

OSG Submission to UN Human Rights Council 55th Session, 26 February - 5 April 2024

Most of the following information is from Oromia Support Group (OSG) Report 64, published 19 December 2023. Information which is from Report 63, dated 12 September 2023, is referenced in the text as (63). See website - oromiasupport.org.

Summary

International awareness of the humanitarian and human rights emergency in Oromia, Ethiopia's largest and most populous region, is inadequate. Bias in governments, media and UN bodies prevents proportionate and fair reportage, compared to Tigray and Amhara Regions.

Killings by government forces; ethnic cleansing by Fano

Over 5,300 killings of Oromo civilians have now been recorded by OSG since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed began his campaign at the end of 2018 to wipe out the Qeerroo movement and then the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and its civilian support base.

The majority of killings, over 3,200, occurred during 2022 and 2023. Over 1,300 were in the four Wallega zones in western Oromia and more than 1,300 in North and West Showa. Fano and other Amhara forces were responsible for most of the 700 killed in Oromia Special Zone, Amhara region, in the last three years, and nearly all of the 900 killed in Horo Guduru and East Wallega zones in the last two years in acts of ethnic cleansing.

Amhara forces had a role in killings and ethnic cleansing in East Showa but the killing there of Karrayyu Gadaa leaders, most of the lethal violence in North and West Showa, and the majority of the 1,000 or more killings in Qellem and West Wallega since early 2020 have been by ENDF; operating out of Command Posts in the case of Qellem and West Wallega zones.

The International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE) reported that the Command Post system 'provides the means to centralize control of all military, law enforcement and civil powers into one integrated security effort, headed by the Prime Minister, and exercised through the ENDF high command. Alongside national or regional command posts, other subordinate command posts continue to be established locally conjoining civilian and military control at lower levels' (paragraph 94).

The 21-page preliminary ICHREE report, presented on 14 September 2023, stated 'In the face of increased violence, . . . command posts were established in Western and Southern Oromia from early 2019, comprised of local militia, Oromia Special Forces, ENDF, federal police and Oromia regional police. . . . Witnesses from Western Oromia described ongoing arbitrary restrictions on freedom of movement, including curfews, denial of access to healthcare, shootings of unarmed residents and arbitrary arrest and detention. Other violations under command post authority include extrajudicial killings, rape and the destruction of civilian property' (paragraph 50).

ENDF, and recently Fano, have particularly targeted young Oromo men for killing, especially those at school or university, because of their potentially becoming members or supporters of

OLA. ENDF commonly execute young men taken from police custody and often kill young men rounded up or randomly encountered in reprisal for battlefield losses with OLA.

When Amhara youth (Fano) demonstrated from 2016 in solidarity with the non-violent Qeerroo Oromo student movement and called for killings in Oromia to stop, the powerful combination forced the EPRDF government to re-organise the following year, allowing Abiy Ahmed to assume the premiership in 2018.

However, the Prime Minister's desire to control the whole of Ethiopia from the centre and his creation of the Prosperity Party divided the two movements. Fano supported centrism whereas Oromo youths and elites rejected it. Fano and Amhara Region forces collaborated with the ENDF in the war on Tigray and attacked the Oromo enclave in the Oromia Special Zone in Amhara Region, during 2021 and 2022. In November 2023, another 18 Oromo villagers were killed there by Fano.

Fano have attacked Gumuz and Oromo villages in Metekel zone, Benishangul-Gumuz Region, Agaw and Qimant communities in Amhara Region and Oromo towns and villages in zones of Oromia which are adjacent to Amhara Region, especially Horo Guduru and East Wallega, where hundreds were killed in 2021 and 2022. Over 62 Oromo civilians were killed by Fano in East Wallega and Horo Guduru between September and December 2023. Local sources claimed in June 2023 that all Oromo villages had emptied into towns in Horo Guduru and that only one kebele in Kiramu district, East Wallega (Wasti), had any Oromo remaining (63).

Fano have also killed Oromo in East Showa, where they have seized ancestral Karrayyu lands (63). Amhara Region has also taken 28 kebeles from North Showa in Oromia.

Humanitarian disaster and IDPs

Media in Ethiopia reported, 1 November 2023, that 1.4 million IDPs were living in 141 camps, in 11 zones and 96 districts in Oromia Region and that 753,674 IDPs were in the four Wallega zones, including 230,017 in Horo Guduru and 282,245 in East Wallega. They fled because of 'enormous destruction of private and public properties', including homes, schools, hospitals and 'vital public service infrastructures.'

Interviewees corroborated information received by OSG of lack of assistance for most of the time in these camps. As well as experiencing 'immense psychological trauma and economic hardship', female IDPs encamped for 11 months in Shambu bus station, Horo Guduru, had experienced rape and at least three were driven to suicide (63).

Although a minority of IDPs fled because of fighting between OLA and ENDF, the majority fled from persecution and destruction of property by Fano in acts of ethnic cleansing. Hence, districts bordering Amhara Region – Abe Dongoro, Agamsa, Jardega Jarte, and Amuru in Horo Guduru, and Kiramu, Gida Ayana and Gute in East Wallega – were 'the epicentres of the displacements'.

Nonetheless, officials, including police, militia chiefs, zonal government head, regional relief commission, the Mayor of Shambu and local NGO officers asked IDPs to leave, without success. Those who did not drift away to beg in Shambu or Nekemte were forcibly rounded up and returned in September 2023. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian

Affairs (OCHA) reported on 1 December that it had ‘assisted’ 200,000 IDPs to return to East Wallega but local sources reported IDPs were forced to return against their will and received no assistance when returned to areas of great insecurity, at risk of further attacks by Fano. They were merely advised by the zonal police chief to sell their goods and buy weapons to defend themselves.

The utter desolation of areas under Command Post rule is evidenced by the catastrophic effect of the 2023 malaria epidemic. A combination of violence, severe malnutrition, economic collapse and record numbers of IDPs left the population in Qellem and West Wallega so vulnerable that thousands died, without government help or acknowledgement.

The Ministry of Health misled the international community and prevented OCHA from describing the extent of the disaster.

‘Amhara lens’

The ENDF offensive, when Fano and Amhara Region militia refused to disband in August 2023, led to vociferous complaints of civilian drone strikes, internet and telephone blackouts, displacements and lack of humanitarian access in Amhara Region.

All of these conditions apply equally and have done so for five years in Oromia Region, but such is the distortion of the ‘Amhara lens’ through which many politicians and media view Ethiopia, these attracted far less interest.

Mass executions and other killings by ENDF in Tigray and Amhara regions are reported by international media, but not those in Oromia.

Drone strikes which killed civilians in Amhara Region attracted the attention of the UN High Commission for Human Rights, but reports of strikes in Oromia were buried deep in the ICHREE report.

OCHA barely mentioned the severe malnutrition and devastating malaria outbreak in Qellem and West Wallega. Shortage of food and medicines in Amhara and Tigray Regions reaches international media, but rarely do similar shortages in Oromia.

The continued detention of Oromo Liberation Front officials, despite court orders for their release, is not reported by international media.

Risk of ethnic conflict

Inadequate and skewed reporting is increasing the danger of large-scale ethnic conflict between Amhara and Oromo. Already, ‘observers fear’ that the presence of Oromo soldiers in government forces in Amhara Region could escalate to ‘an Oromo-Amhara conflict, with possible mass violence’ (EEPA, 2 October 2023).

The 7 November 2023 attacks by Fano on three Oromo villages in the Oromia Special Zone were reportedly in retaliation to murderous attacks by ENDF on Fano in Amhara Region. Fano justified their attacks claiming the ENDF were an Oromo force representing Oromo interests.

Although there are Oromo in the Prosperity Party and armed forces, it is highly dangerous to conflate their selfish interests with the desire of the overwhelming majority of Oromo for peace and equality. Large scale inter-ethnic conflict between the two largest peoples of Ethiopia – Oromo and Amhara – must be avoided at all costs.

Unbalanced reportage must not be added to the substantial and growing list of risk factors for genocide and atrocity crimes in Ethiopia, including widespread hate speech (The acute risk of further atrocity crimes in Ethiopia: an analysis. A/HRC/54/CRP.2, 3 October 2023).