

Besieged, Abused, Ignored: Ethiopian Annihilation Of The Ogaden People

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In the harsh Ogaden region of Ethiopia, impoverished ethnic Somali people are being murdered and tortured, raped, persecuted and displaced by government paramilitary forces. Illegal actions carried out with the knowledge and tacit support of donor countries, seemingly content to turn a blind eye to war crimes and crimes against humanity being committed by their brutal, repressive ally in the region; and a deaf ear to the pain and suffering of the Ogaden Somali people.

Around five million traditionally nomadic pastoralists – live in what is one of the least developed corners of the world besieged by military oppression, drought and famine.

Democracy denied

When the British, with due colonial duplicity, arrogantly handed the Ogaden region over to Ethiopia in 1954, the ethnic Somali people found themselves under occupation by, what they regard as a foreign power. The centuries old struggle for self-determination, has since 1984 been taken up by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), predictably regarded as ‘terrorists’ by the Ethiopian government; which hunts them down and, with impunity, tortures, imprisons and rapes its members and suspected supporters while carrying out widespread extrajudicial killings.

In 1992 as part of the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front’s (EPRDF) much trumpeted, never realized policy of Ethnic Federalism, that promised autonomy and cultural respect to the many tribal groups in the country; ethnic Somalis in the Ogaden were officially acknowledged and inaugural regional elections held. The ONLF, a secular group in a largely Muslim region, “won 60% of seats... and formed the new (regional) government” Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported. Two years later, and in response to the will of the people, the ONLF called for a referendum on self-determination. The government’s reaction to such democratic gall was to kill 81 unarmed civilians in the town of Wardheer, disband the regional parliament, arrest and imprison the vice-president and several other members of the parliament, instigate mass arrests and indiscriminate killings; this brutal act ignited the current struggle and drove the ONLF into the shadows and its current guerilla war.

Resource rich

The region, rich in oil and gas reserves, is potentially the wealthiest area of Ethiopia. Resources that the indigenous people are understandably keen to benefit from, that the EPRDF sees as another party asset to add to its burgeoning portfolio. Genocide Watch (GW) tell us that, “immediately after oil and gas were discovered in the Ogaden, Ethiopian government forces evicted large numbers of [Ogaden Somalis] from their ancestral grazing

lands and herded them into Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, causing a humanitarian disaster". If the ONLF are correct and their view sounds more than plausible, the Ethiopian military intends to secure the resources for the government and exclude the local people. The Africa Faith and Justice Network confirms such suspicions, saying: "With the discovery of petroleum leading to exploration missions by foreign companies, the government's motives are questionable."

Upfront fees for exploration rights are reputed to have been sold to foreign corporations for between \$50 – \$100 million, paid by under-informed, overexcited multinationals, who subsequently pull out, having underestimated the logistical problems of working in the region. China Petroleum was one such; they were subjected to an unprecedented ill-judged attack by the ONLF in 2007 that caused the deaths of nine Chinese workmen and, according to China Daily, "65 Ethiopian employees". The Ethiopian government, itching to intensify the conflict that had been simmering for over three decades, retaliated with excessive brutality, by HRW reports, "launching a brutal counter-insurgency campaign in the five zones of [the] Somali Region primarily affected by the conflict... [Where] the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) has deliberately and repeatedly attacked civilian populations," killing hundreds of men women and children.

Displaced & destitute

Thousands of terrified Ogaden Somalis have since fled the affected areas. They seek refuge "in neighbouring Somalia and Kenya from widespread Ethiopian military attacks on civilians and villages that amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity," (ibid). Large numbers have been made homeless and destitute, accurate numbers are difficult to collate due to restricted access, however human rights groups estimate the number, to be greater than one hundred thousand.

The Ogaden, GW states "has been transformed into a vast military occupied area, with thousands in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps." Most displaced persons, the International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reports, "sought shelter with relatives or safety in the bush, rather than gathering in organized camps," where widespread abuse is known to take place, including starvation that GW describes as "genocide by attrition". These desperate, frightened people are not regarded as refugees and so receive no humanitarian aid support from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). And the EPRDF, consistent with their duplicitous approach to governance, fails to meet dutiful obligations under the historic Kampala Convention which "reaffirms that national authorities have the primary responsibility to provide assistance to IDPs.... (And) ... to address the plight of people uprooted within their borders". The ruling party ignores these requirements, acting not in accordance with international law, the federal constitution or indeed their moral duty.

Especially violent

In 2009, after widespread condemnation of the Ethiopian army's conduct in the region, the regime formed the highly suspect Liyu (Special) Police. Somaliland Press (26/9/12) states, the government "deliberately recruited unemployed youths from the streets". This shadowy paramilitary force of 10,000 – 14,000, fits, HRW says, "into the context of impunity where security forces can more or less do what they want." Not a group, then, that the British government should be supporting. In a baffling move however, according to The Guardian (10/1/13), the Department for International Development (DFID) has submitted, a "tender

to train security forces in the Somali region of Ogaden”, Amnesty International’s Claire Beston said: “It was highly concerning that the UK was planning to engage with the Special Police..... There is no doubt that the Special Police have become a significant source of fear in the region.”(Ibid) The DFID in denying the report ambiguously states that, “reforming the Special Police is critical for achieving a safe and secure Somali Region”, failing to recognize that the Liyu force needs not reforming but disbanding and, along with all Ethiopian military personnel, marched out of the region immediately.

State-sanctioned terrorism and genocide

In addition to murder and rape, appalling levels of torture and extrajudicial execution are reported. Thousands, according to GW, “have been arrested without any charges and held in desolate desert prisons”. Mass detention “without any judicial oversight are routine. Hundreds—and possibly thousands—of individuals have been arrested and held in military barracks, sometimes multiple times, where they have been tortured, raped, and assaulted”, HRW report.

Children and women being the most vulnerable suffer acutely, the rape of Ogaden Somali women is a favored weapon of the Ethiopian paramilitary; held in military barracks women are imprisoned as sex slaves, where they are subjected to multiple gang rape and torture. African Rights Monitor (ARM) recount one woman’s story that mirrors many and shocks us all. She claims to have been, “raped by fifty soldiers for a period of twelve hours and hung upside down over a pit of fire that had chili powder in.... to suffocate her lungs”.

Statistics of abuse are impossible to state, the numbers are perhaps of less importance than the crimes and the suffering caused, survivors bear the physical scars and mental trauma of their ordeals, from which many may never recover.

A scorched-earth policy involving burning of crops and homes and killing cattle is part of the campaign of state terror, as HRW record, “Confiscation of livestock [the main asset], restrictions on access to water, food, and other essential commodities” have “been used as weapons in an economic war”. As has the destruction of villages, confirmed by evidence from the American Association for the Advancement of Science, proving, “that the Ethiopian military has attacked civilians and burned towns and villages in eight locations across the remote Ogaden region of eastern Ethiopia.” Such inhumane methods are employed by the EPRDF to instill fear in the Ogaden Somali people and suppress their legitimate demands for autonomy. It is shocking criminal abuse which staggeringly, “GW considers to have already reached stage 7 [of 8], genocidal massacres against many [Ogadeni, Anuk, Oromo and Omo] of its people”. International donors however, who provide a third of Ethiopia’s total federal budget – around \$4 billion a year, to their utter shame say and do nothing; neglect constituting complicity.

Village executions

With the region virtually shut off, video evidence smuggled out of Ethiopia by Abdullahi Hussein, a former Ethiopian civil servant is rare. Revealing Somaliland Press (26/9/12) say that, “whole villages have been emptied of inhabitants through executions and mass flight from terror... you can hear members of the Liyu Police desecrate a civilian they have just killed. They stomp on his head and poke his face with a stick.” Such attacks on settlements are routine: Demanding our attention is Qurille village in the Wardeer district attacked in

September 2012: Ogaden Online recounts how troops: “Shoot each resident of the town in their custody at point blank range” including women and children. Bodies are hung from trees in a public display of state terrorism, to engender lasting fear. This type of brutality is widespread. HRW records how in Raqda village in the Gashaamo district during March 2012, “the Liyu police force summarily executed at least 10 men – in their custody, killed at least nine residents... [and] abducted at least 24 men.”

The killing continued two days later on 17th March, when “Liyu police took another four men from their homes and summarily executed them. A woman whose brother was a veterinarian told HRW: “They caught my brother and took him outside. They shot him in the head and then slit his throat.” Defenseless villages are easy prey for the Liyu and their brutal methodology, as HRW state, “troops have forcibly displaced entire rural communities, ordering villagers to leave their homes within a few days or witness their houses being burnt down and possessions destroyed—and risk death”. Page upon page could be filled with such violent disturbing accounts.

Exclusion of foreign media and aid workers

Contrary to constitutional and human rights law, the EPRDF has imposed a widespread blockade on the Ogaden region, seeking to control the flow of information outside the country as it does within its borders, where it allows no freedom of the media; of expression, of assembly or of political dissent. Add to this the outlawing of trade unions and the partisan distribution of aid and a picture of a brutal totalitarian regime emerges from the duplicitous mist of politically correct, democratic rhetoric.

Attempts to work in the region by international media and humanitarian groups are seen as criminal acts, punishable under the widely condemned anti-terrorist proclamation.

Two Swedish journalists investigating human rights abuses in the Ogaden, made headlines in July 2011 when they were attacked and arrested by the Liyu police and subjected to a terrifying ‘mock’ execution. Charged and sentenced in Ethiopia’s kangaroo court to 11 years imprisonment, they were later released having served 400 days in appalling conditions. Reporters from the New York Times, The Telegraph and Voice of America have also been imprisoned and expelled, so too United Nations (UN) workers and staff from Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) who were arrested and accused of being spies! Wrapped in paranoia, the EPRDF suspended 42 NGOs in 2009 for reporting government human rights abuses in the region and, in 2007 in what must be the EPRDF’s *Pièce de résistance*, the International Committee of the Red Cross were expelled.

In addition to the information embargo, the region is subject to what HRW describe as “severe restrictions on movement and commercial trade, minimal access to independent relief assistance,” and the “politicized manipulation of humanitarian operations, particularly food distribution”; meaning food supplied by donor countries is stolen to feed the Ethiopian army and the Liyu force. This in one of the worst areas for drought and famine in the country, where, In-Depth Africa reports, “1,539,279 people (30% of the population) in the region lack food, water and health services”.

Peace and justice for the people

The little known conflict in the Ogaden is a cause of intense tension between Ethiopia and Somalia and a destabilizing issue in an unstable region. It is a fight that has been distorted by the former Government of Somalia, which sought to misrepresent the issue and

transform it into a boundary dispute; a misconception that suits the Ethiopian regime keen to avoid the substantive point of regional autonomy.

All efforts to facilitate a lasting peaceful resolution to what is an age-old struggle should be urgently made, Ethiopia's donors and facilitators, principally America, along with the European Union and Britain must act with due responsibility. Action should be taken to: Close down IDP camps and the people allowed to return to their communities; aid provided for rebuilding villages (not to train the Liyu) destroyed by the military; regional elections organised and a referendum on self-determination held.

The appalling atrocities committed daily by the Ethiopian paramilitary constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity that should immediately be referred to the International Criminal Court for prosecution. They are, though, just the deepest wounds within a scarred body of human rights abuses, violating federal and international law, being perpetrated by the EPRDF regime throughout the country and with utter impunity. This must end and the Ogaden Somali people, allowed to determine their own destiny and to live in peace.

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Notes

[i] http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-04/24/content_858956.htm

[ii] <http://www.hrw.org/node/62175/section/4>

[iii] <http://www.genocidewatch.org/ethiopia.html>

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[v] <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/ethiopia>

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<http://somalilandpress.com/ethiopia-a-wave-of-atrocities-against-villages-in-ogaden-35429>

[viii] <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/09/201291795840290803.html>

[ix] http://www.aaas.org/news/releases/2008/0612ethiopia_intro.shtml

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[xi] <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/05/28/ethiopia-special-police-execute-10>

[xii] <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/features/ethiopia/index.html>

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<http://indepthafrika.com/in-ethiopia-a-war-on-humanitarian-agencies-and-staff/#.UPBCpVRI8>

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