

A call for investigation and coverage

- by a coalition of Oromo advocacy and human rights groups (signatories below)
- January 14, 2022

A Dagger to the Heart: Ethiopian Party Officials Order the Killing of 14 Indigenous Oromo Leaders

On the evening of December 1, 2021, 14 respected, experienced and culturally venerated leaders in the Karrayyuu Oromo community of 100,000 in central Ethiopia were killed in minutes by Oromia Special Police and Federal forces operating on orders by ruling party officials sitting a hundred kilometers away in Adama city. The murdered men were located at Fantalle district, East Shewa Zone of the Oromia regional state in Ethiopia. They were killed execution-style at 7:00 PM far from the village where they were abducted when Prosperity Party bosses gave the go-ahead signal via cell phone message to awaiting members of the special forces. The murdered men had just finished conducting *Waaqa Kadhaa*, a sacred indigenous prayer ceremony held on special ground designated for that purpose. In the close-knit iconic livestock-rearing culture of the Karrayyuu people, this was an unthinkable atrocity.

We, a coalition of Oromo advocacy and human rights groups operating internationally consider that this horrifying series of events indicate the intentionality and destructiveness of Abiy Ahmed's government against Oromo and other Southern and marginalized peoples who do not support his direction for the country. We urge the international community, in particular those concerned with justice, peace, stability and human rights, to take note of what has happened in Karrayyuu. Those who were deeply committed to spirituality and to democratic principles above all, were brutally massacred with lightning speed: an act that sends a menacing warning to the populace that no one is safe right now in Ethiopia.

Historic, Political and Economic Contexts

The shocking massacre was carried out amid ongoing brutal wars between Ethiopian Defence Forces and the Tigray Defence Forces in the north of the country and with the Oromo Liberation Army in the south. The site of the killing is the Karrayyuu camel-rearing, pastoral grazing and watering lands located near coveted trade routes for lucrative commodities in a cash-strapped economy. This valued territory has become a target of territorial expansionism by Amhara militias emboldened by Abiy Ahmed's government's failure to protect vulnerable peoples like the Karrayyuu. In the days leading to the event, the Karrayyuu Oromo's community leaders had resisted releasing young people to be conscripted to leave their homeland to fight as part of the Ethiopian Defense Forces in the north. Among Oromo communities throughout Ethiopia, the Karrayyuu are well-known and esteemed for their consistent practice of the principles of the time-honored Gadaa system of socio-political organization that encompassed all Oromo prior to incorporation into Ethiopia at the turn of the 20th century. These and other factors make the tragedy of December 1 resonate throughout the population and account for an ongoing sense of threat and foreboding among other vulnerable groups in the country.

Brutality and displacement of Karrayyuu people have historical precedent in Ethiopia. Karrayyuu have been historically and repeatedly dispossessed of their pastoral lands.¹ They lost more than half when the government of Haile-Selassie established a massive sugar cane plantation at Metahara and also when the Awash National Park in the Awash valley was carved out of Karrayyuu territory 200 km east of Finfinnee/Addis Ababa. Jobs at the sugar factory did not benefit the Karrayyuu but instead went to imported labour from other areas. Over the years substantial contraband trade elsewhere in Ethiopia became extremely lucrative, and the routes to the outlets in Djibouti and Somaliland, thus the flow of wealth and power, join in Awash, just east of Fantalle, before running directly through Karrayyuu territory.

Karrayyuu land has been encroached upon by residents of the neighbouring Amhara Region for a number of reasons. They seek territorial expansion for farmland and strategic trade route control/influence, setting their sights on the grazing lands of the Karrayyuu pastoralists. Since the regime of Abiy Ahmed came to power, Amhara Region Militia has proceeded to encroach on adjacent Karrayyuu land, clearing vegetation and razing Oromo pastoral structures to the ground and moving signposts without any pushback from government forces who would be expected to enforce the law and protect established legal boundaries. These aggressive moves by the militia are followed by the arrival of settlers who construct houses and begin farming. Before 2018, there were territorial disputes, but “there was balance,” according to residents. Now a sign reading “Welcome to Amhara Region” has been erected 45 km deep into Karrayyuu land, crossing the vital supply routes linked to Djibouti and Somaliland. (See map below.) The sign was dismantled eight times by Karrayyuu and nine times reconstructed by Amhara militia until the Prosperity Party dispatched an armed pickup truck to support the Amhara in this struggle over the boundary marker by safeguarding the sign. Such actions are interpreted by local people to indicate that the Abiy Ahmed government is reviving the imperialistic and assimilationist policies of previous Ethiopian regimes. Actions such as this foment ethnic conflict and justify the use of violence in favor of one ethnic group over the rest of Ethiopia. Such policies invite greater instability in Ethiopia and in the region, as the wars in north and south attest. The Fantalle territory is currently a significant prize for Amhara expansionism at the expense of the Karrayyuu. The Abiy Ahmed regime is allowing and condoning this overt land grab.

The Massacre and its Aftermath

What is known² about the Karrayyuu massacre is that Prosperity Party leaders sitting in Adama ordered the execution in cold blood of the Abbaa Gadaa and thirteen other individually selected Gadaa leaders in Fantalle district on the evening of 1 December.

¹ See, for example, “Problems of Sustainable Resources Use among Pastoralist Societies: the influence of state intervention on the pastoral life of the Karrayya,” Assefa Tolera, <http://ossrea.net/publications/images/stories/ossrea/dhp-pastoralists-env.pdf>, pp.40-54.

² Constituent organizations of this coalition of Oromo advocacy and human rights groups have direct contact with citizens of Fantalle who witnessed the atrocity and have spoken with one of the two Gadaa leaders who escaped the killing field. Authors have interviewed a Karrayyuu Oromo in the USA who knows personally all fourteen Gadaa leaders who were killed and remains in intimate contact with the community. We have also consulted several written accounts: [IJA OROMIA](#), 23 December; [Addis Standard](#), 3 December; [Addis Standard](#), 17 December; [OLLAA website](#), 30 December; and [BBC News Afaan Oromo](#), 3 December.

Members of the Michile Gadaa, currently near the middle of its eight-year period in office, were present in the seat of the Gadaa, a sacred village, Motoma, within the loose collection of hamlets which comprise the area of Karra. They had met on the morning of 1 December, 2021 for a prayer ceremony, *Waaqa Kadhaa*, and had returned to their huts when five vehicles arrived, several with mounted machine guns, with about 20 Ethiopian government “security forces” – described as a mixture of Oromia Special Forces, Federal soldiers and police.

These ‘security forces’ called out from their homes several dozen persons who had attended the ceremony and read out the names of 40 individuals. All forty Gadaa leaders, including their overall leader, the Abbaa Gadaa, Kadiro Hawas Boru, and Gadaa Councillor, Jiloo Didoo, came forward and peacefully submitted after some discussion among themselves about the consequences of complying.

Traditional weapons which were worn for the ceremony, and rifles owned by about 20 of the men were removed from their homes and piled before them. Once their weapons had been taken, they were subjected to verbal and, increasingly, to physical abuse.

When the men asked the government forces what they had done to deserve such treatment, the Abbaa Gadaa advised everyone to keep calm, saying there was nothing to fear because they had done no wrong. He informed the soldiers that Abiy Ahmed had visited the area twice and spoken with him personally. Kadiro showed the soldiers a gift he had been given by Abiy Ahmed to prove this claim. (It appeared to be a sort of key fob.)

The forty Gadaa leaders were taken 5-6 km from the village to Anole, an isolated arid area (see map below), where they were divided into two groups. Sixteen, including the Abbaa Gadaa, Kadiro Hawas Boru, and Jiloo Didoo remained in Anole, where they were forced to lie face down on the ground and were beaten, according to two eyewitnesses who later escaped. The Abbaa Gadaa was taken away for separate discussions several times during the day and beaten within earshot of the others. There were many screams of pain but the witnesses were lying face down and unable to see what was happening most of the time.

Throughout the day, there were several phone calls between the commander of the soldiers holding the detainees and Prosperity Party headquarters in Adama to discuss the fate of the detained. According to the two escaped leaders, members of the Oromia Special Forces were speaking with government officials in Adama to get instructions and orders to kill the Karrayyuu elders.

Finally, after dark, around 7:00 PM, the sixteen men were lined up and their heads were covered for execution. When the firing started, one of the soldiers threw his gun down and shouted, “I cannot kill Oromo. I cannot kill Karrayyuu!” Two of the 16 Gadaa leaders, hearing this, seized the opportunity to run off and escape. The fate of the reluctant soldier is not known. His body was not found later, though the witnesses reported that he was sharply rebuked by his fellows as the witnesses departed.

Villagers had heard prolonged shooting during the night and, tipped off by the eyewitnesses, located the killing field later in the morning of 2 December. A soldier guarding the corpses tried

to prevent community leaders from taking the bodies, but he was chased away. The fourteen bullet-riddled remains of the Gadaa leaders were taken back to Karra for burial. When found, their bodies had already been attacked by wild animals.

The government's initial response was to announce that the killings were carried out by "Shane" (Oromo Liberation Army, OLA), a claim that had no credence or evidentiary basis and has since been contradicted by senior officials of the Prosperity Party themselves who posted that the Oromia Regional Government is responsible.³

Local informants believe that only a disagreement between members of the security forces on December 1 prevented all forty men from being executed in Anole.

The other 24 Gadaa leaders were driven 55 km southwest to a military camp at Wolenchiti, where they were detained and tortured for six or seven days before being transferred to a secret unofficial place of detention in Mojo, 28 km on the other side of Adama, along the road to Finfinnee/Addis Ababa. The beating and torture continued.

On 8 December in Mojo, one of the detainees, Jiloo Boraya Hawas, in his fifties, died from his injuries. His body lay in the cell with the other detainees for 24 hours and was then left in a container next to the cell until Karrayyuu elders tracked down the detainees and confronted their captors on 10 December. The body of Jiloo Boraya Hawas was taken back to Karra, where he was buried on 11 December.

Other detainees received hospital treatment before being returned to detention. Six were released to return home on 31 December. The others remain in custody. The presence of these detainees in Mojo and the testimony of the two leaders who escaped the massacre and lived to share their eyewitness accounts, have prevented further claims that the killings were the work of OLA.

The Implications

- *For the Karrayyuu...*

The speed and ferocity of this attack on the sacred and revered Gadaa institution have shocked Oromo communities across the world. The Gadaa is more than a religious institution: it is the core of Oromo identity, the basis of law-making, morality and ethics, civil conduct, and the foundation of a democratic ethos shared by Oromo and other Cushitic peoples of Ethiopia. Oromo democracy, which predates any western equivalent by several centuries and includes

³ See the [statement of Taye Dande'a](#), State Minister of Peace and member of central committee of the Prosperity Party, and [video exposé by Hangaasaa Ibraahim](#), a Member of Parliament for the Oromia Region, admitting government responsibility and naming the key perpetrators. ([English subtitles for MP Hangaasaa Ibraahim's statement](#), in which he accuses Oromia Region Police Commissioner Ararsa Merdasa of ordering the execution, are provided by Anley E. Tefera, known as "Tisho").

Although these Prosperity Party officials are known for spreading false information in the past, it is worth noting that they have stepped forward to offer this information which contradicts earlier government statements that falsely accused OLA "Shane" of the brutality. A leaked one-page letter containing reports of the Karrayyuu massacre case written to the Oromia Police Commission and the Attorney from the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission also confirms that "the order to commit the killing was given from above."

more checks and balances, is grounded in the Gadaa. The Karrayyuu killings are of enormous significance to all Oromo – whether followers of *Waaqefata*,⁴ Christianity or Islam.

Prior to the massacre, persecution of Karrayyuu Oromo had intensified. Those who were found in urban areas, buying goods or seeking medical attention, were liable to beating and imprisonment. Local estimates are of 200 persons detained, including women and the elderly. They cannot be reached by relatives bringing food and are kept *incommunicado*. Since the atrocity on 1 December, movement has been further curtailed. The Karrayyuu pastoralists are prevented from taking their animals to essential water and pasture. They are now forbidden from carrying arms which have been essential to their livelihood, protecting camels. Now they are arrested or shot if seen bearing rifles.

Within a few weeks of the massacre, the sacred Gadaa village at Motoma was razed to the ground by Amhara Region Militia. The Karrayyuu who resisted are accused of supporting OLA.

Regarding this Karrayyuu incident particularly, we support a thorough investigation which identifies the perpetrators, confirming who ordered and who performed the executions, in order to hold accountable all in the chain of command. Such a disclosure will reveal the nature of the regime in power and provide insight into the mechanisms by which impunity prevails in Oromia.

We call for the Karrayyuu community's territories to be respected. Amhara militia should be instructed immediately to evacuate the areas. Federal military forces need to return to their barracks. Traditional and ceremonial arms should be returned so the Karrayyuu may restore their lives and livelihoods. Confiscated camels should be returned to their owners. Rehabilitation funds should be extended to the community who lost their leaders and to the families of the executed men.

If the government officially admits the chain of events and holds the perpetrators accountable, it could open the door to reconciliation between Karrayyuu and government. Otherwise, the current clouds of confrontation between the community and government soldiers send an ominous message to all Oromo and marginalized indigenous peoples and bode ill for the entire region, setting the stage for another catastrophe.

- *For Oromia and the wider south...*

The events in Karrayyuu represent a microcosm of what is happening in communities and villages everywhere in Oromia. Unfortunately, reports have not been getting out about atrocities that take place in the center and south of the country due to communication blackouts and travel restriction. The Karrayyuu experience is what Oromo see as the fate of countless other vulnerable communities if circumstances are not reversed and protections put in place.

This is the type of harassment and persecution directed at all groups who are considered, rightly or wrongly, to be adversaries of Abiy's government.

⁴ Traditional monotheist Oromo religion.

The UN Human Rights Council has resolved to establish an independent commission of experts to investigate human rights abuses throughout Ethiopia,⁵ not only the violations in the Tigray and Amhara Regions. This is most welcome. Independent verification of egregious abuses in Oromia and other regions of oppressed and marginalized peoples of Ethiopia, who constitute a vast majority of the population of the country, will likely strengthen calls for thoroughgoing changes to the political and power structure of Ethiopia.

An independent investigation of these kinds of events will also demonstrate the intentional clearing by Amhara Region Militia of Oromo, Gumuz, Agaw and Kemant people in Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz and Oromia Regions.

If investigations go forward, it will become clear that a solution to Ethiopia's structural problems will not be found in negotiation among northern belligerents alone but must include accountability issues and voices from the wider South and marginalized peoples.

- *For democratic forces and finding inclusive solutions in Ethiopia...*

Investigations will confirm that forces of democracy have been under attack for three years, since late 2018, starting with attempts to eliminate members of Qeerroo, the Oromo pro-democracy student movement. This group, after four years of peaceful protest and at the cost of thousands of young lives, brought an end to EPRDF rule in 2018. The Oromo youth were intent on implementing principles of democracy in Ethiopia. Their hard-won opening of democratic space was systematically sabotaged by Abiy Ahmed, however, who had already targeted the Qeerroo as his "biggest threat" upon arrival in office.

It should be noted that currently the Ethiopian regime accuses Western countries of "imperialism" and "neocolonialism," yet this same Ethiopian regime is spearheading systematic suppression and attacks on indigenous African ways of life and indigenous institutions and leaders within its own boundaries. Abiy Ahmed employs "pan-African" rhetoric claiming "Africa for Africans" at the international level, while allying with notorious dictators and totalitarians around the world. His regime is empowered by this foreign assistance to crush indigenous Oromo people's aspiration for local autonomy and democracy. Are the Oromo, who aspire to revive an indigenous form of democratic governance, less "African" than the ruler who aspires to destroy ancient lifeways to institute authoritarian rule?

We support any efforts to reach a ceasefire between Ethiopian government forces (including Amhara Region Militia and embedded Eritrean troops) and Tigrayan forces. However, we recommend genuinely inclusive negotiations proceed, inclusive of forces represented in Oromia and the southern and marginalized peoples as well, seeking a country-wide and thus lasting solution. The underlying stresses and fault lines in Ethiopian society will not be addressed if negotiations are either influenced or dictated by the government or limited to and controlled by the forces which created the current war.

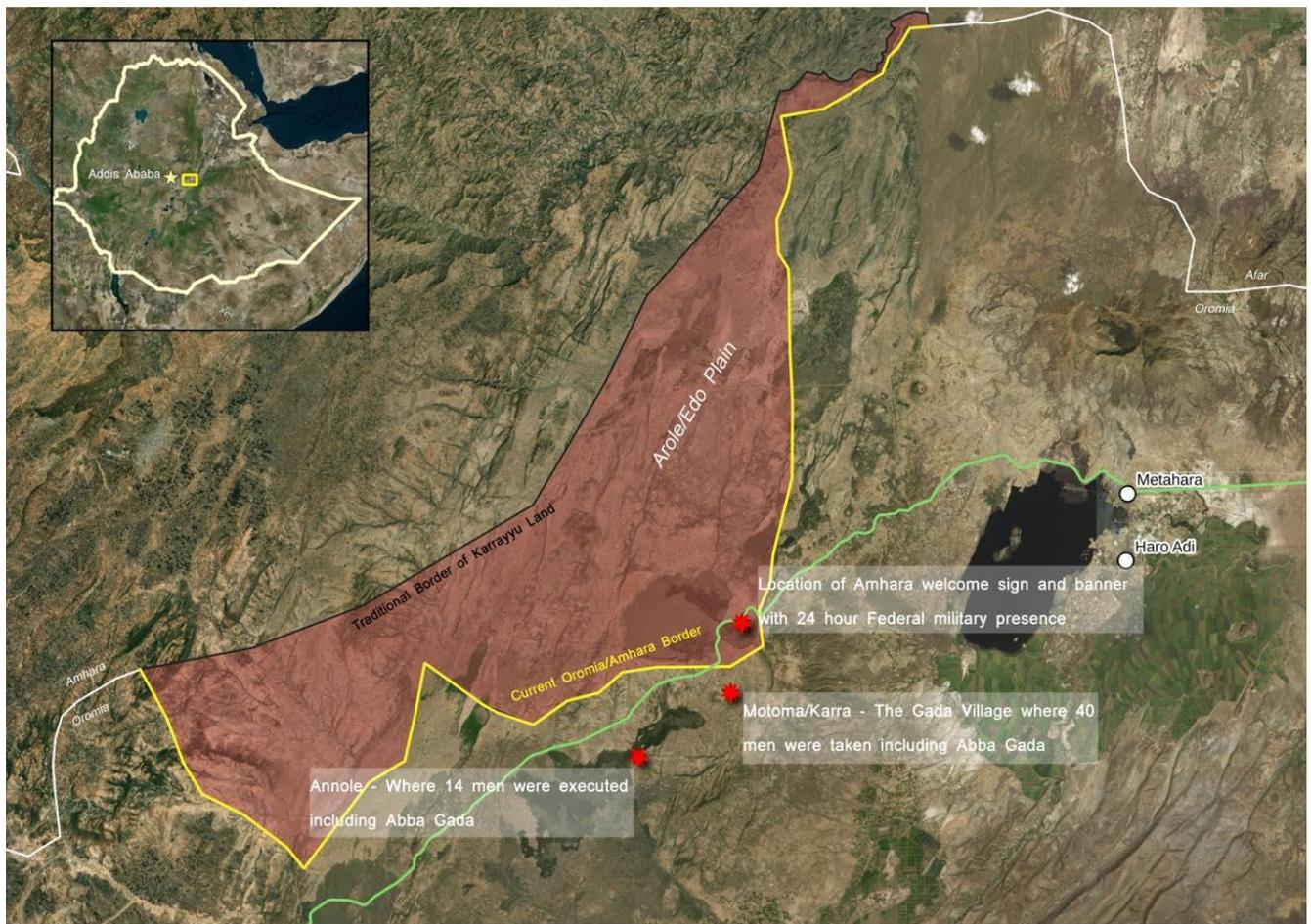
The oppressed and marginalised peoples together constitute a 70-75% majority of the Ethiopian population. At over 40 million, for example, the Oromo alone is twice the population of the

⁵ UN Human Rights Council Resolution 17 December 2021.

average African country. These now-silenced peoples must, with international support and mediation, be central to the conduct of any impartial independently convened dialogue intended to navigate a way to stable forms of democracy and peace.

Addenda

The map below of Karrayyuu region in Ethiopia marks the sites of events described here. The new location of the boundary sign in Fantalle reveals the large swath of land (designated by a rose color), which has been claimed by Amhara militias since 2018 at the shared boundaries of Karrayyuu with Amhara and Afar regional states. The vital trade route to Djibouti and Somaliland runs through Karrayyuu territory near the contested territory.





This is the sign placed 45 kms deep inside official Karrayuu territory that reads:

**“Welcome to Amhara Regional State
East Shewa, to Minjar Shonkora District of the Awurogona Kebele”**

Since January 2021, Karrayuu pulled down this sign eight times. Now the Federal Government has assigned Federal Special Forces to place a federal vehicle and member of the security force to be present 24/7 to watch and protect this signboard, treating its location as if it were a checkpoint, signalling to all residents and travellers official government support for Amhara expansionism into neighboring Oromo territory.

The picture below is of a past Gadaa village, not unlike the sacred Gadaa village of Motoma which has since been destroyed by Amhara Region Militia.



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