constraints, but also provide it with a voice in the decision-making process. This is an important step: to be a decision maker, and not simply a decision "taker." Apart from the chance of direct access to a financial institution like the NDB, membership of BRICS would also help to deepen economic relations with each of the members. Some BRICS members have big economies; others are technological leaders, which give them comparative advantages in different areas. Consequently, Ethiopia seeks to work with BRICS members to share resources and experiences. The government of Ethiopia believes that it has been selected to join BRICS, from a number of nations that expressed their interest, for its potential to be one of the major economies of Africa in the foreseeable future.

Abiy Ahmed posted on X that “Ethiopia stands ready to cooperate with all for an inclusive and prosperous global order” (24 August 2023). This is a public call for working with likeminded nations toward a fair global order. Such statements show the importance of political considerations in the decision to join BRICS.

This may be a result of the diplomatic pressure it experienced in 2020–2022. In those years, Ethiopia was repeatedly mentioned in the UNSC for reasons associated with its construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile River and the Tigray War [Taye 2024]. When the reservoir began to be filled, this caused upset in Egypt, which frequently took the case to the UNSC in order to pressure Ethiopia. The two-year-long Tigray War was also in the dossiers compiled by the countries of the West in order to challenge Ethiopia before the Council. These were the years that Ethiopia was looking for a reliable partner in its diplomatic row against its plaintiffs. Had it not been for the support of China and Russia, permanent members of the Council, and India, a non-permanent member during the time, Ethiopia could have faced numerous sanctions.

The data collected through interviews for the purpose of this research indicates that unless Ethiopia opens itself for multiple engagements with both established and emerging multilateral arrangements, its survival is in danger. During the Tigray War, there were continuous attempts to impose sanctions upon Ethiopia through the United Nations Security Council, but this failed due to vetoing by China and Russia. Without military cooperation with non-Western countries, the incumbent could have lost power. In addition to participation within the supranational institutions found in the Horn of Africa and in the continent, it is also imperative for Ethiopia to engage with institutions operating on the global level.

5. Public opinion on Ethiopia’s accession to BRICS

Voices of support and opposition were heard immediately following the news of accession to BRICS. Government media and government-affiliated think tanks showed their support for the decision, in contrast to the critical voices heard through the private media and think tanks [Goshu, Teshome and Teshale 2024]. Support was given with the assumption that BRICS would bring economic and diplomatic advantage. The accession was considered as a sign of progress from diplomatic pressure and exclusion in the years 2020–2022 to an era of new diplomatic frontiers. It was portrayed as a new diplomatic success, with BRICS providing multiple opportunities to stand together with the countries of the Global South.

However, there are also some groups who criticized Ethiopia for relegating its tradition of a neutral foreign policy as far as great power politics is concerned and involving itself in geopolitical games by taking an anti-Western stand. This is based on the assumption that BRICS stands for replacing the dominant position of the West in the global governance structure. Authors like Acemoglu (2023) consider BRICS as the foreign policy tool of China, since it is, economically, the mightiest member of the club. His article was also republished in local newspaper in Ethiopia, *Addis Fortune* (2023). Ethiopia’s accession to BRICS was therefore viewed as showing support to China. It is also further viewed as a move to challenge the established global governance structure together with

like-minded BRICS countries. But it is far from reality to consider BRICS as an alternative to the established global governance system.

Some even went further and recommended that Ethiopia embrace a de-BRICS approach. An anonymous source within a non-governmental organization in Ethiopia believes that the cost of joining BRICS far outweighs its benefits, and that Ethiopia should therefore think carefully before joining the group. This type of discussion was common, especially in the months between August and December 2023 though it disappeared after Ethiopia officially declared its membership in January 2024. Some also question the relevance of joining BRICS instead of working to further cement its bilateral relations with each of the member countries. Of course, Ethiopia enjoys strong bilateral relations with all the member countries and entering into the BRICS should not prevent it from further enhancing the already established bilateral engagements.

6. Ethiopia's experience within BRICS

One year into its BRICS membership, Ethiopia has had the time to draw conclusions of its own about the way decisions are made at all levels of the BRICS group. Be it in expert meetings on technical details or in political discussions by state representatives, decisions are made via consensus. The apparent difference in economic and military prowess amongst members does not prevent them from sitting together in order to reach agreement.

The other notable thing that Ethiopia experienced in its one-year journey within BRICS is the tendency to have meeting and coordination opportunities among different government agencies of the member countries. The 2023 Johannesburg Heads of State Summit Declaration [BRICS 2023] elaborates the tradition of interagency coordination. For instance, the Counter-Terrorism Working Group is composed of security and intelligence agencies member nations. As the vast majority of the visions and actions of BRICS intend to promote economic cooperation, governors of national banks and heads of relevant ministerial offices have numerous platforms to integrate commonly agreed goals and activities. Ministerial offices responsible for trade, industry, tourism, statistics, and science and technology are at the forefront of interagency coordination. There are also additional platforms to integrate member countries' government agencies working on energy and technical and vocational training. During the Russian presidency in 2024, the number of governmental agencies engaged in interagency coordination increased significantly. Ethiopia participated in more than half of the 200 plus meetings organized by Russia in 2024 [Gebre and Kebeta 2024].

Such interagency coordination may have a positive contribution in norm creation and institutionalization of BRICS over a longer period. It is imperative to raise the neo-functional assumptions of Ernst Haas (1998) at this point. This is a theory that provides assumptions about the way regional integration can be achieved. Even though much of the neo-functionalism theory is proposed as a scheme of integration for geographically neighboring countries, its assumptions on the relevance or the prerequisite of integration in specialized areas of cooperation as a means toward broader regional integration can also be a defining theory for interagency coordination within BRICS. For member

countries that neighbor one another and with wider options of trade and investment, such coordination might lead to broader regional integration.

A year as part of BRICS also shows that it provides additional opportunities to strengthen bilateral economic engagements amongst member states. A good example in this case is the currency swap agreements Ethiopia made with UAE and China. Ethiopia had strong economic ties with both even before joining BRICS, but its accession to the group provided an additional impetus to reach agreement. Similar types of agreements are also common between Russia and China and the UAE with India.

One of the expectations of Ethiopia, to join the New Development Bank (NDB), however, has not yet been achieved. Interviewees² recognized the fact that Ethiopia was expecting automatic admission to the Bank at the same time as joining BRICS. However, the road to the Bank is different, since it operates as an autonomous business. Lately, Ethiopia has realized that accession to the Bank requires not only fulfilling financial requirements but also striking a rigorous diplomatic deal with major stakeholders of the Bank.

7. Conclusion

It is too early to assess the role Ethiopia is playing within BRICS or the benefits it is accruing following accession. In this article, we have attempted to describe domestic public opinion during Ethiopia's move to join BRICS and its one year of membership. For Ethiopia, BRICS has become a supplementary platform for its multi-level and diverse diplomatic engagements with numerous states and international organizations. In its one-year journey within BRICS, Ethiopia has accepted the invitation to membership with a lot of publicity; joined the group and participated in numerous technical and political meetings; passed decisions in collaboration with other member states by way of consensus whereby the 16th BRICS Heads of State Summit and the Kazan Declaration is a good example in this case; and used the platform to further enhance bilateral relations with other member countries. It has also embarked on a bid to join the NDB.

Ethiopia's future actions within the group should be based on its experience over the past year. First, BRICS is still in the process of coordinating various government agencies which might include norm creation over an extended period. Establishing a convention will be the homework for the group in which Ethiopia may also have to engage in due course. Second, Ethiopia has to strategically use the BRICS platform in a way that supports its socioeconomic development. The trade, investment, and technological opportunities are immense, and Ethiopia has to ready itself to exploit the available opportunities.

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² Interview with anonymous sources in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

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