

Ethiopian government kills 100 civilians as protests sweep country

Joe Williams
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International attention was focused on repression of the Oromo people in Ethiopia by the US-backed government in Addis Ababa, after Ethiopian marathon runner Feyisa Lilesa crossed the finish line August 21 with his arms crossed above his head, a gesture to condemn the government's violent attacks on protesters in the Oromia region, where he was born.

Lilesa repeated the action during the award ceremony following the race, where he received the silver medal for finishing second. The 26-year-old refused to board the plane bearing Ethiopian athletes back to their home country from Rio de Janeiro, and indicated he might seek political asylum in the United States. He has a wife and children in Addis Ababa. Ethiopian officials refused to discuss his status or his medal-winning performance.

Earlier this month, Ethiopian security forces killed 100 people while putting down protests in the Oromia and Amhara regions. Deadly clashes took place in 10 Oromo towns, including Ambo, Dembi Dolo and Nekempt, while the violence in Amhara was focused on the city of Bahir Dar. Residents believe about 60 people were killed there.

The Oromia protests have been ongoing since November 2015, when the government resumed efforts to implement the Addis Ababa and the Surrounding Oromia Special Zone Integrated Development Plan. Popularly known simply as “the Master Plan,” it involves seizing land from its Oromo owners for little or no compensation so that it can be sold to international developers. Amnesty International estimates that 400 Oromo have been killed in the nine months since protests began, with tens of thousands more detained, and likely tortured.

The fact that the protests have spread to the Amhara region is a significant development that doubtlessly

alarmed the government, and may have contributed to its decision to dramatically escalate the violence of its response. The Amhara and Oromo are historical enemies, and the government has exploited their enmity to keep the two influential ethnic groups fighting each other.

The government overplayed its hand, however, by attempting to arrest activists in the Amharic city of Gondar in July. They were opposing land grabs in the Wolkayt district similar to the ones being imposed on the Oromo, and the attempt at arresting them provoked two days of deadly clashes between civilians and security forces, and triggered mass consciousness of the fact that both ethnic groups are being manipulated against each other for the interests of the government. Two weeks later, tens of thousands of Amhara protesters took to the streets to declare solidarity with the Oromo.

Merera Gudina, chairman of the Oromo Federalist Congress, compared the protests to the most intense uprisings of the Palestinians against Zionist occupying forces, saying, “These protests are at the level of an intifada—people in their own ways are resisting the government pressure and demanding their rights. ... I don't think it's going to die down.”

The protests come several weeks after the government shut down social media web sites for three days, possibly as a test run in anticipation of the uprising. The government's claim that it did so to prevent students from being distracted during exams has now been exposed as a lie, as it took the exact same measures in response to the protests now sweeping the country. The botched arrest of activists that triggered the protests in Amhara took place during the supposedly exam-related Internet shutdown.

The government has been trying to control the flow

of information since last year, when the country suffered a drought that has cut economic growth in half. The worst drought in over a decade, it caused a social and political crisis. The number of people receiving emergency food assistance more than doubled to 10.2 million, schools and hospitals have been shut down, and hundreds of thousands of children are experiencing malnutrition. A similar drought in 2011 killed 200,000 people in neighboring Somalia.

As the government came under fire domestically and internationally for its failure to respond to the crisis, it tried to intimidate journalists from covering it. 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.’ ” The last two Ethiopian regimes were overthrown during droughts that devastated the economy and caused food shortages.

The US embassy in Addis Ababa released a statement that tacitly supported the government’s actions. While claiming to be “deeply concerned” and expressing “deep condolences” to the dead and injured, the statement seeks to place the blame on the victims, noting that “the demonstrations took place without authorization,” along with the standard implorations to “all parties” to remain peaceful.

In 2015, Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman described Ethiopia as “a democracy that is moving forward in an election that we expect to be free, fair, credible, open and inclusive. ... Every time there is an election, it gets better and better.” In fact, that election proved to be a farce. The ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) received 100 percent of the vote, and the mass incarceration of political activists, including most of the leaders of the Oromo Federalist Congress, followed shortly thereafter.

The rigged election and subsequent repressions did not prevent Obama from travelling to Ethiopia last summer and declaring the regime to be “an outstanding partner” that had been “democratically elected.” He made clear his motives for falsifying the government’s

record on democratic rights, as well as Ethiopia’s role in America’s regional foreign policy strategy, saying that the US doesn’t “need to send our own Marines in to do the fighting. The Ethiopians are tough fighters.”

The EPRDF government has provided basing for US drone operations and is propping up the US-backed regime in Somalia. Addis Ababa is currently hosting an emergency meeting of US allies in eastern Africa to form a Force Intervention Brigade to stabilize South Sudan. Unlike the UN peacekeeping mission currently deployed there, the Force Intervention Brigade will be authorized to carry out offensive missions.

At the same time, Ethiopia has responded positively to overtures from China, which include financing for badly needed infrastructure development in Ethiopia. Part of that development is the LAPSSET rail and transportation corridor, which would connect Ethiopia to Kenya, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, and South Sudan, while allowing transport of raw materials back to China. Chinese trade with Africa has grown rapidly since 2009.



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