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Ethiopia's Meles Goes on Sick Leave

This is IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English.

This week, Ethiopians were closely following any news about the condition of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. A spokesman said in Addis Ababa on Thursday that the prime minister was taking sick leave on doctors' orders. Spokesman Bereket Simon said Mr. Meles' health was good, but he needed time to recover from an illness caused in part by an overload of work.

BEREKET SIMON: "Regarding his illness, I think I have told you that he is in good condition. He has got very good treatment for the ailment, and definitely he's in good condition."

Mr. Bereket did not give any details of what the fifty-seven-year-old prime minister was being treated for or where. But he denied reports on Ethiopian dissident websites that Mr. Meles had brain cancer.

The spokesman said the government was operating as normal and that Mr. Meles was still in power.

BEREKET SIMON: "The only thing that I can say is, although he's in charge, he has to take some rest -- a week, ten days, five days, whatever. A leave of absence does not mean there's nobody in charge."

His comments followed media reports that the Ethiopian leader was in critical condition at a hospital in Belgium.

David Shinn, formerly American ambassador to Ethiopia, told VOA that he had no information about the prime minister's health. But he said the spokesman's comments suggested a serious health issue.

DAVID SHINN: "You wouldn't make a statement like that -- that is so open-ended -- unless the problem is significant."

He also described Mr. Meles as the kind of leader who plans ahead.

DAVID SHINN: "Whatever his health problem is, he probably has known about it for some time. This was not some sort of a surprise issue, at least, that would be

my guess. And if I am correct in that assumption then I would be willing to bet very good money that he has been planning for some way to deal with this issue in order to ensure some kind of reasonable succession of government in Ethiopia."

Mr. Meles became president after he led rebels to power in nineteen ninety-one, overthrowing Ethiopia's former military government. He was elected prime minister in nineteen ninety-five.

Mr. Meles has served as the African Union's spokesman on climate change. He has been praised for helping lift Ethiopia out of poverty after civil war. But he has been criticized for silencing all forms of dissent.

Ethiopia has been seen as a close American ally in its support of anti-terrorism efforts in Somalia and East Africa. But the State Department has been critical of the government's human rights record and use of new anti-terrorism laws to suppress free speech. American officials have also criticized the way in which the government held recent national elections.

Mr. Meles was last seen in public more than two weeks ago. He did not attend a meeting of AU leaders in the Ethiopian capital last Saturday and Sunday. At that meeting, South Africa's home affairs minister became the first woman to lead the African Union Commission.

NKOSOZANA DLAMINI-ZUMA: "I, Nkosozana Dlamini-Zuma, solemnly undertake to exercise in all loyalty, discretion and conscience, the function and responsibility entrusted to me as chairperson of the Commission of the African Union."

Ms. Dlamini-Zuma is the former wife of South African President Jacob Zuma. She was elected Sunday on the fourth ballot, defeating Chairman Jean Ping of Gabon.

And that's IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English. For the latest news from Ethiopia and across Africa, go to voanews.com. You can also click on Learning English to read, listen and learn English with our programs and activities. I'm Steve Ember.

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