

**Refugee Review Tribunal  
AUSTRALIA**

**RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE**

**Research Response Number:** ETH33268  
**Country:** Ethiopia  
**Date:** 9 May 2008

Keywords: Ethiopia – Treatment of supporters or suspected supporters of Oromo Liberation Front– Jehovah’s Witnesses

This response was prepared by the Research & Information Services Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. This research response may not, under any circumstance, be cited in a decision or any other document. Anyone wishing to use this information may only cite the primary source material contained herein.

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**Questions**

- 1. Please provide information regarding the current treatment of people of Oromo ethnicity – and, in particular, women of Oromo ethnicity – in Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa?**
- 2. Please provide information in relation to anti-government opinion being imputed to people of Oromo ethnicity, in particular in Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa?**
- 3. Please provide information regarding support for or membership of the OLF being imputed to people of Oromo ethnicity by the authorities, in particular in Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa?**
- 4. Please provide information relating to differential treatment of people of Oromo ethnicity in the process of obtaining a passport?**
- 6. Deleted**
- 7. Please provide information on the current treatment of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Ethiopia and the extent to which they may practice their religion in Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa.**

**RESPONSE**

- 1. Please provide information regarding the current treatment of people of Oromo ethnicity – and, in particular, women of Oromo ethnicity – in Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa?**

The Oromo is the largest ethnic group comprising up to 40% of Ethiopia’s population and Oromia is the largest of Ethiopia’s 9 states.

A partisan source claimed at the end of 2006 that there were 30,000 Oromo prisoners of conscience detained in Oromia and that the regime had become more insecure and so “with impunity, it kills, displaces, detains and tortures anyone who dissents.” (Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee on Human Rights, ‘Human Rights and Political Situation in Ethiopia: Presentation’ 2006, National Parliament of Ireland (Oireachtas) website,

<http://debates.oireachtas.ie/DDebate.aspx?F=FOH20061206.xml&Node=H2> – Accessed 8 May 2008 – Attachment 1)

Human Rights Watch reported prior to the recent elections that

A dominant theme in the EPRDF's political discourse on Oromia is the need to combat the activities of the outlawed Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which has been fighting a low-level insurrection against the government for years with Eritrean backing. Across much of Oromia, local officials have routinely and for many years used unproven allegations of links to the OLF as a pretext to subject law-abiding government critics to arbitrary detention, torture, extrajudicial killing, and other forms of human rights abuse.

Local officials in Oromia have also made extensive use of the kebele system, along with smaller cells called gott and garee, to keep residents under constant surveillance for signs of government criticism. The overwhelming majority of local and regional authorities in Oromia belong to the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), which is the regional arm of the EPRDF.

Ethiopia's last elections were parliamentary polls in 2005. The run-up to the elections saw signs of openness in some areas, though in most constituencies the same patterns of repression documented above prevailed. Following the elections, opposition efforts to contest the results sparked a heavy-handed government crackdown that saw several hundred people gunned down in the streets of Addis Ababa, mass arrests of perceived opposition supporters, and several prominent opposition leaders jailed on charges of treason that were ultimately dropped. ("Repression sets stage for non-competitive elections" 2008, Human Rights Watch, 10 April, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200804110930.html?viewall=1> – Accessed 6 May 2008 – Attachment 2)

Oromo leaders and activists argue that the repression of the Oromo population constitutes a form of state terrorism such that

They do not have personal and public safety in their homes and communities. They are exposed to massive political violence, human right violations and absolute poverty. Because of the magnitude of the Oromo problem, it is impossible to provide a numerical face to the devastating effects of violence, poverty, hunger, suffering, malnutrition, disease, ignorance, alienation, and hopelessness. Since the Meles regime is weak and lacks legitimacy, accountability, and professionalism, it could not and cannot solve these massive and complex problems...State terrorism is a systematic governmental policy in which massive violence is practiced on a given population group with the goal of eliminating any behaviour which promotes political struggle or resistance by members of that group.

The same writer also makes the claim that the wider OLF has become almost synonymous with the Oromo people, with the regime's actions consistent with the destruction of both;

With the increasing intensity of the Oromo national movement, the Tigrayan authoritarian-terrorist regime is determined to increase the level of mass killings and terrorism. The regime is concerned with the existence of the OLF and the support and sympathy this organization enjoys from the majority of the Oromo people...What bothers the regime is that the more it terrorizes the Oromo people by killing or imprisoning thousands of them by claiming that they are the supporters of the OLF, the more the Oromo are determined to embrace Oromo nationalism and the OLF. As a result, the Oromo and the OLF have almost become synonymous. Therefore, it is impossible to destroy the OLF without destroying the Oromo

people. (Jalata, A, "The impacts of Ethiopian state terrorism and globalization of the Oromo national movement" 2005, Oromo Liberation Front website, <http://www.oromoliberationfront.org/Publications/Publications.htm> - Accessed 8 May 2008 – Attachment 3)

According to Freedom House organisation, the government has established a women's affairs ministry (announced in October 2006), the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association has begun training on women's rights issues to the police force, but although organisations to assist women exist, they apparently lack public support. Most independent reports consistently refer to the routine violation of women's rights in the country:

Women have traditionally had few land or property rights, especially in rural areas, where there is little opportunity for female employment beyond agricultural labor. Violence against women and social discrimination are reportedly common. Societal norms and limited infrastructure prevent many women from seeking legal redress for their grievances. While illegal, the kidnapping of women and girls for marriage continues in parts of the country. (Freedom House 2007, *Freedom in the World Report – Ethiopia (2007)*, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2007&country=7175> - Attachment 4)

CARE Ethiopia has recently launched a project which is aimed at the elimination of bride abduction called 'Healthy Unions: Behaviour Change to Eliminate Bride Price, Bride Abduction, and Early Marriage in Ethiopia'. Men who are 'unable to afford the bride price abduct young women and rape them, making them unmarriageable' CARE reported.

Although the Ethiopian law, amended in 2004 to penalize abduction with 3-10 years incarceration, the law remains largely ignored by law enforcement and the judicial system, according to CARE Ethiopia.

... Indicating the National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia (EGLDAM), CARE Ethiopia stated the incidence of bride price is widespread among the Oromo people, Ethiopia's largest ethnic group representing 40% of the total Ethiopia population "In Oromiya, where the project will operate, 80% of marriages resulted from abduction, where as the national average stands at 69%," he stated while explaining for the selection of the region, in particularly Borena and West Hararghe, for the project. ("Bride-Price Key in Increasing Rate of Rape" 2008, *All Africa (Daily Monitor)*, 10 April <http://allafrica.com/stories/200804100957.html> - Accessed 5 May 2008 – Attachment 5)

The US Department of State has noted the high incidence of non-reporting of rape

Observers estimated that at least 1,000 rapes occurred annually in Addis Ababa, but data based on official police reports counted only approximately 400 cases per year. The press continued to report regularly on rape cases, particularly when injury to minors resulted. Courts sentenced convicted rapists to 10 to 15 years' imprisonment, as prescribed by law.

Domestic violence, including spousal abuse and rape, was a pervasive social problem. A 2005 World Bank study concluded that 88 percent of rural women and 69 percent of urban women believed their husbands had the right to beat them. While women had recourse to the police and the courts, societal norms and limited infrastructure prevented many women from seeking legal redress, particularly in rural areas. The government prosecuted offenders on a limited scale. (US Department of State 2008, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2007 – Ethiopia* 11 March (Section 4) - Attachment 6)

**2. Please provide information in relation to anti-government opinion being imputed to people of Oromo ethnicity, in particular in Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa?**

**3. Please provide information regarding support for or membership of the OLF being imputed to people of Oromo ethnicity by the authorities, in particular in Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa?**

A number of reports refer to the adverse treatment of individuals suspected of having links with the Oromo Liberation Front. A research response completed in April provides recent information on this subject, which includes Human Rights Watch comments concerning harassment and abuse of members of even registered opposition parties the Oromo National Congress and the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement:

In Oromia, Ethiopia's most populous state, government authorities have used the fact of a long-standing insurgency by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) to imprison, harass, and physically abuse critics, including school children. Victims are informally accused of supporting the OLF, an outlawed rebel group, but supporters of the Oromo National Congress (ONC) and the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM), registered opposition political parties, suffer similar treatment. In early January, more than thirty students were arrested and at least one, a tenth-grader, died as a result of police beatings in Dembi Dollo, western Oromia. Other students were severely injured and hospitalized. Also in January, local police and militia members in Ghimbi shot two high school students dead, one as he and others were walking peacefully along, the other as he covered the body of the first with his own in order to protect him from further harm. In March security officials allegedly executed 19 men and a 14-year-old girl near Mieso in northeastern Oromia. Starting in August, federal and state security forces arrested well over 200 people in western Oromia, including three members of the executive committee of the Nekemte chapter of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council and OFDM members, on suspicion of links to the OLF. Some, including the EHRCO officials, were released under court order after the police failed to provide evidence against them but most were still detained as of early November. At least 25 were being held in defiance of court orders to release them (Human Rights Watch 2008, *World Report 2008 – Ethiopia* – Attachment 7).

The Ethiopian Human Rights Council provides regular reports on human rights throughout Ethiopia. In its most recent report the Council provides the list of members or supporters of OFDM who were purportedly being detained at the Addis Ababa Central Crime Investigation Department and elsewhere since August 2007 “for allegedly having links with the Oromo Liberation Front”. Forty names are listed. (Ethiopian Human Rights Council 2008, ‘29<sup>th</sup> Regular Report’, January, EHRCO website <http://www.ehrco.org/> - Accessed 6 May 2008 - Attachment 8)

Earlier reports record similar events of illegal detention, including Sewnet Sequare:

He is a father of one living in the CMC locality in Addis Ababa. On 30 May 2007, armed policemen arrested him without a warrant on suspicion of links to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). The policemen took him to the Central Crime Investigation Department (*Maikelawi*) and detained him there. He was taken to court on 2 June 2007. His family told EHRCO that Sewnet had his cloths [sic] torn up and he was also limping on the day he was brought to court and they suspect that he was assaulted in *Maikelawi*.

...

[Likewise] Tarekegn Bersosa. He is a college student living in Addis Ababa Sholla locality. On 26 May 2007 armed policemen arrested him without a warrant in Fincha town of the Oromia Region on suspicion of having links with the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). He was

brought to Addis Ababa and has been detained at the Central Crime Investigation Department (*Maikelawi*) since then. (Ethiopian Human Rights Council 2008, '28<sup>th</sup> Regular Report', 20 September, EHRCO website <http://www.ehrco.org/> - Accessed 8 May 2008 – Attachment 9)

The Oromo Support Group also provides regular reports on human rights, its most recent being for 2006-2007 and it includes a description of an unexplained death of an Oromo pharmacy student at Addis Ababa University in April 2007 which resulted in a demonstration at the end of that month.

Against Oromo cultural norms and without permission from the student's parents, internal organs, including his eyes, were removed and the body was severely disfigured. The outrage was intensified by the university President, Dr Endrias Eshete, who made derogatory comments to the young man's father and student representatives, when they complained. Government special riot police, the 'Agazi', dispersed the rally on the campus, using force, injuring and imprisoning an unknown number of students. (Oromo Support Group undated, OSG Press Release No. 43, July 2006-2007 <http://www.oromo.org/osg/pr43.htm> - Accessed 7 May 2008 – Attachment 10)

The US Department of State reported that

Security forces arrested without warrant hundreds of persons during the year, particularly prior to the Ethiopian New Year on September 11. Security forces began arresting individuals throughout the Oromiya Region on the grounds that they were involved with the OLF and possibly planning terrorist activity. Many of those arrested were members of the opposition UEDF or OFDM parties. Approximately 450 cases of arrest were reported to opposition party offices in Addis Ababa. (US Department of State 2008, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2007 – Ethiopia* 11 March (Section 1d) - Attachment 6)

In a presentation to a sub-committee of the Irish Parliament it was stated that

Any person who expresses sympathy for the opposition is systematically accused of having OLF sympathies and becomes a military target, following which he or she is subjected to harassment, arbitrary arrest and so on. In addition, the Government looks to provoke tensions between communities to prevent unification of the opposition, justify further reparations and provoke mass arrests, the purpose of which is to target specific persons such as high profile opponents and leaders of the community. (Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee on Human Rights, 'Human Rights and Political Situation in Ethiopia: Presentation' 2006, National Parliament of Ireland (Oireachtas) website, <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/DDebate.aspx?F=FOH20061206.xml&Node=H2> – Accessed 8 May 2008 – Attachment 1)

Previous research responses also provide relevant information including RRT Research Response ETH32748 of 11 February 2008 (question 4) (RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response ETH32748*, 11 February – Attachment 11) and ETH33166 (RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response ETH33166*, 24 April (question 5) - Attachment 12) and ETH31109 (RRT Country Research 2006, *Research Response ETH31109*, 20 December (question 6) - Attachment 13).

#### **4. Please provide information relating to differential treatment of people of Oromo ethnicity in the process of obtaining a passport?**

No specific evidence of discrimination against someone of Oromo ethnicity without any other special circumstances relating to the passport application was found. DFAT advice from September 2006 includes information should the person in question be of interest to the authorities (DIAC Country Information Service 2006, *Country Information Report NO. 06/52 – Ethiopia: Passport Issue Arrangements*, 15 September- Attachment 14 ).

Although it does not specifically relate to an Oromo passport applicant, a more recent DFAT report which related to the circumstances of an applicant of Oromo ethnicity included information obtained from DFAT's Canadian counterparts in Addis Ababa

They noted that there have been several cases of political protesters being arrested and detained (and most likely tortured) in 2005/6, however they could not comment on protests in 2001. There have also been reports of Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) members (as well as Oromos who are generally accused of being OLF sympathisers) being seriously harassed by authorities. While not prepared to comment on the specifics of this case, they noted that in general, it is clear that serious human rights violations are committed against those perceived to be a real threat to the government (such as the OLF). Threats to political opposition (e.g. CUD) appear to be less of a concern at the moment, but that could change.

Ultimately, it is very difficult to assess what threat the individual in question might face. The key question would be whether or not Ethiopian authorities saw him as a real threat. If so, then he could face serious problems, but if not then he might be able to return without incident. There is not enough information to provide a conclusive response. (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2008, *DFAT Report 768 RRT Information Request: ETH32591*, 1 February – Attachment 15)

#### **6. Deleted.**

#### **7. Please provide information on the current treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses in Ethiopia and the extent to which they may practice their religion in Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa.**

There are no reports that Jehovah's Witnesses have any restraints imposed on their ability to practice their faith. The US Department of State has reported that

Christian evangelical and Pentecostal groups continue to be the fastest growing groups and constitute an estimated 10 percent of the population. Established Protestant churches such as Mekane Yesus and the Kale Hiwot are strongest in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPR); western and central Oromiya; and in urban areas. In Gambella Region, Mekane Yesus followers represent 60 percent of the population. The Evangelical Church Fellowship claims 23 denominations under its religious umbrella throughout the country.

Oriental Rite and Latin Rite Roman Catholics number more than 500,000. There are reportedly more than 7,500 Jehovah's Witnesses adherents and 105 Kingdom Halls in the country. Jews, animists, and practitioners of traditional indigenous religions make up most of the remaining population in the country. In Addis Ababa and north Gondar, in the Amhara Region, the people known as Feles Mora claim that their ancestors were forced to convert from Judaism to Ethiopian Orthodoxy many centuries ago. There are very few atheists.

Although precise data is not available, active participation in religious services is generally high throughout the country. (US Department of State 2007, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2007 – Ethiopia*, September - Attachment 18)

Similarly,

Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses continued to lease their own plots of land in the capital and throughout the country, due to lack of suitable properties available from the Government. However, in Oromia some plots were provided free of charge to some religious groups to build places of worship. (US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2006 – Ethiopia*, September - Attachment 19)

According to the figures on the Watchtower web site there was a 2007 peak of 8,058 Jehovah's Witnesses, and 157 congregations in Ethiopia ('Statistics: 2007: Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide' 2007, *Watchtower web site* <http://www.watchtower.org/e/statistics/wholereport.htm> - Accessed 5 May 2008 – Attachment 20)

## **List of Sources Consulted**

### Internet Sources

#### **Government Information and Reports**

Immigration & Refugee Board of Canada <http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/>

UK Home Office <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/>

US Department of State <http://www.state.gov/>

#### **International News & Politics**

BBC News <http://www.bbc.co.uk>

Economist <http://www.economist.co>

New York Times <http://www.nytimes.com/>

#### **Region Specific Links**

All Africa.com <http://allafrica.com>

Africa Confidential <http://www.africa-confidential.com/home>

Ethiopian Human Rights Council <http://www.ehrco.org/>

Oromo Liberation Front <http://www.romoliberationfront.org/>

Oromo Support Group <http://www.oromo.org/>

#### **Search Engines**

Google <http://www.google.com>

Google Scholar <http://www.google.com/scholar>

Clusty <http://www.clusty.com>

Altavista <http://www.altavista.com>

#### Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIAC Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Research & Information database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

MRT-RRT Library Catalogue

## List of Attachments

1. Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee on Human Rights, 'Human Rights and Political Situation in Ethiopia: Presentation' 2006, National Parliament of Ireland (Oireachtas) website, <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/DDebate.aspx?F=FOH20061206.xml&Node=H2> – Accessed 8 May 2008.
2. “Repression sets stage for non-competitive elections” 2008, Human Rights Watch, 10 April, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200804110930.html?viewall=1> – Accessed 6 May 2008.
3. Jalata, A, “The impacts of Ethiopian state terrorism and globalization of the Oromo national movement” 2005, Oromo Liberation Front website, <http://www.romoliberationfront.org/Publications/Publications.htm> - Accessed 8 May 2008.
4. Freedom House 2007, *Freedom in the World Report – Ethiopia (2007)*, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2007&country=7175> .- (REFWORLD)
5. “Bride-Price Key in Increasing Rate of Rape” 2008, *All Africa (Daily Monitor)*, 10 April <http://allafrica.com/stories/200804100957.html> - Accessed 5 May 2008.
6. US Department of State 2008, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2007 – Ethiopia* 11 March.
7. Human Rights Watch 2008, *World Report 2008 – Ethiopia.*)
8. Ethiopian Human Rights Council 2008, ‘29<sup>th</sup> Regular Report’, January, EHRCO website <http://www.ehrco.org/> - Accessed 6 May 2008.
9. Ethiopian Human Rights Council 2008, ‘28<sup>th</sup> Regular Report’, 20 September, EHRCO website <http://www.ehrco.org/> - Accessed 8 May 2008.
10. Oromo Support Group undated, OSG Press Release No. 43, July 2006-2007 <http://www.oromo.org/osg/pr43.htm> - Accessed 7 May 2008.
11. RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response ETH32967*, 11 February.
12. RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response ETH33166*, 24 April.
13. RRT Country Research 2006, Research Response ETH31109, 20 December.
14. DIAC Country Information Service 2006, *Country Information Report NO. 06/52 – Ethiopia: Passport Issue Arrangements*, 15 September. (CISNET Ethiopia CX161651 CX161651)
15. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2008, *DFAT Report 768 RRT Information Request: ETH32591*, 1 February.



16. Deleted
17. Deleted
18. US Department of State 2007, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2007 – Ethiopia*, September.
19. US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2006 – Ethiopia*, September.
20. “Statistics: 2007: Report of Jehovah’s Witnesses Worldwide” 2007, *Watchtower web site* <http://www.watchtower.org/e/statistics/wholereport.htm> - Accessed 5 May 2008.