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Human Rights Abuses in Ethiopia

The Oromia Support Group is a non-political organisation which attempts to raise awareness of human rights abuses in Ethiopia. OSG lobbies governments to withdraw support from the Ethiopian government until it abides by its constitution which guarantees human rights and self-determination for all peoples of Ethiopia.

OSG has now reported 2,754 extra-judicial killings and 842 disappearances of civilians suspected of supporting groups opposing the government. Most of these have been Oromo people. Scores of thousands of civilians have been imprisoned. Torture and rape of prisoners is commonplace, especially in secret detention centres, whose existence is denied by the government.

ADDIS ABABA AND CENTRAL OROMIA REGION

130 killed in Addis Ababa riots, more elsewhere

The riots in Addis Ababa on 17 and 18 April were widely reported in the western media. The *Economist* reported that 130 were killed by riot police and over 250 were seriously injured. One hospital alone reported 23 dead to the UN news agency, IRIN. Government figures, widely quoted in the media, are 30 or 40 dead. Over 2,000 were arrested, including many Oromo students and the Chairman of the Oromo Students Association. Although most were released one week later, another 15 were kept in detention after hundreds of riot police broke up a meeting on Addis Ababa University campus on 30 April. Over 250 remained in detention until July, when at least 16 are known to have been denied bail.

Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the European Parliament condemned the use of excessive violence by the police. The Federal Police Commission admitted that excessive force was used not only in Addis Ababa, but also to put down disturbances in Dire Dawa and Harar, in E. Hararge. In May, large troop movements were reported in Salalee (Showa), Bale and Horo Guduru in Wallega zone and Ginir, Bale zone. Local populations report being terrorised. Roads were closed around Horo Guduru. The district administrator in Salalee was reported abducted on 16 May.

Few casualty figures from outside Addis Ababa, have been reported. Oromo student, Simee Tarrafaa, was found dead after demonstrations in Mekele, Tigray. Five are reported killed in Gindeberet, Showa.

Those killed in Gindeberet were named by a local OSG informant (correspondence received 16 May):

Handuma Dheressa
Demalesh Deksissa
Masiresha Dobocho
Dhaba Kidanemariam
Tolera Mosissa

At least seven high school teachers were detained at Kachisi police station, according to local sources:

Ayele Negera
Tadesse Dhugumma
Alemu Merga
Kumissa Milkessa
Gonfa Goshu
Waquma Buchuqa
Tadesse . . .

Five were reported killed in Sidama zone of the Southern People's Region by representatives of the Sidama Liberation Movement in the UK.

A student was reported to have disappeared in Wallega and among the growing number of students crossing into Kenya are pupils from Jimma University and Nazaret Technical College, although there have been no reports of violence there. Over 100 were said by Kenyan media to have been in the 'latest crossing' with soldiers, on 21 June. Two hundred were reported on 12 July to have crossed.

There were two independent reports of government troops being moved to Gindeberet, Ambo and Gudar, in Showa zone, and widespread severe harassment, looting and terrorising of the local population in early June. No casualty figures are available.

Addis Ababa students complained of being prevented from travelling from Addis to their home towns and of being prevented from travelling by air. Over 40 demonstrated in Nairobi, to pressurise UNHCR for their speedy resettlement.

The Federal Police Commission has blamed the riots on the Amhara political opposition, as represented by the Ethiopian Democratic Party (EPD), the All Amhara Peoples Organisation (AAPO) and the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO).

EPD member, Tewfid Lalle, was killed in the riots. The EDP reported that 110 members, including secretary general Lidetu Ayalew, executive committee member, Tamirat Tarekegne, and members of Addis Ababa City Council, were detained on 27 April. Lidetu, whose health was said to be deteriorating, and three other members were released in early June, only to be re-arrested on 26 June. There were complaints of 'rough treatment' from 22 EDP members who were released on 5 July.

At least 30 AAPO members were detained and one was killed.

Founder member and former director of EHRCO, Professor Mesfin Woldemariam, and another EHRCO official, Dr Berhanu Nega, head of the Ethiopian Economic Association, were arrested on 8 May and held until the end of the month. Both had conducted a session of human rights education on behalf of EHRCO at the university on 8 April and were accused of inciting the students to violence.

According to Human Rights Watch, a total of 150 political activists were detained.

Detention, interrogation; disappearance and killings.

AS, a 27 year old lady, now exiled in the UK, wrote on 5 January 2001, of her and her family's persecution because her father was Eritrean. Like many families with Eritrean connections, they were targeted because they ran a thriving business, which, along with their home, was sealed and confiscated. They ran a very successful textile business, based in the Mercato district of Addis Ababa. Her elder brother was briefly detained in June 1998. Security men arrived at her house in Addis Ababa during the night of 28 October 1999. She and her father were forced into a military vehicle and taken to the 5th Police Station. They were separated on arrival and she did not see her father again. Her mother 'was told one day not to bring food and clothes anymore because he was being transferred to another detention centre. However, they would no tell her where. **There has been no further news of my father since then**' she wrote.

She wrote about her own detention, beating and interrogation. She was thrown in a cell with two other women. She writes 'Early the following morning at about 8.30 am, a uniformed woman guard opened the door and called my name and lead me to another room. When I entered the room, there was one officer sitting and another standing by him. The officer sitting was in plain clothes and the officer standing was in uniform.

The man who was sitting spoke to me politely at first and said that my father and I had been collecting money and other things to support the Eritrean cause and sending the money to Eritrea. He said he knew that we had been collecting money . . . using our business as a front.' She was asked for names of contributors. She denied that her family had anything to do with politics, and 'the man standing up started shouting at me. He said "We know that you are involved in this. You had better tell us the truth or you will not like what is going to happen to you and your father".

Then he started slapping me repeatedly on the face. He grabbed me by my neck like a cat and pushed me out of the door. He shouted at the woman guard and told her to take me back to the cell . . . They left me alone for two days after this. I was given water and some dried bread. . . . We slept on the floor with no bedding. We slept on some cardboard. During the night we had a bucket to go to the toilet. . . . The conditions were humiliating and degrading.

On the third day, in the middle of the night the woman guard opened the cell door and called me outside.'

She was taken back to the same room and was met by the same two men, who asked the same questions as before and gave the same warnings. 'Then the man in uniform started kicking and beating me. He used his hands and feet. The other man in civilian clothing told him to stop because he was so brutal . . . as I might die. At that time I was three and a half months pregnant. I fell down. I pleaded with them. I said I was pregnant, and please do not hit me in the stomach. At this point the guard was called to take me back to my cell.'

She was vomiting and could not eat for two days. 'On the third day I started bleeding' and she miscarried in hospital, where she was allowed to go after repeated pleading by her mother and the woman guard.

She also wrote that her elder brother was detained from his house shortly after her father and herself. In answer to her mother's enquiries, the authorities 'told her that he had been deported to Eritrea. However, when my mother contacted our relatives in Eritrea, **she was told that my brother had not arrived.**

Tolchaa Wegii Seto, a 31 year old who had been detained by the Dergue, when aged ten to sixteen, and whose family was well known for supporting the Oromo nationalist movement, wrote

in May of his persecution by the present regime. He became the OLF political cadre and representative for Jeldu region in 1991.

He wrote 'On June 22, 1992 . . . [immediately after the OLF were forced to withdraw from the transitional government of Ethiopia] soldiers of the TPLF attacked the OLF office in Jeldu from three directions. They opened fire on me and present members of the OLF. I was an eye witness how **they brutally killed my following colleagues:**

Tamana Tolasa (Tolcha's nephew)

Tibabu Ejo

Bekele Tola

Shirke Tadessa

Bekele Tamana

. . . I hid in the area of Jeldu. . . . I heard that many of my friends who worked with me in Jeldu . . . were discovered, arrested or killed. **My younger brother was imprisoned and tortured** several times by the security forces. . . . **they hammered a nail through his hand** because he refused to disclose the place where I hid. Also **my old father was repeatedly tortured by TPLF cadres.**

Kedir B, a 33 year old from Nazaret, Showa, moved to Addis Ababa in early 1996. He and his family had been members of the AAPO since 1992. He was an active member and used to distribute leaflets for the party. He wrote that in late 1998 'on a Friday evening, I was arrested with four or five others while distributing leaflets. A few cars pulled up. Inside were men in uniform carrying weapons. Although I had previously been threatened by members of the security forces, I had not been detained. One of us was shot that day and the rest were arrested. I understand that about 10 AAPO were arrested that week.'

He was held without charge for one year in Karchale Central Prison in Addis. 'During the course of that year, I was tortured and questioned regarding my involvement with the party and also to find out . . . the workings of the party.

I was kept in a small cell with many other people. The room was very claustrophobic. People were sleeping across each other. We were given one small meal a day. Our families also brought in food but this was often taken by the guards.

Sometimes I would be tortured every day but at other times I would not be interrogated for over three weeks. . . . I could not give them the answers but they would beat me anyway. . . .

On one occasion I was attacked by one of their dogs . . . I have scarring to the top of my right arm.

On a number of other occasions I would be taken out of the cell into the open air. There I would be forced upside down into a barrel of cold water. I would be left in the water until I couldn't breathe and only at that stage, when I thought I would drown, they would pull me out. My face still bears the scarring where it was grazed on the stones at the bottom of the barrel. I was forced to walk on my bare knees on gravel. I was sexually abused. They would tie up my genitals and force me to drag myself around.'

He wrote of severe psychological effects of torture. The British Home Office refused his asylum application.

Edassa Dabala was taken from the house of a relative, where he was lodging, in Higher 24, Kebele 15, Addis Ababa, in early March. Two months later, he was believed to be being held secretly in Maikelawi Central Investigation Centre. [Information from local informant.]

Mitiku Bayissa, an Oromia Court translator at Sidist Kilo, Addis Ababa, and a student in the Addis Ababa University law department's extension programme, was taken by government security men to Maikelawi in April and held *incommunicado* for two weeks. He was later transferred with 100 prisoners to Showa Robet prison. [Information from local informant.]

EASTERN OROMIA REGION

Detentions, Torture etc

Jaafar SF, a 27 year old, who worked in his father's textile and shoe shop in Deder, E. Hararge, wrote from exile in Kenya on 5 July. He wrote that his father went missing in 1997 and his mother, in 2000. He was first detained on 1 January 1993 and tortured with his arms being tied tightly behind his back and by having a heavy stone placed on his chest for 20 minutes, repeatedly for one month. He was kept in detention for six months. He was again held for seven months from August 1997, following OLF military activity in his area. He was bayoneted in his head three times, beaten and subject to mock execution. He was again detained from July 1999 until May 2000, and tortured with suspension of a water container from his penis, as well as being whipped with electric wire and the usual beatings. In common with most detainees, he was released only after signing that his life would be forfeit if he 'committed any crime' and on condition of reporting to security men every week.

Ahmed ZH, a 30 year old businessman from Hirna, W. Hararge, used to trade between Hirna and Addis Ababa and ran a large tailor's business. He wrote from Kenya on 28 June, where he and his family are refugees. He wrote,

'One morning in January 1994, the EPRDF army walked into my shop and they called me and took me to their cell. They enquired about my property. After I denied it belonged to the OLF, they detained me at Asebetafari military camp.' He was accused of supplying the OLF with goods.

'They handcuffed me, beating me with whip. They took me up a steep valley at night and shot guns over my head.' He was detained until January 1995.

In August 1998, after local OLF activity, he was again detained. 'I was severely tortured. My vehicle and shop was confiscated. I was beaten, taken to a steep valley and my colleagues were killed. In March 2000 I was released after signing to be killed if I will be found guilty, to report weekly, and report my visitors. . . In April 2001, after the students of Hirna arrived home [after student strikes in Addis Ababa], the TPLF hunted me, claiming I had an underground link with the strike.'

He and his family report being too frightened in Nairobi to approach UNHCR.

SOUTHERN OROMIA REGION

Killing, detention, torture and confiscation

Adisu G, a 28 year old driver and trader from Borana zone, in a statement written in February 2001, wrote of the presence of government 'Tabaka' militia on the road between Negele and Moyale, where he used to drive. 'I was stopped, searched and beaten on a number of occasions in the course of my work', he wrote.

'In May 1998, I was with three friends in my lorry and about twelve militia stopped us. They said they were 'Tabaka'. They smashed the windscreen. They beat me. They abducted my friend Ahmed. I haven't seen him since then. My other friend, Bidu, was injured in the head. I was taken, beaten and mistreated for three days. I was given no food. I was interrogated about members of the OLF. They released me but said they would continue to follow me. On release, I learnt that my mother's house had been set on fire and my uncle Godana had been arrested.' His uncle was later released 'because they thought he would die there'.

He also wrote that, because he was suspected of supplying the OLF with cattle, **his father was shot dead in July 1996**, while visiting a friend in Negele. 'His friend was beaten up and taken away.'

SOUTHERN PEOPLES REGION

Sero L, aged 26, wrote from Kenya on 21 June, reporting his being detained in 'Awas' military camp, commonly known as 'debubizz', from 1 to 16 June and 23 July to 24 August, 1998, and from 30 November 2000 to 16 March 2001. During detention he 'was severely beaten with electric wire, tied with my hands back for prolonged periods, immersed in cold water and taken to the bush at night and threatened with the gun point to my ear', he wrote.

PRESS: MORE DETENTIONS

On 20 April 2001, according to Article 19, the police rounded up newspaper and magazine vendors. They were released on 21 April, on condition that they stop their vending activities. Circulation of newspapers outside Addis Ababa has been severely affected by this action.

Seifu Mekonnen, a reporter with *Mebrek* newspaper reappeared after two days detention in Addis Ababa on 26 April, according to Reporters Sans Frontieres. Mekonnen, disappeared after attending a press conference given by the Ethiopian Human Rights Council.

Chief editors of *Netsabrek*, *Netsanet*, *Wogahta* and *Medina* were called to Maikelawi Central Investigation Department on 4 July. The chief editors of *Satanaw*, Merid Zelleke, and *Moged*, Mengistu Wolde-Selassie, were earlier detained after giving statements while the chief editor of *Dagim Wonchif*, Leyikun Ingida, was released on bail. On 6 July it was reported that *Wogahta's* editor-in-chief, Berhanu Hailu, was detained in Maikelawi and denied bail.

Tamirat Zuma, former publisher and chief editor of the now defunct *Atkurot* newspaper, was detained on 25 May, and charged with inciting violence, because of an article written two years ago. The Committee to Protect Journalists appealed for his release at the time of his hearing in June. He was still in detention at the end of the month.

Tsegaye Alalew, chief editor of *Genenaw* weekly paper, was detained on charges of defamation, on 1 June. He was released on bail, about one month later.

The Ethiopian Free Journalists Association reported that the chief editor of *Kicker*, a weekly sports paper, Yoftahe Tsegaye, was sentenced to one month in prison for not renewing his press licence, on 26 June.

KENYA - Increased insecurity for refugees

Just before going to press, OSG was reliably informed by several sources that insecurity for Oromo and other refugees in Nairobi is at an all time low. There are reported to be many more TPLF security men in Nairobi, since the internal problems of the TPLF. High profile dissenters - Tigrean and Amhara, as well as Oromo and others - are more at risk in Nairobi now than at any time in the past.

Many refugees who have been recently released on bail from detention in Ethiopia are having great difficulty in making a first contact with UNHCR. Three men, who waited all day in vain for a planned interview, witnessed on 17 July the attempted abduction of an Oromo refugee from the large queue outside the UNHCR compound. Dirriba Tamiru, most of whose family remain in detention in Ethiopia, was forced to climb over the compound fence and seek protection from UNHCR personnel, when TPLF security men tried to take him away. An Amhara refugee is believed to have actually been abducted. Oromo refugees are simply too frightened to approach UNHCR.

Refugees whom UNHCR know are at higher than average risk of abduction are isolated and defenceless in Nairobi.

DWS, a long term resident of Kakuma camp in Northern Kenya (see last issue for accounts of insecurity there), wrote on 14 June. He was detained and tortured on three occasions before leaving Ethiopia. Despite applying for resettlement on 5 May 1999, he remains in Kakuma, where he reports being followed by members of the Ethiopian community who have links with the embassy in Nairobi.

The Oromo Community organization in Kakuma camp wrote on 5 June.

'We had our Oromo Community in Kakuma since 1993, in harsh environment, surviving hand to mouth. The camp is infiltrated by Ethiopian government agencies collaborating with Ethiopian Community through their embassy in Nairobi . . . We are in a dilemma, with great fear, living a miserable life and forgotten people. Moreover, we have reported on these issues to UNHCR but no consideration or measurements were taken.

Regarding . . . resettlement, there is no beneficiary from the Oromo Community while others are leaving daily to third countries . . . we Oromo at Kakuma will be waiting only for death. Although we have been writing several letters to Oromo communities in foreign countries and Oromo political organizations, we have had negative replies . . . even current information.

We are strongly requesting humanitarian assistance of funds, materials like newspapers, magazines and sponsorship for 790 persons of Oromo Community in Kakuma refugee camp.'

The community organisation may be reached via UNHCR, PO Box 43801, Nairobi.

SOUTH AFRICA

Refugees bypassed in resettlement process

Members of the Oromo refugee community in South Africa wrote the following letter on 10 June.

There is a long-standing relationship between the Ethiopian Community leader and Mr. Mengesha Kebede, Head of the Southern African Regional Representative of the UNHCR. Through this access and upon his advice the Ethiopian Community leaders have applied for resettlement in-group. The Community leaders have also included their close friends, who are ex-soldiers and some civilians as well, registered under the Ethiopian Community of South Africa.

In line with their general application, Mr. Mengesha Kebede advised and helped them to prepare individual applications based on the list of names submitted to him. The individuals application were forwarded to the lawyers for human rights and to the law clinic of the Witswatersrand University who are at present delegated by the UNHCR to assist the office in preliminary screening. In accordance with the directives given by Mr. Mengeha Kebede, the cases of 50 individuals have been reviewed and approved. Thereafter, the lawyers for Human Rights and the law clinic approved their case including their recommended for resettlement and forwarded it to the UNHCR. All these work was done secretly. We knew only after these individuals got approved and filled in the resettlement form.

Furthermore, the same person aforementioned advised the Ethiopians Community leaders to send him more list of individuals who can be recommended for resettlement. The requisite list has been forwarded to the UNHCR and from among them about fifteen of them have the approval of the lawyers of Human Rights and the Law clinic. At present their recommendation have been forwarded to the UNHCR for the final approval.

Regarding the first batch, two of them have already gone to Canada, and for the remaining ones who wanted to go to USA, the INS and the JVA have come to RSA from Kenya to review their cases from 16 May 2001 to 29 May 2001. Accordingly, they have interviewed all of them and gave them their letter of approval. Their departure for USA is programmed within four months time.

The allegation we make here is that the Oromo Community of South Africa is known by UNHCR but has been intentionally not invited to apply for resettlement. Besides this, the Oromos who have a valid reason to have fled from their country of origin have been excluded from this opportunity. The longstanding amnesty between the Abyssinians and the Oromos have been reflected in this fishy process. The political prosecution that we faced in Ethiopia followed us further out of the border, in the Republic of South Africa. We are Oromos and the members of the Oromo Community of the South Africa: we cannot be members of the Ethiopian Community. Hence we should have not been deprived of this opportunity.

At this point we want to make clear that there is only 4 Oromo individuals who have applied for family reunification and their individual personal cases.

Therefore we kindly request Oromo organisations to closely follow up this matter and bring to the attention of the UNHCR our complaint and find us a final alternative solution to our problem.