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By a guest author
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On Ethiopia: ‘I’ve lost faith in everything “American”’



Displaced persons at a camp in Debarq, Ethiopia, Oct. 10

Ann Garrison is a Black Agenda Report contributing editor based in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 2014, she received the Victoire Ingabire Umuhoza Democracy and Peace Prize for promoting peace through her reporting on conflict in the African Great Lakes Region. Twitter @AnnGarrison. Her interview with photographer and human rights investigator Jemal Countess, originally published Nov. 3 in Black Agenda Report, has been lightly edited.

Ann Garrison: Jemal, the last time we caught up with you, you were between the cities of Gondar and Bahir Dar in Amhara Region. Where did you go after that?

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Jemal Countess: After I was working in Bahir Dar, I went to a camp outside of Bahir, two hours away in a city called Intebet. This is home to an IDP [Internal Displacement] camp that had a large number of young boys in particular, ages 10 to 16, who had primarily left the city of Sakota in the middle of the night, leaving their families behind to escape forced conscription into the TPLF ranks. [The Tigray People's Liberation Front is actually a long-standing U.S. ally.] What the TPLF was doing was kidnapping young Amhara boys, giving them minimal military training and making them march ahead of their ranks as human shields.

AG: Were they carrying weapons?

JC: In some cases fake weapons, but for the most part, no.

AG: And what else did you see there? Were there a lot of IDPs?

JC: Yes, this was a large IDP center. About 4,000 I was told, and in this IDP camp, as in most, they were taking refuge in primary schools. So you have local students who don't have access to education. They're missing a whole year of school. You have IDPs living in these classrooms, sometimes 50-plus in a room — these young boys who had escaped forced conscription by the TPLF. Try to imagine these little guys, 10 to 16 years of age, walking and running through the countryside, leaving their homes in the middle of the night, and they haven't seen their families in weeks. They don't even know if their families are alive or dead.

AG: Where did you go on from there?

JC: I went north to the site of the massacre at Teklehaymanot Church in the village of Chenna. This massacre took place in late August, what would be August 31 on our calendar. On the annual Day of Commemoration for Saint Teklehaymanot.

That morning, during mass, the TPLF surprised a group of parishioners at a church and opened fire with automatic weapons. They killed 207 people over the course of two days; but they started the massacre on a holy day when they fired on parishioners at the church, killing over 100 there, then continuing the next day going door to door, pulling Amhara out of their homes and killing them. The villagers say that they have buried 207 of their

fellow villagers. The official government numbers placed the total at 120. So either way this was the site of a brutal massacre.

AG: Where did you move on from there?

JC: I went to the city of Debarq, which is host to a large number of IDPs as well. I was traveling with a team of doctors and humanitarians dispensing food and food aid and mattresses to the IDPs.

AG: And from there?

JC: I went back to Adama, so I could go to Dessie and Kombolcha. Kombolcha is a city just about 35 minutes south of Dessie, in the eastern region of the country, near the Afar Region. And there are over 300,000 IDPs in Dessie.

AG: I've got a list of Ethiopian cities here, and it looks like there are 610,000 people in Dessie. Now there are 300,000 IDPs there as well?

JC: Yes. It's a large modern city, and these 300,000 IDPs have caused the streets to swell. It's noticeable when you are walking and driving around Dessie. The streets are very crowded. And, as in other cases, these IDPs are located in the schools. That also means that a large population of young people aren't receiving education this year, because the schools are occupied by IDPs.

AG: And from there you went on to Kombolcha?

JC: Well, I did Kombolcha first. There I went to an IDP site that hosted 700 IDPs. And they had been forced out of their town by the TPLF army. This was a large population of Muslim women and their children — Muslim women IDPs who were without their husbands who had stayed behind to try to defend their areas or cities. They told amazing stories, heartbreaking stories, and showed unimaginable compassion — this from people who had basically lost everything but who still maintain their humanity, their kindness and their compassion. That was a very touching episode, to be in Kombolcha.

AG: And who were the aid workers? Who were you traveling with?

JC: I was traveling with a team of doctors and also translators and drivers who were IDPs from Lalibela, the holy Eastern Orthodox Christian city — a site now occupied by the TPLF. They had been tour guides in Lalibela, so I reached out and made arrangements to utilize their services, translating and driving, in and around Kombolcha and Dessie.

The team of doctors are affiliated with the Amhara Emergency Fund and are local doctors, or they're coming from other parts of the country to administer whatever aid and assistance they can.

AG: So they're not from outside. Not from Médecins Sans Frontières?

JC: No, no, these are all local. These are all local resources. I never even see those guys — Médecins Sans Frontières — anywhere. I hear about their presence in some of these camps or what they've done. But when I've gone to these camps, I have seen only aid workers from local charities and local organizations that have been doing the heavy lifting.

AG: Today, there was a headline saying that Dessie and Kombolcha had been captured by the TPLF. Do you know if that's true, and in what sort of situation does it leave the IDPs there? And also, another headline was that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had called on civilians to respond to a state of emergency and defend the capital, Addis Ababa, which is also the seat of the African Union. Do you know the truth of these two descriptions that make it sound like an increasingly urgent situation?

JC: I think that people need to be aware of the fact that there have been ethnic Tigrayans sprinkled throughout the country, especially in business centers. You know, aside from Addis Ababa, which has a large ethnic Tigrayan population. Dessie also had a large ethnic Tigrayan population.

Now all Tigrayans are not TPLF. We just need to be very clear about that. My wife is half Oromo, and she considers herself an Ethiopian citizen first. But there are large numbers of TPLF amongst the Tigrayans in these cities, including Addis. You do have lots of TPLF-friendly or TPLF-sympathetic people throughout the country.

In Dessie there were TPLF sleeper cells who, when they heard that the TPLF had advanced into the city, came out and started to attack the Amhara. So a number of Amhara who were killed in Dessie were killed by the sleeper cells. There were eyewitness accounts

of that from both national army troops and people who were in Dessie and able to communicate what was happening.

Last I heard of, Dessie, a large city, was in the throes of street fighting, and the TPLF had seized control of some part of it. In the case of Kombolcha, I heard that the TPLF had captured it and immediately massacred over 100 youth, young people who were sympathetic or who were friendly to the national army, the Ethiopian National Defense Force or the Fano.

AG: Who are the Fano?

JC: The Fano are an Amhara youth militia group — young 20-somethings, who are patriotic Amhara, who would focus on defending the Amhara Region. The TPLF has reportedly massacred, between the two cities of Dessie and Kombolcha, approximately 300 Amhara, within just a short period of time, barely more than a day after entering both of those cities. The Fano are trying to defend the Amhara from the TPLF.

AG: And those cities are close to Addis, right?

JC: Yeah, 300 kilometers, give or take.

AG: Give me half a minute to convert that to miles. Looks like it's just over 186 miles. So someone driving 60 miles per hour from there could get to Addis in about three hours.

JC: Yes, but it'll be very difficult for the TPLF to get to Addis on that road, because the Ethiopian National Defense Force has drones and other forms of air power.

AG: And what about what Prime Minister Abiy said? What about his declaration of a state of emergency and call for all Ethiopians, including civilians, to defend Addis?

JC: Well, the call is to defend the country. The call is, basically, with a suspension of some government activities and government work, for people to be prepared. But we've caught some of the mistranslations coming from a couple of Western publications. Abiy told civilians to be prepared to defend their homes and the country. Recently there was a revelation that foreign fighters of lighter skin, presumably Egyptians or Arabs, had been

sighted in parts of Wollo. And, like I said, there are TPLF-sympathetic or actual TPLF members, who are present in Addis and throughout the country, who are armed.

To give you an example of an omission in Western media coverage, there was a hotel in the middle of Addis, the Harmony Hotel, which was closed down because it was found to be a stash house for automatic weapons to be utilized by the TPLF when the time came. So this large stash of weapons was confiscated by the government, and that hotel, along with a few dozen others, was closed by the federal government. If the others weren't storing weapons, they were funneling money back to the TPLF.

So you have a lot of Western reporting about the persecution of Tigrayans but they never report that there are TPLF sleeper cells and agents, active throughout the country, who are aiding and abetting the TPLF war effort, so civilians have to be prepared to defend not only the government but their own homes. None of the Western outlets reported on the hotel stashing automatic weapons.

AG: That sounds all but impossible for the national army to fight, because there's no frontline.

JC: It is.

AG: I've heard a number of Ethiopian and Eritrean Americans, who organized to elect Biden, now saying that they feel so betrayed that they're now organizing to vote Republican. . . . What do you think of this? Do you think this is a widespread sentiment among the diaspora community?

JC: [This is] the one-year anniversary of the TPLF attacks on the national army's Northern Command by TPLF commandos and regular TPLF cadre. Most Ethiopians know that the TPLF massacred over 6,000 soldiers during these attacks on the Northern Command in the first five days of that first year of the war, which began on Nov. 3, 2020. Altogether they murdered over 7,600 people over the course of a week.

And after watching the Biden administration support, prop up and handhold the TPLF in spite of this, I don't really blame Ethiopians for feeling the way they do. As somebody who worries about raising a Black son in America and the resulting policies and behaviors that may come out of a majority red-state government, nationally or in key states, it

concerns me. But having been to Ethiopia and smelled death and seen death at the hands of the TPLF, I get it. I really get it. I can't blame them.

AG: How does this make you feel about the U.S.?

JC: Well, I have to be quite clear. I'm the only child out of five generations that didn't serve [as military] in this country. That was only because I didn't qualify to fly. I come from a very military family. [Now] having also lived in Africa and studied African history, whether it was Zimbabwe or South Africa or Ethiopia, I've lost faith in everything American to be honest with you. I'm not despondent, full of despair in my own life. I'm just like, well, we've tried to sit the entire Democratic Party down and give them a step-by-step lesson on the TPLF, and this is their response, so I don't know what to feel about what's happening here anymore. I really don't.

AG: I doubt that many senators or members of the House know a lot about the TPLF, but I'm sure that the executive branch, the president, National Security Council, State Department and Pentagon know what they are. They enabled the TPLF for 27 years in exchange for the Ethiopian military's collaboration on their agenda in Africa. And Congress usually follows their lead. But here I am getting editorial in your interview.

JC: That's okay.

AG: Jemal, thank you for speaking to Black Agenda Report.

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