

## Press Release

**Date:** Tues 31<sup>st</sup> May 2022  
**Release:** Immediate

### **War on Oromia damages prospects for democracy and stability in the Horn of Africa**

**The Ethiopian government has pivoted from full scale assault on Tigray in the north, to full scale assault on the peoples of Oromia in the south.**

A hidden war in Ethiopia, targeting the Oromo people and the Oromia region, is threatening dire local, regional and international consequences.

In early 2022, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia and government officials announced intentions to eliminate government opposition from Oromia. This amounted to a declaration of war on Oromia, Ethiopia's most populous, diverse, productive and centrally-located region.

After committing internationally condemned crimes against humanity and possible genocide during a brutal war in the northern part of Ethiopia, the government has pivoted to launch this offensive on Oromia.

In fact, the war on Oromia predates the conflict in the north Ethiopia Tigray region. Many parts of Oromia have been held under the control of military command posts from January 2019, but this new campaign by the Ethiopian regime has dramatically intensified hostilities.

The assault threatens the stability of the Horn of Africa and, if not halted, will close the most viable pathways to peace and stability. The Abiy Ahmed regime, lacking support from Ethiopia's biggest population, the Oromo, has sought collusion and assistance in the form of ground forces and weaponry from several authoritarian rulers, the closest being leaders of Eritrea, Turkey and UAE.

The broadened offensive targets a pro-democracy force, a grassroots youth-led movement that brought down Abiy's predecessor using peaceful means. The regime's decision to wage a war on the people of the Oromia region confirms that Ethiopia has become a failed state.

The West's focus on Ethiopia's public claims of commitment to de-escalating the war in Tigray regarding it as a "move toward peace," has blinded policy makers to the simultaneous escalation of hostilities against the Oromo in Oromia, the region's central heartland.

**We call attention to the fact that the Ethiopian government has pivoted from full scale assault on Tigray in the north, to full scale assault on the peoples of Oromia in the south.**

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<sup>1</sup> A coalition of Oromo advocacy and human rights organizations (see overleaf) based in the United States of America, Canada, Europe and Australia.

As documented in the background information below, **egregious human rights abuses including summary and mass executions are being committed in Oromia as they were in Tigray. The weight of a comprehensive military campaign is being borne by Oromo civilians.**

Acknowledgement of the gravity of the war, and a change in perspective and discourse about Ethiopia and the region is required to address the current worsening crisis. No resolution can be crafted nor a route to stability and peace contemplated or accomplished without grappling with the reality and scope of the impending disruption, displacement, instability and destruction. It is not too late to reverse this deadly trend. The demands of the Oromo and other southern peoples and their proven commitment to peace must be central to any solution.

## Signatories

Advocacy 4 Oromia; Melbourne, Australia  
Oromia Global Forum;<sup>o</sup> Tacoma Park, MD  
Oromia Support Group; Malvern, UK; Melbourne, Australia  
Oromo Advocacy Alliance; Washington DC  
Oromo Community of Arizona, AZ  
Oromo Community of Boston, MA  
Oromo Community of Chicago, IL  
Oromo Community of Denver, CO  
Oromo Community of Georgia, GA  
Oromo Community of Houston, TX  
Oromo Community of Iowa, IA  
Oromo Community of Jacksonville, FL  
Oromo Community of Kentucky, KY  
Oromo Community of Las Vegas, NV  
Oromo Community of Los Angeles, CA  
Oromo Community of Memphis, TN  
Oromo Community of Michigan, MI  
Oromo Community of Nashville, TN  
Oromo Community of Ohio, OH  
Oromo Community of Portland, OR  
Oromo Community of San Diego, CA  
Oromo Community of Seattle, WA  
Oromo Community of South Dakota, SD  
Oromo Community of Tampa Bay, FL  
Oromo Community of Worthington, MN  
Oromo Legacy Leadership and Advocacy Association;\* Falls Church, VA  
Oromo Menschenrechts und Hilfsorganisation (Oromo Human Rights and Relief Organisation); Hanover, Germany  
Oromo Professionals Group; Washington, DC  
Union of Oromo Communities in Canada; Ontario, Canada

\* OLLAA is supported by the Oromo Community organizations listed above, each of which endorsed this press release.

<sup>o</sup> OGF is a coalition of Oromo faith-based, community, civic, professional and scholarly organizations, and human rights advocates including some of the above and:

Bilal Oromo Dawa Center; Minneapolis, MN  
Canaan Oromo Evangelical Church; Bethesda, MD  
DMV Oromo Islamic Center, Silver Spring, MD  
Global Gumii Oromia; Tacoma Park, MD  
Global Waaqeffannaa Council; Oslo, Norway  
Mana Kiristaanaa Fayyisaa Addunyaa; Washington, DC  
Network of Oromo Studies; London, UK  
Oromo Communities Association in North America; Washington, DC  
Oromo Community of Oslo, Norway  
Oromo Evangelical Lutheran Mission Society, St Paul, MN  
Oromo Seniors Welfare & Benevolent Association In Victoria; Noble Park, Vic, Australia

Oromo Society of Science and Technology; Spanga, Sweden  
Oromo Women's Association UK; London, UK  
Our Redeemer Oromo Evangelical Church; Minneapolis, MN  
Tawfiq Islamic Center; Minneapolis, MN  
Tumsa Sochii Haqa Oromoo; Glasgow, UK  
United Oromo Christian Church in Australia; Dandenong, Vic, Australia  
United Oromo Evangelical Churches; Minneapolis, MN  
Washington DC Metropolitan Oromo SDA Church; Tacoma Park, MD

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## Background Information and Evidence

### **Killing Squads – Summary executions and massacres**

Special killing squads composed of combinations of armed forces have been major drivers of the mounting death toll and for terrifying the populace into submission by conducting brutal massacres on the ground. One such brutality, on 2 May, was the capturing of a group of 18 farmers – taken from wedding festivities, from church, from the market and from bed while sleeping – holding them at a military center, taking them to nearby mountains, binding their hands, shooting them execution-style and throwing their bodies off a cliff at Warro Jarso in northern Shoa, Central Oromia. [One survivor lived to tell that story](#). Similar horrifying accounts have surfaced from across Oromia – descriptions of massive execution-style killings of civilians, of civilians forced to join federal military operations unarmed, of open slaughter of civilians during public gatherings, etc.

### **War Conditions – Oromia is forced to become a battleground**

The current war on Oromia is an extension of long-standing military “command post” structures imposed within a year of Abiy Ahmed taking office. **Many parts of Oromia have been under military command posts since January 2019.** The current campaign is best regarded as an intensification of the government’s war footing in that region. Public statements and open threats made against Oromo opposition, citing the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA)<sup>2</sup> in particular – made in Parliament by the Prime Minister, in Prosperity Party meetings by the President of Oromia and chairman of Oromia’s Prosperity Party and on state-sponsored media by military and party officials indicate the amplification of ongoing hostilities throughout much of Oromia.

In a many-faceted campaign, ground forces rely upon federal military, Oromia Special Forces, Federal police, Republican Guard, locally recruited militia, Fano paramilitary groups

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<sup>2</sup> The officials intentionally employ the term “Shene” when speaking of Oromo opposition. Alternatively spelled Shane, Shanee, Shunee and Shene, referring to people of Oromo identity or espousing Oromo nationalism, Shene is an Oromo term but employed by the regime as a derisive slur, intended to be a dismissive and pejorative reference to Oromo nationalists. Originally it was couched as “OLF-Shene” but more recently “Shene” is directed primarily to the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), its supporters and any Oromo individuals who fail to show adequate support for the government, i.e., who oppose or resist the federal Prosperity Party and its local government officials.

from the neighboring Amhara region and other internal and external armed forces. These have been [supported from the air](#) with [military hardware acquired from UAE and Turkey](#).

Political operatives participate by identifying and accusing suspected government opponents who become targets of the military and armed units without evidence or due process.

## Strategy and Scope of the War

In mid-March, a leaked document in Amharic claimed to be a detailed strategic plan for war tactics to be carried out specifically in Oromia.<sup>3</sup> By mid-April through May 2022, the strategy appeared to be in full operation. Synchronized military assaults had indeed been carried out on multiple named fronts in the center, west, east and south of Ethiopia, all locations where Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) operates. Eyewitness reports from across Oromia and in other southern regions confirm 1) ground offensives of armed groups activated in Oromia, 2) increased incidents of brutality, rape and imprisonment, 3) destruction, looting and burning of thousands of civilian homes, assets, livestock herds, communities, services and infrastructure, 4) daytime drone attacks and helicopter bombings claiming dozens of civilian lives with each incident, 5) imposition of onerous government demands and loyalty tests with severe reprisals against individuals who fail to comply, 6) sharply rising death tolls,<sup>4</sup> 7) widespread displacement adding tens of thousands to the hundreds of thousands already displaced in the Nekemte area,<sup>5</sup> 8) economic activities crippled due to conflict, 9) destruction of farming and agricultural infrastructure that exposes producers to food shortages that have spiked in the country's breadbasket and 10) looming famine.

## War tactics concealed, unseen by international community

Despite the growing scale of destruction and the widespread implications of these assaults, this is a shuttered war by design. **Independent media were closed in Oromia in July 2020, disabling research and reporting capacity in most of that region.** State media and local Ethiopian media who operate with official sanction over content have been instructed by government letters to refrain from covering this campaign in Oromia. International media have been denied access. Widespread disabling of internet and telecommunication networks has been carried out in affected areas. Consequently, the unfolding tragedy is proceeding in a virtual information vacuum; Oromo parties, the [Oromo Liberation Front](#), and [Oromo Federalist Congress](#) have issued updates to bring attention to the growing crisis in the absence of independent media to cover the conflict. The impacts of the information blackouts alone are staggering.

## Consequences of the War on Oromia

- The war introduces economic strangulation across the country. Major indicators reveal crisis conditions that could lead to generational losses of wealth, restricted prosperity, looming regional instability, and the prospect of state collapse.
- Destruction of infrastructure and farming communities is so severe that future productivity is threatened. **Famine is looming in areas that in the past produced the bulk the country's food, both agricultural and animal products.**

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<sup>3</sup> *Counter-insurgency Operation Plan against 'Anti-peace' forces*, leaked to Oromia Media Network and broadcast on YouTube on 28 March at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xel7q5Kq2Ys>. Translation by coalition members in USA, Canada, Belgium and Switzerland.

<sup>4</sup> Between 16 April and 29 April alone, [278 civilians were killed](#) by summary mass executions and by drone strikes in central, western and southern Oromia. Another [18 were summarily executed](#), while bound and prostrate, on 2 May in West Showa.

<sup>5</sup> Over 500,000 were displaced due to conflict in West Oromia, before the current upsurge in violence.

- The impact on the youth cohort is crushing. The youth, who only four years ago emerged victorious in a long struggle for freedoms, have been the prime targets of attack by this regime, alarmed at the prospects of their ability to undermine the PM's authority. This setback affects future generations. Schools are not effectively operating; there is no functional regular education process.
- Key public services and opportunities for youth and producers are not operating. Also absent is access to the kinds of services necessary to make their entrepreneurial or progressive vision for their country achievable. Essential services are withheld or are not functioning as a result of war. Movement of goods and services has halted.
- Prior to the uptick in the war on Oromia, **50,000 youth, primarily former Qeerroo, were languishing in prison. The war has increased that number.** Respected leaders of opposition groups from every nationality are in detention. This issue of prisoners and their ultimate release is key if a solution is to be found that includes all of the country's major stakeholders.
- The destructive impact of the war on regional stability is certain, with mass displacement in a population of 40 million people inevitable.
- The war is evidence of Ethiopia's march toward authoritarian rule. Ethiopia's turn to authoritarian rulers for support and supplies bodes ill for US-Ethiopia relations and could contribute to a shift in East-West balance of power across the continent. It is a breach to be mended immediately, with implications for East-West balance in a critical region.

### ***Coalition Calls on International Community to Recognize the Import and Impact of the War on Oromia***

Acknowledgement of the gravity of the war, and a change in perspective and discourse about Ethiopia and the region is required to address the current worsening crisis. No resolution or route to stability and peace can be contemplated or accomplished without grappling with the reality and scope of the impending disruption, displacement, instability and destruction.

Despite two months of threats and forewarning and the detailed leaked strategy document that foretold operational plans for military and political attacks, no Western government, international or multilateral agency, global media outlet, or NGO publicly indicated either awareness or concern about the intensification of hostilities, destruction and civilian loss of life as this war-footing intensified. Now the intent and pattern is coming into sharper focus.

It is clear from the evidence that Abiy Ahmed does not seek peace but rather seeks power at a very high and destructive cost. The West has been blind to this dynamic and to the level of chaos that is created in the wake of this Prime Minister who speaks of peace but creates havoc and wreckage, even where there were prospects for peace and stability. Attention to the real conditions on the ground, conditions that have thus far been effectively cloaked from the world's view, reveal dire consequences of this ruinous assault.

It is time to reverse this trend to authoritarianism and construct avenues to support and nurture key freedoms that could lead to democracy:

- We ask the **West** to re-think its understanding of the Oromo people, to place into perspective the nonviolent movements that have arisen from the Oromo and other marginalized peoples. This requires recalibrating its approach to Ethiopia, with

serious attention to the contributions Oromo make to democracy, stability, and economic productivity.

- **We ask neighboring countries** to understand and act in self-preservation to avoid the risks that are ahead in light of the likely consequences of this war and how will it impact them economically if Oromo continue to be driven off their ancestral lands through violent aggression. It could be devastating.
- Outcomes in Ethiopia, as the second most populous country in Africa, affect prospects for the entire continent. Once its hopes for democracy are dashed, it could reverse the trend toward democracy on the continent that was so hopeful in 2018.
- The demand for democracy from the Oromo in 2014-2018 came as a surprise to the international community. They were not expecting it and did not recognize its historic and regional significance. The international community including the West, other African countries, and international organizations did not give that achievement the attention it deserved. This blind spot enabled Abiy's government to move to dismantle and try to destroy the capacity for Oromo youth to resist his authoritarianism.
- The demand for freedoms, though blunted, has not been extinguished. Insofar as this phase of war against the Oromo is an extension of those earlier moves to disable the ability of the youth and producers to resist, it is important to use this opportunity to stop the hostilities, revive the mechanisms that support freedoms, and push to prevent the political space from closing completely in this era. The potential for stability, peace and a form of democracy remains within the people, but it is actively under attack and stifled. Oromo need allies in this effort.
- We as a coalition consider the legislation on Ethiopia that is currently under consideration in the United States Congress – Senate S3199 and House HR6600 – to provide mechanisms for the US to ally with populations in Ethiopia who seek an end to war and a future free of authoritarian rule. We support this legislation and urge its passage.