



# Ethnic and State Violence on University Campuses in Ethiopia's Oromo and Amhara Regional States: Four Case Studies

A report by the Oromo Legacy Leadership and Advocacy Association (OLLAA)  
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## Introduction

Since November 2019, over 100 students have been dismissed temporarily or permanently from University institutions across Ethiopia. Over 3000 students have fled from campuses in the Oromo and Amhara regions because of violent unrest. Over ten students have been killed and many more injured. A majority of these dismissals and those that have had to flee are of the Oromo ethnic group, Ethiopia's largest ethnic group and nation. This report describes the events experienced by four students and one Professor, as expressed in face to face and telephone interviews with the report writer, Soreti Kadir. This report places these first-hand accounts in the context of UN charter of human rights, article 9 & 10 and the African charter of human rights, Article 17.

This report is intended for use by English speaking government and advocacy bodies who want a clear and objective account on the current state of affairs, as they pertain to the problems of human rights protection, in Ethiopia. All names used in this report are the real names of the people interviewed, each person can be directly contacted through OLLAA if further information is needed.

## Case studies

### Case Study 1

**Diriba Gurmessa Hordofa - Age 22**  
**Wallo University, Amhara region**  
**Major: English Literature (3rd year)**

**Debisa Chimdesa - Age 22**  
**Wallo University, Amhara region**  
**Major: English Literature**



Deriba begins his interview with a moving statement that one can not help but feel has grown in its conviction through immensely trying experiences. It is a statement that he wished to share off the record, so I will not repeat it here, but I feel it is necessary to inform you, the reader of this report, that due to these incidents, the lives of Deriba and others like him have been changed in ways that cannot be understated. Both Deriba Gurmessa Hordofa and Debisa Chimdesa give their interviews together.

Deriba begins by giving an impassioned insight into why he chose English Literature as his major. “Firstly, completing my education is a means by which I can become self-sufficient. To understand what is going on in the rest of the world and to contribute on a global scale, the English Language is a necessity. In Ethiopia, there is not much focus on strengthening the English language. There are more opportunities if a person can speak English, and so I wanted to teach my people, that way, we can make the most of these opportunities.” Deriba is the first person in his family to enter into University. He expresses the magnitude of this not just for himself, but for his family and his community. He describes that violence last year between Oromo and Amhara students was mediated and resolved by elders of the Oromo and Amhara communities.

When asked how the tensions started again, Deriba recounts the use of historically racist slurs being used by Amhara students, towards Oromo students. “Galla” - A term that is akin to the word “nigga” or “negro” in the African American context. He describes, that at the beginning of classes, teachers would begin by talking about politics, in relation to figures like Jawar Mohammed, Abiy Ahmed and Lemma Megerssa. “They would begin classes by talking about Jawar said this, Abiy said that and Lemma said this” He goes on to describe the following events of violence that lead to the death of a student: “We had no idea that this was happening, but there were Amhara students that came from Gonder and they gathered at a pool house in town owned by a person named Sami. He called them there to empower them, motivate them and push them to do what was to come. That night, at around 8pm, students were doing things as usual. Some were in their dorms, some were in the library studying and some were walking around the campus. The students broke into the dorm room of Adi Wako and they beat him until he was nearly dead. He was hospitalized and died within two days.” I asked whether these were students that they knew, to which Deriba confirmed that although they dressed in a way that hid their identities, these were students that studied on the same campus as Deriba, Debisa, Adi and others.

In response to the question: “as an individual, how would you describe the kind of harm that you have experienced?” Deriba responded as follows: “Not only have my democratic rights been breached, but my human rights have been denied. I am someone who was studying to not only change my life, but the state of my country. When we expressed that it was unsafe for us to study at the university and that we



should be transferred to a University in the Oromia region, we were denied. We were able to escape by wearing jumpers with the figure Tewodros (An Amhara Emperor) on the front, so we were mistaken for Amhara students. As a human being, I have been denied the opportunities that belong to me.”

Debisa enters: “My name is Debisa Chimdesa and I began my early education in Ambo, my hometown. My main hope was to become educated to support my mother and wider family. I never imagined that all of this would happen and I would have to give up my dream.” I asked Debisa the same question, “as an individual, how would you describe the kind of harm that you have experienced?” Debisa continues: “As my brother described (he uses brother to express their closeness, Debisa and Diriba are not biological brothers), at around 8pm, as some students were in the lounge area, others in their dorm, I was in the library when the attack broke out. We had nowhere to run, it seemed that Amhara students had been forewarned and had evacuated earlier.”

Debisa continues: “When the first two students were killed at Woldia University, we tried to offer our solutions, we are not politicians, we are just students with pens and books, but we tried because our rights and safety was being threatened, not because we hated the government or anything like that. What should have happened was, when these two students were killed at Woldiya University, the government should have thoroughly investigated the matter. After that, they should have taken steps to reinstate safety and peace for all students affected, so that they could return to study. Even if that meant closing the university for a time period. Just like they did when the Oromo student, Uni Alemayehu was killed in Dire Dawa, they immediately shut down the University and Oromo students were hosted 10 to one house, Amhara students were evacuated at night. They didn’t mediate the conflicts at Woldiya University properly, and now, the conflicts have spread. If the situation at Woldia University had been dealt with properly, we wouldn’t be here. Since fleeing the University and living in Addis Ababa, we have represented a group of 2,500 students to the Minister of Education. His suggestion is to go back and that they have set up a command post. We know the situation on campus, and it all happened with the presence of federal police, a federal command post, so we know it’s not safe.”

Deriba adds onto what Debisa says: “People think that because the Prime minister of the country is Oromo, somehow we have the upper hand. This is not the case. An Oromo student named Masho Umer, who was studying his second year of University on the Tedros campus, was attacked and fled. He was told by the President of the University to go back and that he would be safe. He was killed soon after. Same with Adi Wako from Woldiya University who would have graduated this year. Right now, we are asking the government peacefully to figure out a way for us to resume our studies. We have given them options, one: admit us to Universities in the Oromia region. If this



can not happen, then we ask to be admitted to a University in one of the other seven regional states of Ethiopia. We are still waiting to hear back from them.”

When asked if they wanted to make any final comments, Deriba began: “Right now Oromo students are facing two kinds of situations, there are those who can not get off their campus and are in an unsafe and unstable situation, and there are those who have fled or have been unfairly and unethically dismissed. Nothing is being done to fix the situation and to return people to their studies. It is people who have been educated that can move our country forward. We need education to be able to serve our country. Both the Education Minister and the Science and Technology Minister need to take action. As we know, we are heading towards an election. For Oromo students still on University campuses in the Amhara region, this is a very scary situation to be in. When we get closer to the election, it’s going to be worse than what we have seen. The government needs to pay attention to this.”

Debisa added: “My words are for the government. So many of us have been displaced, imagine you send your child to study and they are harmed in this way, you would feel that it is not right that the government watch and do nothing. The media here has been silent, we are people who were born and raised in this country, why are we being treated like we have no worth? The government needs to be asking the question of who, at large, is being dismissed and harmed. They need to ask this question fairly. Our rights are being violated, and so we have to enter the arena of political discourse to defend ourselves. As a human being, when your rights are being violated, it is your right to defend yourself. There are plenty of Oromo students who have been physically harmed, yes, but plenty more who have been psychologically harmed. What is being done to support them? We want to go back and study, and it is the responsibility of the government that we are able to do this safely.”

## Case Study 2

**Ashetu Mamo Danga - Age 22**  
**Haramaya University, Harar region**  
**Department: Cooperative (2nd year)**

Ashetu is the first in his family to go to University, he has an older sister who has a disability in both legs, making her unable to study. Ashetu’s father has passed away. Ashetu has aspirations to work in banking. He was born in Wallaga with no family in Harar, where he has been studying for two years. When asked how the conflict began, Ashetu describes the following: “Oromo students from all regions across Oromia had come together and decided that, to stand in solidarity with students at Woldiya University, where a student had recently been killed, we decided to wear all black as an



act of protest. It was also to signify our protest regarding the situation in Wallaga.” Wallaga is currently under military command post and students away from their families have no way of contacting them as the internet and phone lines are cut in the region.

Ashetu goes on to describe the following: “On the day of the Ethiopian Orthodox celebration, the Federal police force was deployed on campus and began arresting any students that they found wearing black. Students in the cafeteria, in the games room, across and outside the campus were targeted. Many of these students were not participating in the protest, they just happened to be wearing black. Some were coming back from church or the mosque, others were just hanging around the campus and town. A total of 77 students were rounded up and told to get in a police truck and were taken to the police station.” While detained, students were notified of their dismissal from University. We were all dismissed for two years. Ashetu recounts the shock and denial amongst the cohort. He describes what happened at the police station: “There was a woman that came and gave us food, she tried to take a picture of us but the police officer threw her. She eventually left us. The police officer then said to us, “whether you like or not, you will leave Haramaya tonight and you better be nowhere to be seen.” That same night, a federal police officer from the campus came and brought us food. We were afraid to eat it because it may be poisoned, so we refused. The police officer from the campus insisted we eat, buying us water and trying the food first to show us it was safe to eat. He really empathized with us, so we ate. The other police officers came and started threatening us, they said that they would shoot us if we were to be seen in Haramaya again. There were three 3f cars in front of us and behind us as we were driven to Addis Ababa, we were split into two buses.”

He says: “we were not able to go back onto campus grounds to retrieve any belongings. With just what we had on us, all 77 students were escorted to Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa. We were dropped off to a bus stop called Auto bistara with no money or place to go.” Ashetu stresses his words when he says: “we got to Finfinnee (the Oromo name for Addis Ababa) with nothing! They took us from Haramaya with nothing, no clothes or money.” He continues: “When we were at the bus stop Auto bistara, other police began surrounding us. We moved on quickly from there and I called Degene Tafo, a member of one opposition party, Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC). I had also called him at the police station in Haramaya. I told them that we can’t be split up, I was particularly afraid for the 16 women in the group. Anything could happen to them, so I didn’t want to leave them there. As a group, we went to Asko.”

In detail, Ashetu describes the way that they were supported by way of provided accommodation, living essentials and a platform to tell their story by organizations like the Macha and Tulma association, Oromo Liberation Front, Oromo relief and



development association, OFC, Oromia Media Network and Oromo individuals from across the country.

In response to the question, “what did tensions on the campus look like before the larger part of the violence took place?” Ashetu describes that “things weren’t good. When the student at Woldiya University was killed, we were patient. Then the student at Gonder was killed, then Bahir Dar. As for me, I am known to dislike the Ginbot flag 7 deeply. When I see it around campus, I’d feel sick. When we’d see students wearing it, we’d tell them to take it off or we’d remove it.” When I repeat what he said to make sure I was recording it correctly, Ashetu reiterates that as killing or harming students was not an option, he wouldn’t make it easy for students to wear the flag visibly.

When asked what he feels now, weeks on from the events, Ashetu describes feeling sad that he has not been able to fulfil his dream, more for his family's sake than his own. He says: “At that moment, we are being terrorized and arrested on what, for many, is supposed to be a holiday. People are giving each other holiday wishes, and we were going through something of a totally different spirit. Moreover, I can not contact my family because of the command post in Wallaga.”

Ashetu describes how much he loved school: “I would consistently get high grades, I was so disappointed to be dismissed, mostly for my family's sake.” In his final comments, he says: “14 of of the 16 students dismissed from Ambo University have been readmitted. We should be readmitted as well.”

### Case Study 3

#### **Abeya Degefa**

**Assistant Professor - Developmental Psychology**

**Teaching at Dire Dawa University for 10 years**

**Previous University admin and development Vice President**

Abeya Degefa completed his bachelor’s degree at Bahir Dar University in Pedagogical Science and English Composite, and his master’s degree at Addis Ababa University in Developmental Psychology. He is the first person in his family to complete higher education and has been teaching psychology at Dire Dawa University for 10 years. Abeya describes conflict starting on the campus (Dire Dawa University) last year because of political tensions in the country. He describes that, although no students died, the University faced many issues. Abeya played a key role in facilitating a reconciliation process between students, bringing together elders from both the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups to help see an end to the animosity. Abeya describes that the process produced unprecedented success: “students who had attacked each other



ended by embracing one another. " The killing of two student at Woldia University, in the Amhara region, was what reignited the conflict on the campus. This incident instigated the desire in Oromo students on campus to express their protest in the form of rallies and by taking their lunch to cafeteria's and not eating. It is at this point that the presence of federal police arrived on campus. Protesting is prohibited on the campus, and students were instructed to stop, Abeya was also a part of giving this instruction. Eventually, students were encouraged to maintain order on campus. Just two days afterwards, a student in the Ambo region named Tolessa was beaten severely by Amhara students, reigniting conflict on the campus.

Abeya describes the following: "Tolessa's beating gave way for the students to demonstrate again, they said that they were going to boycott classes. Then, an Amhara student from the Gojam region died and Amhara students left campus to protest. We convinced them to come back and resume classes. After the death of the student in North Shewa, the division between Oromo and Amhara students deepened. The federal police began attacking Oromo students on campus. Students were dragged on the ground, beat in the head and more than 700 dormitory doors were broken. This exacerbated protests. Students declared that they were not going to return to class until the federal police left campus. The attacks on Oromo students were carried out by the federal police and by a group of young Amhara's that call themselves "Satanaw". "Satanaw" consider themselves the equivalent to "Qeerroo"."

'Qeerroo' is the name given to unmarried men via the Oromo Gadaa system, an indigenous of social organization. It was this age bracket that led the protest movement that saw the changes in Ethiopia's government, which is why the movement is known to be led by the 'Qeerroo'. Misunderstandings and misinformation in Ethiopia and abroad have led many to believe that young people organised themselves into a group and called themselves 'Qerroo', which is incorrect.

I asked Abeya to tell me more about the reconciliation process that he started, mentioned briefly, earlier on in this report: "In consideration of the political tension and the ethnic based issues rife almost countrywide, I called Amhara and Oromo elders from Dire Dawa and I called students from Wallaga and Gojam and people around the University who were very interested in the process." Abeya describes that, before the reconciliation process, these students were "looking to kill each other." He continues "There were about 10-15 people altogether. The students who had attacked each other directly came together, they hugged each other, they forgave each other and they said that there would be no more attacks and that there would be no more hatred. After they returned to their respective regions and came back to campus, it felt like they had come back with certain missions influenced by political tensions outside of the University. We could really see this after the two students were killed in Woldiya University. It feels like



these attacks are well organized, the students who were attacked and the students who were killed are from Gulliso, the same small town in Western Wallaga. I am also from a town in Wallaga called Aira Gulliso”

Abeya tells me about a student named Bulti Negero: “There was a student who was stabbed in the abdomen and he really could have been sent home in 2 or 3 days if he was properly treated. But the first two surgeries performed at Dire Dawa University were so poorly done, that even though the following two that were performed after his transfer to tukur Ambassa Hospital were done well, he is now in a coma and the infections in his blood and body from the first two surgeries are almost irreversible. He has been in a coma for over a month. Currently, his medication is costing 15,000 birr daily. We had to make a lot of calls to get him transferred to Addis Ababa. There was an attempt on his life even while he was in the hospital in Dire Dawa, he survived only because a member of the Oromia police from the Dire Dawa city administration was there at the right time. According to me, the doctors who operated on him initially should be held legally accountable.“

Abeya tells me about the nature of his dismissal from his position as the University’s Admin and Development Vice President, a position that he describes as having required a highly competitive process to be selected for. “I have not been fired from the University totally, but I have been fired from my position as the University Admin and Development Vice President without any legitimate reason. I was in Addis and I had travelled back late one evening and had to go to campus to check on the progress of different tasks. The President of the University had called me earlier and said that we needed to meet that evening. After I had finished my tasks, she called me to the office where the two other Vice Presidents and the Secretary were present. They said: “the University board has made a decision, here is your letter.” I read the letter and it said: “Thank you for your service, you are no longer Vice President of Dire Dawa University” That is it. I called to ask them why and nobody answered my calls. I sent them messages; nobody answered my messages. The only reason that I think that they could have fired me for was that I had said that whenever you (the University) take measures, make sure to take fair measures, don’t side with certain groups because this will backfire. Of the 25 students dismissed, 16 of them are Oromo. Yet, 1,543 Oromo students were attacked by the federal police. They were made to kneel on the group and crawl, amongst other abuses. Out of that number, 23 students were arrested and only one of these students was non-Oromo. Mind you, this is on the same day that Bulti Negero was attacked. So, I was asking, quite boldly, why no action was being taken against the organized groups from outside of the University who were coming and attacking students. I think that they took my record of asking these questions and used it as a reason to fire me. Of those students taken to the police station, 7 were dismissed for a year and others were given a final warning, which means that they could be





dismissed at any moment.” Abeya emphasizes his words when he says that “There was no reason for these dismissals.” He continues: “There were students coming back from Mosques, who had no information about what was happening, but because they were heard speaking Afaan Oromo, they were arrested. Then these same students come out of prison and find that they have been dismissed, with no opportunity for a hearing. Nobody asked them any questions. There were no witnesses except the police. They had to go straight home, they were not allowed to collect their belongings from campus. This has created a lot of psychological and economic problems. I spoke about all of this, not just for Oromo students, but I advocated for Amhara students as well.”

Abeya speaks about the impact these events have had on his life and gives his closing remarks: “The students that are currently imprisoned and the students have been dismissed really need to be investigated. There are some students that really need to be dismissed from both the Amhara and Oromo group, I believe that. But more than 50% were dismissed simply because they are Oromo and this really needs to be investigated. As for my case, I really don’t know what I am going to do about the level of this harassment. There have been many attempts to attack me. Right after the dismissal, the Satanaw group tried to attack me on through occasions on my way and to church. I now fear for my life. And I think that attacking me would be a part of a particular political strategy. I have thousands of people behind him, and if I am attacked, it will create problems. I am protecting myself not only for myself but also for the community around Dire Dawa and wider areas. I haven’t been on campus since the dismissal. I have received death threats. I can not move freely around the town, I have two-three members of the community that act as guards if I ever need to go anywhere. I fear for my family, I have three children, a 6 ½-year-old son, 4 years and 1 month old daughter and a 5 months old baby boy. I know that there are people who have my information and who are looking for me. I don’t know what is going to happen.”

Last year, Abeya was also attacked by federal police on campus, as the students were being attacked. He describes a police officer threatening to shoot him in the head. It has been three and a half weeks since Abeya was dismissed from his position on the University board. There have been calls made on social media for him to be attacked. He translated some captions written in Amharic with his photograph attached that were posted on facebook, they read:

‘Abeya Degefe is the DDU Vice president. He is Oromo and extremely racist. He organizes and provides a wide range of support for Qeerroo and whenever Qeerroo commits crimes, he covers up for them. He needs to be persecuted.’



Part of another caption reads: “He is killing Amhara students. He often goes to Papa Recreational Centre with his family, please Fano Amhara (the group considering themselves as the Amhara equivalent to Qeerroo), take action on him.”

There are currently up to 500 federal police posted at Dire Dawa University.

## Case Study 4

### **Tokuma Boja** **Matu University - Illubabor Region** **Computer Science (3rd year)**

Tokuma had aspirations to work with the government to improve the conditions for Oromo people, particularly in the area of strengthening democracy. Like many others, he is the first to attend University from his family. When asked to describe what had happened on the campus before the dismissal occurred, this is what he described: “There were a lot of problems for Oromo students before the dismissals, we were being beaten in dorm rooms and elsewhere on campus by Amhara students and by the federal police, our dorm rooms would be broken into, students being withheld food and stripped of their Identification without any legal reason.” Tokuma’s own dorm room was broken into three times. Of the 29 students dismissed with Tokuma, 25 are from the Wallaga region of Oromia, Ethiopia. 6 students were dismissed for a year, 14 for two years and 9 dismissed indefinitely. Tokumma continues: “We were asked to forgive the Amhara students and not long after, those same students took the Abba Gadaa flag (the red, black and white Oromo flag) and burnt it in the middle of the campus. On one hand, we were being attacked by students and on the other hand, we were being attacked by police. We had nowhere to go on campus that was safe.”

Tokuma describes the following: “we refused to go to classes because of the situation that we were in, so the University withheld food from us, saying that we would only be given food if we resumed classes. We refused and because of this, we were issued letters saying that we were dismissed.”

Similar to the situation faced by Ashetu and other students from Haramaya University, Tokuma and the other 29 students were forced onto a police truck without the opportunity to collect any of their belongings from their dorms. Tokuma’s hometown, Horro guduru, Wallaga, is currently under a command post that has lasted more than two months. Effectively, this meant that they had no where to really go home to. When he and others reached a checkpoint at Shambu, they were not able to pass through because they did not have their ID cards. Tokuma describes that the police stationed there would not take their letters of dismissal as an indication of identity or their present



situation. “I explained that I couldn’t call anybody from his family because of the command post and network outage in Wallaga, they didn’t care.” After a long back and forth, which Tokuma describes to be a humiliating, degrading process, the students begged to be let past the checkpoint and eventually were. When asked where he is now, Tokuma says: “I am in Wallaga but I am in hiding. I sleep wherever I can find a place.”

Some days later, Tokuma called me. He says the following, short statement: “We are hearing that readmittance forms are being given to Amhara students. We haven’t been given these re-admittance forms.”

## Summary

Under normal circumstances, students who are accused of breaching rules are sent by teachers or any other body to the discipline committee. The discipline committee is responsible for investigating the case, including producing evidence and witnesses and the student is given a hearing where they can defend themselves. Punishment is then assigned accordingly. In crisis situations like what we are now seeing across Ethiopia, higher education will can make judgments about the students code of conduct but a student still has the right to a hearing. In the case of Dire Dawa University and other Universities, due process was not followed. This is a direct breach of Article 10 of the United Nations Human Rights Charter: “Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.”

The case studies in this report give us insight into the unethical and unlawful detention experienced by many Oromo students, with many more still detained. In the case of Tokumma, he reported that 12 students were released from prison the day that we spoke on the phone for our first interview. No students were properly charged with crimes and in cases like Ashetu and the 76 other students he was with, students were treated inhumanely whilst being detained arbitrarily. This is a direct breach of Article 9 of the United Nations Human Rights Charter: “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.”

Finally, I want to bring your attention to the extreme and widespread abuse of the Right to Education, outlined in the African charter of Human Rights as the 17th clause. To become educated is a human need and it is essential for a country’s population to undergo quality, consistent education in order for that country to develop economically, socially and politically. According to a report by USAID, Ethiopia’s youth unemployment rate is at 27% percent. More than half of the overall youth population is between the age



of 15 - 29, the age bracket in which higher education is traditionally pursued. In listening to these stories, the violence appears systematic and organized, though it is not in the scope of this report to make and defend that claim. Still, the case studies clearly show that the violence that has led to the deaths of students, the dismissals and the displacement is making it impossible for individuals to fulfill their right to education. More importantly in Ethiopia where many rural families use all their saving to pay for school and school is the only reasonable environment to which such young people belong to learn and become productive adult and stay out of violence, their dismissal directly links them and their family to communal human rights violation.

If you have any questions, please Contact us [info@ollaa.org](mailto:info@ollaa.org)  
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