

What Really Happened in the “Tole Massacre” in Western Ethiopia?

Reporting without Verification Exposes Major Media Outlets to Complicity
in a Deadly Government Narrative in Ethiopia

Account Issued by the coalition of Oromo advocacy and human rights groups

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During the week following June 18, international print and broadcast media ran a dramatic story about a “massacre” that was supposedly carried out by a “rebel group” driven by “ethnic hatred” in the Oromia region of Western Ethiopia. The report, which grabbed the headlines and went viral on the Internet on June 19, was that “at least 200” persons who were claimed to be “civilians” of “Amhara ethnic identity” were slaughtered following a battle between “Ethiopian government forces” and the “Oromo Liberation Army” in the Tole/Gimbi area. Accusations escalated. Some outlets reported that the victims were “mostly women and children”; some gave the number as “25”, others said “200”, others as high as “320.” By the end of the week the alleged number had escalated to “1500” or “many thousands.” The essential components of this story were picked up within hours of the first filing, though any search for hard evidence has yet to be carried out.

Media Outlets are Complicit in Magnifying the Ethiopian Government’s Propaganda Campaign and in Fomenting Intensified War in Oromia

Posting such a sensational story, which has far-reaching political and moral implications, without inquiry or verification, is irresponsible. It exposes most international media outlets to complicity with the Ethiopian government’s strategy to foment war against its most significant challenger, OLA, in the largest region of the country, Oromia. Broadcasting these unexamined accounts asserting “horrific brutality” magnifies an overt propaganda campaign. Yet it was hastily picked up without examination and transmitted instantly in Ethiopia and globally carried by virtually all major media outlets.

We call for rapid, thorough investigation of this complex incident to be conducted by impartial skilled researchers who have ample experience and awareness of authoritarian regimes’ efforts to manipulate and weaponize information by intimidation of witnesses, blockades of communication and transport access to affected areas, and control of both translators and interview subjects. We also believe an impartial investigation of the “Tole massacre” by a neutral body would open up an equal opportunity of extending impartial investigations in other parts of Oromia.

The “Tole Massacre” Story Augments a Global Disinformation Campaign

The story of a brutal “massacre” attributed to the Oromo Liberation Army was immediately used by the Ethiopian government as a pretext for publicly discrediting OLA and for declaring a renewed and intensified military offensive against this resistance movement. Widespread coerced conscription of youth in Amhara and Oromia region was launched within a week of the story breaking for the expressed purpose of “eliminating” the OLA force.

In the same month that the international community, particularly Western policy circles, were announcing the “end of the war in Tigray” the Ethiopian government is using this highly suspicious incident as the pretext for expanding the war front in Oromia with the OLA.

By June 24, the international policy establishment including the offices of the US Ambassador to the UN and the US State Department had issued responses of concern that accepted the essential components of the story, thus giving credence to the Ethiopian government’s accounts.

The intensity and scope of the disinformation campaign surrounding this “massacre” reveals the well-orchestrated nature of the regime’s propaganda capacity and reach. Consider some of the components:

- Abiy Ahmed’s government asserted that OLA should be condemned by the international community and banned from internationally-supported negotiations about Ethiopia, thereby aiming to legitimize his government’s war campaigns and abuses in Oromia.
- Widespread social media rhetoric and hashtags amplified the story and widely disseminated the narrative that the event constituted “ethnic cleansing” and “proof of genocide”, laying the responsibility at the feet of the OLA.
- Photos and images of other massacres, some that occurred in December 2020 in West Africa and from Metekal zone on October 8, 2021, flooded social media, posted as if they were from Gimbi on June 18, 2022.
- [Vigils](#) and [protest rallies](#) decrying the “slaughter” were held worldwide[.
- Prominent Ethiopian singer, Teddy Afro, [released a single](#) titled “Unleavened Bread” about the event.
- [A Wikipedia entry for “Gimbi Massacre”](#) was set up immediately.
- The Prosperity Party appointed Presidents of both Oromia and Amhara regional states [held a joint press conference](#) to announce their common goal of eliminating the OLA.

Fundamental Questions:

What actually happened?

- It is not yet known what actually occurred in the Gimbi area of Wollega on June 18, 2022. The factual/evidentiary basis for stories of a massacre has not been collected or made available yet. There are widely varying verbal reports.

Who is telling the story?

- Initial reporting was based on interviews conducted exclusively by phone from Addis Ababa or Nairobi with hand-picked witnesses. The initial story was collected by an Ethiopian journalist working for Associated Press who rushed to file the story. As of July 5, there had been no in-person follow-up investigation by media who ran the story.

Were there casualties?

- There have been no authenticated photos, no video, no in-person interviews or forensic investigation that might indicate the nature and scale of what may have occurred.

Who were the perpetrators?

- Accounts vary. Some Amhara residents reported that *Oromo Liberation Army* combatants were responsible. Other Amhara residents, one of whom was a member of the militia himself, claimed that it was not OLA but *Amhara militia* were “killing their own.” A third account explained that the “higher authorities” sent *regional special forces* to clean up the area and that they themselves were ordered to vacate the area. OLA asserted that *ENDF (security) forces of the regime* itself carried out the attacks in an effort to

“disparage” them. OLA expressed confidence that they would be exonerated by any fair investigation. A local witness reported that after a battle in which OLA had held Gimbi and Dembi Dollo towns for a day or two, the governors of the district and the local farmers’ association (Kebele) were ordered by higher party officials of the regional state to vacate their positions for a specified period of time, during which the [massacre](#), occurred. He said that these regional forces, *Defense and Oromia Special Forces (OSP)*, took orders from the Regional President. “Tole’s Massacre is the regime’s work and the government is responsible. We, together with the *Woreda* officials, had to watch the massacre just like a movie.”

Who were the victims?

- This has yet to be established. Were they civilians? Some say, yes, that defenseless civilians were slaughtered in ruthless attacks by armed combatants who pulled them from their homes and killed them outright. Some accounts say that *Amhara civilians, women and children* were killed. Others explained that those killed were *combatants* reported as civilians, others that the dead were *Argoba Muslim settlers* who were resettled by the TPLF government in the 1990s. Some say *Oromo civilians* were killed by Amhara militia and reported as Amhara civilians.
- Another account claims that the dead were *Amhara combatants* killed in armed confrontations between the OLA and the ENDF (government military forces) with Amhara militia in the days prior to June 18. The fire fights had produced a large number of casualties. Some reports said that armaments were removed from the bodies of the *combatants* and that, without inspection, there was a general claim that all the dead who were buried were Amhara civilians.

What was the scale of the operation?

- Assertions of casualties/deaths vary from 25 to 1500. The scale of the operation must be determined by neutral investigation.

How can the truth be known?

- This is a daunting challenge as it appears all avenues to conduct protected interviews appear to be closed. Independent and impartial investigation must be conducted in person to ascertain the facts. The Ethiopian government routinely blocks communication and visitors’ travel access to this area of Western Wollega, Oromia:
 - o From June 29, 2020 the government closed all remaining independent media in the country, notably Oromia Media Network and Oromia News Network among others, leaving internal media and journalists under government control.
 - o For over three years, that area of Wollega has operated under the tight control of Command Post (military rule) which displaced civilian administration,
 - o An internet blackout, in place in Western Wollega since 2019 has meant that little information has been available.
 - o [Telecommunication services are blocked intermittently and frequently.](#)
 - o Roads are often blocked. When open, roads are closely monitored by government agents with aggressive interrogation and surveillance at frequent check points.
 - o Journalists and human rights personnel are denied travel permits to access affected regions.

Who benefits from the account?

The unexamined story of the Tole massacre is being used as a rationale by the Ethiopian government to further its propaganda and political agenda and to disrupt the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

- Policy benefits, both local and international, accrue *Ethiopian government authorities* as the US and UN reaction provide an unmerited measure of credibility to the Ethiopian government's stratagem.
- The headline-grabbing response to the "Tole Massacre" report turned media attention away from gruesome news videos of verified June 17 atrocities against Oromo by the Ethiopian government and Amhara militia. These stories were overshadowed:
 - 1) In Gambella region approximately 200 Oromo civilians were killed in violent house-to-house attacks following a military operation
 - 2) [In Wollo](#) two truckloads of Oromo young men were pulled out of the freight hauler and dozens were shot as video captured the incident.
- The people of Oromia, numbering over 44 million, are the real targets of this campaign. Since the government of Ethiopia does not enjoy their support, it has chosen to try to silence them through terror rather than accommodating their demands.

What should be done?

Western and international news media should take specific steps to avoid complicity in the overt attempts by the government of Ethiopia and its official state media outlets to influence the international news cycle and gain visibility for what will most likely be revealed as outright propaganda and calculated disinformation. These media should step away from playing critical role in fanning the flames of violence by generating multiple headlines derived from the same original unverified sources.

The gruesome story cannot be taken lightly. The government's agenda is to dishonor and remove independent Oromo parties from participation in any negotiations about the future of the country. OLA and OLF are thus accused of "terrorism" and "brutality." This incident and the international reaction to it furthers those government objectives and fits previous patterns of disingenuous attribution. The pattern of instigating division and violence followed by false attribution is well-established, but, as yet, unseen or unacknowledged by international audiences. Fair and through investigation is urgently needed.

Breaking Update _____

- *July 4, 2022* – "Qellem Massacre" – As this piece is released, another massacre has been carried out that fits this pattern precisely: attacks carried out by Federal security forces were blamed on the Oromo Liberation Army. However, in this case, [local Amhara community members revealed](#) that the attacks have come from the government and that the OLA has never hurt them. Then a [Member of Parliament](#) also has exposed and attested to the Oromia Regional government's responsibility for the slaughter.

Signatories

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