

Ethiopian government kills students in protests over latest land grab

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Weeks of protests in Addis Ababa and surrounding towns have culminated in clashes that left 75 civilians dead and an as-yet-unknown number arrested. The protests are led by students belonging to the Oromo population, who are angry over the federal government's most recent land grab. A similar move by the government in 2014 instigated protests in which dozens were killed and thousands arrested. Many of the students arrested then are languishing in jail to this day.

The land grab is part of the Addis Ababa and the Surrounding Oromia Special Zone Integrated Development Plan, known colloquially as “the Master Plan.” It involves seizing land from its historic Oromo owners for little or no compensation, and turning it over to foreign companies for infrastructure and agricultural development. The government plans to seize enough land to expand the area of the city about 20-fold, in violation of Ethiopia's constitution, which grants the city's government sole responsibility for economic planning.

After two weeks of protest, local residents responded to news that implementation of the master plan was set to resume by razing several farms owned by Dutch conglomerates Solagrow and Grazeland Farm Agro Industry on December 11.

The government seized on these actions to paint the protesters as violent. Abiy Berhane, a counselor in Ethiopia's London embassy, told *International Business Times*, “The protesters are members and sympathizers of violent opposition groups who are determined to overthrow the constitutional order in Ethiopia by force.” Government spokesperson Getachew Reda joined in slandering the students, telling a press conference, “Elements trying to take advantage of the misunderstanding now have reached the point where they are organizing armed gangs and

routinely burning down buildings belonging to private citizens, along with government installations.”

In reality, just as in 2014, the students and farmers have been met with violent resistance since their protests began in late November in the town of Ginci. As college, high school, and even elementary school students staged massive walkouts from classes, the protests soon spread to Haramaya, Jarso, Walliso, and Robe and eventually engulfed much of the country in a movement “far, far bigger” than any the government has had to deal with since coming to power in 1991, according to Merera Gudina, chairman of the Oromo Federalist Congress, an opposition party. He explained the ferocity of the protests, saying, “People are frustrated to live under this government, frustrated with the election, frustrated with their local governments, frustrated with their whole lives.”

Oromo expatriates held solidarity rallies in London, Washington, New York, Los Angeles, and several other cities around the world. In Sioux Falls, South Dakota, protesters marched to the office of Republican US senator Mike Rounds to deliver a letter demanding that the US government stop funding and arming the regime. His office hasn't responded.

Milkessa Midega of Addis Ababa University concurred with Gudina's assessment that the protests pose a serious challenge to the regime, telling Bloomberg News, “The party looks to have neither developed the society—we are begging food aid now—nor democratized the state-society relationships in Ethiopia.... The Oromo protest movement burns out of the general socio-economic and political marginalization and exclusionary features of the current regime.”

The government responded by ordering soldiers to fire on protesters, and insists that fewer than 10

civilians have been killed. A college in the capital was cordoned off, and soldiers removed dozens of students. Many have not been heard from since, and their fellow students have expressed fears that they are being tortured. All schools in Oromia have been shut down, the citizens are under curfew, and the military has set up command posts in Oromo towns.

In the midst of the protests, ethnic clashes between the Oromo and Amhara peoples added to the bloodshed in nearby Ameya Woreda. Estimated at 40 percent of the population, the Oromo are by far the largest ethnic group in the country, but have historically faced persecution under a series of governments drawn from non-Oromo groups. The Ethiopian Human Rights Council has accused the government, which is dominated by members of the Tigray ethnic group, of stoking tensions between the two groups to distract from the land grab. The Council's director, Bestate Terefe, described a horrifying situation in which order has completely broken down and people are evacuating the town. "Everybody is full of fear, no one has security. Those who have armaments are protecting their house from any attack. Others are moving in the forest, others are taking their property to other places.... Things are not stable, we are totally in danger."

The protests come as the government is facing international criticism for its mishandling of a drought plaguing the eastern part of the country. The number of people requiring food assistance has nearly doubled from 4.55 million to 8.2 million, and the UN expects it to double again to 15 million in the coming year. Despite this, Finance Minister Abdulaziz Mohammed said, "Regarding the impact on economic growth, the drought affected areas are peripheral and pastoral communities in the southern and eastern parts of the country...normally, those parts of the country contribute not more than 5 percent to our GDP. On the other hand, we expect harvest to be more this year."

Instead of helping its citizens, the government has chosen to confront NGOs and journalists trying to cover the crisis. Cognizant that the last two Ethiopian regimes collapsed amid similar droughts, it has sought to intimidate those reporting on the current one. According to *Allafrica.com*, "NGOs are being warned not to use the words 'famine, starvation or death' in their food appeals. Neither are they to say that 'children are dying on a daily basis,' or refer to

'widespread famine' or say that 'the policies of the government in Ethiopia are partially to blame.' Neither are they allowed to 'compare the current crisis to the famine of the eighties.' Instead, the latest drought in Ethiopia is to be described as 'food insecurity caused by a drought related to El Nino.' "

A drought in 2011 killed 200,000 people in neighboring Somalia and nearly brought down its government. Kenyan-led African Union troops were sent in to stabilize the US-backed regime, and today Ethiopian troops are primarily responsible for keeping it in power. The US has grown increasingly concerned that economic overtures from China, which include badly needed infrastructure investments, may undermine the Ethiopian regime's willingness to do its part in Washington's pivot to Asia.



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