



«IT DID NOT FEEL LIKE WE HAD A GOVERNMENT»

Violence & Human Rights Violations following Musician Hachalu Hundessa's Assassination

Investigation Report

Executive Summary and Recommendations

During the security crisis that followed musician Hachalu Hundessa's assassination on June 29th, 2020, people died in gruesome killings, others suffered physical and mental injuries, property destruction as well as displacement and harassment.

The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) investigated human rights violations across the region during the three days of unrest that ensued. This report presents the findings thereof.

In the 40 localities where the EHRC investigation was carried out, the security crisis that lasted from June 29th to July 2nd, 2020, led to the death of 123 people, physical injuries of at least 500 people, the displacement of thousands, and looting and destruction of private and public property. 35 of the 123 victims who lost their lives and 306 of those injured were killed or injured by individuals and groups participating in the unrest while at least 76 deaths and 190 bodily injuries were caused by government security forces. 12 people died as a result of a bomb explosion, fire or similar disasters during the security crisis.

During these widespread attacks, a large number of people, moving in groups and armed with knives, stones, flammables, electric cables, sticks, axes and machetes; beat, injured and killed people in a gruesome manner, including through torture and beheading. The attackers committed these killings by breaking into or forcing people out of their houses, before dragging or throwing bodies along streets. People were subsequently prevented from recovering the bodies of their loved ones.

The gravity of some of the injuries was such that victims were still hospitalized and agonizing long after the events. Many of those who survived such grave injuries say they were still alive because even their attackers left them for dead. In addition to the beatings, killings and property destruction, the attackers used ethnic slurs, humiliated and threatened their victims. The trauma has left victims feeling vulnerable targets to further ethnic or religious attacks.

In addition to the loss of human life and property, 6468 people have been displaced from their homes after losing their house and property to the attacks or in fear of their lives, and at the time of the investigation, still lived in temporary shelters in churches and makeshifts set up by local authorities. Large scale property destruction has occurred; at least 900 properties have been burned, looted or vandalized, including houses, commercial properties and vehicles.

Crime against humanity

The Commission finds that the attacks during the unrest and overall commission of the crime by individuals and groups who directly took part in it, constitutes the elements of a crime against humanity.

More specifically,

- A large number of people, organized in groups for the most part, moved from place to place to kill, bodily and mentally injure and displace people; destroy property,
- The conduct was committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack against civilian population that extended to at least 40 different localities and over three days from the early hours of June 30th to July 2nd, 2020,
- Some targets in the attacks were selected on the basis of ethnic and religious identity. Other civilians were attacked with intent regardless of their religious or ethnic affiliation,
- The perpetrators knew that the conduct was part of or intended the conduct to be part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population and
- The social media and television content/messages broadcast/circulating at the time as well as the slogans chanted by perpetrators of the crime show that the individuals and groups taking part in the conduct acted in a strategic and coordinated manner with full knowledge of the act thereof.

On the basis of the above findings, the overall conduct carried out by the attackers who were organized in groups, and the result thereof, is not a simple criminal act but a crime against humanity which is an atrocity crime and a grave violation of human rights.

Killings, Bodily Harm, Property Destruction and Displacement

In the 40 localities where the Commission's investigation took place, following news of musician Hachalu Hundessa's death on June 29th, 2020, a large number of people went out into the streets, initially in the form of protest. After an act of burning tires, throwing stones and closing off streets, groups went on to attack people and destroy property in a conduct that took up pace beginning June 30th, 2020.

In localities where protesters who went out into streets caused unrest and attacks, civilians were attacked inside their homes by individual and grouped perpetrators and were beaten and killed in streets in a gruesome and cruel manner with sticks, knives, axes, sharp iron bars, stones and electric cables. People have also suffered mental and bodily harm; their houses and property were either looted or intentionally burned. People were displaced as a result and both private and public property was destroyed.

While the conduct varied from place to place in scale and nature, the attack targeted people of Amhara ethnic origin in localities where Christians constitute the majority of the local population and, inversely, Orthodox Christians where Muslims are a majority.

The role of the security forces in preventing and stopping the attack on people and property also varied from place to place. In some of the localities, security forces had appropriate preparedness and successfully managed to prevent, stop or minimize damage. On the contrary, where the security forces had minimal preparedness, such as in Batu, Shashemene, Chiro, Haromaya, Woliso, Adama, Goba, Arsi Negele and Arsi Robe in particular, as well as Dera, Adaba, Agarfa, Kofele, Djadju and Iteya, the damage was extensive.

EHRC found that the localities where the devastation was massive, local authorities and security did not respond to victims' repeated calls for help, being told instead "that higher ups gave no order to intervene, we are not here to protect private property, we are here to provide security to government development institutions, banks and religious institutions". Survivors and witnesses also recount how sometimes police stood watching as the attacks took place. "It did not feel like we had a government!" decried one victim the Commission spoke to.

Local authorities, security forces and government officials on their part say that the widespread nature of the attacks and the large group of people taking part in them, made it difficult to stop the attacks with sufficient speed and scale. However, the lack of preparedness on the part of the Regional government to prevent such attacks, including in those localities where similar attacks have taken place before, has exposed people to a repetitive cycle of abuses and violations.

Disruption of medical services

In some of the localities where EHRC's investigation was carried out, witnesses describe being barred and prevented from accessing medical services. In Guna Woreda, Negele City, Arsi Negele and Dodola, in total violation of human rights obligations, security forces even went inside medical institutions and harassed, including by threatening medical professionals, and barred victims from getting medical help. Flouting their humanitarian and professional obligations, some medical professionals themselves, in Wolisso in particular, refused to treat victims of the attacks.

Use of Force by Security Forces

While it is understandable that security forces had the challenging task of restoring order in the face of such widespread violence, the proportionality of the force employed in some contexts is highly questionable.

In Guna Woreda, Negele City, Adama, Dodola, Negele Segala, Awoday, Burayu and Ambo the Commission found that there were people killed with bullet wounds to the head, shots to the chest area or the back. People not participating in the protests - passersby, bystanders observing from their doorsteps, young people, elderly people trying to mediate, people with mental illnesses, and even police officers - also lost their lives in the unrest.

In some of the localities, Ambo and Ginchi for instance, armed lone perpetrators as well as those moving from place to place in groups, throwing hand grenades and shooting, also injured and killed security officers. It is understandable that the situation forced security officers to use lethal weapons. However, even in many other localities where the context could have allowed for use of less-lethal weapons, the use of lethal weapons exposed protesters, residents and the security officers themselves to otherwise preventable bodily harm and death.

At the time of the investigation, the Commission did not find any indication of ongoing efforts to investigate the use of force by security officers during the unrest and to hold to account those who caused unnecessary human suffering as a result.

Recommendations

To Federal and Regional government authorities

- To start the process of investigating and bringing to justice and hold perpetrators accountable based on the Commission's findings of crimes against humanity,
- Based on recognition that an atrocity crime can occur in Oromia or in other regions elsewhere in the country, it is imperative to design and set up a comprehensive atrocity crimes prevention mechanism,
- To recognize, as indicated in the report, that crimes against humanity of this nature combined with the current national context are signs that the risk of atrocity crimes, including genocide, is increasing and to put in place a Comprehensive National Strategy for the Prevention of Atrocity Crimes,
- To recognize that international human rights law obligates governments to take appropriate and concrete measures to ensure the safety and security of people, in particular where there are strong indications that the ethnic or religious affiliation is putting the basic safety of people dangerously at risk,
- To carry out an impartial investigation into the role of security officers during the attacks and in the disruptions of medical services,
- As provided by international human rights law, to ensure transparency into the ongoing process and mechanism of appropriate compensation and rehabilitation of those who have suffered physical, mental and material injury, and
- To ensure fair treatment of suspects and prisoners detained in relation with the security crisis, and appropriate investigation and accountability of security officers who have caused physical injury of suspects.

To Federal and Regional Offices of the Attorney General

- In accordance with international human rights law, to identify and hold accountable the perpetrators of the human rights violations that occurred during the widespread security crisis and to regularly update the public on the process.

To the House of Peoples' Representatives and Chaffee Oromia

- To monitor the implementation of the recommendations based on the human rights violations this investigation has identified,
- To monitor that federal and security officers carry out their duties in a manner that respects human rights,

- To facilitate a lasting and institutional solution for the increasing trend of discrimination and attacks against minorities in Oromia Region or elsewhere in the country, and
- To set up a national rehabilitation and compensation fund that would allow for a harmonized and sufficient compensation for victims of human rights violations as per international human rights standards.

To media and activists/social media influencers

To recognize there is an increasing vulnerability to atrocity crimes and taking into consideration the current complex ethnic, religious and political tensions in the country, to avoid sharing/producing content that, directly or indirectly, promotes discrimination, suspicion and hatred thereby aggravating the risk for violent conflicts.