A Note on the New Reign of Terror in Ethiopia

Present political developments in Ethiopia clearly indicate that the country is back in another cycle of violence. The promises of democracy made by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia in 1991, following the demise of the former military regime (the Dergue), seem to have evaporated into thin air, and the country has fallen again under another authoritarian regime, which rules in the name of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Over 80% of the EPRDF members are Tigreans.

Like its predecessor the Dergue, the EPRDF has taken an uncompromising posture against opposition, and violation of human rights is on the increase. Journalists and human rights activists from inside and outside Ethiopia maintain that the present human rights situation is as bad as, if not worse than, it was during the notorious Red Terror of the former military dictatorship in the 1970s. Many reliable sources indicate that with a growing opposition to the Tigrean regime, the cycle of violence is approaching such a level that it may lead to one of the worst bloodshed in the history of the region. In fact, a recent report by Susan Pollock (see article in this volume) suggests that a human tragedy of great proportions is already in the making.

Although almost every region in Ethiopia is subjected to EPRDF's reign of terror, the Oromo are, by far, the most affected people. The EPRDF, has been at war with the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) since 1991 and intimidation, imprisonment, concentration camps, torture, extra-judicial killings, kidnapping and disappearances of individuals suspected to be members, supporters or sympathizers of the OLF have characterized its rule in Oromia. Lootings of Oromo property and the burning of Oromo homes and villages by the EPRDF forces are incidents reported almost daily from all corners of Oromia. In 1994 and 1995, 873 extra-judicial killings, 365 disappearances, and imprisonment of thousands of civilians were registered. These records are of known cases only (with names, addresses and in many cases also photos) and are mainly from the urban areas. Reports for the rural areas are very scant, although much of the repression is taking place there. In 1996, the situation is reported to be even worse, and torture, disappearances and extra-judicial killings are increasing rapidly.

As the case of Qamaria Haji Shabbu and her child shows (source: Urjii Weekly Newspaper, Addis Ababa, 14 and 21 May 1996), imprisonment, torture, and extra-judicial killing affect not only adults but even children including those who are yet unborn.

Qamaria Haji Shabbu lived all her life in Robee town in Bale province. In 1995 she married Saani Abdalla, a local businessman. Since he was continuously harassed and threatened by the EPRDF who accused him of supporting the OLF, Abdalla was forced to flee for his life that same year, leaving behind his pregnant wife. Shortly after her husband's flight, Qamaria was arrested; the new home and life that the young couple had just started to build for themselves and children was destroyed forever.

According to the EPRDF forces who arrested Qamaria, her crime was that she decorated her living room with a koboo (an embroidered basketwork) with colours to those of the OLF banners. Although the basketwork which Qamaria had embroidered is a common object for home decoration in the region, the EPRDF authorities used it as evidence for subversive activity against her.

On November 11, 1995, Qamaria was dragged from her home by the EPRDF military authorities without any warrant from a law court and thrown into prison, where she was kept for four and half months and was subjected to torture. Her case was even brought before the court, and the judge, seeing no crime in decorating her home with the koboo basketwork, ordered the prison authorities to set her free. But the local EPRDF political cadres over-ruled the court decision and threw her back into prison where they continued to torture her. Induced perhaps by the torture, Qamaria, who was then in an advanced stage of pregnancy gave birth prematurely to a son who survived for only three hours.

After the death of her child, Qamaria's health deteriorated rapidly. Because they were unable to give her proper treatment, the local medical authorities recommended that she should be taken to a hospital to save her life. But the EPRDF officials did not allow even that. On March 24, 1996 she passed away in prison. Qamaria was in her late teens.

Qamaria's case is an example of the outrageous human rights violation occurring today in and outside the numerous secret prisons and concentration camps that are mushrooming all over the Oromo country. The torture that caused the death of Qamaria and her infant son symbolizes the suffering of the Oromo and the brutality of their Abyssinian rulers. This should not be allowed to continue.

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