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Ethiopia 2020

Security forces used excessive, and sometimes lethal, force and carried out extrajudicial executions. Hundreds of people were killed and property destroyed in ethnically motivated violence by armed groups and militias. Opposition members and journalists were subjected to arbitrary arrests and detention.

Background

Recurrent unrest and violence led to increased political polarization along ethnic lines, and largely prevented the realization of political and human rights reforms initiated in 2018.

The conflict in the Tigray Region, which began on 4 November, pitted the Ethiopian federal government against the Tigray regional government. From the beginning of the conflict, there were armed confrontations between the federal army, supported by the Amhara Region’s special (paramilitary) police units and local militias on one side, and the Tigray special (paramilitary) police units and local militias on the other.

Extrajudicial executions

Security forces responded to protests and civil unrest with excessive and, at times, lethal force. Between 9 and 11 August, they killed at least 16 people, including two bystanders, during protests in Wolaita zone in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People’s Region (SNNPR). Demonstrators, who had taken to the streets to protest at the arrests of over 20 Wolaita zone administration officials, community leaders and activists in the area, were shot at and beaten by security forces.¹

Freedoms of expression and assembly

In January, the government adopted a new anti-terrorism law. Although it contained some provisions which could better protect the rights of those detained or prosecuted for alleged terrorism offences, other provisions restricted the right to freedom of expression. The Hate Speech and Disinformation Proclamation, adopted by the Federal Parliament in March, criminalized people for exercising their right to freedom of expression.

Security forces used violence to repress the right to freedom of assembly.

On 15 February, Liyu police raided an inauguration event by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) opposition party at its office in Welenchiti town in Oromia region. They fired live ammunition and tear gas at participants, killed one OLF supporter and beat others. They shot holes into the tyres of the Oromia News Network crew’s van, later confiscating their equipment.

Later that day, Liyu police violently dispersed OLF supporters from a launch party at a hotel in Burayu town, killing one person and injuring scores more. They forced around 30 of them into a police van and drove them to the Burayu stadium, where they beat them again and forced them to do laps around the stadium on their knees.²

Arbitrary arrests and detentions

The authorities subjected opposition politicians and journalists to prolonged pre-trial detention without charge, many of them for several months. Although courts increasingly asserted their independence in granting bail to some opposition politicians, police frequently defied these orders.

In January, police arrested at least 75 OLF supporters in Oromia Region. Most of them were held without charge and not brought before a judge for several months. They included Chaltu Takele, a prominent political activist, who was released in February but re-arrested in early July and accused of organizing the violence which followed the killing of Oromo musician Hachalu Hundessa (see below, Unlawful killings). She was released on bail in August on charges of organizing violence.

In February, security officers arrested five senior OLF members and four supporters in the capital, Addis Ababa. Eight of them were released within 24 hours.

Two Oromia News Network journalists and three OLF officials were arrested by police in March and charged in connection with photographing the Burayu police station, and traffic offences. Although the Prosecutor later dropped the charges on grounds that the allegations did not relate to criminal acts, the police continued to detain them, claiming that their identity documents were irregular. Four of them were released in May without charge, but one of them, Batir Fille, remained in detention in Yabelo without charge at the end of the year.

Unfair trials

In October, the government tabled the draft Criminal Procedure and Evidence Code to replace the 1962 Criminal Procedure Code. It was intended to address long-standing fair trial concerns, but contained some provisions which did not meet international fair trial standards.

Unlawful killings

Hundreds of people were killed in widespread ethnic violence and attacks by armed groups.

Between 30 June and 1 July, 166 people were killed in violence which erupted in the Oromia Region after the killing of Hachalu Hundessa, a popular Oromo musician, on 29 June. His killing sparked mass protests and violence in Addis Ababa and various areas of Oromia, Harar and Dire Dawa. Organized youth targeted ethnic and religious minorities, including Orthodox Christians, at least 40 of whom were killed in various towns in the region and their properties set alight. In several Oromia cities, protesters clashed with security forces, who used live ammunition to disperse them, resulting in over 100 deaths. Federal Police officials said that at least 10 people, including two police officers, were also killed in grenade attacks and shootings in Addis Ababa on 30 June. Around 5,000 people, including opposition party leaders suspected of involvement in the unlawful killings and destruction of property, were arrested. In September, the Attorney General Office brought terrorism charges against opposition party leaders Jawar Mohammed, Bekele Gerba and Eskinder Nega. In October, four people suspected of being responsible for Hachalu Hundessa's killing were arrested and charged with terrorism and homicide.

In September, armed groups which, according to regional police, belonged to the Benishangul People's Liberation Front, carried out a series of attacks on ethnic Amhara and Agew residents in Metekel zone in the Benishangul-Gumuz Region, killing at least 45 people and displacing thousands.

Between 18 and 21 October, at least 31 ethnic Amhara residents from the Guraferda district in the SNNPR were killed by armed assailants, and around 1,500 of them were displaced.³

On 9 November, local militias and youth stabbed and hacked to death scores, and likely hundreds, of ethnic Amhara residents in Mai-Kadra in the western part of the Tigray Region.⁴ Witnesses reported that they saw dead bodies with gaping wounds that appeared to have been inflicted by weapons such as knives and machetes. Survivors of the attack also reported that local youth and security officers loyal to the Tigray regional government had carried out the attack.

Forced evictions

In mid-February, the Addis Ababa municipal authorities demolished dozens of homes, making at least 1,000 people homeless, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The inhabitants said they had built their homes on land they bought in 2007, but the authorities insisted the families were squatters who had not purchased the land from the Addis Ababa municipality. The families were not given prior notice of, or consulted about, the evictions. Most of them relied on the informal economy to make a living and had lost their livelihoods due to COVID-19 measures which limited employment opportunities.

Following the demolitions, the residents tried to build temporary shelters from canvas and tarpaulin, but on 14 April these were also pulled down by the authorities and the materials confiscated by the police. As a result, the families were forced to sleep in the open during periods of heavy rain.

Right to truth, justice and reparation

The authorities provided no information as to what measures they had taken to locate and rescue 17 Amhara students abducted in November 2019 from Dembi Dolo University in western Oromia by unidentified people. Their whereabouts remained unknown at the end of the year.⁵

The government took some steps towards ensuring accountability for atrocities and grave human rights violations carried out since 1991, including extrajudicial executions, torture and other ill-treatment, and mass and arbitrary arrests. These measures offered little hope that victims would see justice for crimes, including killings, torture and other ill-treatment, and excessive use of force, carried out by security forces, including the Ethiopian National Defence Force, the Federal Police and regional police special force units.

1. [Ethiopia: Stop the use of deadly force on protesters \(Press release, 14 August\)](#)

2. [Ethiopia: Vendor killed, musician injured after police attack opposition supporters in Oromia \(Press release, 17 February\)](#)

3. [Ethiopia: Authorities ban protests as “illegal and unnecessary” \(Press release, 27 October\)](#)
4. [Ethiopia: Investigation reveals evidence that scores of civilians were killed in massacre in Tigray state \(Press release, 12 November\)](#)
5. [Ethiopia: Parents fear for missing Amhara students as universities close over COVID-19 \(Press release, 25 March\)](#)

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