

**Refugee Review Tribunal
AUSTRALIA**

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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Keywords: – Ethiopia – Ethnic composition and political profile of Yirgalem in the Sidama zone of the SNNP region – Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) leaders – Current treatment of OLF supporters – United Arab Emirates non-signatory to Refugee convention

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Questions

- 1. What is the ethnic composition of Yirgalem?**
- 2. Please provide any information regarding Yirgalem’s political profile, including the names of local leaders of the OLF.**
- 3. Please provide the names of prominent leaders of the OLF in Ethiopia since 2001.**
- 4. Please provide information on the current treatment of OLF supporters in Ethiopia.**
- 5. Is the United Arab Emirates a signatory to the Refugee Convention?**

RESPONSE

Amongst the sources consulted, the town of Yirgalem was frequently referred to as Yirga Alem or Yirga ‘Alem. Each of these transliterations was used in the relevant searches undertaken in preparing this research response.

1. What is the ethnic composition of Yirgalem?

Yirgalem is a township in the Sidama zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) region, bordering the Oromiya region (‘Plate 87: Sudan South, Ethiopia and Somalia’ 2005, *The Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World* (11th edition) – Attachment 1; ‘Administrative Regions of Ethiopia’ (undated), United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs website

<http://ochaonline.un.org/OchaLinkClick.aspx?link=ocha&docid=8510> – Accessed 14 April 2008 – Attachment 2).

Information on the website of the Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia indicates that Yirgalem is within the Dale wereda (an administrative division smaller than that of the zone, also transliterated as 'woreda') and that the official estimate of Yirgalem's population in July 2006 was 43, 815 ('Section – B Population' (undated), Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia website http://www.csa.gov.et/text_files/national%20statistics%202005/Population.pdf – Accessed 14 April 2008 – Attachment 3).

A search of the sources consulted found no detailed statistical data on the ethnic composition of the Yirgalem township, the Dale woreda, the Sidama zone (formerly the Sidamo province) or the SNNP region, and few specific mentions of the Oromo population within these administrative areas.

The only specific reference found to the Oromo community in Yirgalem is in a document on an Australian website relating to a study tour. The tour itinerary includes two days in Yirgalem, during which the tour party meets with "members of the Oromia Farmers Cooperative Union, A Fair Trade Cooperative, operating in the area" ('The World of Coffee – Ethiopia' (undated), Four Corners Travel website www.fourcornerstravel.com.au/focus/Itineraries/Ethiopia_Coffee_Tour4.pdf – Accessed 10 April 2008 – Attachment 4).

Information on the website of the Oromo Liberation Front indicates that a "large proportion" of the population of the Sidama zone is Oromo:

The Oromo make up over 30 million out of the present 55 million population of the Ethiopian Empire. They are found in all the regions of the Ethiopian Empire except for Gondar. They make up a large proportion of the population of Ilubbabor, Arsi, Baale, Shawa, Hararge, Wallo, Wallagga, Sidamo and Kafa ('Oromia Briefs' 2005, Oromo Liberation Front website <http://www.romoliberationfront.org/OromiaBriefs.htm> – Accessed 14 April 2008 – Attachment 5).

The *World Directory of Minorities* states that the "Oromo are the largest ethnic minority group in Ethiopia... [and] are predominant in southern, south-eastern and south-western Ethiopia" (Minority Rights Group 1997, *World Directory of Minorities*, Minority Rights Group International, London, p.413 – Attachment 6).

2. Please provide any information regarding Yirgalem's political profile, including the names of local leaders of the OLF.

A search of the sources consulted found limited information regarding these matters.

The most recent House of Peoples' Representatives elections and State Councils elections were in 2005. The Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) were the main opposition to the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) contested the elections as part of the EPRDF coalition and the Oromo National Congress (ONC) contested the elections as part of the UEDF coalition ('Political Party Coalitions' (undated), National Electoral Board of Ethiopia website <http://www.electionsethiopia.org/Political%20Coalitions.html> – Accessed 14 April 2008 – Attachment 7).

There were 545 seats contested for the House of Peoples' Representatives. According to the official results, the EPRDF won a majority of 327 seats, the CUD won 109 seats and the UEDF won 52 seats, with the remainder going to other parties. Within the Sidama zone, the CUD won in the Awasa constituency and the EPRDF won all other seats ('Official election results for the House of Peoples' Representatives' (undated), National Electoral Board of Ethiopia website – <http://www.electionsethiopia.org/PDF/results/HPR%20Result.pdf> – Accessed 14 April 2008 – Attachment 8).

In the elections for the State Council of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples region held at the same time, 348 seats were contested. The “winner party” for the state is identified in the official results as the “SEPDM/EPRDF”, the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) being a member party of the EPRDF coalition. The SEPDM/EPRDF won 271 seats, the CUD 39, the UEDF 37 and the Sheko and Mezenger Democratic United Organization (SMPDUO) won one seat ('Winner Parties of State Councils' (undated), National Electoral Board of Ethiopia website <http://www.electionsethiopia.org/PDF/results/Regional%20Council%20Summary.pdf> – Accessed 14 April 2008 – Attachment 9).

Reports on the local council elections held in April 2008 indicate that the ruling EPRDF was expected to win, with the opposition parties complaining of harassment and intimidation in the lead up to the elections ('Ethiopia votes in local elections' 2008, *BBC News*, 13 April <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7344936.stm> – Accessed 14 April 2008 – Attachment 10).

The only specific mention found of political unrest in the Sidama zone relates to the Sidama ethnic group, Amnesty International having reported that:

There were detentions in March 2006 of some 60 peaceful demonstrators belonging to the Sidama ethnic group in the Southern Region, who were arrested in Awassa and other southern towns: they were calling for the Sidama administrative zone to be upgraded to a regional state (Amnesty International 2006, *Ethiopia: Prisoners of conscience on trial for treason: opposition party leaders, human rights defenders and journalist*, AFR 25/013/2006, 2 May – Attachment 11).

3. Please provide the names of prominent leaders of the OLF in Ethiopia since 2001.

The website of the Oromo Liberation Front provides no historical information regarding its leadership nor detailed information regarding current office bearers. However, a document dated 31 March 2008 on the website is attributed to “Daawud Ibsaa, Chairman, National Council of the OLF” (Daawud Ibsaa 2008, ‘The Famine in Oromia: the Dry Season is Not the Only Culprit’, OLF website, 31 March http://www.romoliberationfront.org/PressReleases/Famine_not_only.pdf – Accessed 14 April 2008 – Attachment 12).

The *Political Handbook of the World: 2007* makes reference to the leadership of the OLF as follows:

OLF antigovernment military activity in pursuit of independence was reported in mid-2002, although severe factionalization was reported between OLF militants, led by Daoud Ibsaa, and moderates inclined to negotiate with the government. The OLF remained “at war with the regime” in early 2005, although Galasa Dilbo, the OLF

chair who had been under house arrest, had been permitted to leave for Nairobi, Kenya, in late 2004...

Leaders: GELASA Dilbo (Former Chair, in exile), Daoud IBSA, (Chair), Harsan HUSSEIN (resident in Washington, D.C.), Shigat GELETA (resident in Berlin, Germany) (Banks, A.S., Muller, T.C. & Overstreet, W.R. (eds) 2007, *Political Handbook of the World: 2007*, CQ Press, Washington – Attachment 13).

A detailed report dated 1 October 2004 documents the process of conflict resolution with respect to conflict within the OLF leadership in 2001. The report refers to meetings in May and June 2002 with “Obbo Daawud Ibsa, the Chairman of the OLF, and Obbo Galassa Dilbo the former Chairman”, and with “Obbo Abiyu Geleta, the former OLF Foreign Affairs Representative”. The Chairman’s name is also transliterated in different parts of the document as Dawud Ibsa and as Daawud Ibsaa, although most references to him are as Obbo Daawud (Shanachaa Jaarsummaa 2004, ‘A Report on the Peace Process to Resolve the Conflict within the OLF Leadership’, Africa Working Group website, 1 October <http://www.africaworkinggroup.org/shanachaareport/files/Shanachaa11.final.report.pdf> - Accessed 8 April 2008 – Attachment 14).

The 2004 edition of *Revolutionary and Dissident Movements of the World* refers to the chairman of the OLF as Daoud Ibsa Gudina (Szajkowski, B. (ed) 2004, *Revolutionary and Dissident Movements of the World*, 4th edition, John Harper Publishing, London, p. 115 – Attachment 15).

Africa South of the Sahara 2004, also published in 2004, reports that Katabe Mayu was at that time the acting Chair of the OLF and Abdulfattah A. Moussa Biyyo the Vice-Chair (*Africa South of the Sahara 2004*, 33rd edition, Europa Publications, London, p.426 – Attachment 16).

By way of background, according to Oromo naming traditions “[e]ach person has one main name, their given name... Their second name is the main name of their father. A third name is usually the name of their paternal grandfather... “Obbo” is the Oromiffa equivalent to “Mister” (“Oromo Cultural Profile’ (undated), Ethnomed website, http://ethnomed.org/ethnomed/cultures/oromo/oromo_cp.html#names – Accessed 14 April 2008 – Attachment 17).

4. Please provide information on the current treatment of OLF supporters in Ethiopia.

An article dated 27 October 2007 in *The Reporter*, an Addis Ababa newspaper, reports that Prime Minister Meles had stated that only those engaged in subversive activities on behalf of OLF had been arrested in an ongoing operation to contain the OLF. According to the article:

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi sent a warning on Tuesday to some of the opposition parties which he described as front organizations for the outlawed dissident group, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).

The prime minister delivered the warning during a parliamentary debate on the President’s opening speech delivered at the House of Peoples’ Representatives.

Meles’ warning came in response to the accusation put forward by the Bulcha Demeksa, chairman of the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM), about the alleged

persecution of Oromos. Bulcha questioned the validity of the president's speech for its failure to mention what he called the plight of Oromos.

"Oromos are being chased after, killed and harassed. How come the president of Ethiopia did not raise this issue? We hoped that the president would extend a request for some kind of reconciliation but in vain," Bulcha said. He said that the kind of mass arrest facing Oromos cannot be overlooked.

...

Meles responded to the accusations that the Oromo people as a whole have not been jailed or harassed. Of the many millions of Oromo people a little over 200 of them could be arrested, which he said is very few. He posed a question as to who is being arrested. He said that only those engaged in subversive activities on behalf of OLF have been arrested.

"If there is any one who equates all the Oromo people with that of OLF, that's his problem. OLF and the Oromo people are not one and the same thing," Meles emphatically said.

...

Meles told parliament that his government tried to approach OLF people to try to solve their differences peacefully. He added that he even personally met some of their representatives to talk about peace but to no avail. He accused the front of collaborating with the Eritrean government and Somali Jihadists, and implanting bombs in Ethiopia and wrecking people's lives.

The government had to respond and contain OLF, PM Meles insisted: "If the government kept quiet and did nothing about it, it would be, not just negligence of duty but criminal because every government has the responsibility to protect its citizens." He added that it is not the government that is primarily going after OLF people, but the Oromo people themselves, especially in the rural areas. His hope is that the on-going operation would bear fruit within several months (Bruck Shewareged 2007, 'Meles Warns Opposition Parties Supporting of OLF', *The Reporter*, 27 October <http://allafrica.com/stories/200710270019.html> – Accessed 11 April 2008 – Attachment 18).

An Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) report dated 31 October 2007 provides information on persons detained without warrant on suspicion of having links with the OLF, notwithstanding lack of sufficient evidence:

In this 103rd Special Report, EHRCO has compiled complaints received from families of victims on the situation of detainees who were arrested without a court warrant from different areas of the Oromia region and Addis Ababa on suspicion of having links with the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). According to the complaints, once appearing before a judge, the detainees have been remanded in custody on several adjournments with the request of police for additional time to conduct investigation. Some of the detainees have had their files closed by courts for police could not come up with sufficient evidence to warrant their continued detention and some of them were allowed bail. However, in defiance of these court orders, police continued detaining the individuals by the time this report was being compiled.

...

[I]n a letter dated on 15 October 2007, No. O.F.D.M/100/617, the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) filed a complaint with EHRCO stating that several of its members and supporters have been arrested without a warrant on suspicion of having links with the OLF and are being held in defiance of a court order which declared the closing of the files for lack of sufficient evidence to warrant their detention. According to the letter, the following individuals are being held in *Maikelawi* in spite of appearing before a court on several adjournments and the courts ordered for their files to be closed for police could not justify their continued detention with sufficient evidence (Ethiopian Human Rights Council

2007, '103rd Special Report', EHRCO website, 31 October
<http://www.ehrco.org/reports/special103eng.pdf> – Accessed 11 April 2008 – Attachment 19).

The Human Rights Watch report on events in Ethiopia in 2007 also mentions arrests by federal and state security forces of people “on suspicion of links to the OLF”. The report states that:

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 20).

The US Department of State’s report on human rights practices in Ethiopia in 2007 also mentions actions by the Ethiopian authorities against persons and groups suspected of involvement with the OLF. According to the report:

on January 3, police shot and killed two students during a raid on Gue Secondary School, Gue town, Oromiya Region. Police stormed the school in response to suspicions that supporters of the outlawed Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) were active in the school. Several other students were beaten and arrested. Some of the students were released, but others remained in detention at year’ end.

...

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. Three of these cases were executive committee members of EHRCO’s Nekemte office. Nearly all those held were not charged with any crime or brought to court. At year’s end 148 remained in jail (US Department of State 2008, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2007 – Ethiopia*, March – Attachment 21).

A Human Rights Watch report dated 11 April 2008 claims that political competition in the then upcoming and “crucially important” local council elections was largely prevented by the ruling coalition. The report notes widespread acts of violence and states that “[m]any local officials in Oromia have made a routine practice of justifying their abuses by accusing law-abiding government critics of belonging to the outlawed Oromo Liberation Front”. According to the report:

The Ethiopian government's repression of registered opposition parties and ordinary voters has largely prevented political competition ahead of local elections that begin on April 13, Human Rights Watch said today. These widespread acts of violence, arbitrary detention and intimidation mirror long-term patterns of abuse designed to suppress political dissent in Ethiopia.

...

The nationwide elections for the kebele (village or neighborhood councils), and wereda (districts made up of several kebeles administrations), are crucially important. It is local officials who are responsible for much of the day-to-day repression that characterizes governance in Ethiopia. Many local officials in Oromia have made a routine practice of justifying their abuses by accusing law-abiding government critics of belonging to the outlawed Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which is waging a low-level insurrection against the government.

Candidates allied with the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) will run unopposed in the vast majority of constituencies across Ethiopia. On April 10, one of Ethiopia's two major opposition coalitions, the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF), pulled out of the process altogether. UEDF officials complained that intimidation and procedural irregularities limited registration to only 6,000 of the 20,000 candidates they attempted to put forward for various seats. By contrast, state-controlled media reports that the EPRDF will field more than 4 million candidates across the country.

Violence, Arbitrary Detention, and Intimidation

Local ruling party officials have systematically targeted opposition candidates for violence, intimidation, and other human rights abuses since the registration period began three months ago. Particularly in areas with established opposition support, local officials have arbitrarily detained opposition candidates, searched their property without warrant, and in some cases physically assaulted them.

Credible reports collected by Human Rights Watch indicate a pattern of cooperation among officials across all three tiers of local government – zone, wereda, and kebele administrations – in carrying out these abuses. Victims interviewed by Human Rights Watch across different locations in Oromia recounted a consistent narrative. Some were arbitrarily detained and then interrogated or threatened by wereda administration officials in the presence of zonal officials. Others were arbitrarily detained by wereda police and then transferred to the custody to zonal security officials or federal soldiers.

One 31-year-old school teacher in western Oromia was detained by police and then interrogated by wereda and zonal security officials when he sought to register as an opposition candidate. "I was afraid," he told Human Rights Watch. "They accused me of being an OLF member and said I would be shot... They put a gun in my mouth, and then made me swear that I wouldn't go back to the opposition." He was released nine days later, after the deadline for candidate registration had passed. Human Rights Watch interviewed other OPC candidates who had also been detained after trying to register in other constituencies.

Prospective voters who might support the opposition have been similarly targeted by the government. Secondary school students in Oromia's Cheliya wereda, many of whom are of voting age, reported to Human Rights Watch that they have been compelled to provide a letter from representatives of their gott/garee – unofficial groupings of households into cells that are used to monitor political speech and intimidate perceived government critics – attesting that they did not belong to any opposition party. Local officials said that unless they produced

those letters, they would not be allowed to register to vote. One civil servant in Gedo town was warned by a superior that he would lose his job if he supported the opposition.

“The same local level officials who are directly responsible for much of the day-to-day political repression that occurs in Ethiopia have their jobs at stake in these elections,” Gagnon said. “As such, their efforts to intimidate ordinary people into returning them to office are especially intense.”

Local authorities have also prevented the registration of opposition candidates in many constituencies where the opposition’s success in 2005 parliamentary polls appeared to give them a chance at winning. In Fincha in western Oromia, for example, the opposition Oromo People’s Congress (OPC) made three attempts to register a candidate for an open parliamentary seat. The seat had been vacated by an OPC candidate who won 81 percent of the vote in 2005 but was later forced into exile after local authorities accused him of being an OLF supporter. The OPC tried to replace him on the ballot with three different candidates but each was prevented from registering. All three candidates were physically threatened by members of the wereda administration and police and one was detained for more than a week when he tried to register.

The opposition Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) has encountered similar problems in western Oromia, with 10 of its 14 candidates resigning in response to pressure from local officials. In February, police in Dembi Dollo arrested 16 OFDM members and accused them of belonging to the OLF. Although a court ordered them all released two weeks later when police could provide no evidence to support their allegations, they were subsequently threatened with physical harm by local officials (Human Rights Watch 2008, ‘Ethiopia: Repression Sets Stage for Non-Competitive Elections’, 11 April – Attachment 22).

A report dated 21 April 2008 in Nairobi’s *The Nation* observes that the ruling party ran “unopposed” in the local council elections following boycotts by the OFDM and the UEDF:

Ethiopians cast their ballots in the second round of elections today. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi’s ruling party, the Ethiopian People Democratic Front is running unopposed in the local council elections.

Two main opposition parties have boycotted the poll.

The voter turnout was low today but election authorities pronounced it had more than 90 per cent on the first round of voting last week. Two parliamentary opposition parties have been boycotting the election. United Ethiopia Democratic Forces (UEDF) and Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) have accused election officials and the ruling party of intimidation and arrest.

Ruling party officials dismissed the opposition complaints and said it’s a systematic escape from facing defeat (Argaw Ashine 2008, ‘Ethiopian Party Runs Unopposed in Polls’, *The Nation*, 21 April <http://allafrica.com/stories/200804210210.html> – Accessed 24 April 2008 – Attachment 23).

5. Is the United Arab Emirates a signatory to the Refugee Convention?

The United Arab Emirates is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees nor to the 1967 Protocol (United Nations High Commission for Refugees 2007, ‘State Parties to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967

Protocol', United Nations High Commission for Refugees website, 1 November <http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3b73b0d63.pdf> – Accessed 14 April 2008 – Attachment 24).

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Ministry of foreign Affairs of Ethiopia website <http://www.mfa.gov.et>

National Electoral Board of Ethiopia website <http://www.electionsethiopia.org>

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

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

Non-Government Organisations

Amnesty International website <http://www.amnesty.org>

Ethiopian Human Rights Centre O website <http://www.ehrco.org/>

Human Rights Watch website <http://www.hrw.org>

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs website

<http://ochaonline.un.org>

International News & Politics

Africa Confidential website <http://www.afric-confidential.com>

Africa Daily website <http://www.africadaily.com>

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

BBC News website <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

IRINnews.org website <http://www.irinnews.org>

The Reporter website <http://www.ethiopianreporter.com>

Topic Specific Links

Lonely Planet website www.lonelyplanet.com

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

Rough Guides website www.roughguides.com

Tourism Ethiopia website <http://www.tourismethiopia.org>

TravelBuddy website <http://www.travbuddy.com>

Virtual Tourist website <http://www.virtualtourist.com>

Walta Information Centre website <http://www.waltainfo.com>

Search Engines

Copernic search engine

Google search engine

Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIAC Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Research database)

List of Attachments

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