

The ‘New Auschwitz’: Wollega, Oromia region, Ethiopia

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Introduction:

A few years ago, I visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum, on the sites of Auschwitz Concentration Camp, the largest Nazi concentration and extermination camp. Last week, I visited a Jewish cultural center/museum in Riga, Latvia, with similar content. The two camps, Auschwitz-Birkenau and the one in Riga, are now prominent memorial sites on the Holocaust tragedies. The Auschwitz Museum relates the in-depth history of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. It stands today as a reminder of the horrendous harvest resulting from hate and discrimination. The core message, as most aptly expressed by Ellen Germain, the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues, on the 75th Anniversary of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum on 13th July 2022, was: "We must safeguard your testimony, their testimony, so that truth will never die. The world must never forget. The world must never deny. The world must never downplay the Holocaust. We must remain ever on guard, and we must do far more to teach the lessons of the Holocaust and apply them in our own time. We must counter hate and lies with tolerance and truth. And we must stand up for human dignity and freedom wherever they are imperiled." Indeed, that is what we learned during the visit!

More than 75 years after the crematoria ceased their most inhuman deadly work, the State Museum continues to ensure the site is preserved in perpetuity. The Holocaust site is maintained so as to help future generations understand that such cold-blooded cruelty and systematic mass murder must never happen again. Indeed, it must be maintained as irrefutable evidence of the Holocaust to all perverse persons who may attempt to deny or refute its real occurrence. What amazes me is that similar atrocities are conducted right now, as I write this piece. It is not a thing of the past. It is happening in Ethiopia as well as in Ukraine. The only difference between the two is that virtually no one cares about the poor Ethiopians who are the victims in the New Auschwitz, the Wollega Zone in Oromia Region. The victims in the Wollega Zone New Auschwitz are prevented, by the Oromia state authorities, from escaping. They are helplessly "reconciled" to their impending brutal death.

What is Happening in Wollega, Oromia Region, Ethiopia?

The Washington Postⁱ wrote that as the world is focused on Ukraine, a genocide is taking place in Ethiopia. Mass killings targeting ethnic Amharas have been taking place since the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power four years ago. In the past few weeks alone, hundreds of innocent civilians, many of them women and children, were killed in Wollega, a region in Oromia, where the massacres have become alarmingly despicable and frequent. The Ethiopian government mentions barely the ongoing genocide in this hell region. The victims are primarily the Amharas. Nobody has been brought to justice over any of these mass killings of Amharas -or 'Neftegnas' in the parlance of their killers. In short, the life of an Amhara citizen in Ethiopia is considered worthless in Abiy's regimeⁱⁱ. The latest massacres and property destruction took place, on the **26 of September**, in Jirte and Jirdega and other woredas in Horo Guduru Wollega Zone, Oromo Region.

According to Borkena (2022)ⁱⁱⁱ hundreds of civilians are killed in the Umuru district of Horo Guduru zone in the Oromo region of Ethiopia. Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) on Monday said the civilians were killed since August 31, 2022. Private properties including cattle were plundered too and several thousand were displaced from the area to find themselves without any essential emergency aid and in a difficult circumstance. The rights group said it had confirmed it from affected people who escaped the killing in the area. The group is linking the killing to OLF-Shane, *what it called irregular forces from the Amhara region and individuals* [italics mine because it is deceptive]. EHRC asserted the measures the Federal and regional authorities are taking to reverse ethnic-based attacks in the region are not a match for the magnitude of the security problem in the area^{iv}. Earlier this week, according to Borkena, the government admitted that the radical ethnic Oromo nationalist group killed civilians in the Horo Guduru area. It did not, however, specify the number of deaths from the attack

and those who were wounded. The rebel group operating in the area, which calls itself the Oromo Liberation Army, has announced that it has formed a military alliance with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The TPLF is attacking the Amharas from the North, while the so called "Oromo Liberation Army" attacks from the South. We acknowledge the attack from the north has taken a civil war shape, where both the Amharas and the Government are tackling the issue, however the attack from the south is going on unchallenged, or at times in collaboration with the regional authorities of Oromia.

The level of coordination between state and non-state actors both while the attacks are taking place and later in covering the news about the attacks are dangerously being perfected. We demand independent investigation before this killing cycle claims even more lives! Facts: A) Oromo residents were told to leave the area in advance B) Services were disconnected in advance C) Local administration tell Amharas routinely, that they cannot leave as that will look bad, instead they could arm and defend themselves. D) Amharas are routinely disarmed" (EthioHRC's note from Sep. 26, 2022, on the massacres and property destruction that took place in Jirte and Jirdega and other woredas in Horo Guduru Wollega (Genocide Prevention In Ethiopia 2022 Sept 29). Ethiopia has turned the Wollega zone a Nazi-style death camp, burning bodies and blocking humanitarian convoys to hide evidence of mass killings and other atrocities there. The armed groups burn the bodies of those that had been slaughtered and burn the civilians alive, imagery that raised the specter of the 20th century's greatest crime. This paper aspires to awaken the public that the world has not seen the scale of the tragedy in Wollega since the Nazi concentration camps. The armed groups in collaboration with the region's security apparatus have turned the whole region into a death camp. We demand independent investigation before this killing cycle claims even more lives!

Silence gives consent: Human right organisations and religious institutions

Ethiopians are currently affected by untold misery and agonizing national muffled sorrow. The country's fate is in the hands of ethno-nationalists, ethno-fascist mobs and murderous groups of people within and outside of the current leadership. Atrocity crimes, murder, slaughter, and inhuman treatment and arrest of zealous Ethiopians are a common scene. But where is the anguished outcry of our spiritual and religious leaders? Where are their voices? Where are the voices of humanitarian organizations? Why don't we hear them condemning the murder of young and old Ethiopians? The silence of the leaders of Ethiopian churches and mosques — all the centers of holy worship where the most fundamental law of humanity are preached: that murder is wrong. As we all know there is no "military" solution to the current murderous crimes and genocidal acts in Ethiopia. Ethiopian religious and spiritual leaders, in particular the Oromo spiritual leaders including the intellectuals, both at home and abroad need to come out, loud and clear and repeatedly, say in one voice that we are all — every single one of us — children of God and that to murder is to profane the very God they claim to glorify. It's hard to miss the news today. It is sad that Ethiopian religious leaders and establishments make no effort to make this particular slaughter of innocents a priority. Continued overwhelming silence on the part of our religious and community leaders is always wrong and will be a catastrophe in the struggle to defend the unity of Ethiopia and sanctity of the lives of Ethiopians. In a disaster or national tragedy, religious and community leaders are frontline, trusted caregivers to whom people look for assistance and support for healing. They are also expected to be the voice of the voiceless.

Now the situation in Ethiopia requires their leadership and guidance primarily to stop the madness orchestrated by the political elites' intent on destroying Ethiopia and creating civil war; and secondly, they can help create a forum for national reconciliation, stability and sustainable peace. The leaders have unique position to respond to people who are impacted by the injustices and man-made national disaster because they are already in an established role, have a core

of relationships, and bring a faith perspective that speaks to the need for meaning that is so pervasive in the human experience of suffering that most Ethiopians find themselves in.

The expansion of protestant sects in Wollega zone is visible. It is high time that these groups of churches, the Muslim organizations and the Orthodox Church take concerted initiatives to condemn the atrocities in Oromia region and frame a peaceful transition. Internal strife and dispute on trivial differences in doctrines are just prolonging the dictators' or ethno-fascists' hold on power and thereby the sufferings of the faithful. Although religious organizations are to be independent of political control in a healthy, just, and inclusive society, the situation in Ethiopia is different.

If you, religious leaders and intellectuals, do not stand in uniform condemnation of this killing spree, genocidal act, then not only will you be judged by our people, not only will you be judged by history, you will be judged by 'God'.

There is no room in today's Ethiopia for different faiths, different sects or different doctrines to battle over power, when the battle is between good and evil, death and life. It is a matter of priority!

"In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousand-fold in the future. When we neither punish nor reproach evil doers, we are not simply protecting their trivial old age, we are thereby ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations."

— Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956

It is unacceptable that our leaders are silent in the face of unspeakable atrocities. They should make their voice heard in a peaceful manner and call for the political leaders to address the matter and encourage the regime to respect the rule of law and bring the perpetrators to justice. The whole state and federal political, social and economic infrastructure are infiltrated by ethno nationalist cadres and dangerous forces^v.

"It's not unpatriotic to denounce an injustice committed on our behalf, perhaps it's the most patriotic thing we can do."— E.A. Bucchianeri, Brushstrokes of a Gadfly.

What is Dr Daniel Bekele of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission doing? The Ethiopian people are not doing anything significant while their compatriots are being slaughtered like animals! The so-called Oromia Special Force and the Police, which is supposed to keep peace and order in the region is apparently complicit in the genocidal massacres being perpetrated under watchful eyes of the Oromia President, that gets the silent approval of the Prime Minister who is also the Commander-in- Chief of the Ethiopian Armed Forces! There is no separation of powers in the political structure of the Abiy regime in its entirety! The parliament is a mere rubber-stamp body! The judiciary has become a political instrument busy fabricating trumped-up accusations and charges! The President has failed to use her figure head status to pronounce moral redlines! Worst of all, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, which is supposed to be at least partially financially independent has not yet admitted that genocide has been committed in Ethiopia despite an overwhelming body of evidence to the contrary! Hence atrocity crimes continue to be committed with impunity! What then should be done? As can easily be seen, internal institutions and forces have failed miserably to stop the atrocity crimes being perpetrated in Ethiopia even as I write! The Ethiopian people seem to have been shocked and terrorized into silence and apathy by the enormity of the crimes which encompass cannibalism including slashing the bulging bellies of pregnant women and eating the fetuses in the third trimester! Help! Help! Dr.Daniel Bekele, where are you in Ethiopia's moment of greatest need ?!! (Personal Communication Tekleberhan Geberemichael 2022-09-29)

Why, over the past century, have good people repeatedly ignored mass murder and genocide? In a compellingly insightful article entitled “*If I look at the mass I will never act*”: *Psychic numbing and genocide*, Slovic (2007)^{vi} wrote that most people are caring and will exert great effort to rescue individual victims whose needy plight comes to their attention. These same good people, however, often become numbly indifferent to the plight of individuals who are “one of many” in a much greater problem. Of course, every episode of mass murder is unique and raises unique obstacles to intervention. But the repetitiveness of such atrocities, ignored by powerful people and nations, and by the general public as we witnessed in the case of the Amhara plight, calls for explanations that may reflect some fundamental deficiency in our humanity — a deficiency that, once identified, might possibly be overcome.

The Ethiopian Government and international community must once and for all denounce the genocide denial and the manipulation as well as victim playing, in Pope Benedict’s words, as “intolerable and altogether unacceptable.” “If the international community has learned any lessons from its past sins, it must take stock of the gravity of recent acts perpetrated against Christians and Amharas in Ethiopia and must do everything possible to hold those responsible to account and to prevent further escalation”^{vii}. Stanely Cohen (2013)^{viii} stated that three forms of denial are possible with respect to what is being denied: *literal, interpretative and implicatory*. All these forms of denial are manifested in different forms and utterances by the government officials and some *ethno-nationalist groups* in Ethiopia. Literal denial implies that the knowledge or the raw facts are blatantly denied: “nothing happened,” “there was no massacre or genocide.”

Rees^{ix} examines the strategic decisions that led the Hitler and Himmler to make Auschwitz the primary site for the extinction of Europe's Jews-their "Final Solution." He concludes that many of the horrors that were perpetrated in Auschwitz were the result of a terrible immoral pragmatism. The story of the camp becomes a morality tale, too, in which evil is shown to proceed in a series of deft, almost noiseless incremental steps until it produces the overwhelming horror of the industrial scale slaughter that was inflicted in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. We are heading to that scale in Wollega, in the new Auschwitz. This is no longer Chechnya or Aleppo. This is the new Auschwitz and Majdanek. The world must help punish the Abiy regime. After Ethiopia’s Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, ended a decades-long border conflict, he was heralded as a unifier. Now critics accuse him of tearing the country apart^x.

Accountability and responsibility

Clearly the responsibility lies with the Oromo elites. Fearon and Laitin (2000)^{xi} found considerable evidence linking strategic aspects of ethnic identity construction to violence and more limited evidence implicating discursive systems. The most common narrative in these texts analyzed by the authors has large scale ethnic violence provoked by elites, often motivated by intra-ethnic conflicts. Followers follow, despite the costs, out of increased fear of thugs and armies “let go” by elites (both the other side's and their “own”) and often in pursuit of local grievances that may have little ethnic component. Several other mechanisms are also discussed, including the role of discursive systems in conditioning publics for violence and the role of violent efforts to enforce “everyday primordialism” by policing supposedly primordial ethnic boundaries.

All this government orchestrated propaganda and a culture of belittling other ethnic groups will backfire. We should learn from history! The colonial changes to ethnic identity have been explored from the political, sociological, and psychological perspectives. Ethnic manipulation manifested itself beyond the personal and internal spheres. Divide-and-rule strategies and discourses of superiority have dangerous consequences sooner or later. A number of Ethiopian scholars I interviewed informally told me that the discourses in the power corridor, in some government affiliated social

media and among adherent supporters of the regime, are characterized by a steady stream of derogatory remarks about the Amhara people and members of other ethnic groups.

There is also very little accountability in the new administration. Accountability is an elusive concept, but understanding where it originates can help citizens find ways to hold governments accountable. In the narrowest sense, accountability refers to the obligation to give an account of one's action to particular individuals, groups, or organizations. This does not happen in Abiy Ahmed's regime, where government forces are complicit in mass-killings and nothing is said about it. When asked about these atrocities, he brushes off the question with a chillingly indifferent answer: "I am not militia or police who has control over the activities of district or village level activities". In late 2020, as yet another mass-killing was reported in which hundreds of men, women and children were locked in a school hall and machine-gunned to death, Abiy Ahmed decided to dress up as a police officer in the streets of Addis Ababa and surprise unexpected drivers, who were then given his personal well-wishes for the Christmas holiday. It was another cute publicity stunt, made all the more disgusting by the fact that he said not a word about the massacre. "This summer, militias in the countryside carried out a spate of massacres. In the first, in mid-June, hundreds of ethnic Amhara civilians were killed in Oromia; among the victims were women and children who were shot or burned alive. When I raised the slaughter with Abiy, he brushed aside the news. He said that there were always people "up to mischief" in the countryside, and that he knew how to deal with them (see *The New Yorker*, 2022-09-26). After the second massacre, Abiy appeared in parliament, where legislators questioned him. "When is your government going to stop this?" one demanded. "Why is it difficult for you to hold those responsible accountable?" Abiy was evasive. "Terrorists are operating all over the world," he said, reeling off statistics of recent killings in the United States. "Without stopping their children dying in their cities, they are talking about *our* agenda." He said that he was hearing a lot of "prescriptive" solutions from people, and added loftily, "I should point out that the government has more information than the general public." (Ibid). As Ethiopia descends into hell, one is forced to wonder whether his political acting is part of a sophisticated strategy of genocide denial or simply the result of inept and weak political leadership. There is no easy answer.

Conclusion

Finally^{xii}, this is a wakeup call for the Oromos as these are matters of very real and growing concern to people living in Ethiopia and beyond. Nonetheless, all Oromos should not be held collectively responsible for the crimes of their elites; however, they have a moral responsibility to stop this inhuman madness in their names, just like the Nazis carried out atrocities in the name of Germans. The key components of the basic notion of moral responsibility, as David Risser^{xiii} accurately captured, are deeply rooted in the fabric of every society and are constitutive of social life. Without some conception of moral responsibility, no amount of imaginative insight will render a society recognizable as a human society. While there is broad, often tacit, agreement regarding the basic model of moral responsibility as it applies to individuals, there is considerable debate about how this notion might be applied to groups and their members.

I argue that the grave leadership incompetence and a moral excess of the Abiy regime have contributed to the current crises in Ethiopia, because people with low moral intelligence grabbed power. Beheshtifar, Esmaeli, and Moghadam (2011)^{xiv} claim that moral intelligence is the "central intelligence" for all humans." It is considered a distinct form of intelligence, independent of both emotional and cognitive intelligence. Lennick and Kiel, authors of *Moral Intelligence*^{xv} and the originators of the term, identified four competencies of moral intelligence: integrity, responsibility, forgiveness, and compassion. Ethnonationalists in Ethiopia, in particular the Oromo fanatic nationalists lack these skills and values, and their moral scores are shockingly low. They *inherited* this deficiency from their masters, the TPLF. Lies and devilish thought pervades people with deficit moral intelligence. They are infected with this endemic.

References

- ⁱ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/18/ethiopian-genocide-commands-attention/>
- ⁱⁱ The government's failure to protect its citizens makes the tragic situation more horrendous. Because of the recurring threats and attacks on civilians, the number of displaced people is staggering. Thousands of displaced families continue to suffer under brutal circumstances. Moreover, and sadly, those who are committing the massive crimes have not been brought to justice. These catastrophes could have been prevented if the Ethiopian government were determined to stop those who are terrorizing communities. Mr. Abiy and officials at the federal and regional levels, including leadership of the security forces, should be held accountable for the thousands of lives lost in the past four years.
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://borkena.com/2022/09/27/ethiopia-horo-guduru-wollega-oromo-region/>
- ^{iv} https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OF2Ishms_s2dTmyosQCNr3lv7AME-5bE/view
- ^v <https://www.eurasiareview.com/16052021-the-logic-behind-events-in-ethiopia-oped/?nowprocket=1>
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