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Ethiopia: No Justice in Somali Region Killings

Paramilitary Force Killed 21, Detained Dozens, in June 2016

(Nairobi) – Ethiopian authorities have failed to hold accountable a paramilitary force that killed at least 21 villagers in the Somali region of Ethiopia in June 2016. The government should promptly grant access to independent international monitors to investigate these killings and other reported abuses by this force, known as the “Liyu police.”

On June 5, 2016, Liyu police members entered the village of Jaamac Dubad in eastern Ethiopia’s Somali Regional State after an officer had been wounded in a dispute with local traders. The police started shooting indiscriminately, killing at least 14 men and seven women, and then looted shops and houses. Nine months later, survivors said they were not aware of any investigation into the killings and had not received any compensation.

“Liyu police killed 21 villagers in the Somali region and devastated this vulnerable community, but there’s no sign that the government is working to bring anyone to justice for these killings,” said Felix Horne, senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Ethiopian authorities should end their indifference to the murderous operations by this paramilitary force and work with international monitors to investigate their abuses.”

Ethiopian authorities created the Liyu (“special” in Amharic) police for the Somali region in 2007, when an armed conflict between the insurgent Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and the government escalated. By 2008, the Liyu police had become a prominent counterinsurgency force recruited and led by then-regional security chief Abdi Mohammed Omar, known as “Abdi Illey.” Abdi Illey became the president of Somali Regional State in 2010, and the Liyu police continue to report to him.

The Liyu police have frequently been implicated in extrajudicial killings, torture, rape, and violence against people in the Somali region, as well as in retaliatory attacks against local communities. There has also been growing evidence of attacks by the group against



A toddler shows a scar from the shot he sustained in the chest during the Jamaac Dubad killings, when he was 5-months-old. His mother and grandmother were killed in the incident, December 2016.

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communities outside of the Somali region, including in the Oromia region since late December 2016, and in Somalia.

Between December and February 2017, Human Rights Watch interviewed 31 residents of Jaamac Dubad and people from nearby villages, including 10 witnesses to the June 5 killings who had fled to neighboring Somaliland.

Survivors and witnesses to the June 5 violence said that the Liyu police entered and encircled the village with vehicles, then fired randomly at people gathered in the market and at women near their homes and shops, and directly at those who tried to flee. Witnesses said that they had not seen any of their community members using firearms in response.

“The bullets were flying all over the place,” said a 40-year-old woman. “I came out of my house, saw that many people were fleeing, and saw people in uniform shooting. ... With my four children, I just left my house. The Liyu police were shooting as we fled.” She said that two women running behind her were shouting that they had been hit.

During the shooting, many residents fled the village. The next day, the Liyu police prevented residents from returning to bury the 21 people killed. Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that when they were able to return, they found that there had been widespread looting of shops and houses in the village, with food, goods, and money missing.

In the ensuing weeks, the Liyu police conducted a disarmament operation in neighboring villages, detaining dozens of residents and beating several.

Since 2007, the Ethiopian government has imposed tight controls on access to the Somali region for independent journalists and human rights monitors. Ethiopia’s regional and federal governments should urgently facilitate access for investigations by independent human rights investigators, including the United Nations special rapporteur on extrajudicial and summary executions, of the shootings at Jaamac Dubad and other alleged serious abuses by the Liyu police, Human Rights Watch said. The governments should promptly compensate those harmed and the families of those killed.

“The Liyu police’s killing of 21 people is one in a long list of serious abuses for which this force has escaped scot-free,” Horne said. “The scale of their abuses over the last decade warrants international scrutiny, and Ethiopia’s international supporters should push for access to independent investigators into the Somali region to ensure that no one else has to suffer at their hands.”

For details about Human Rights Watch’s findings, please see below.

Abuses in Ethiopia’s Somali Region

The Somali region has been the site of a low-level insurgency by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) for more than a decade and a major counterinsurgency campaign since April 2007. However, the area has not been directly affected by the largely peaceful protests that have swept Ethiopia since 2015 or the government’s bloody crackdown on them.

In a June 2008 report, Human Rights Watch found that the Ethiopian National Defense Force and the ONLF had committed war crimes in the Somali region between mid-2007 and early 2008, and that the Ethiopian armed forces could be responsible for crimes against humanity. These abuses have never been independently investigated.

The Liyu police was established as part of the counter-insurgency campaign. Human Rights Watch has received credible allegations of abuses by the Liyu police, including extrajudicial killings, torture, rape, and other abuses of civilians accused of being members of or sympathetic to the ONLF.

The government has responded to reports of abuses in the Somali region over the years by severely restricting or controlling access for journalists, human rights groups, and aid organizations. Criticism of the local authorities, particularly of Abdi Illey, the regional president, is not tolerated, both inside and outside of Ethiopia. Arbitrary arrests and mistreatment of family members of Ethiopian-Australians who protested Abdi Illey’s June 2016 visit to Australia illustrates the regional

authorities' ongoing repression of dissent, Human Rights Watch said.

Human Rights Watch has also found other evidence of Liyu police abuses against people in parts of the Somali region that had never been a source of support for the ONLF, including in the Gashaamo district, largely populated by the ethnic Somali Isaaq clan. In 2012, the Liyu police summarily executed 10 people and committed other serious abuses, including torture and looting, in four villages in the Gashaamo district. Human Rights Watch received credible reports of reprisal killings against civilians, including women and children, in May and June 2015, following fighting between the Liyu police and clan militia near the Somalia border. A United Nations security council monitoring group found that an estimated 30 to 40 people were killed.

Since December 2016, credible reports have emerged of Liyu police incursions into the neighboring Oromia region. While there has been sporadic fighting on both sides of the Oromia-Somali regional border areas between ethnic Oromo and Somali pastoralists, sometimes involving the Liyu police, recent incidents have been far more violent, involving armed men on both sides. Dozens of casualties have been reported to Human Rights Watch, including many civilians in Oromia. Restrictions on access have made it difficult to corroborate details.



A toddler who at age 5 months was hit by a bullet in the leg during the Jamaac Dubad killings. His mother and grandmother were killed in the incident, December 2016.

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Killings in Jaamac Dubad, June 2016

On June 5, 2016, a Liyu police officer was injured, according to second-hand sources, during a shootout between Liyu police forces and unidentified gunmen linked to local traders of khat, a stimulant grown in the Ethiopian highlands. According to residents and media reports, Liyu police members had tried to confiscate a vehicle owned by local traders after it was involved in an accident with a government ambulance. The shootout occurred near Jaamac Dubad in the Gashaamo district, when the Liyu police towed the car away.

Around midday, Liyu police vehicles entered Jaamac Dubad apparently looking for those involved in the shootout. Ten survivors and witnesses said that Liyu police began firing indiscriminately around the village and directly at fleeing people. Residents, including people who saw their relatives' bodies, said that at least four women and two men had been shot in the upper body and head.

One community elder said Liyu police arrested him and two other elders as they headed toward the village: "We were two kilometers outside Jaamac Dubad walking toward it when the Liyu police drove by, stopped their vehicles, and grabbed us. They choked me and threw me to the ground. I broke a vertebra in my lower neck." He showed Human Rights Watch an X-ray of the broken bone. The elder said he was later sentenced for illegally assisting khat traders and imprisoned for over two months.

While pastoralist communities such as those in and around Jaamac Dubad are likely to have small arms to protect their animals, Human Rights Watch did not find any evidence that residents in the village engaged that day in armed resistance to the Liyu police. One resident said she saw the former village administrator run into his house to pick up his gun after the Liyu police entered the village but said he was gunned down before he was able to shoot at anyone.

“Abdi,” an elderly man who was in the market when the shooting started said:

Vehicles drove quickly into town and slammed on the brakes, [Liyu] police got out, and immediately started firing at people. They weren’t firing into the air. Sometimes they would shoot directly at people, other times they were just randomly shooting at the crowds. People were running everywhere, only to find their way blocked by the Liyu police. If those running managed to make it through, the Liyu police would chase after them shooting.

An 80-year-old man saw another elderly man trying to escape toward the eastern part of the town. He said: “Dhabuke was running and was shot by a soldier from behind. He was hit in the shoulders and fell face forward. He died immediately.”

One young woman was holding her 5-month-old son when she was fatally shot. The baby was hit in the chest and leg but survived. The woman’s mother and a neighbor were also killed. A family member described the wounds she saw:

My sister had been hit on the lower arm and in the head. My mother was hit in the left side under her breast. The other woman [a neighbor] had a big [gunshot] wound, just in the middle of her chest.

During the shootings, a number of people ran into the village mosque seeking shelter. Liyu police officers pursued them and fired through the main door into the mosque. At least one elderly man, “Abdirahman,” was wounded – shot in the leg – while inside the mosque.

At least two men managed to escape through another door. Mohamed, 60, said, “My cousin ran out of the door [of the mosque] facing the market. He was shot in the side of the head. They [the Liyu police] were five meters from him, chasing him, there was two of them, behind them were two others, and behind them were two more.”

Altogether, the shooting lasted one hour.

The Liyu police detained several men and women outdoors until the following afternoon. The baby boy who was seriously injured was handed over to those detained, as the baby’s aunt later learned. She said:

There were women who were held as prisoners by the Liyu police around Jaamac Dubad. They were released at 4 p.m. [on June 6]. One of them had my nephew with her. I asked how they had found the child, and they said that a government representative from Gashaamo came to us when they were detained and gave them the child. He had told the women that the child had received first aid and that his dead mother had been holding him when they found him.



A toddler, then 5-months old, who was wounded but survived the Jamaac Dubad killings. His mother and grandmother were killed in the incident, December 4, 2016.

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Residents fled the fighting into the countryside and neighboring villages. For almost a day after the killings, the Liyu police prevented other residents from returning to the village to bury their dead.

“Abdirahman” managed to crawl back to his home the following morning:

My *macawis* [Somali sarong] was full of blood and it was becoming hard, so I wanted to change it. But when I arrived at my house, I searched for my *macawis* and I couldn’t find any. My mattress, my mosquito net, my bed sheets, my pillows, everything was missing from my house.

He said that on the morning of June 6, while the Liyu police and Ethiopian forces were still restricting entrance into the village, he and another man who was badly injured were given first aid, and driven in a private vehicle to the nearest hospital, in the town of Gashaamo, about 25 kilometers away.

The forces allowed residents to return in the afternoon of June 6. Residents as well as people from neighboring villages came to bury the dead. The Liyu police, along with Ethiopian army officials and local officials, were present throughout the burial. Two residents said that the mayor of Gashaamo ordered the residents to be silent throughout the burial and not to cry. The residents dug a mass grave then left the village again. As one woman who lost two family members said: “We were scared, we had no time, so we buried them all in one big grave. Everyone worked to put the bodies to rest. The Liyu police were all over the place.”

Residents of Jaamac Dubad, including witnesses to the killings and people who arrived the day of the burial, all said that their shops and houses had been looted of property, food, and money after the shootings. While most had not seen the looting, they believed that the Liyu police were responsible. One man who was among the residents detained overnight in the village said he saw the Liyu police looting his shop early on the evening of June 5.

The incident occurred shortly before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, so the shops were better stocked than usual. The aunt of the injured baby said:

My sister who was killed had come from Hargeisa [capital of Somaliland] – she had only been back in the village 10 days – she had brought a lot of food and sugar. When we went to our house we saw that they had taken the clothes and food. I also saw that they had broken into many of the shops.

Arbitrary Detention, Ill-Treatment During Disarmament

In the weeks following the June 5 killings, the Liyu police conducted a disarmament operation in the villages neighboring Jaamac Dubad, including Bodadheere, Gorgor, Ina Nur Muse, all inhabited by communities from the same sub-clans as Jaamac Dubad. They arrested dozens of people, detaining them in makeshift facilities, trying to get them to turn over their guns. Human Rights Watch spoke to nine people who were detained during operations. They said that they thought that the Liyu police feared that the local community would retaliate against them for the killings.

Several residents said that the Liyu police kicked and beat them with gun butts on their backs and shoulders when they were first detained and later in detention when they failed to produce a gun.

The Liyu police detained residents between two days and a month without charge, while the community was ordered to collect enough weapons to secure their release. Liyu police detained women to get the weapons belonging to husbands or fathers who were not there. One woman said she was detained for two days with her baby. Another woman said she was among 13 women detained in the Ina Nur Muse village school:

I was held for 13 days. There were six of us in one classroom, and seven in another. They would beat us with their gun butts, they would pull us out of the classroom to beat us and convince us to hand over guns. They would give us one

meal in detention in the evening. I have five children, who I could not see during detention. My uncle in Bilincle [a village in Somaliland] sent a gun to secure my release.

Those interviewed by Human Rights Watch had fled their homes in the days following the shootings and the sweeps. Many had not returned to their homes as of December 2016 because of the violence and an ongoing drought. Some have nothing to return to. One 33-year-old woman said: “I was married with seven children and had a shop. But now my shop is looted and closed, and my husband is dead. My little baby was just 10 days old when it happened. I am very upset and don’t want to go back, but my home is there.”

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