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Ethnic Terrorism Continues to Stalk Ethiopia

Where there is division there will be conflict. In a country such as Ethiopia with dozens of ethnic/tribal groups, the need for tolerance, cooperation and unity is essential if there is to be peace and social harmony. Where these are absent, where differences and historic grievances are enflamed by ideologically ambitious individuals/groups, fear hate, and violence flourish.

Ethiopia is a large country divided into 11 regions. Covering over a third of the total land mass Oromia is the largest and, with an estimated 35% of the total population (approximately 122 million), the Oromo constitute the largest ethnic group, followed by the Amhara (28%).

Within Oromia and neighboring regions (Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz), a targeted slaughter, that many believe constitutes genocide, is taking place — perpetrated by Oromo extremists against the Amhara people.

The Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) is the principle force behind the violence. During the recent war they allied themselves with the US-backed TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) terrorists, and have over the last four years carried out dozens of deadly incursions. Whole districts in western Oromia are being purged of Amhara people in a brutal campaign which, some fear, could trigger a civil war between the two largest ethnic groups.

The situation is complicated, contradictory narratives, denials and accusations abound; dis-misinformation is being propounded by the OLA through sympathetic media outlets such as the Oromo Media Network (OMN) and Kush Media Network (KMN). Spurious material which, according to Genocide Prevention in Ethiopia (GPE), an NGO collating

data on the conflict, has previously “led to a massive campaign against Amharas across the entire Oromo Region”.

While the politics of the conflict, objectives and the line/s between tribal political alignments and terrorism may appear obscure, what is crystal clear is that the Ethiopian people, drained after two years of war with the TPLF (November 2020-November 2022), with many deeply traumatized, cannot withstand another bloody conflict.

The OLA militants

The OLA constitutes the armed wing of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Formed, according to their [website](#), in 1973 by “Oromo nationalists to lead the national liberation struggle of the Oromo people against the Abyssinian colonial rule.” The fundamental objective of the OLF is, they say, “to exercise the Oromo people’s inalienable right to national self-determination to terminate a century of oppression and exploitation.” They routinely claim to be defending Oromo civilians from Amhara militia and federal forces, and maintain that, “the protracted armed resistanceof the Front, [OLF] is an act of self-defence exercised by the Oromo people against successive Ethiopian governments including the current one, who forcibly deny their right to self-determination.”

Exiled in Eritrea/Kenya until 2018, when, under an amnesty introduced by the current government led by Abiy Ahmed (an Oromo), thousands of political prisoners, journalists and critics of the previous regime (a coalition of which Abiy, as leader of the Oromo Democratic Party, was a part) were released, and opposition parties located abroad, welcomed home. Upon their return a number of OLF politicians are said to have secured influential positions on the fringes of the government, whilst some of the more military minded, were assimilated into the OSF. Since the arrival of the OLA on the scene, unlike other armed groups, they have not only been allowed to retain arms, but given the space in which to radicalize, recruit, and train young Oromos.

Since 2018, when the violence began, it is impossible to know the number of people (mainly Amharas) killed. GPE estimates it to be around 30,000, other sources put the figure much lower; the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project e.g. [shows](#) that from August 2021 to July 2022 alone “there were 3,784 deaths linked to the OLA.”

What is undisputed is that it is overwhelmingly Amhara people who are being murdered (sometimes in the most barbaric, horrific fashion), women/girls raped; hundreds of thousands displaced, countless homes destroyed, livestock stolen; and that, despite their claims to the contrary, the OLA/OLF are responsible. The OLA is supported by regional terror groups (Gumuz Liberation Movement and Gambella Liberation Front), criminal

gangs and, it is widely believed, factions within the Oromo Special Forces (OSF), acting on orders from the Oromia Regional Authority (ORA).

The ORA is widely thought to have been infiltrated by Oromo nationalists, and is not under the control of the federal government. In July 2022 an elected member of the Ethiopian parliament, Hangaasa Ahmed, accused the (Oromo) regional administration of coordinating attacks in Wollega, where many of the killings have taken place. Elements within the regional body (not the federal government) are said to be conspiring with the OLA, and radicalized OSF fighters.

One such incursion, with witnesses asserting OSF involvement, took place on 10 December in the Kemashi Zone of Benishangul-Gumuz region (bordering Sudan). The Amhara Association of America (AAA), a human rights group based in the US with a small team of investigators in Ethiopia, relates claims that the OLA were supported in the attack by Qeerro, a notorious Oromo youth group, which was instrumental in removing the previous EPRDF regime in 2018, and, eye witnesses claim, by members of the OSF. “They killed at least thirteen Amhara civilians, injured five more.” Over 500 houses were deliberately burned [forcing around 2000 people to flee] and over 3,000 farm animals were looted.” A survivor told AAA’s investigators: “There were both Special Forces and Shene (OLA) united to eliminate Amharas.”

There have been many such attacks over the last three years or so, too many to recount: the Gimbi massacre however stands out. It is one of the few incidents to be widely covered by western media, and highlights the brutal nature of the Oromo nationalists’ campaign, and the degree of human suffering inflicted.

On 18 June 2022, “OLA militants entered Tole Kebele (district) [West Wollega Zone, Oromia Region, Ethiopia] and opened fire on Amhara civilians in a nine hour long killing spree which spanned ten villages.” AAA relate witness statements — “First, the militants began shooting people and then used machetes to finish off victims whom they suspected had not died from the gunshots.” The NGO estimate around 503 Amhara civilians were killed, while elsewhere it was reported that, “more than 1500 ethnic Amhara were massacred, including children and women.”

True to form the OLA denied any involvement; their spokesperson, Odaa Tarbii, told AP that the Gimbi attack, “was committed by the regime’s military and local militia as they retreated from their camp in Gimbi following our recent offensive.” Local residents however confirmed that the OLA were behind what one survivor described as a “massacre of Amharas.” Prime Minister Abiy condemned the “evil force” and vowed, to “eliminate”

the OLA. A pledge, like political statements made the world over, easily made, but more difficult to accomplish.

Amhara homes demolished

In addition to attacking unarmed Amhara civilians, a house demolitions program, which has existed in and around Addis Ababa since 2018, is intensifying. A detailed investigation by AAA found that, “At least 3,415 houses belonging to non-Oromo owners (most of them belonging to Amhara owners) were demolished” this year alone — properties owned by Oromo were left untouched. The human rights group claims that, “Oromia Special Forces [OSF], Oromia Region police, government representatives, and local youth” are responsible for the demolitions in various parts of “the newly established Sheger City administration”; an area populated by both Amhara and Oromo, where control switched from a local administration to the Oromia Regional State in August 2022.

According to AAA, when people asked the authorities why their houses had been destroyed, their personal belongings trashed. The response was swift and ferocious: “At least 40 individuals were arrested and their whereabouts remain unknown. Another 10...were brutally injured by security forces of the Oromia Regional State.” A local resident whose home was levelled, relates that on 3 January, “hundreds of local youth, police and special police came to the Enku-Gabriel area (Betachignaw side),” they opened fire on those trying to stop them and proceeded to “abscise the roof and doors of houses and took the tin to the Oromia Region with the help of 11 [Isuzu] FSR trucks.”

The houses, many occupied by the same family for 30/40 years, may, as some claim, have been built illegally, and some will no doubt argue that demolitions were based, therefore, not on ethnic hatred but on legality of ownership. Where a legitimate question of ownership exists the matter should be properly investigated; there is no justification for such wholesale vandalism, and, in a country seeking to strengthen democratic institutions and the rule of law the perpetrators of such destruction should be held to account.

Many of those affected believe the demolition campaign is an attempt to eradicate Amhara people and “Oromize the area”. A plan, which, some hold, included the recent introduction of the Oromo national anthem and display of the Oromo flag in schools in parts of Addis Ababa. An illegal move that triggered powerful popular resistance forcing the policy to be withdrawn; a triumph for community action and common sense, which could empower people to take further action against ethnic nationalism and communal division.

Building unity creating peace

Although the OLF (regarded as a legitimate political party) and OLA appear to be two distinct groups, they are but opposite sides of the same violent tribalistic coin. Sharing a flag, a hatred and resentment of Amhara people, and a divisive vision of Oromo Statehood; an expanded Oromia that would swallow up territory of neighboring states (Amhara, Afara, BSG, Gambella, Ogaden) and include the capital, Addis Ababa.

Whether their aim is self-determination as stated on the OLF website, or an independent (enlarged) Oromo Republic, the need for urgent government action to stop the killing/displacement and destruction of homes is clear. Long-term grievances can be examined and dealt with after the guns have been silenced, the machetes laid down, those responsible arrested and prosecuted. This requires government to act decisively, to powerfully condemn OLA attacks and loss of life — something routinely lacking — enforce law and order effectively and consistently, and to safeguard the community. As The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission rightly states: “The killing, maiming and displacement of civilians in the [Oromo] region.....calls for immediate action by the federal government and a concrete and lasting solution.”

To date, the government’s response has been disappointing. This may be partially explained by the demands the TPLF conflict placed on federal forces and officials; some, however, believe it shows political weakness in the face of Oromo nationalist influence at the heart of government; other, more critical voices, suggest that through neglect and omission, the government is complicit. GPE for example, claim that government agencies are implicated in OLA/OSF incursions, cutting telecommunication, electricity/water supplies and blocking roads in preparation for an impending attack.

Such accusations, if true do not prove federal government involvement; they may point towards participation at a local administrative level however, and thereby reveal the degree to which regional administrations and some (Oromo) ethnically aligned voices within the federal government are able to act independently. If this is so, again strong decisive government action is required to weed out such voices.

Immediate substantive action must be taken to stop the carnage. It can be done if the will is there: when the TPLF attacked in November 2020, the government initially responded decisively and swiftly. The OLA and their allies are just as great a threat as the TPLF; they, too, must be stopped.

In the long term, constitutional reform is required, ethnic federalism jettisoned, all regional militia disarmed, and a national debate around democratic participation and regional governance initiated. Nothing lasting can be achieved in the country without first peace;

no prosperity, no social changes, no lasting democratic developments. These will not be created by gesture politics or flamboyant speeches, but through inclusive policies that encourage broad democratic participation; by building relationships based on respect and trust and creating a vibrant sense of national unity.

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