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'It was terrifying' - escaping Ethiopia's armed kidnappers

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BBC News, Addis Ababa

Bekele's sister is one of dozens of students from Ethiopia's Debark University who have been missing for a week now - she got on a bus to go home at the end of the academic year, but never reached her destination.

No-one in the family had been able to make contact with her, so when his mobile phone lit up, telling Bekele he had an incoming call from his sister, he swiftly pressed accept. The names of the people the BBC spoke to for this article have been changed for safety reasons.

He was greeted by the voice he had longed to hear, but then an unfamiliar man's voice came on, telling him that if he ever wanted to see his sister again, he needed to cough up 700,000 Ethiopian birr (\$12,000; £9,400).

Dozens of bus passengers, mostly students, were kidnapped by gunmen last Wednesday.

Some managed to escape - and three of those who successfully broke away told the BBC they believe more than 100 people are still being held.

The kidnappers rang Bekele three times, demanding the 700,000 birr ransom.

Bekele fears the worst - he says that as a day labourer he can't even afford to pay the captors 7,000 birr.

He is far from alone - in recent years, Ethiopia has seen a dramatic surge in kidnapping-for-ransom.

Oromia, Ethiopia's largest region which surrounds the capital Addis Ababa, is worst affected.

The security forces have been stretched thin in an effort to contain numerous conflicts that have broken out in Africa's second most populous state, and it has led to increasing lawlessness.

The people kidnapped last Wednesday were travelling in three buses, making their way to Addis Ababa from Debre Tabor University in the Simien Mountains, a well-known tourist destination.

The vehicles came to an unexpected halt near Garba Guracha, a small town in Oromia.

“There were gunshots and I heard repeated orders to run. I didn’t even know what we were doing,” Mehret, an animal science student travelling on one of the buses told the BBC.

Law student Petros added: “They told everyone to get off. They started beating everyone [with sticks] and forced us to run to the woods close by. It was terrifying.”

The gunmen forced their captives on a journey to a remote rural area where the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) rebel group is believed to operate.

The OLA says it is fighting for the "self-determination" of the Oromo ethnic group, Ethiopia's biggest, but it has been classified as a terrorist organisation by the federal parliament.

Mehret and Petros have said the OLA was behind their abduction, but the rebel group has not commented.

OLA spokesman Odaa Tarbii has previously denied to local media that it carries out abductions to finance its operations, saying a weak federal government has allowed criminality to flourish.

After being forced to run and walk for around two kilometres (1.2 miles), Mehret, Petros and some other abductees managed to escape.

The gunmen were struggling to control the large group “so some of us hid under the bushes and waited until they went far”, Petros said.

One student, who is still being held by the gunmen, managed to sneak a phone call to her family. She told them she had witnessed her captors killing some of the other students.

“She has given up on life now,” a relative told the BBC. “She doesn’t think even paying ransom would win freedom.”

The mass abduction has similarities to other abductions. Just over a year ago, more than 50 passengers travelling from the Amhara region to Addis Ababa were kidnapped.

A local official said those who were able to pay a ransom were released, but did not specify what happened to those who could not.

The BBC was given exclusive access to the secretive OLA in 2021

In another high-profile case, 18 university students in Oromia were said to have been kidnapped by armed attackers in late 2019. They have not been found until this day.

The government faced fierce criticism for failing to secure their release and find the perpetrators.

A few months after the students went missing, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed told lawmakers that the kidnappers were “unknown people” and that there was no evidence “to say something bad happened” to the students.

Although Oromia is a hotspot for abductions, kidnappers also operate elsewhere, such as the war-scarred regions of Tigray and Amhara.

In March, kidnappers in Tigray captured a 16-year-old schoolgirl and demanded her parents pay a ransom of three million birr. The family reported the abduction to the police, but the schoolgirl's dead body was found in June, leading to a national outcry.

The hundreds of abductees across Ethiopia often endure cruel treatment, including torture, the state-affiliated Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) says.

The government has not yet commented on last Wednesday's abduction and officials have not responded to BBC requests for comment.

Some of the abductees' relatives have accused the authorities of not giving the incident enough attention.

“It is confusing why the authorities are neglecting the issue while our children have been taken away,” said Dalke, a farmer whose daughter was kidnapped.

Another father said they just wanted their loved ones back.

“We don't have any money to offer [the kidnappers]. I sacrificed a lot to send my children to school... now all we do is cry and pray,” he said.