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HUMAN RIGHTS IN AFRICA: REVIEW OF 2019 - ETHIOPIA [AFR 01/1352/2020]

As part of its reform programme, in February, the government overturned the civil society legislation which had curtailed the right to freedoms of association and expression and tabled a new draft law before Parliament to replace draconian anti-terror legislation. At the same time, numerous journalists and other critics of the government continued to face arbitrary arrest, illegal prolonged detention and unfair trials. Hundreds of people were killed in a surge of communal violence, and the army unlawfully killed at least nine protesters, including children.

BACKGROUND

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali won the 2019 Nobel Prize for Peace for domestic reforms, including the release of thousands of opposition political party leaders and members, lifting the ban on previously outlawed opposition political parties, and for his role in the peace deal that ended the border stalemate with neighboring Eritrea (see Eritrea entry). Since taking office in April 2018, his government released dozens of arbitrarily detained journalists and bloggers.

COMMUNAL VIOLENCE

Amnesty International has documented a surge in ethnic violence that resulted in thousands of killings across the country, where the security forces failed their duty to protect. Instead, the security forces, particularly the members of the regional police and local administration militia had active roles by siding with their ethnic groups involved in the communal violence.

On 10 and 11 January, in Metema town, the North Gondar Zone of Amhara Region, around 60 people were killed in coordinated attacks against members of the Qimant, an ethnic minority people who had campaigned for autonomy within the Amhara Regional State. The attacks were carried out by an [Amhara community] vigilante group and regional government security forces. In September, at least 30 people, were killed in a communal violence in Gondar city and in areas surrounding the city including Fenter, Weleqa, and Azezo.

In September, in the predominantly Qimant districts of Chilga and Arbaba, at least 30 people died in skirmishes between armed members of the Qimant community and the regional security forces. . . Between 28 September and 15 October, reprisal attacks on Qimant people and their businesses in Gondar city and surrounding towns resulted in at least 405 deaths.

In April, members of the ethnic Gumuz group killed 21 Amhara residents in the Benishangul Region. In May, armed people in the Awi Zone of neighbouring Amhara Region killed at least 100 ethnic Gumuz and Shinasha residents.

In July, the violent dispersal by federal security forces of a meeting in Hawassa City, held by Sidama activists and elders, triggered ethnic attacks against residents in multiple towns throughout the Sidama Zone. At least 50 people were killed by communal violence, and also as a result of the use of excessive force by security forces who responded to the unrest. By the end of the year, the government had not conducted full investigations into the killings.

In October, at least 74 people were killed in towns in Oromia and Harari Regional States due to communal violence that erupted during protests against a government decision to withdraw protection from an Oromo political activist.

In November and December, at least 12 students were killed during ethnic clashes in universities in Amhara and Oromia. The killing of an Oromo student in Weldia University, Weldia town in Amhara, triggered a series of revenge killings including in Dire Dawa, Dembi Dolo and Gondar universities. Around 35,000 students left university campuses to avoid the violence and returned to their homes. In December, an unidentified armed group abducted around 20 Amhara students as they were leaving Dembi Dolo University to return home.

UNLAWFUL KILLINGS

In January, members of the Ethiopian Defense Forces unlawfully killed at least nine protesters, including three children, in the towns of Genda-Wuha and Kokit, in the Amhara Region. The army was escorting a convoy of vehicles, ostensibly carrying construction machinery, but which protesters believed was being used to traffic weapons and ammunition. When the townspeople blocked the road that traversed the two towns, in order to search the vehicles, the army shot at them. Witnesses told Amnesty International that the protesters did not use any violence means during the standoff during the blockade. Although, in January the army's Deputy Chief of Staff promised to investigate the incident, no findings had been made public by the end of the year and no prosecutions were initiated.

In October, the security forces killed at least 12 protesters in Ambo and Adama towns during protests against a government decision to withdraw protection from an Oromo political activist.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Despite notable progress since the 2018 political reforms, there were numerous arbitrary arrests, particularly of journalists and writers who criticized the government. In [August], the Federal Police arrested eight people in the capital, Addis Ababa, for facilitating the publication and distribution of a book called *The Hijacked Revolution* which had been published under an alias. The police questioned them about the author's identity and released some of them weeks later but detained the publisher until the end of November when he was released after the police dropped the terrorism charges.

In September, the police arrested five journalist who worked for *Segele Qerro Bilisuma*, an Oromiffa online media outlet. They were charged under provisions of the repressive Anti-Terrorism Proclamation 2009 (ATP), and detained at Addis Ababa Police Commission for over two months before being released unconditionally.

Following the spate of communal violence, the government tabled a draft law before Parliament in November, which would outlaw speech that advocates violence, and the spread of "disinformation." The draft contained broad and vaguely-worded provisions that undermine freedom of expression.

Tigray Regional State security forces, including the regional police and the local administration militia, targeted perceived or actual supporters of the Wolkait Amhara Identity Committee after it petitioned the Tigray Regional State and the federal government for Wolkait district to become part of Amhara Regional State. Victims and other witnesses said that those targeted were subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention, torture and other ill-treatment on the basis of their Amhara identity, for speaking Amharic, or listening to Amharic music.

UNFAIR TRIALS

[Hundreds] of political opposition members, journalists and others who were critical of the government faced unfair trials on charges brought under the ATP law. The trials were marked by illegal and prolonged pre-trial detention, unreasonable delays and persistent complaints of torture and other ill-treatment.

In June, the Legal Advisory Committee, tasked with leading legal reforms, tabled draft terrorism legislation [before] Parliament which was expected to replace the ATP during 2020.

In February, the police arrested Colonel Gemechu Ayana, a prominent Oromo Liberation Front member, and detained him [on terrorism charges] for eight months, in violation of ATP provisions which allow for a maximum four months' pre-trial detention period. In December, the authorities dropped the charges and released him.

Following the assassinations in June of the Amhara Regional State president and the Chief of Army in Addis Ababa, hundreds of people were arbitrarily arrested. Among those targeted were leaders of the Amhara Nationalist Movement (a political party), government officials, journalists, opposition political party leaders and members of the Addis Ababa Care Taker Committee which promotes administrative autonomy for residents of Addis Ababa. For four months, at least 10 suspects remained in pre-trial detention [under terrorism charges], before their trial that commenced in November. Police also arrested a journalist when he attended the pre-trial hearings and charged him with terrorism crimes together with the suspects.

In July, dozens of Sidama activists, were arrested on suspicion of instigating the communal violence in Sidama Zone in July. They included employees and leaders of the Sidama Media Network. They were held in detention until the end of the year without being charged in a prison in Halaba town, over 100 kms from their families.

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

In March, Parliament adopted the Civil Society Proclamation No 1113/19, replacing the Charities and Societies Proclamation No 621/09. The new law eased restrictions which had hindered the ability of groups to secure foreign funding; to carry out human rights-related work and activities; and had put obstacles in the way of foreigners or non-residents who wished to engage in the monitoring and promotion of human rights, conflict resolution or anti-corruption activities.

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