



## Monthly Situation Update: February 2023

*This report is part of OLLAA's monthly report series documenting the ongoing pattern of human rights abuses perpetrated against Oromo civilians, both inside Ethiopia and throughout the world. These reports also document the humanitarian situation inside Oromia, including the effects of the drought and conflict on civilians.*

### **Attacks on Civilians:**



*Liban Woreda IDP Site in Guji Zone, Oromia, Photo Credit: Oromia Physicians Association (OPA)*

Throughout the month of February, reports continued to circulate regarding violent attacks against Oromo civilians committed by both state agents and non-state armed actors.

In one [incident](#), two civilians—family members Gabree Balcha and Caaltuu Balay—were killed by Ethiopian security forces in the Gideberet district of the West Shewa zone because they suspected that they had supported the OLA. It was also [reported](#) that Amhara regional security forces and police had been targeting Oromo civilians who were originally from the Wollo Oromia Special zone but were currently residing in Finfinee. Finally, Ethiopian security forces [burned](#) down the homes of civilians in the Ifata woreda, West Shewa zones who they accused of supporting the OLA.

Regarding non-state armed actors, on February 1st, it was [reported](#) that members of an unidentified armed group attacked civilians in the Golgota kebele of the Arsi zone. On February

14th, [10 civilians](#) were killed and 300 houses were burned down in Mana Sib, West Wollega zone, by armed groups from Benshangul Gumuz.

Attacks on civilian populations throughout Oromia over the last few years have led to widespread displacement. In mid-February, the Oromia Physicians Association [claimed](#) that over 1.5 million people have been internally displaced (IDPs) due to conflict in the region and that there are 142 IDP sites throughout Oromia. They further reported that IDPs have been unable to access the medical care and assistance they need due to a lack of resources and personnel. Throughout the region, they found that 908 health posts, 158 health centers, and 6 hospitals had been damaged as a result of the conflict, leading to negative health consequences for the entire population of Oromia.

The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has issued a [report](#) finding that at least 50 people were killed in an attack on an IDP camp in the East Wollega zone between February 2nd-4th. They also claimed that 8 civilians were killed by federal security forces after the city was recaptured, based on “suspicion of collaborating with Shene.” Although the EHRC report describes IDPs as the targets of this attack and claims that the attack was perpetrated by the OLA, the report also notes a statement by an OLA representative during a VOA interview that the attack was on “members of the Amhara forces who were training in the camp and not on civilians.”

#### **Arbitrary Arrests and Detentions:**



*Dr. Gada Oljira, a Detained OLF Leader, Photo Credit: Social Media*

Oromo civilians routinely face arbitrary arrests and detentions, which are arrests and detentions not in accordance with the procedures established by law. Often, such arrests are due to civilians' purported—and tenuous—connections to the OLA. In other incidents, they are arrested for exercising their right to freedom of expression by participating in peaceful protests, for their involvement with leading Oromo opposition political parties, or because they are suspected of otherwise being Oromo nationalists. In February, Ethiopian security forces reportedly [arrested](#) several civilians in the Alaga Dureti kebele, Jeju Woreda, Arsie zone who they accused of supporting the OLA. In a separate [incident](#), a teacher at Salale university was detained by Ethiopian security forces. He was charged with supporting the OLA, and, although the charges were dismissed by a court of law, he remains detained.

OLLAA has also [continued](#) to monitor the situation facing leaders of the OLF who remain detained, often despite court orders for their release. In February, a spokesperson for the OLF [highlighted](#) the situation facing four detained members of the OLF Central Committee—Kennasa Ayansa, Dawit Abdeta, Gadaa Oljirra, and Gadaa Gebissa—who continue to be denied access to medical care. Colonel Gemechu Ayana, another OLF senior officer who was released from prison in May 2022, also [spoke](#) with reporters about his time in detention following the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa in June 2020. According to Colonel Gemechu, he experienced multiple abuses while detained, including his rights to due process of law, overcrowded detention centers, denial of medical care, and others.

### **Calls for Peace in Oromia:**



*Oromia Regional President Shimelis Abdisa calling for peace talks before the Cafee Oromia,  
Photo Credit: OBN*

Over the past few months, there have been growing [calls](#) for the Ethiopian government to enter into a peace agreement with the OLA, similar to the one that was reached with the TPLF in November 2022. Such calls continued throughout the month of February.

On February 8, 2023, the Oromia regional president gave an [interview](#) in which he called for a “peaceful path” toward ending the conflict in Oromia. On February 9, 2023, a coalition of Oromo advocacy groups and Oromo diaspora communities—including OLLAA—sent a [letter](#) to both parties urging them to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. [Several media](#) outlets publicized the call, including VOA, who [spoke](#) with OLLAA’s Executive Director, Seenaa Jimjimo, about the Oromo community’s call for peace. As part of their coverage, the VOA also reached out to representatives of the OLA and the Ethiopian government for their responses. For their part, the OLA noted that they were open to peace talks, but had conditions, including, among others, “the release of prisoners, ceasefire and intervention of neutral third parties.” In stark contrast, Kebede Disisa, the Ethiopian Federal Government’s Communications Minister, reiterated the government’s calls for the OLA to lay down their arms.

Despite the initial reception from the Ethiopian government, shortly following the transmission of this letter, the Oromia regional president again issued a call for peace talks with the OLA before [Cafee Oromia](#), the regional general assembly. In response to the statement by the Oromia regional president, the OLA issued a [statement](#) that the call was “welcome news,” but reiterated their belief that any peace negotiation should be between the OLA and the Ethiopian federal government and that international actors should be involved in the negotiation.

During his [interview](#) with Addis Standard that was released on February 21st, Colonel Gemechu Ayana, a leader of the OLF, also highlighted the need for the Ethiopian government to reach a similar peace agreement with the OLA as it had reached with the TPLF, noting that, “The war is causing more damage every day. It may take a long time but no force can stop the freedom of the Oromo. So, there is no need to torture the people and destroy lives and property for many years trying to stop what is inevitable. If we could solve the issues peacefully, the outcome would be great. So I believe we should now settle it through negotiations.”

### **Schism in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church:**





*Photo Credit: Canva*

As detailed in OLLAA's [January Situation Update](#), last month there was a [schism](#) in the Ethiopian Orthodox church (EOTC) following the decision of 3 Archbishops to appoint 26 Bishops without the approval of the Holy Synod. This decision was made in response to longstanding [calls](#) from the Oromo community to allow services to be conducted in Afaan Oromoo.

Throughout the month of February, OLLAA continued to follow reports on the schism. There were reports of violence at a church in [Shashemene](#), West Arsi zone, on February 4th, and in [Philidoro](#), a town located outside Addis Ababa, on February 6th. Two journalists were reportedly [detained](#) by Ethiopian security forces after reporting on the schism. The Ethiopian Orthodox Synod then issued a [call](#) for demonstrations on February 12th, and a counterprotest was planned for the following day. In the days leading up to the planned protest, an [internet shutdown](#) was put in place and the [Joint Security and Intelligence Task Force](#) issued a call for both parties to refrain from the "illegal demonstration and conflict-inciting activities." The Oromia, Harari, and South West regional governments issued [statements](#) in support of the task force's ban on rallies. Ultimately, the protest and counterprotest were [canceled](#).

On February 16, 2023, it was announced that the two parties had reached an agreement to [reconcile](#), and to "enhance the use of Afaan Oromoo language in all churches across Oromia Regional State."

#### **Humanitarian situation:**



*Effects of drought on civilians in Kenya, Nov. 9, 2022, Photo Credit: AP Photo/Brian Inganga*

The Oromia region of Ethiopia is currently experiencing a perilous humanitarian situation and increasing food insecurity due to multiple factors, including drought and conflict. Recent reports indicate that at least [24.1 million people](#) in Ethiopia have been affected by the drought and [11 million livestock](#) have died across the Horn of Africa. Current forecasts indicate that there is no end in sight to this crisis, with the IGAD Climate Prediction and Applications Centre [predicting](#) another period of below-normal rainfall over the next three months.

In Oromia, one of the areas hardest hit by the drought is the [Borana](#) zone, where over 2.3 million livestock have died, and the 372,000 members of Borana's pastoralist communities have been internally displaced. It has been reported that at least [7,800](#) students in the zone have been forced to drop out of school due to the impacts of the drought. The Borana Zone Health Office has [reported](#) that thousands of children are being treated for Severe Acute Malnutrition, and the Administrator of the zone, Jaarsoo Boruu, has [claimed](#) that the drought is "the worst in history," leaving more than 800,000 people in desperate need of humanitarian assistance. The Communications Officer for the Arero district has [noted](#) that, although some agencies have provided assistance to civilians, "the humanitarian crises surpasses the amount of supply being provided," and that civilians are facing shortages of both food and water. The Oromia NGOs Humanitarian Alliance has issued an [emergency appeal](#) to all stakeholders to address the crisis in the Borana zone and claimed that at least 3.7 million people in the zone need emergency



water assistance. In some cases, women have [reported](#) that they have been forced to walk for 10 hours to receive water.

Another impact of the drought throughout the Oromia and Somali regions has been outbreaks of cholera and measles. 357 new [measles cases](#) were recorded by health officials in the Oromia and Somali regions during the final week of January. On February 27th, the IFRC issued an [update](#) on the cholera outbreak, finding that cholera cases have been reported in 66 kebeles and 8 woredas in the Bale, Guji, and West Arsi zones of Oromia, alongside the Liban zone of the Somali region, leading to a total of 1055 cholera cases and 28 deaths since September 2022.

### **International Response:**



*Human Rights Council at the European Headquarters of the United Nations, 2019. Photo Credit: Magali Girardin/Keystone via AP*

### *United Nations*

Throughout the month of February, the Ethiopian government continued pushing for the mandate of the UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (ICHREE)—an independent body tasked with investigating allegations of human rights abuses committed since November 2020—to be dissolved during the upcoming session of the UN Human Rights Council. In early February, the Ethiopian government asked Ambassador Tracey

Ann Jacobson, Chargé d’Affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Ethiopia, to [terminate](#) the mandate of the Commission. On February 15th, Ethiopia’s Deputy Prime Minister [claimed](#) that the commission “could undermine the AU-led peace process & the implementation of the Pretoria Peace Agreement with inflammatory rhetoric.” On February 18th, it was [reported](#) that the Ethiopian government had requested the African Union support them in their efforts to end the mandate of the ICHREE. In response, on February 28th, Human Rights Watch [published](#) an open letter to all members of the UN Human Rights Council urging them to support the continuation of ICHREE’s mandate. This letter was signed by 63 civil society organizations, including OLLAA.

### *Humanitarian Assistance*

Throughout the month of February, multiple countries and intergovernmental organizations renewed their calls for humanitarian assistance to address the impacts of drought throughout the Horn of Africa. On February 8th, the Commissioner of the UNHCR, issued a [call](#) for further assistance to Ethiopia, with a focus on long-term solutions for individuals displaced by conflict. The UN Secretary-General [announced](#) they would devote \$250m from its Emergency Response Fund towards helping communities facing famine in Africa, alongside other “forgotten crises” throughout the world. On February 11th, the Australian government [announced](#) it would provide an additional \$25m in assistance to address food insecurity throughout the world, including \$15m devoted to the Horn of Africa.

### *AU Summit*

Ethiopia [hosted](#) its 36th African Union Summit from February 18-19th, an event that is attended by intergovernmental organizations, State parties to the AU, and others. Representatives from multiple countries outside of the AU also attended this event, including [Australia](#) and the [United States](#). Ahead of the trip, Ned Price, the Spokesperson for the U.S. Department of State [noted](#) that “the United States is committed to supporting the African Union and its High-Level Panel to ensure the cessation of hostilities agreement delivers a lasting peace and efforts to avoid further conflict and human rights violations in Oromia.”

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The Oromo have faced systematic human rights abuses at the hands of multiple Ethiopian governments. Despite the repressive tactics they have faced for generations, they have, time and again, sacrificed their lives to advance human rights in Ethiopia, including by leading the peaceful protests that led to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s rise to power in 2018.

Unfortunately, over the last two years, the situation for the Oromo has only worsened, particularly following times of relative peace in northern Ethiopia. Since the signing of the peace agreement between the TPLF and the Ethiopian government in November 2022, there have been increasing reports of attacks against civilians, both by Ethiopian security forces and non-state armed actors. As documented above, these trends continued in February 2023.



Despite the growing body of evidence of a systematic pattern of human rights abuses being perpetrated against the Oromo, the plight of the Oromo continues to be ignored by the international community. OLLAA fears that the continued failure of the international community to pressure the Ethiopian government to protect human rights and seek a peaceful means to end the conflict inside Oromia will only lead to further loss of life and the destabilization of the entire Horn of Africa.

As such, OLLAA calls on the international community to:

- Condemn the human rights violations noted in this report, as well as all other credible allegations of human rights violations throughout the country;
- Consider launching independent investigations into reports of human rights violations committed inside Oromia and across the country, and support the work of the UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia;
- Pressure the Ethiopian government to find peaceful means to end the conflict in Oromia, as it has done with TPLF in northern Ethiopia;
- Ensure provision of humanitarian assistance to all who need it across Ethiopia, including inside Oromia;
- Ensure the Oromo are included in any transitional justice measures, including inclusive dialogue processes.