

Memo on violence in South Omo areas, SNNPRS, Ethiopia (October 2019): a call for preventive action and rule of law

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1. Since the 2018 change of government and the significant and promising reform process in Ethiopia, not all regions and peoples have fared equally well. While the policies of the new, Nobel Laureate PM Abiy Ahmed and his government hold out hope for millions and have brought very meaningful, positive changes, developments on the local level in ‘peripheral’ regions outside the purview of the Federal government are not yet addressed. Scores of people – including those of ethnic minority groups - are suffering of displacement, killings, and discrimination – all issues that are not in line with the new ethos of democratic reform and human rights respect.
2. The present Memo calls attention to the situation in the South Omo Region - as emblematic for more general problems that play out in some areas of the Southern Regional State (SNNPRS), in Beni Shangul-Gumuz, Gambela and possibly other Regional States of Ethiopia.
3. The prime cases at hand here are that of the **‘Bodi’ people** (self-name: *Me’en*, with two sub-divisions: Mela and Chirim) in South Omo Zone (since 2nd week of September), and the **Mursi people** in South Omo Zone (since 29 September 2019, through to 13 October). Since 20 October there are also indications of additional instability in the Dima area (southwest of Mizan town) that has led to killings of people of the **Suri** ethnic group.

So far, no decisive action has been taken by either the Federal Army or by local, Zonal or SNNPRS Regional authorities against abusive police and armed forces units.

4. The authors of this Memo, a group of international and Ethiopian scholars and researchers on Ethiopia, have been compiling information from this area because the Ethiopian national press and other news media are not reporting on peripheral areas and do not have reporters there or interest in it. The sources of this information are local witnesses, travellers and survivors.
We also refer here to two recent press reports on these dramatic events in the Southwest: Robbie Corey-Boulet, “ ‘Killing without any reason’: Deaths in rural Ethiopia spark outcry”, AFP, 16 October 2019,¹ and Jed Stevenson and Felix

¹ See: <https://news.yahoo.com/killing-without-reason-deaths-rural-ethiopia-spark-outcry-032902013.html>.

Girke, "The Nobel peace prize can inspire Abiy Ahmed to new heights in Ethiopia", *The Guardian*, 21 October 2019.²

I. *We describe the Bodi case first.*

On 17 September we received the first field reports of serious violence, perpetrated on the Bodi people in a highly irregular manner, breaking the constitutional bounds of police and army action. This military violence occurring in Bodi was of an unprecedented scale.

What happened?

On 9 September, Bodi men were at first summoned by military units to a supposedly 'peace meeting' in Hana, following a fight between Konso settlers and Bodi (The Konso settlers are people brought in to live in Bodi lands by the previous government, without any preliminary study or any asking of permission from the local Bodi inhabitants on the reallocation of their lands or if there was enough space and land). Different military units (in total ca. 300 heavily armed troops) were present at this meeting. Bodi men were forced to tell the names of so-called 'shiftas' among them. If they said they didn't know any, they were beaten up. They were threatened and forced, and eventually gave random names. But after this, the military went on an unlawful intimidation campaign, going from one Bodi settlement to another. The soldiers beat people up and shot many others. They demanded that all men hand over rifles.

Incidents during this 'campaign':

- A Bodi policeman who worked as a translator during meetings was shot dead as he was walking away, unarmed, from the above 'peace meeting'.
- In the second week of September at least 11 Bodi people were killed, mostly *elders* (some over 60 years old), and also including a woman and her baby. Identifying the number of Bodi youngsters killed is still going on. Names are not known yet.
- A Bodi teenager who was guarding the grave of his mother (who had been hit by a vehicle) tried to flee when he saw his father being beaten up by military in his own camp; the military caught him and beat him up so bad people know he won't survive.
- In another Bodi camp, a 5-year old boy was kicked and beaten to death.
- In Chirim (the Bodi who live neighbouring the Konso settlement sites), people say that "the women have been finished", and that more women than men were killed and their bodies thrown in the river. This seemed to be a special targeting of women of the Bodi community.

² See: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/oct/21/the-nobel-peace-prize-can-inspire-abiy-ahmed-to-new-heights-in-ethiopia>

- Many Bodi people fled from Hana where most of the violence is happening and hid in the bush.

This is indiscriminate abuse and killing, constituting a series of appalling crimes, directed against a specific agro-pastoral group. These people - and several others similar to them in livelihoods, and who were hardly ever 'food insecure' - already have a very unfair deal, due to the inconsiderate expansion of state sugar corporation project activities, faulty irrigation and other 'investment schemes, destructive environmental effects, and imposed land alienation without compensation or other assistance.

No functioning justice system is locally in place to effectively help the Bodi (and other local) peoples in their quest for justice and rights.

We received more messages later in September 2019, and by then the Bodi survivors were able to tell the number of people who had been killed right after the meeting in the area around Hana town: by that time, survivors had counted about over *thirty people dead*. They had to follow the vultures circling in the sky to find the dead bodies (most people had tried to run away in the bush when they were attacked by the military), so they assume they will find more. The exact number of people who were shot in Chirim (northern Bodi) is not known yet.

Local people now know of 14 Bodi people from Hana who were killed, and at first, 15 people from Chirim. They later found 9 bodies of people killed down in the Omo River, so the total is now 38. The people who are unaccounted for (and whose bodies were not found yet or who are hiding in some place) are about 50-60.

More details on the violence again reached us in early October:

- The youngest Bodi victim was a 10-month old baby.
- When they were detained, Bodi men had to endure humiliations such as being forced to drink the urine the military had collected in a plastic cover.
- After detention people were also beaten up severely, often with the butt of guns.
- Military looted the houses: they took the guns, ammunition and money they found.
- The campaign also appeared to be a deliberate undermining of Bodi culture: military threw necklaces of beads in the bush and cut women's leather skirts into pieces. More significantly, military forced two Bodi men to unearth the remains of their ritual leader (*komorut*) who had died of sickness a few weeks before. Military shot five bullets in his corpse, and stood guard over the exhumed body for several days to make sure Bodi people would not try to bury him again, and eventually burned the remains.
- On 14 October, the Bodi of the Gura area were summoned to a collective meeting (like the one in Mursi, see below) and people having seen the violence and abuse are of course reluctant to go. Previous to that summons, on 29-30 September, military action was already threatened, with houses and granaries in Gura to be searched "to find remaining guns".

Later we also got information that:

- During the above campaign, one Bodi young man was *hanged*.
- The younger brother of the dead ritual leader (the *komorut*), who was beaten on his nape, died of his injuries.
- There were three cases of gang rape of Bodi women reported.
- The military *burned down granaries* in two places, thus destroying local food supplies and condemning families to hunger and destitution.
- They also seized the entire cattle herd of one Bodi man as they were drinking at the river, and were killing the animals for their own consumption.
- The military also attacked innocent people indiscriminately: a ritual leader (*komorut*) in Chirim, around 90 years old, was severely beaten on his stomach and died of his injuries.
- On 16 October it was reported from Arbujo location that military took down the beehives that Bodi men place in the trees (the soldiers had already burned granaries). This is purposeful destroying of Bodi livelihoods.

All this is unprecedented, unacceptable violence and should not pass without legal investigation. It cannot go unpunished in the new Ethiopia, claiming to have chosen the way of political reform, democratization and respect for human rights.

One main purpose of all this military action – beyond cultural humiliation and abuse - appeared to be to force the Bodi to ‘disarm’: i.e., to have them hand in their weapons.

Whatever the logic of doing this, in this insecure environment the Bodi, Mursi, Suri and other peoples need reasonable means of self-protection against the insecurities and dangers of existence in this area, especially *in the absence of proper security provided by the state*. Some groups (like the Suri) live in an area on the border with South Sudan, from where regular raiding on their cattle and other property occurs, by e.g. Toposa invaders. This goes unpunished by the Ethiopian authorities. Suri on the border thus need some arms to protect their property and their homes. Despite this, they have been the target of similarly indiscriminate ‘disarmament’ campaigns in the past years.

If there is to be ‘disarmament’ in the areas of it should be negotiated and be a disarmament of *all* groups, not selected targeting of only some, and be done with financial compensation and with security and justice structures that offset the risks incurred by local people.

Secondly, the authorities have never taken action against the *very high rate of fatal road accidents*, due to drivers of the local Sugar Plantation and Factory as well as other outsiders driving at breakneck speed and not heeding local pedestrians or livestock: they have killed dozens of Bodi-Mursi women, men and children, as well as cattle. There was no recourse to justice and hardly any compensation for damages was ever paid.

The above cases apparently indicate that people are being *collectively punished*, in an appalling and wholly unconstitutional manner. This should not be tolerated in a rule-of-law state, or one that *aims* to be one.

It seems that the police/army forces in the region are operating excessively and with impunity. It also appears that they do this on the basis of a highly skewed perception of the Bodi and related groups as ‘culturally inferior’, second-class citizens without rights.

II. *The Mursi were the second group targeted by the local military and authorities, since 29 September 2019.*

- After the campaign against the Bodi (Mela and Chirim), military units moved into Mursi country on 1 October. They called on the Mursi to attend a ‘big meeting’ in Romos and to hand in arms. They intimidated and threatened people indicating that they would get at those who would not come.
As of 13 October, the c. 200 Mursi people gathered there are being held against their will for days, and continue to be treated in inhumane ways -- they cannot attend to their sanitary needs, sit in the burning sun and are not provided with any shade or medical attention for those who need it. People were even forbidden from talking to each other. There are no indications either that the military has been forthcoming with food and water. They are prisoners for over a week now. Sleep deprivation and withholding people of all elementary needs is traumatizing them.
- The military unit stationed at Elma - in the Mursi area – in late September, during the Bodi operation - cut open the bags of grain that Mursi women were carrying and poured their content on the ground.
- The Mursi were told during the above meeting in Romos that “...the government is coming to clean your lands and to teach you to be better”. In fact, the total *opposite* is happening.
- When relatives of these people, held as prisoners, bring food to them, the government forces take it and throw it away. They beat up those bringing the food and told them not to bring food again. Instead, every evening the government forces gave these prisoners uncooked food to eat.
- On 9 October, the government military started to confiscate mobile phones from Mursi people. For what reason and under what mandate is not known. Obviously it was greatly resented by people.
- On 12 October it was reported that the military started further actions, by burning Mursi property and attacking and beating up people, including local ritual leaders/priests.
- Even Mursi sugar cane plantation guards, students and educated Mursi females and men were reportedly beaten every day. No food and water were served to them, only once a day a small portion. The aim again seems to be to instill fear and intimidation among the Mursi as a people.
- In a deliberate act of cultural humiliation, the military maltreated and abused the ritual leaders (the *komoruts*) of the Mursi and violently stripped them of their insignia like age-old bead strings and necklaces indicating their status and prestige. This is exactly copying what the previous *Derg* military government (up to 1991) did.

- The local authorities have a longer record of abusive incidents. E.g., in late 2018, the authorities came to Mursi and rounded up about a dozen children for 'mandatory' police training. These teenagers and their relatives were not asked. Parents and relatives did not hear where their kids would go to or would end up. This was again a serious violation of the human rights of the local people.
- As of 16 October it was confirmed that 16 Mursi men had disappeared, forcibly taken by military.
- By 20-24 October, the military still gathered more Mursi people to be imprisoned in open-air camps, like Romos (above). All to force them to 'hand over' weapons and 'deliver criminals'. The security forces threatened that if the other Mursi would not come to the camp then they would go to the villages and start beating up or shooting the people there. The forces also threatened to shoot the Mursi in the detention camp if the other Mursi don't come and give themselves up.
- Repeating a pattern seen military abuse among the Bodi, two ritual leaders of the Mursi were beaten up badly. These leaders/priests were specifically targeted for beating.
- On 22 October many more security forces arrived, some with guns mounted on the back of their vehicles. They gave the Mursi "two days to deliver their guns and criminals before they would start opening fire in the villages."
- On 24 October news came out that the missing Mursi men had been grossly abused and beaten up in the prison camps near Romos and Mara. Several recordings made revealed that over many days the men were beaten so severely (with rifle butts) that some could only crawl out of the houses in which they were being tortured. The testicles of the younger men were beaten so badly that they are not sure that they will ever be able to have children. These victims were 'shown' on purpose to the all Mursi held prisoners in the camps so as to frighten and intimidate them.
- The men imprisoned and beaten up were also forced to drink their own urine (like in the Bodi case, see above) and some were even forced to eat their own faeces. Some they were hung upside down and beaten, and they were told throughout that they were "dogs and baboons".

These abuses apparently take place under the auspices of the Selamago-Hanna district (*woreda*) administrator, the Jinka Zone administrator, and SNNPRS Region Hawassa commanders. In how far Federal forces are involved is not clear.

Other groups in the South west may be future targets of similar indiscriminate and excessive violence, if nothing is done.

III. Requests

The violence described above is appalling and transgresses all civil and human rights constitutionally accorded to all Ethiopian citizens, including to minorities such as the ones discussed here. The violent campaigns are aimed at traumatizing and destroying people, and are intolerable. They do not solve anything.

The abusive actions by military in South Omo and possibly in neighbouring areas are unworthy of the current reformist Ethiopian government. They are totally unacceptable and can and must be halted.

In this context, we would like to submit the following *requests*.

- We recognize that the Federal Government currently has many security challenges in the country. But the ‘peripheral areas’ of the country should not be forgotten. *We beg the Federal and Regional (killil) and zonal authorities to take action to **stop** all ongoing military operations and repression in the South Omo Zone and in adjacent areas.* In view of the appalling violence and gross abuse it is advisable is to withdraw all military forces until further notice, and investigate all units and their deeds in the areas mentioned above. If military is to be sent at all to such areas, more well-trained and more responsible *federal* elite units, that might use proper restraint and can negotiate, should be used. The excessive use of violence and torture as seen in the above cases has no justification whatsoever.
- We also plead for an *immediate full investigation* on the level of the Southern Region police/army forces and for them to be made accountable to the Federal Government and reviewed under the framework of the federal Constitution and the federal courts. We urge the *Federal Government*, as guarantor of the constitutional order in Ethiopia, to take *responsibility* for this.
- We ask the official *Ethiopian Human Rights Commission* and other relevant public bodies in Ethiopia to send teams to as soon as possible *investigate* the above-mentioned abuses and killings.
- We also appeal, via this Memo, to global bodies and human rights agencies to take note of this chronicle of *ongoing* violence and gross abuse perpetrated on Ethiopian ethnic minorities.

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