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Ethiopia: Lethal Force Against Protesters

Military Deployment, Terrorism Rhetoric Risk Escalating Violence

(Nairobi) – Ethiopian security forces have killed dozens of protesters since November 12, 2015, in Oromia regional state, according to reports from the region. The security forces should stop using excessive lethal force against protesters.



Protesters in Oromia region, Ethiopia, December 2015.

Police and military forces have fired on demonstrations, killing at least 75 protesters and wounding many others, according to activists. Government officials have acknowledged only five deaths and **said** that an undisclosed number of security force members have also been killed. On December 15, the government announced that protesters had a “direct connection with forces that have taken missions from foreign terrorist groups” and that Ethiopia’s Anti-Terrorism Task Force will lead the response.

“The Ethiopian government’s response to the Oromia protests has resulted in scores dead and a rapidly rising risk of greater bloodshed,” said **Leslie Lefkow**, deputy Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “The government’s labelling of largely peaceful protesters as ‘terrorists’ and deploying military forces is a very dangerous escalation of this volatile situation.”

Protests by students began in Ginchi, a small town 80 kilometers southwest of Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa, when authorities sought to clear a forest for an investment project. Protests quickly spread throughout the Oromia region, home of Ethiopia’s estimated 35 million Oromo, the country’s largest ethnic group.

They evolved into larger demonstrations against the proposed expansion of the Addis Ababa municipal boundary, known as the “Addis Ababa Integrated Development Master Plan.” Approximately 2 million people live in the area of the proposed boundary expansion and many protesters fear the plan could displace Oromo farmers and residents living near the city.

Since mid-November, the protesting students have been joined by farmers and other residents. Human Rights Watch received credible reports that security forces shot dozens of protesters in Shewa and Wollega zones, west of Addis Ababa, in early December. Several people described seeing security forces in the town of Walliso, 100 kilometers southwest of Addis Ababa, shoot into crowds of protesters in December, leaving bodies lying in the street.

Numerous witnesses told Human Rights Watch that security forces beat and arrested protesters, often directly from their homes at night. Others described several locations as “very tense” with heavy military presence and “many, many arrests.” One student who took part in protests in West Shewa said, “I don’t know where any of my friends are. They have disappeared after the protest. Their families say they were taken by the police.”

Local residents in several areas told Human Rights Watch that protesters took over some local government buildings after government officials abandoned them. Protesters have also set up roadblocks to prevent the movement of military units into communities. Some foreign-owned commercial farms were looted and destroyed near Debre Zeit, 50 kilometers southeast of Addis Ababa, news media reported.

Human Rights Watch has not been able to corroborate the precise death toll and many of the details of individual incidents because of limited independent access and restricted communications with affected areas. There have also been unconfirmed reports of arrests of health workers, teachers, and others who have publicly shown support for the protest movement through photos and messages on social media.

The United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials provide that security forces shall as far as possible apply nonviolent means before resorting to the use of force. Whenever the lawful use of force is unavoidable, the authorities should use restraint and act in proportion to the seriousness of the offense. Lethal force may only be used when strictly unavoidable to protect life.

The Ethiopian government should respect freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, Human Rights Watch said. While police have the responsibility to maintain order during protests, they should only use force when strictly necessary and in a proportionate manner.

Ethiopia's government regularly accuses people who express even mild criticism of government policy of association with terrorism. Dozens of journalists, bloggers, protesters, and activists have been prosecuted under the country's **draconian 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation**.

On December 16, 2015, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn **said** that the government "will take merciless legitimate action against any force bent on destabilizing the area." The same day, Getachew Reda, the government communication affairs office minister, **said** that "an organized and armed terrorist force aiming to create havoc and chaos have begun murdering model farmers, public leaders and other ethnic groups residing in the region." While there have been some recent reports of violence by protesters, according to information obtained by Human Rights Watch, the protests have overwhelmingly been peaceful.

Ethiopia's pervasive restrictions on independent **civil society and media** mean that very little information is coming from affected areas although social media are filled with photos and videos of the protests. Authorities have cut mobile phone coverage in some of the key areas, particularly areas where there is significant military deployment, raising concerns over the potential crackdown. In communities where there is mobile phone coverage, witnesses reported repeated gunfire and a heavy military presence.

The authorities' response to past protests in Oromia raises serious concerns for the safety of protesters and others arrested, Human Rights Watch said. In Oromia in **April and May 2014**, security forces used live ammunition against largely peaceful student protesters, killing several dozen people, and arrested hundreds more. Some of those arrested are still detained without charge. Former detainees told Human Rights Watch that they were tortured and otherwise ill-treated in detention. On December 2, 2015, five Oromo students were convicted under the counterterrorism law for their role in the protest movement. There has been no government investigation into the use of excessive force and live ammunition during the 2014 protests.

While both the 2014 and current protests are ostensibly responding to the Addis Ababa expansion plan, they also derive from deeper grievances, Human Rights Watch said. Many Oromos have **historically felt marginalized and discriminated** against by

successive Ethiopian governments, and Oromos are often arbitrarily arrested and accused of belonging to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which waged armed struggle in the past and which the government designates a terrorist organization.

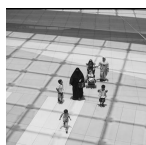
Under the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms, in cases of death or serious injury, appropriate agencies are to conduct a review and a detailed report is to be sent promptly to the competent administrative or prosecutorial authorities. The government should ensure that arbitrary or abusive use of force and firearms by law enforcement officials is punished as a criminal offense. Superior officers should be held responsible if they knew or should have known that personnel under their command resorted to the unlawful use of force and firearms but did not take all measures in their power to prevent, suppress, or report such use.

The Ethiopian government should support prompt, independent investigations into the events in Oromia region, including by UN and African Union (AU) human rights experts on freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association. Governments and intergovernmental organizations, including the AU, should raise concerns about the excessive use of force against protesters and call on Ethiopia to respect fundamental human rights in its response to the protests, Human Rights Watch said.

“Ethiopia’s security forces seem to have learned nothing from last year’s protests, and, instead of trying to address the grievances that are catalyzing the protests, are shooting down more protesters,” Lefkow said. “Concerned governments and institutions should call on Ethiopia to halt its excessive use of force and stop this spiral into further violence.”

Region / Country Africa, Ethiopia

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