
PRESS RELEASE

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OLF leaders critically ill in unlawful detention

At least seven top officials among dozens of imprisoned leaders of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) are critically ill. They have been held in abusive life-threatening conditions for over two years in defiance of more than six court orders for their release.

[Addis Standard 24 February](#) named sick prisoners illegally held in Burayu Police Station – Kennasa Ayana, Dawit Abdata, Dr Gadaa Oljirra and Gadaa Gabissa. OSG informants named three others – Mikael Boran, Abdi Regassa and Lammi Benya. There are many more.

OSG reported in April 2021 that 884 senior OLF members and officials were detained and 103 OLF offices had been closed down and their contents confiscated.

Kennasa Ayana and other OLF leaders were briefly held in Maikelawi prison in February 2020. Many, including Kennasa, were again held after the assassination of singer Haachalu Hundeesa on 29 June 2020, in underground cells in Sidist Kilo and then Kilinto prison. Cleared for the fifth time with nine others by Lideta Federal High Court in May 2021, they were arrested on leaving Kilinto prison and taken to Awash Melkassa military camp, where they were subject to torture and beating, until moved in September 2021 to an unofficial secure unit in Sololia, Gelan, in the Oromia Special Zone around Finfinnee/Addis Ababa. Many were then moved with Kennasa to Burayu Police Station, where they remain despite another court order for their release by Burayu 3rd District Court on 19 July 2022.

Kennasa is now bed-bound, unable to be moved except in a wheelchair, due to spinal damage and diabetes. Co-detainee Mikael Boran, imprisoned and freed by court orders like Kennasa, has a nervous disorder, is frail and is now losing his sight.

Abdi Regassa was detained in February 2020 like Kennasa but was not released. He was transferred to Burayu and lost to follow up until found in September 2020 in the underground cells in Sidist Kilo, then Awash Melkassa, Gelan and Burayu, in August 2021. Court orders to release him have been issued at least eight times, including the 2022 ruling by the Burayu 3rd District Court. He is now dangerously thin, withdrawn and no longer communicates.

Gadaa Gabissa was arrested with *Oromo News Network* journalists Wako Nole and Dessu Dula on 7 March 2020 when visiting Abdi Regassa in Burayu Police Station. Gadaa was lost to follow up, detained again in February 2021 and was named among those kept illegally in Kilinto prison after the Lideta Federal High Court order in May 2021, since when he has been detained and moved alongside Kennasa Ayana and Mikael Boran in defiance of court orders.

Gadaa has developed Hepatitis B and has been denied life-saving medication and suitable diet and support. Baate Urgeesa, another top OLF official, also developed Hepatitis B in Burayu after being detained there when visiting colleagues on 20 March 2021. He suffered head and facial injuries in Awash Melkassa and became seriously ill with hepatitis after

returning to Burayu. He was taken to hospital on 11 February 2022 but was returned to his cell before being released to hospital on a stretcher on 12 March 2022.

The fate of Dr Gadaa Oljirra is similar to that of Kennasa Ayana and Mikael Boran since his arrest in December 2020. He has been told he risks paralysis without surgery, is chronically ill and in serious pain.

Dawit Abdata is in severe pain following back surgery and Lammi Benya has developed hypertension. The two prominent OLF youth leaders, rounded up with others on 3 July 2020, are also veterans of Sidist Kilo, Awash Melkassa, Sololia secure unit and Burayu Police Station. They were released on bail by Oromia Supreme Court in November 2020 and December 2020. They were acquitted again in January 2021 but immediately rearrested and taken to an unknown place from Sabata Dalati prison on 5 February 2021. Their release was then ordered by the Federal Supreme Court on 29 March 2021 and again on 1 July 2021 but they were re-arrested as they walked from the court and taken to Burayu.

The families of OLF detainees have also been persecuted. Lammi Benya's 19 year-old brother, Fira'ol, was taken from home in Nekemte, East Wollega, and executed in cold blood in August 2022. His sister Sara was detained and his older brother has fled, leaving Lammi's mother unsupported. Baate Urgeesa's elderly father, uncle and other relatives including two children were beaten and detained in November 2021.

Unknown numbers have died in detention. At least one young OLF supporter died in Awash Melkassa in August 2021 and 19 were reported to have died from an infectious disease in Tullu Dimtu, an unofficial site for political detainees and army sex slaves in Finfinnee, in August/September 2019. Prisons do not provide food for OLF prisoners.

Release from detention is no guarantee of safety. OLF member Bikila Bidira was released after being detained on 11 March 2020 and killed three months later on 3 June. Qeerroo activist, Nimona Ijjigu, was detained with Gadaa Gabissa, Dr Gadaa Oljirra, Lammi Benya and Dawit Abdata in Kilinto prison and, unlike the others, released by Lideta Federal High Court in May 2021. He was re-arrested in Nekemte and executed with three fellow Qeerroo members on 17 December 2021.

The [Ethiopian Human Rights Commission called for the release of OLF political prisoners](#) in May 2022 and for them to receive compensation. They have committed no offences.



Although not named among those with poor health by *Addis Standard*, the change in physical appearance of Col. Gamachu Ayana (above left) during 11 months detention in 2019 and of OLF Foreign Affairs spokesman Dr Shigut Galata (above right), after being detained for two months in 2020, illustrate the conditions in which political detainees are kept in Ethiopia. Col. Gamachu, in detention again since July 2020, is now reported to 'look like a skeleton' after being moved numerous times between at least nine detention facilities. Courts have ordered his release at least seven times.

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