

## **A Wake-up Call: Degradation of Ethiopian Lives**

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I join 101 million Ethiopians at home and abroad in expressing utter dismay and disbelief, sorrow and anger at the wanton and brazen violation of our ancestral land's sovereignty and borders; and the massacre of innocent people and children in Gambella. Whoever the power behind and whoever the perpetrators are, this is the first time in the annals of Ethiopia's modern history—post fascism—that any group would do the unthinkable of attacking 200 villages simultaneously, kidnaping children and snatching huge amounts of livestock from Ethiopia. The incident reminds me of the abduction of several hundred Nigerian girls by Boko Haram and the worldwide outrage that followed. The whereabouts of many of these girls is still unknown. At the time, millions of Nigerians protested and demanded the resignation of the country's President.

Why? Nigerians found this act of terrorism to be an affront to their honor and dignity; and felt strongly that their government was inept and incompetent. I can't blame Nigerians. At least, they had the freedom to remove their incompetent government through a free and fair election process. We Ethiopians do not have that same right and privilege; and we should and we can if we collaborate if not unite!

Ethiopians at home and abroad find it hard to believe that any group would violate the country's sovereignty, cross its borders in day light, go from village to village, kill 208 Ethiopians including children, "kidnap 104" innocent children and take 2,000 heads of cattle from Gambella to South Sudan. Aaron Maasha of Reuters who disclosed the news on April 16 and 18 quoted medical doctors at a local hospital in Gambella that "the hospital was filled beyond capacity" and that hundreds of lives are at stake.

### **No Ethiopian government in sight**

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that dominates the state and government nominally run by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) prides itself in establishing an intelligence, security and defense network that is second to none.

I recall during the 2005 Parliamentary Elections a heated conversation about disclosure concerning budget, composition and asset ownership by these TPLF coveted institutions and their personnel. Meles retorted then that "the defense and security establishment" is a national institution and must be "shielded from public scrutiny." Who would disagree if it was a national institution that is composed of competent and able Ethiopians from all ethnic groups? Ethiopia had an established history of such diversity until the TPLF/EPRDF took power in 1991 and politicized the country's defense the same way it has politicized religion and other aspects of societal life.

According to the CIA's latest World Fact book on Ethiopia, the Oromo constitute 34.4 percent, the Amhara 27 percent (a whopping 61.4 percent) of the country's 101 million

people. Tigray constitute 6 percent of the population; but staff more than 90 percent of the top leadership in intelligence, security, defense and foreign relations. Ethiopia's largest ethnic groups are not only the least represented; they are also the most marginalized and the most muffled. Amnesty International reported that "more than 5,000 ethnic Oromo were arrested between 2011 and 2014." Almost all of the 200 people murdered by security forces during the 2005 elections were non-Tigrean. More than 200 ethnic-Oromo have also been killed by TPLF/EPRDF security forces over the past few months. No one really knows the number of disappearances in Oromia and Wolkait, Northern Gondar. These are the top locations where popular resistance to the dictatorship is intense.

The government's own census reported a few years ago that 2.5 million ethnic-Amhara could not be accounted for. In Gambella more than 400 innocent people were massacred. The government has been accused of "crimes against humanity in the Ogaden" and of ethnic cleansing of Amhara at various locations throughout the country.

In brief, the state and government are therefore capable of inflicting pain and suffering on the vast majority of the population. In light of this reality, the regime's proclivity to give special and coveted status and economic and financial privileges to the top Tigrean brass who manage intelligence, security and defense forces is understandable. The ethnic state and government can't last without the loyalty and support of this establishment. Ethiopia has more generals today than ever. But, it is not fighting a foreign enemy. These top cadres are among the wealthiest in a country where 15-18 million people starve and where annual per capita income is a third of the Sub-Saharan African average. Where are these well-endowed generals when a "well organized and armed group" massacres innocent civilians and kidnaps more than 100 children?

Ironically, Ethiopia endears itself by availing fighters to UN peacekeeping operations in South Sudan to restore peace; and to the United States to fight Al- Shabab and other terrorist groups in the Horn. It is the largest African troop contributor to the UN. There is nothing wrong with this involvement in collective security. Ethiopian defense forces served in Korea and the Congo. Regime change should not result in change in global engagement. But Ethiopia's first priority is to defend its borders and to safeguard its citizens.

The critical question is who within the Ethiopian intelligence, security and defense is accountable and responsible for Ethiopia's vulnerability from foreign attack and for the massacre of innocent citizens and the abduction of more than 100 children? The Washington Post noted on April 19, 2016, that Ethiopian officials had no clue who the perpetrators are. "What we know is that they are heavily armed and well organized, and knew what they were doing....Some of them were wearing military camouflage." The Prime Minister of Ethiopia "expressed his deepest grief." Ironically, he and other Ethiopian officials were hosting a "high-profile African security conference in the city of Bahir Dar." Whose security might they be talking about? We don't really know.

Clearly, Ethiopia's vulnerability from different directions is not given prominence by its own government. Ethiopia's intelligence, security and defense forces are much more competent and capable of quelling civil unrest in Oromia, Gambella, the Ogaden and Northern Gondar than in anticipating external threats and n thwarting them before they do the greatest damage within the shortest time possible.

Is this crisis precedent-setting? I worry that it might be. What action, if any is the Ethiopian government going to restore public trust and preserve Ethiopia's dignity as a sovereign state?

Unfortunately, Ethiopia's external enemies seem to be zeroing in at a pace not seen since the downfall of the Military regime. For instance, Egyptian think tanks, academics and newspapers keep warning Ethiopia about the adverse consequences of completing and filling the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The Sudanese government continues to assert its rights by claiming large tracts of Ethiopian lands defended by previous regimes and by the people affected.

Increasingly, there are numerous signs that the Red Sea is becoming an Arab Lake. On April 18, the celebrated Jane's Defense Daily reported that the United Arab Emirates is building a "permanent military port in the Port of Assab." This port is part of Ethiopia and should not have been ceded by the TPLF to Isaias Afewerki and company. Isaias Afewerki is subverting Eritrea's newly acquired independence and undermining Ethiopia's long term national security in the process.

What plausible guarantee is there that a small determined, organized and armed group financed by Ethiopia's traditional enemies won't use the Gambella precedent and destroy huge infrastructures such as dams and rails?

This is the reason for the title of a "wake-up" call. Ethiopians deserve better. They need to close ranks, establish a unity of purpose and struggle for a an all-inclusive and democratic government that would represent their interests and the interests of their country. Is it not time to unite?