



**Centre for Ideas, integrity &  
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مركز الأفكار والنزاهة وشؤون التنمية

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## Ethiopia: After 3 years, there is still no justice for the victims of the West Hararghe massacre

Security forces and justice and human rights committees failed to protect and investigate atrocities in West Hararghe

16 December 2020

Somalis living under Ethiopian rule have faced relentless atrocities over the past century as consecutive Ethiopian emperors and tyrants unleashed scorched earth policies aimed at uprooting and annihilating its Somali populace in the east. However what occurred exactly three years ago today on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2017 can only be described as a crime against humanity as hundreds of Somalis were wantonly massacred in the span of 24 hours.

Balbalayti area is situated in the West Hararghe zone of Oromiya region and has been home to thousands of Somali families for centuries. The Somali people in West Hararghe, have lived in the area for centuries and interestingly, most of them do not able speak Somali language. However, they have been targeted and murdered because of their ethnicity and religion background (Somali and Islam).

On 15 December 2017, more than 300 unarmed civilians from ethnic Somali were killed in three districts (including 64 individuals in Gadula) in the West Hararghe Zone of Oromia region. Prior the massacre, the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) gathered all males over 15 years old and placed them in concentration camps in the area. In Gadula Kebele (village), the ENDF gathered 65 individuals into their barrack and then left, realizing the threat facing victims (*Unfortunately, all of them were killed; only one child escaped, who fled to a Mosque*). On the night of 14th December 2017, ENDF contingents stationed in the area abruptly withdrew. The following morning (15th December) all roads leading in and out of Balbalayti were blocked off by the Government's Oromo police and paramilitary forces, and QEERROO.

In a blink of an eye, the town of Balbalayti and its Somali inhabitants were besieged by Oromiya regional state police and paramilitary forces and allied militias from the

Oromo youth movement commonly referred to as “QEERROO”. What followed next was a horrific reign of terror that saw hundreds of Somalis murdered. Many of them butchered alive. Even the women and children were not spared. This behaviour of mass killings is out of the local cultures, norms and traditions, which is new in the region. Turning a blind eye to this tragedy is being complicit, therefore the perpetrators must be held responsible for their acts, without impunity.

Following the onslaught a mass exodus ensued. Thousands of Somalis trekked from Balbalayti in the Oromiya region and sought refuge in the neighbouring Somali regional state. On 16th December 2017, a high-level officials from the federal government and Oromia region administration consisting of the Defence Minister Siraj Fegesa, the Attorney-General Getachew Ambaye, the Minister of Federal Affairs Kebede Chane, the Chief Commissioner of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission Dr Addisu Gebregziabher, the Commissioner of the Federal Police Abiyu Assefa, and the Deputy Head of the Secretariat of Oromia’s ruling party OPDO/EPRDF (Birhanu Tsegaye) have visited the massacre area, and found two mass graves, and recovered 48 bodies in Gadula, and reported the situation to the Prime Minister. Two days after the Balbalayti massacre (17th December 2017), Hailemariam Dessalegn who was the Ethiopian Prime Minister at the time went on the air and specifically stated a “massacre” had taken place in reference to the heinous atrocities that unfolded in Balbalayti. The top federal government officials and Oromo leaders (both Oromiya regional state and Diaspora leaders) are responsible for the West Hararghe tragedy, and other atrocities against humanity, including the Aweday massacre in East Hararghe of Oromiya region, as well as the displacement of more than a million people. Despite this well documented admission by the former premier, no one has still been held accountable for the Balbalayti massacre in West Hararghe of Oromia region.

The victims were gathered, detained and kept in a barracks and police stations for more two months. The government (the military and security forces officials at federal and Oromiya State) and the United Nations were aware of the looming tragedy, but they remained silent. The federal army withdrew from the area just a day before the massacre. All communications and also roads to and from the area have been cut off. The massacre was led by state security and police commanders in the region and zone. Therefore, what happened in West Hararghe was not a coincidence, but rather a well-organized and coordinated plan by the government (the federal and the Oromia State) that is supposed to protect them.

The well organized and targeted mass killings and displacements of innocent people by the government forces and affiliated militia have touched nerves with many Ethiopians, and humanitarian community. According to the [United Nations](#), “genocide is not something that happens overnight or without warning requires organization and constitutes and mostly carried out by governments or groups controlling the state apparatus”. According to the [Rome Statute of the International](#)

**Criminal Court** and other international laws, killing of innocent people, vulnerable groups (such as women, children, older people, and persons with disabilities) and minorities from a particular ethnic group is defined as an ethnic cleansing, genocide and crimes against humanity.

Three years have elapsed since hundreds of Somalis were wantonly massacred in Balbalayti area and the government of Ethiopia and international community and rights groups alike continue to sleep behind the wheel instead of getting justice for the victims of Ethiopia's biggest mass murder in recent history. To date, there is no single report about the massacres and forced displacements, and no one has been held accountable, criminally investigated, or charged for these offenses.

Failure of the Federal Government and Oromiya State, and the international community to prevent and address West Hararghe massacres has had prompted perpetrators to commit further violence against civilians from other ethnic groups, and created a political crisis, controversy and conflicts among the EPRDF tribes (Amhara, Oromo, SNNP and Tigray), and is encouraging many others. As a result of this failure, the criminals and perpetrators have committed further violence against civilians from other ethnics and killed hundreds and also displaced thousands of innocents from Gedeo, Benishangul, Gumuz, Sidama, Walayta, Harari, Amhara, Gurage, Tigray, Silte, Dorze, Gamo, and other ethnic groups in Ethiopia.

The families and relatives of the victims of East and West Hararghe massacres, and the elders and intellectuals of the Somali community believe that, there is no peace and reconciliation in Ethiopia and Horn of Africa, unless the East and West Hararge, and other massacres, and also plight of Qolji IDPs (*with more than 80,000 inhabitants, Qolaji camp is the largest of all internal displacement sites in Africa if not the world. They fled the fled ethnic cleansing and genocide in Oromiya region*) are effectively addressed. Therefore, we strongly believe that, at such a critical juncture in Ethiopia's history, the establishment of an UN mandated Commission of Inquiry or similar international mechanism is a minimum requirement for ensuring justice and accountability, and can also significantly contribute to preventing further atrocities being committed against ethnic Somalis and other minorities at risk in Ethiopia. The commission's findings will play a crucial role in assisting the Ethiopian government in promoting accountability for grave crimes committed by its regular and militia forces.

CIIDA Council (Centre for Ideas, Integrity and Development Affairs) is ready to direct and support any independent investigation into the war crimes, crimes against humanity, including gross human rights violations and atrocities committed in East and West Hararghe, Moyale and Tuliguled, and against the pastoralists and ethnic minorities in Ethiopia.

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16th December 2020