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Ethiopia: Ethnic Tigrayans Forcibly Disappeared

Discriminatory Arrests, Detentions, Business Closures in Addis Ababa

(Nairobi) – [Ethiopian](#) authorities since late June 2021 have arbitrarily detained, forcibly disappeared, and committed other abuses against ethnic Tigrayans in Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa. The authorities should immediately account for Tigrayans’ forcibly disappeared, release those being held without credible evidence of a crime, and end all discriminatory treatment.

On June 28, following eight months of fighting in Ethiopia’s northern Tigray region, Tigrayan forces recaptured the regional capital, Mekelle, while government forces withdrew. Tigrayan forces then moved quickly into the neighboring Afar and Amhara regions, [triggering large-scale displacement](#). Since then, serious human rights violations by government security forces against ethnic Tigrayans in Addis Ababa have escalated.

“Ethiopian security forces in recent weeks have carried out rampant arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances of Tigrayans in Addis Ababa,” said [Laetitia Bader](#), Horn of Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “The government should immediately stop its ethnic profiling, which has cast unjustified suspicion on Tigrayans, produce information on everyone being held, and provide redress to victims.”

In July and August, Human Rights Watch interviewed by phone eight current and former Tigrayan detainees, four Tigrayan business owners, and 25 relatives of detainees, witnesses to abuses, and lawyers. Human Rights Watch also reviewed court and police documents and relevant photos. An August 11 email to Attorney General Gedion Timothewos summarizing the Human Rights Watch findings and requesting further information has not received a response. This research supplements interviews in November and December 2020 with nine people subjected to profiling, searches, and arbitrary arrests of Tigrayans in Addis Ababa after the conflict in Tigray began in November.

In mid-July the Addis Ababa police commissioner, Getu Argaw, told the media that over 300 [Tigrayans had been arrested](#), saying they were under investigation for their alleged support for Tigray’s former ruling party, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), which Ethiopia’s parliament [designated](#) as a terrorist group in May. Although the attorney general [told the media](#) that ordinary citizens would not be affected, in the arrests that Human Rights Watch researched, most if not all appeared to have been targeted on the basis of ethnicity.

Witnesses said that security forces stopped and arrested Tigrayans on the streets and in cafés and other public places, and in their homes and workplaces, often during warrantless searches. In many cases, security forces checked people’s identification cards to confirm their identity before taking them to a police station or other detention facility. A Tigrayan political activist and a Tigrayan aid worker, both based in Addis Ababa, were among those arrested in July, as were at least a dozen journalists and media workers who have reported on abuses against Tigrayans.

While family members often knew where their relatives were being held during the first few days of detention, many were then secretly transferred to unidentified locations. Lawyers and families discovered, often weeks later and sometimes only informally, that some detainees were being held in the Afar region, over 200 kilometers from Addis Ababa. The whereabouts of others, including 23 cases Human Rights Watch documented, remain unknown.

On July 2 the authorities arrested a 34-year-old Tigrayan man along with a friend and two other Tigrayans in a café in the Haya Hulet neighborhood, popular with Tigrayans. He said that 12 police officers entered the café, checked their IDs, and took them to the Karamara police station, where all detainees were separated by ethnicity. While the man was released the following day, his friend was among approximately 90 Tigrayans who were not. Two days later, the man received a call from his friend using a borrowed phone, who told him: “We are being transported by 16 buses. There are police, intelligence, and also military.” The man called the number the next day and a police officer said that the detainees had been taken to Afar.

The media and witnesses have reported that since June 28, [authorities have closed dozens of businesses in Addis Ababa](#) belonging to Tigrayans, particularly in Haya Hulet and several neighborhoods in Bole district. For instance, on June 29, police and intelligence agents arrested a hotel owner and shut the hotel, but released his colleague, who is ethnic Amhara. The Tigrayan owner’s brother said that within two days, security forces moved the hotel owner to an undisclosed location, and his whereabouts remain unknown.

Security forces have also intimidated and threatened people, including detainees and their relatives. “Many of the police officers who were in the compound [of the detention center] were insulting me,” said a woman detained in July. “They were using abusive words that are directly attached with identity. They said I was a ‘venomous snake.’”

Ethiopian government abuses against Tigrayans in Addis Ababa started after the Tigray conflict began in November. In November and December, the authorities arbitrarily arrested and dismissed from work Tigrayans working in the government security and civil services, profiled Tigrayans during systematic ID checks, and searched homes without warrants, in many cases repeatedly. These actions have restricted Tigrayans’ freedom of movement throughout the duration of the conflict.

Many of the unlawful tactics currently being used by the security forces, such as secretly transferring suspects among various police authorities to evade legal requirements and prolong detention periods, were used in 2020 [against arbitrarily detained opposition figures](#) and journalists.

Enforced disappearances are defined under international human rights law as the arrest or detention of a person by state officials or their agents, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the arrest or to reveal the person’s fate or whereabouts. Forcibly disappeared people are outside the protection of the law, making them more vulnerable to torture, extrajudicial execution, and other abuses.

Forcibly disappearing people denies them access to lawyers, undermining their right to a fair trial, and may inflict severe mental suffering on their families. In Ethiopia their situation is exacerbated because detainees rely on their relatives to provide them with adequate food, clothes, and other essentials that the government does not provide.

Ethiopian authorities should comply with international legal prohibitions against arbitrary deprivation of liberty and enforced disappearances, Human Rights Watch said. As an urgent matter, they should provide families with information about their loved ones, release those wrongfully detained, and transfer civilians held in military custody to civilian control.

“The Ethiopian government’s ethnic profiling, arrest, detention, and enforced disappearances of Tigrayans is unlawful and unjust,” Bader said. “Donor countries should raise their concerns with the government to immediately end and investigate these discriminatory practices that threaten to worsen ethnic tensions in the country.”

For further accounts of enforced disappearances and other security forces abuses, please see below.

Enforced Disappearances

Human Rights Watch interviewed relatives, friends, and lawyers of 23 Tigrayan people whom the authorities arrested between June 28 and July 19 and whose whereabouts have not been revealed. A lawyer also shared a list of an additional 110 people whose relatives said they did not know their whereabouts as of August 2. The people interviewed are identified by pseudonyms because of security concerns.

The documented arrests were carried out by the Addis Ababa city or federal uniformed police, often accompanied by suspected intelligence officers in civilian clothes. For a few days after arrests, relatives could sometimes locate and bring their loved ones food, but after that short period, the authorities told relatives that the person had been moved to an undisclosed location or released, even though the detainees did not return home.

Both federal and city police authorities initially detained people in police stations and prisons, including at Gotera, Gulele, Akaki Kaliti, Addisu Gebeya, the Addis Ababa Police Commission (commonly known as “Sostegna”), and the Federal Police Commission.

The sister of a 39-year-old man whose whereabouts remain unknown described her brother’s enforced disappearance on July 2 and his last communication with his family:

On Wednesday [June 30], he was stopped in Piazza [north central Addis Ababa], and they said to him: “We know that you were just in Tigray.” He said no, he had been in Addis the whole time. They kicked him in the chin. He gave them his ID and insisted on calling a police officer, who ordered the officials to let him go. He stayed at home for the next two days. Then on Friday [July 2], he left the house and was arrested at around midday, around Teklehaimanot [north central Addis Ababa]. He called our other sister and said: “They put us in a car with a lot of other Tigrayans. I’m not sure where they are taking us,” and then the call was cut.

Habtom, a 22-year-old tailor, was most likely arrested on June 28, along with 30 other Tigrayans. Habtom’s sister Tsega visited him during his first week in detention, first at the Gulele subcity police station and then at a temporary detention facility near Kaliti subcity. She saw him again during a court appearance in Addisu Gebeya, where prosecutors told the court that Habtom and what Tsega estimated to be dozens of other Tigrayans were accused of “being a terrorist.” Habtom “disappeared,” three days before his next scheduled court appearance. “On Tuesday morning, when I brought him some food, they told me that he had been released,” she said. “But my brother hasn’t come home.”

Tesfay and 10 friends, all of whom were originally from a small village in Tigray but had been living in Addis Ababa for several years, were detained on July 3. Tesfay’s brother said:

I asked a friend. He said he would check to see where my brother was. After two days, I was very worried. He finally told me that my brother had been arrested and brought to Shola [police station]. They were held there for one night. Then, in the early morning, they were taken away in 26 buses - all with Tigrayan men.

He said that as of August 16, he had not been able to find out where his brother was.

Several family members and lawyers said that they had heard informally that their detained relatives had been moved to Awash Arba and Awash Sebat Kilo, towns in the Afar region more than 200 kilometers from Addis Ababa. A former detainee arrested in Addis Ababa and then transferred by the federal police to Afar said that he was held in Awash Sebat Kilo Police Training Center and that most of the detainees in his cell were Tigrayans from Addis Ababa.

Several people said that they have since seen their missing relatives or friends initially arrested in Addis Ababa as detainees on government media and affiliated broadcasts. Two recognized their friends in a July 15 program on a government-affiliated television station, Walta TV, that claimed to show captured Tigrayan fighters eating in a detention facility. Tesfay’s brother saw one of his brother’s 10 arrested friends in photos [posted on state-owned Fana Broadcasting Corporation](#). Relatives of a man who had been arrested at his restaurant in Addis Ababa in early July along with his brother-in-law, [were seen being marched along in an August 11 Ethiopian TV program](#).

None of these programs provided information on the detainees’ whereabouts or their legal status.

Incommunicado Detention of Journalists, Political Activist, Aid Worker

Federal police held incommunicado for nearly a month 10 Ethiopian journalists and media workers, including four women from Awlo Media, along with another journalist, and two journalists from Ethio Forum. Awlo Media and Ethio Forum have both reported extensively on abuses against Tigrayans since the Tigray conflict began in November. The police also held a Tigrayan political activist and an aid worker incommunicado.

Police arrested 10 Awlo Media [journalists and media workers on June 30 at their offices](#), along with another journalist who was there. Their lawyer said that relatives were able to visit them at the Federal Police Commission for two days but were told on July 2 that they had been released.

Federal police in Addis Ababa arrested and detained Ethio Forum staff members Abebe Bayu on July 1 and Yayesew Shimelis on July 2. Yayesew was detained on his way to a monthly court hearing on charges related to the spread of fake news that [he has been facing since May 2020](#). Relatives were able to bring them food and clothes at the Federal Police Commission, near Mexico Square, until July 2. The authorities then told the relatives that Abebe and Yayesew had been released, but they never returned home.

On July 27 after the journalists’ lawyer filed a habeas corpus petition, the Federal Police Commission [told a civil court](#) in Addis Ababa that all 13 detained journalists and media workers had been transferred to federal police custody in Awash Sebat Kilo in Afar. The commission alleged that the journalists had sought to incite violence to overthrow the government in violation of the new media law. The [13 appeared before](#) the Awash Fentale District court on August 2, the media reported.

The authorities have said that two other detainees – a political activist and an aid worker, both Tigrayans – had also appeared before the Awash Fentale District court. Tsegaze’ab Kidane, a local aid coordinator for Finote Yared Philanthropic, according to his acquaintances, appeared before the court on August 2 alongside the journalists. His lawyer [had not known his whereabouts since July 4](#).

Kibrom Berhe, an activist with the Baytona political party in the Tigray region, was detained on July 16. Initially, security forces took Kibrom to the Federal Police Commission in Addis Ababa. On July 17, federal police told his relatives that he had been released, and on July 27, said that he had appeared before a court in Awash Sebat Kilo, accused of spreading false information. Earlier, on July 6, suspected plainclothes intelligence officials accompanied by federal police had assaulted Kibrom in a café in Addis Ababa and detained a friend who was with him.

Nine of the Awlo Media journalists and staff and the other journalist arrested at their offices were released on August 9. The court ordered the release on bail of the remaining journalists, as well as Tsegaze’ab and Kibrom, on August 16, but they remained in detention at time of writing.

Arbitrary Arrests, Unlawful Searches of Homes, Businesses

Many Tigrayans in Addis Ababa have been detained for several days or weeks, on many cases being released after paying bail of between 3,500 and 50,000 birr (US\$80 to US\$1,130) either to the police or the courts.

Eight Tigrayans described security force searches without warrants of their homes and businesses in Addis Ababa since November. Most said that the security forces claimed they were looking for weapons. Three of these families said their homes and businesses were searched repeatedly.

The daughter of Selam, a 60-year-old widow, said that on July 9, three armed police officers and a plainclothes officer searched her mother’s house without a warrant while her grandchildren watched. The officials claimed they had received a tip that she had weapons and a stash of cash. They then detained Selam outside a police station and refused at first to allow her relatives to bring her food. The following day they released her after her family signed a document stating that “she was detained for having a war weapon.”

Tsega, who was detained in July, said that security forces searched her house before arresting her for allegedly helping the [Tigrayan Defense Forces \(TDF\), a self-proclaimed armed resistance group](#) that has emerged in Tigray:

[The neighborhood police chief] and a dozen Addis Ababa police officials came to my house and told me they wanted to search it. I asked them for a search warrant, but they told me they were working on it. Since my neighbors were all out, and the number of the police [officers] were too many, I allowed them to search without a warrant. They said they were looking for a weapon and told me I better hand it over before they started the search. I told them that I don’t have one.

People released from detention said they encountered many Tigrayans while in custody. One estimated seeing about 200 Tigrayans at the Addis Ababa Police Commission in late July:

There were 80-year-old priests, monks, church administrators, government officers... I think most of them were arrested from the day after Mekelle was controlled by the TDF. Around five older people. The owner of Axum hotel [in Addis Ababa] was there; he is probably around 70 years old. The monks were arrested from monasteries around Addis Ababa. The monks and priests- they were questioned [and] accused of giving training to soldiers who are going to fight in Tigray. Some of them don’t even have bank accounts, but they were also accused of transferring money to the TPLF.

During her week in detention, a Tigrayan woman said she met a range of people who, like her, were accused of supporting the TDF: older people, former police, lawyers, and youth.

Security forces have intimidated and threatened people during searches, detention, and prison visits, often referencing their Tigrayan identity.

A 37-year-old man, whose home was searched twice by dozens of police during a single week in November, said: “I asked if they had a warrant. They said: ‘You can take your court order from Mekelle.’ They were smiling.”

“To breathe right now is very difficult,” said a man who assisted people detained in recent months. “We just don’t know what’s going on.”

Government Closures of Tigrayan-Owned Businesses

Seven Tigrayan owners of small restaurants, bars, or hotels said that Addis Ababa police, often accompanied by officials from the Addis Ababa City Administration Trade and Industry Bureau, shut down their premises without any notice. The authorities gave various reasons for the closures, including [failing to follow Covid-19 measures](#). These closures cause financial strain with payments due for salaries, rent, and taxes.

A restaurant owner, Goitum, said that a group of federal police officers and plainclothes officers closed his small restaurant in Bole district in early July, purportedly for violating Covid-19 regulations:

The reason they gave me was that I didn't respect the Covid rules, that I was supposed to only have three clients in the space I had. But this is just an excuse. In the butcher's nearby, there are lots of people and they didn't say anything to them.

At other times, the police did not explain the reasons for the closure. The 35-year-old owner of a small restaurant in Haya Hulet neighborhood said that armed police and officials from the Trade and Industry Bureau shut it down on July 1 with no explanation. The officials left a sign in Amharic on the door of the closed restaurant that reads “closed because of security problems.”

The police have also targeted bars and venues featuring music in Tigrinya, the language spoken by Tigrayans.

A woman who worked as a bar singer lost her job in early July after the Addis Ababa police threatened to close the bar. She said:

While we were performing, the police came in and said, “We heard singing in Tigrinya. You have to stop singing in Tigrinya.” They spoke to the owner of the club. They were speaking between Oromo and Amharic - we understood some of the Amharic - and they were saying, “You know that we are shutting down all the Tigrayan clubs, why are you still allowing them to sing?” Our owner came to us [the Tigrayan performers] and said, “You are good workers, and I am sorry to let you go, but if I keep you, they will shut us down completely.”

Another Tigrinya singer said that the authorities shut down his place of work, a bar in Haya Hulet where Tigrinya songs were performed.

Two business owners said that they had visited several government offices to appeal closures and to learn when they could reopen their business, but their inquiries proved unsuccessful.

ecoi.net summary:

Addis Ababa: Authorities have arbitrarily detained, forcibly disappeared and committed other abuses against ethnic Tigrayans since late June 2021

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