

Human Rights Violations in Ethiopia

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The US State Department Country Report for human rights practices in Ethiopia covering 1997 conveys the impression that the Ethiopian government is committed to improving human rights and the democratisation process in the country. Extra-judicial killing and disappearance are said to be "unconfirmed".(1)

Dr Susan Rice, Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, told an audience at the African Studies Association conference in Columbus, Ohio, on 14th November, that the State Department applauded the efforts made by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to improve the human rights situation in Ethiopia. (2)

Those human rights violations which are conceded by the Ethiopian and US governments are blamed on local officials and the lack of a democratic culture and history of respect for human rights. (1)

Where a degree of central planning is obvious, as in the shooting of three unarmed Oromo in Addis Ababa on 8th October, the government proclaims a deliberate crackdown on "terrorists". (3)

Internationally respected human rights organisations - Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch/Africa, the Committee to Protect Journalists and the International Commission of Jurists, etc. - claim that human rights violations in Ethiopia are severe and widespread. (4, 5, 6, 7)

The Oromia Support Group (OSG) has recorded 2385 extra-judicial killings and 646 disappearances to date (8). Scores of thousands of illegal detentions are reported. Torture and rape of detainees is commonplace, especially in unofficial detention centres, according to all human rights organisations. (4, 5, 8)

Many of the reports originate from second-hand, uncorroborated sources : institutions which support the Ethiopian government are quick to point this out.

However, OSG has now received enough first-hand reports directly from victims, their close relatives and eye-witnesses to reveal a clear pattern of human rights abuse throughout Ethiopia. Some of these accounts show how suspected supporters of opposition, nationality-based political groups are pursued and tracked down over many miles before being detained, disappeared or killed. The role of "local officials" in these violations and in the street killings in Addis Ababa appears to be minimal.

A representative selection of accounts given to OSG now follows. These reports are consistent with each other and with the many second-hand reports received from single sources. The distribution of abuses, the history of people who are abused, the methods of abuse and the reasons given all reveal a consistent pattern of abuses across Ethiopia, consistent with a centrally planned policy.

The information about all of these cases came directly from the victims, their close relatives and eye-witnesses.

Case 1. Oromo Relief Association (ORA) orphans.

Approximately 1300 Oromo children, mostly orphans aged 5-18 yrs, were cared for by ORA in two camps in Sudan, until the downfall of the communist military dictatorship in 1991. After moving from camp to camp, because of local conflicts between the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), 700 children mostly aged between 12 and 18, settled in Kobor, 10-20 km from Begi, in Wallega province. They constructed a camp for themselves and were awaiting the arrival of younger children who remained in Damazine, Sudan.

The camp was attacked in June 1992, when the OLF withdrew from the regional and general elections because of widely acknowledged electoral abuses by the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). OLF offices and the encamped OLF troops were overran. Members and supporters were killed and detained.

The children were chased to Gaba Dafino, to Charpha and over the Dabus river toward Mendi. Adults who accompanied them, teachers and carers, were shot, detained and tortured.

Over 600 children were chased over the Dilla river, a tributary of the Dabus, after three weeks on the run, suffering from hunger and sleeping rough, often in mud.

A few found haven with local peasants, especially if they had relatives nearby. Some hid in the forest for up to three months, only to be caught when exploring for food. A few were escorted back to Sudan, despite a heavy TPLF military presence on the border.

Many were taken to Didessa concentration camp, notorious for malaria, TB and water borne diseases. Some, like many detainees at Didessa, died of infection and malnutrition.

The few who were under five years old were released when local peasants paid bribes. Those who remained faced beatings. Some were tortured and some were raped. Some girls became unwilling brides for TPLF soldiers.

Initial claims that 30-70 were shot or drowned during one of the river crossings are probably exaggerated. Later, eye-witnesses assessed that about 20 died.

Local informants described the fleeing children being hunted like *kurupe*, a small antelope which bounds through the grass. They were jumping to see where they were going.

Between 170 and 200 bodies were found.

Interviews with surviving children, teachers and carers and with residents in Wallega province, 1995-6.

Case 2. Torture by arm-tying, before 1992.

Human rights violations began shortly after the Transitional Government of Ethiopia was established. This case concerns an Arsi farmer who was 26 years old when he was taken from his house during the night of 22nd June 1991. He and four other farmers were detained apparently at random following the murder of a traveling businessman nearby.

Four EPRDF soldiers beat and kicked them. Then they tied the victims' upper arms tightly behind their backs. The 26 yr old's arms were tied in this fashion for 30 hours. He showed weakness and wasting of muscles of both arms and hands due to the interruption to the blood supply of the nerves. Such paralysis commonly follows this method of torture. The victims are unable to feed themselves or attend to bodily hygiene. Instead of breadwinners, they are a drain on family resources.

As happened to the 26 yr old, the restricted blood supply sometimes leads to irreversible tissue damage and gangrene, necessitating amputation.

The arm-tying method of torture is commonly used in the west, south and east of Ethiopia, with the same results.

Interviews with victims by Ethiopian Human Rights Council and videotaped interviews of victims taken in 1994.

Case 3. Arm-tying, disappearance and extra-judicial killing in the East.

These are the words of a woman from Eastern Hararge, in Eastern Ethiopia, who was similarly tortured in 1993.

I was arrested on 24 June 1993 when there were mass arrests of Oromos. There was mass tying of people by EPRDF and looting of property . . . Bodies of people who had been killed were left on the road. Ten people chewing khat were shot dead. This went on in a widespread area. I was tied for eight days and then taken to a forest where I saw many people tied. Some were strangled to death, while others were taken away and disappeared. OLF fighting was far away but this was revenge for the fighting. Girls were abducted and raped in all the villages around and there was much killing by soldiers.

She bore well-marked scars on her upper arms, but fortunately suffered no long term effects.

Victim interviewed by Amnesty International. 'Ethiopia - Accountability past and present: Human Rights in Transition' p. 40, Amnesty International, London, April 1995.

Case 4. Arm-tying, looting, disappearance and extra-judicial killing.

Abdul Bahar Abdurahman was 31 years old when he was interviewed in August 1996. He was a trader from Chalanko, East Hararge, before he sought asylum in the USA.

His father died following torture in 1992. The following are extracts from Abdul Bahar's statement.

"After my father's death, they seized all property at the house, saying it was all OLF property.

I was in prison ten times between 1992 and 1996 . . . eight times in the secret detention centre at Kumutu military camp . . .

I have spent eleven months of the last four years in prison . . . My last time was for six weeks in January and February of this year [1996 - Bribes paid by his family secured his release each time, and that of other family members.].

I was tortured every time I was in prison . . . stripped naked and beaten on my back . . . My arms were tied during six imprisonments . . .

They tied a plastic rope around my neck and pretended to hang me. They put a gun to my head. They told me to tell them where the OLF were and to admit that our money and cows belonged to the OLF . . .

They torture a lot of farmers at Kumutu detention centre every day. Every day they bring new people, between two and five farmers usually . . . One day they bought in 24 peasants from Bikiye [near to Chalanko]. They were still there when I left . . .

Some people disappear in the middle of the night. Everyone thinks they may be the next. The farmers have the [arm-tying] torture straight away. Most get paralysed. I only had numbness in my arms for a short time.

Town or city people can sometimes escape by giving bribes of 3-5,000 Birr. So if they want money, they imprison businessmen to pay bribes.

Thirteen people disappeared during my eleven months in prison . . . two in my last six weeks imprisonment . . . Their bodies were found part eaten by hyenas . . . When this was reported to the government, they said the two had escaped"

He bore a scar on his upper left arm from the arm-tying torture. His older brother disappeared in 1995 and several of his relatives are still in prison and have been tortured.

Interview with victim, Atlanta, Georgia, August 1996.

Case 5. Disappearance.

Most reported disappearances remain missing. Only four "reappearances" are known to the Oromia Support Group.

A typical case of disappearance is that of Mrs Zewde Ragassa Gored. She was a mother of three, a shopkeeper and businesswoman who was seen as a local women's leader. During a twelve month detention in her local town of Gidda, in Wallega province, she had been raped by her captors.

About two months after her release, on 2 February 1997, she was taken by government security men in Gidda. She has not been seen since and her presence in any prison is denied.

She has disappeared.

Letter from brother of victim, in exile in Djibouti, June 1997.

Case 6. Detention, torture and death in custody.

Worku Mulatta is an engineer and father of four children. He was arrested in the street, near the Piazza area of Addis Ababa, on 11 February 1997. This day, Wako Tola, a teacher at the renowned Sandford School in Addis Ababa, was also detained. He died in police custody on March 31.

After his arrest, Worku Mulatta was escorted home, where photographs were taken by four

government employees, including a female Tigrean neighbour. He was missing for two days until his wife was ordered to bring food and clothing to Maikelawi Special Investigation Centre in Addis Ababa, where Wako Tola later died.

Worku had been chief cadre for the OLF in Showa, during their presence in the Transitional Government from 1991 to 1992. There was no warrant for his arrest: he has not been charged nor has he appeared in court.

In June, it was reported that Worku Mulatta was being taken by closed van from Maikelawi at night, three times per week, to another destination where he was being tortured. He was reported to be fearful of dying in police custody, like Wako Tola, or suffering permanent disability.

Telephone interview with close friend of family of victim.

Case 7. Disappearance and torture.

Magarssa Dame was a young teacher of *Qubee* in rural Wallega, in the area of Amuru. *Qubee* is the Latin script best suited to the Oromo language and is a symbol to the Oromo people of an emerging sense of nationalism and escape from cultural hegemony. Magarssa was teaching *Qubee* from September 1991 until he was taken from his family home in Amuru on 20 July 1992.

He was held and tortured at Amuru police station until he escaped on 22 October.

His father, Dame Jana, was detained from that day to 15 November, interrogated and told that Magarssa would be killed if he were caught.

The young teacher reached his brother's house in Harar, Eastern Hararge, after his escape. He was taken from there at 2.00am on 5 December.

A few weeks later, he was seen by a trader at Kombolcha prison and described as weak and faint. He had a blackened finger on his right hand, from torture involving electric wire.

His brother tried to visit but was denied access. On 23 February 1993 Magarssa's brother was told he was no longer there. Since then, his whereabouts have been unknown.

Harar is as far from Wallega as it is possible to get in Ethiopia. The tracking down, continued torture and eventual disappearance of Magarssa Dame illustrates a degree of central planning in the detention of Oromo who supported the OLF: when it was the legal voice for the Oromo people in the Transitional Government.

Statement from brother of victim, March 1997.

Case 8. Disappearance.

Mohamed Yusuf was a young businessman from Dire Dawa, E.Hararge, who was detained for a month while on a business trip to W.Wallega in January 1996. He was released after his family paid a bribe. He then went to live in Addis Ababa.

His sister wrote, "*In the beginning of 1997 . . . at midnight the security members came to our house [in Dire Dawa, E.Hararge], asking . . . for my brother. My father told them 'He is not here'. They took my father to jail for one month.*

They got my brother in Addis Ababa and arrested him. Our family went to Addis to visit him. After they visited him for one week they were told not to come here and ask for Mohamed

Yusuf. They told my family he is not there now.

So they have made him 'disappear'. We don't know if he is alive or dead."

This case again illustrates central planning in tracking down victims.

Statement from sister of victim, in exile in Switzerland, May 1997.

Case 9. Disappearance.

Joseph Bati, a teacher from Bale, was abducted by the EPRDF security forces on 27th November 1992. He has not been seen since. He was imprisoned from 1978 until 1988 in Menelik Palace, Maikelawi and Karchalee prisons in Addis Ababa, as a prisoner of conscience. After his release, he fled to Kenya where he remained as a refugee until his return to Ethiopia on 2nd March 1991. He became involved with the OLF and was active within the organisation until its withdrawal from the Transitional Government in June 1992. On 15 September 1992, Joseph was arrested in Shashamane and held for 6 weeks in a secret detention centre in Addis Ababa and then released. On 27th November 1992, he was abducted and put in a car by two security officers whilst walking with a friend on the street in the Tekele Haimonat area in Addis Ababa. Today he remains disappeared.

Interview with brother of victim, August 1997.

Case 10. Torture, the experience of a refugee.

Gaali Nurreddin Hussein is a 30 yr old Oromo interviewed in Djibouti in the summer of 1996.

Informants in Djibouti report being actively sort by Tigrean agents of the Ethiopian government and those who interviewed Gaali Nurreddin believed publication of his photograph may expose him to danger.

He first went to Djibouti in 1990, to escape the last wave of conscription into the Dergue army. He was hesitant to return to Ethiopia after the overthrow of the Dergue. However, along with 200 other Oromo refugees in Djibouti, he was persuaded by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) that it was safe to return in July 1995.

He boarded the train in Dire Dawa, with some provisions and money. He and his fellow returnees were told to await further rations in Dire Dawa.

After seven days, he and a friend with whom he had been staying, were summoned to the local Kebele office. They were stripped naked and told that their UNHCR cards were stolen goods. They were accused of being OLF spies.

He said at interview *"They especially wanted to know the whereabouts of two returnees in Dire Dawa . . . they put a gun to my head and dragged me to a car . . ."*

One month of torture then began.

"Four of us had to strip . . . Five officials whipped our naked bodies . . . The torturers screamed at us 'You can choose for yourselves. Either you admit to being members of the OLF or we will kill you' . . ."

They tied my upper arms behind my back. They then wet some string. They filled a one and a half litre bottle of water and tied it to my genitals with the wet string . . . for one hour . . . I started

to bleed . . . The pain was indescribable . . .

They kept on yelling 'Confess or we will kill you' . . .

He was held for 28 days in solitary confinement while his wounds festered.

He escaped by bribing a helpful guard, who had told him he was to be executed, and made his way slowly back to Djibouti.

Interview with victim, Djibouti, July 1996.

Case 11. Extra-judicial killing in Wallega, the fate of most of the 'disappeared'.

Henoch Yonatan was a 24 yr old farmer, intelligent and well-respected for the self sacrifice he had made to help bring up his siblings. He was due to be married. He was imprisoned and tortured for one month in early 1995. He and Mesfin Gedefa were taken from Nejo military camp on 6 April.

On 28 April 1995, the villagers of Babo Gambel, in the Jarso district of Wallega, heard gunfire. They found 27 bodies in three sites. Only three of the men were identified, including Henoch Yonatan and Mesfin Gedefa.

The photograph of their bodies has become a symbol of the Oromo human rights movement since it was smuggled out of Ethiopia. The other 24 will be counted among the disappeared.

Henoch's parents were refused permission to bury him. Farmers reported the bodies to the local administrator in Jarso town and were told not to bury them with proper ceremony.

Although he did not take the photograph, the father of Henoch has been detained since the picture of his dead son was smuggled out of Ethiopia.

Report from clandestine human rights organisation, Addis Ababa, confirmed by photograph obtained later by OSG.

Case 12. Extra-judicial killing in Addis Ababa.

In the last year, killings have occurred openly in the capital.

Ebbisa Addunya was a 26 yr old musician and singer with the *Bilisuma* band. He and his friend Tana Wayessa were woken at 6.00am on 30 August 1996 by government soldiers entering Ebbisa's house. Ebbisa and his friend were shot dead and taken outside the house, a mere few hundred metres from the American embassy, to be collected by a government Land Rover. Although efforts to clear the streets were made, there were many eye-witnesses. Yet, the authors of the State Department report were unable to confirm the killings.

The Chief Security Officer for Addis Ababa apologised to Ebbisa's uncle and said the killing had been a mistake. But, OSG has interviewed a man who visited Ebbisa and Tana the evening before they were killed. He was detained after leaving the house and kept for 30 days. It is thus evident that the operation was planned and not a mistake.

Ebbisa Addunya was very popular among Oromo. He had played at wedding parties held in the houses of prominent Oromo, including Worku Mulatta. Other artists performing at the same functions - Elflesh Qanno, Boharsitu Obsa and Shabbe Shekko - have all been detained.

Informants in Addis Ababa and interview with close associate of victims, April 1997.

Conclusion

In February 1997, the official newsletter for EPRDF government cadres, *The Peoples Custodian*, exhorted members to regard the Oromo petit bourgeoisie as enemies of the people. It clearly stated, in Marxist-Leninist style, that Oromo intellectuals and businessmen were to be eliminated, to remove the focus for the Oromo nationalist movement.

Since October and November 1997 there has been a sharp increase in killings and detentions in Addis Ababa and surrounding areas. (9)

Unarmed Oromo have been shot on the street and the Ethiopian media, apparently with State Department approval (1), claim the government is cracking down on terrorists. Elders, businessmen, journalists and human rights activists have been imprisoned and labelled as terrorists. This has been confirmed by informants in Addis Ababa, Amnesty International (4), Human Rights Watch/Africa (5), and close relatives or close associates of the victims, living in the USA. (9)

The Ethiopian government has claimed these arrests and the killing of three unarmed Oromo were because they belonged to an OLF cell which was responsible for the bombings in Addis and Dire Dawa earlier this year.

The Ethiopian government once claimed that the bombings were the work of Al-Ittihad, a Somali-based opposition group. Al-Ittihad itself claimed responsibility for earlier bombings and were attacked in their bases in Somalia, where the Ethiopian government still has a military presence. (10)

When Taye Wolde/Semayat, Chairman of the Ethiopian Teacher's Association (ETA), was detained in 1996, the government claimed he was leading an Amhara terrorist cell of the Ethiopian National Patriots Front, then blamed for bombings. When unarmed Assefa Maru, Acting Chairman of the ETA and Board Member of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, was shot on 8 May 1997, the public were told he was leading the Ethiopian United Patriotic Front, also blamed for the explosions. (10)

The State Department is backing the Ethiopian government's claims that their actions are against terrorists and seems committed to include the OLF on their terrorist list. Dr Rice, in her speech, said one of the important roles of the State Department, was to assist African countries by providing anti-terrorism training and information on terrorist activities. It is known that Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has provided the US Embassy with the evidence against those currently detained. (11)

The British Department for International Development (DFID) has reversed its decision to stop assisting in the training of police in Addis Ababa. Assistance, including to major NGOs in Ethiopia, was withdrawn following the street killing of Assefa Maru in May. Resumption of aid was contingent upon there being an inquiry into the killing. (12)

However, the Ethiopian government "*felt unable to meet our desire for a full enquiry*". Nonetheless, aid is resumed because this is the best way of helping the Ethiopian government "*to improve its human rights record*", according to a DFID spokesman. (12)

Meanwhile, prominent NGO's which have supported the Oromo Relief Association in the past, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch/Africa, have all called for the release of the prisoners of conscience who have been recently detained.

These people have been arrested simply for taking a public stand against human rights violations against members of the Oromo ethnic group or for their peaceful Oromo community activities. They are prisoners of conscience and should never have been arrested in the first place. Amnesty International News Service, 27 November 1997.

The inability of the intelligence network available to the US State Department to confirm extra-judicial killings and disappearances is difficult to understand. There appears to be a lack of will within all western governments to openly confront the government of Ethiopia concerning its human rights record. The commitment of the European Commission and the USA to link aid and investment to human rights is questionable.

Dr Trevor Trueman, Chair, Oromia Support Group, 29 May 1998.

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