



EUROPEAN
INSTITUTE
OF PEACE



The Potential for Peace in Western Oromia



Date: October 2022



Contents

<i>Executive summary.....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Key dates</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Acronyms</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>1. Introduction.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>2. The seeds of an Oromo insurgency (2018-2019).....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>3. OLA rising (2019-2020).....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>4. The OLA-TPLF coalition (2020-2022)</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>5. Civilians: between a rock and a hard place</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>6. Unforgetting a forgotten conflict: towards a peaceful Western Oromia?</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>Appendix 1: Conflict actor mapping in Western Oromia</i>	<i>34</i>
<i>Appendix 2: Summary of key issues and actor narratives</i>	<i>37</i>

Executive summary

A years-long conflict in Western Oromia has unfolded in the shadow of the conflict in northern Ethiopia following the return of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) from exile. This report traces the OLA insurgency and its dire effects on the civilian population in Western Oromia. Based on field research conducted during July and August 2022 in Western Oromia, the study examines first, the social discontent in Oromia as the OLA returned there; then, the failure to disarm, demobilise, and reintegrate OLA fighters and the split from the political wing, the Oromo Liberation Front; the increase in violent attacks and the launch of a counter-insurgency operation by the federal and regional government; and the alliance the OLA concluded with the TPLF as it sought to overthrow the Ethiopian government in Addis Ababa.

One of the problems this study intends to address is that the voices from people in Western Oromia are so rarely heard. This report specifically seeks to highlight the plight of civilians in the areas where the OLA and government security forces are active. The OLA has carried out heinous massacres of civilians, like in Tole in June 2022, when hundreds of civilians were brutally killed. There have been repeated extra-judicial killings by both the OLA and government security forces. People have been burned alive, houses and villages have been burned down and destroyed, and groups of armed bandits take advantage of the lawlessness to loot, kill, kidnap, and rape. Amhara civilians, who are often the target of OLA attacks, increasingly rely on Amhara militias for their protection, but these militias themselves have also committed massacres. As the cycle of violence deepens, basic services and humanitarian aid are disrupted, and internal displacement increases. People across Western Oromia are tired of conflict and the severe toll it has levied on local communities.

The report concludes with recommendations to move towards a more peaceful Western Oromia. This will not be an easy feat, as fighting has intensified recently, but both sides have periodically signalled their willingness to come to a negotiated solution. To support the small opening for peace, the following is recommended:

- If the OLA would be serious about declaring a ceasefire, it should immediately cease offensive operations, stop targeting civilians in the area, and cooperate with investigations into recent massacres. The OLA should also renounce the objective of the armed overthrow of the Abiy government, which is an increasingly unrealistic goal (if it ever was) that has largely been abandoned by the OLA's TPLF allies during their talks with the Ethiopian federal government.
- The Ethiopian government may want to consider that years of counter-insurgency operations in Western Oromia have not brought victory while causing severe civilian suffering. There is a need to provide additional protection for Amhara villages in Western Oromia, but for their part, Amhara forces should cease crossings into Oromia, and Amhara militias in Oromia should avoid undertaking any offensive military operations that could endanger civilians.
- If there is a willingness on the part of the Ethiopian government to return to talks and consider pardoning OLA fighters, the focus could initially be on negotiating and agreeing on a ceasefire before demanding the disarmament of OLA fighters. A subsequent political dialogue may

include a thorough evaluation of the failed DDR initiative for OLA fighters returning from Eritrea in 2018/2019 to prevent a repeated DDR failure in an environment where trust between the two sides is already much lower than it was back then.

- Beyond the political level, the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission should provide a platform for the voices of Western Oromia to be heard. In first instance, this may not necessarily focus on the conflict parties, the participation of whom remains a highly controversial issue, but it should provide opportunities for ordinary people from Western Oromia to share their stories – especially women, who have suffered disproportionately and are prominent voices for peace, but also elders, youth, religious and community leaders, and others. Even if the conflict is still ongoing, this would signal that the situation is high on the agenda and the plight of people in Western Oromia is not forgotten.
- The international community should, if requested (as this remains an internal Ethiopian affair) provide support to talks or processes of conflict resolution or respond to specific requests for provision of expertise or financing for DDR or human rights investigations. It should also resolve to raise awareness about the conflict in a way that centers the suffering of ordinary people.

Key dates

1973	The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) is established, vowing to fight for the self-determination of the Oromo people in Ethiopia.
1974	The Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) is established as the military wing of the OLF.
1991	Insurgent forces led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) overthrow the Derg and establish a transitional government led by Meles Zenawi.
1992	OLF and OLA are banned by the transitional government.
1995	The Ethiopian Constitution ends the transitional government period and enshrines ethnic federalism. The TPLF-led coalition win a majority of seats in the first election.
2014	Protests break out in Oromia over a "Master Plan" to expand Addis Ababa/Finfinne and take land from Oromo communities. They will continue until 2018.
2018 (Feb)	PM Hailemariam submits his resignation after Oromo protests have spread nationally.
2018 (Apr)	Abiy Ahmed becomes Prime Minister of Ethiopia.
2018 (Aug)	The Ethiopian government meets an exiled OLF delegation in Eritrea: an agreement is signed, but remains secret. Oromo activist Jawar Mohammed returns to Ethiopia.
2018 (Sept)	OLF members return to Ethiopia. 23 people are killed in protests.
2018 (Dec)	The federal government declares a state of emergency and launches a counter-insurgency operation in Western Oromia following fighting with OLF/OLA returnees.
2019 (Jan)	OLF and federal government sign a deal for a ceasefire and demobilisation of OLF/OLA fighters.
2019 (May)	OLF announces that 1,000 fighters have disarmed. OLA announces a split from OLF and vows to continue the insurgency campaign.
2019 (Nov)	The ruling EPRDF coalition and its affiliates merge into a national Prosperity Party. TPLF refuses to join.
2019 (Dec)	OLA leader Jaal Marroo claims Western Oromia is largely under OLA control, and calls for a ceasefire and an end to the state of emergency.
2020 (Feb)	Elders travel to Western Oromia to pursue peace talks, to no avail.
2020 (Jun)	Popular Oromo artist Hachalu Hundessa is murdered. Protests across Oromia kill 166. Prominent Oromo politicians, including Jawar Mohammed, are arrested.
2020 (Nov)	TPLF forces attack the Northern Command of the Ethiopian army. A violent conflict with the Ethiopian federal government, Amhara forces, and Eritrean forces ensues.

2021 (Mar)	40 Amhara civilians are killed in Western Oromia. The OLA and federal government blame each other.
2021 (May)	The Ethiopian parliament declares TPLF and OLA terrorist organisations.
2021 (Jun)	Ethiopia holds national elections. Abiy Ahmed's Prosperity Party is the big winner. Many Oromo opposition parties boycott the elections.
2021 (Aug)	The OLA conclude an alliance with the TPLF intended to overthrow the federal government, which denounces the alliance.
2021 (Oct)	Amhara militias conduct attacks along Western Oromia's borders, killing dozens and displacing thousands.
2021 (Nov)	TPLF forces advance towards Addis Ababa/Finfinne and physically link up with OLA forces. The federal government declares a nationwide state of emergency and succeeds in repelling the TPLF-OLA advance.
2021 (Dec)	Fourteen elders (Kerayu Gedaa) are executed. The attack is initially blamed on the OLA but later reported to be carried out by government security forces.
2022 (Jan)	Jawar Mohammed and other Oromo politicians are released from prison.
2022 (Mar)	The federal government declares a humanitarian ceasefire in Tigray. Counter-insurgency operations in Western Oromia continue as the OLA expands its control.
2022 (Jun)	Massacre in Tole village in Western Oromia. Hundreds of Amhara and some Oromos are killed by OLA forces.
2022 (Jul)	Massacre in Mender, Western Oromia kills hundreds of people. The government and OLA trade blame.
2022 (Aug)	Fighting between TPLF and the federal government resumes in Tigray, Amhara and Afar. The OLA reconfirms its TPLF alliance. Amhara militia kill 55 in Western Oromia. Oromo opposition parties call for a ceasefire and negotiations with OLA.

Acronyms

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
BAQ	Bandit Armed Qeerroo
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, & Reintegration
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defence Force
EPRDF	Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front
GSF	Government Security Forces
IDPs	Internally Displaced People
OCHA	(United Nations) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODP	Oromo Democratic Party
OFC	Oromo Federalist Congress
OLA	Oromo Liberation Army
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
OPDO	Oromo People Democratic Organization
OSPF	Oromia Special Police Force
PM	Prime Minister
PP	Prosperity Party
TPLF	Tigray People Liberation Front

1. Introduction

In early 2018, Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn submitted his resignation in an attempt to end unrest and upheaval across the country.¹ Hailemariam had taken over after the death of Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) leader Meles Zenawi, who had led Ethiopia in the aftermath of the change of power in 1991, overseeing rapid economic development accompanied by an inequitable distribution of wealth and an undemocratic, authoritarian political culture.² Ethiopia's 1995 constitution had enshrined ethnic federalism as the system of governance for the country's "nations, nationalities, and peoples"³ but rather than guaranteeing their "unconditional right to self-determination," ethnic federalism was often used by the TPLF as instrument of domination by divide-and-rule: when that failed, the system relied on exclusion and suppression. Ethnic federalism also formalised unhealthy competition between and within Ethiopia's ethnic groups.⁴

The Oromo, the country's largest ethnic group, were especially dissatisfied with the lack of regional autonomy and representation at the federal level. The Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) had long played a secondary role in the TPLF-dominated ruling coalition. In 2014, protests broke out in Oromia over a "Master Plan" to expand Addis Ababa and take land from Oromo communities.⁵ They were violently repressed.⁶ In November 2015, three months after the election in which the EPRDF won 100% of the seat in parliament, Oromo protests flared up again in Ginchi and expanded across Oromia; over the next years, security forces killed and detained hundreds of protestors before the protests spread to Amhara, home to Ethiopia's second largest ethnic group.⁷ The widespread unrest caused Hailemariam to step down and the governing coalition, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), elected Abiy Ahmed (PhD) as their new leader.

Although coming from the OPDO, Abiy signalled an early departure from many long-held EPRDF positions, including by widening the space for civil society and media as well as releasing political prisoners, and acknowledging torture by Ethiopian security forces.⁸ He pursued a *rapprochement* with

¹ "Ethiopia PM Hailemariam Desalegn in surprise resignation" (2018) *BBC*, 15 February, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43073285>

² Lubo Teferi (2012) "The post 1991 'inter-ethnic' conflicts in Ethiopia: An investigation", *Journal of Law and Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 4 (4), pp. 62-69, April, <http://www.academicjournals.org/JLCR>.

³ In the Preamble and in the Articles of 3, 8, 39, 41, 43, 47, & 61 of the 1995 FDRE constitution, the Ethiopian Society has been redefined and deconstructed as Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples of Ethiopia.

⁴ Semir Yusuf (2019) "What is driving Ethiopia's ethnic conflicts?" *East Africa Report*, November, <https://issafrica.org/research/east-africa-report/what-is-driving-ethiopias-ethnic-conflicts>

⁵ The "Addis Ababa Integrated Regional Development Plan" proposed to annex most of the capital city's surrounding rural and urban areas jurisdictionally under the Oromia State administration. See Human Rights Watch (2014) "Ethiopia: Brutal Crackdown on Protests," May 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/05/ethiopia-brutal-crackdown-protests>

⁶ Tsegaye R. Ararssa (2015) "Why resist the Addis Abeba Master Plan? – A constitutional legal exploration," *Addis Standard*, 20 August, <https://addisstandard.com/why-resist-the-addis-abeba-master-plan-a-constitutional-legal-exploration/>

⁷ Awol Allo (2016) "The Oromo protests have changed Ethiopia," *Al Jazeera*, 21 November, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2016/11/21/the-oromo-protests-have-changed-ethiopia/>

⁸ Cochrane, L. L., & Mandefro, H. (2019). Discussing the 2018/19 Changes in Ethiopia: Hone Mandefro; "Ethiopia PM: Security agencies committed 'terrorist acts'" (2018) *Al Jazeera*, 19 June, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/ethiopia-pm-security-agencies-committed-terrorist-acts-180619051321984.html>

Eritrea as well as with long-banned Ethiopian opposition groups.⁹ The fact that Abiy was part of “Team Lemma”, the movement led by Lemma¹⁰, the President of the Oromia region, which protested abuses by security forces during the street protests that occurred from 2014 until 2018, ensured his immediate popularity among Oromos. His immediate national popularity was characterised as “Abiymania.”

With Abiy’s popularity came high expectations. It did not take long for political actors with competing interests to re-emerge and start organising against the reform agenda. The TPLF, which had found itself dislodged from power for the first time in nearly three decades, increasingly withdrew to Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, refusing to partake in the transition initiated by the new leadership. The “Oromara” (Oromo-Amhara) marriage of convenience – concluded between Lemma and Amhara state President Gedu Andargachew to counter the TPLF’s domination of EPRDF – which had made the ascent of Abiy possible, suffered from disagreements over the status of Addis Ababa.¹¹ With the TPLF out of the way, some Amhara felt threatened by what they saw as an emboldened Oromia.

Some had expected that the OPDO replacing TPLF at the helm of the ruling coalition would in turn lead to a coalition of Oromo opposition forces replacing the OPDO in the Oromia regional administration. Others had even foreseen a transitional government at the federal level, in which they expected to play a part. But the EPRDF would have none of that, and Abiy’s political reform programme for a while took the wind out of the opposition’s sails. Signalling an intent to break with the past, the OPDO changed its name to Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) in September 2018.¹²

Abiy also took a symbolic step to remove the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) from a terror list.¹³ The OLA had been created in 1973 to advocate for the self-determination of the Oromo people, complete with a military wing, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), but banned by the EPRDF in 1992.¹⁴ It was not always a violent campaign: in particular, the death of Jaal Legese Wegi, former OLA West Oromia Commander, initiated a shift from armed struggle to more civilian-led political tactics, including through youth movements such as “Qeerroo Bilisummaa Oromoo” (QBO – Oromo Youth Liberation) and the “Youth Movement for Freedom and Democracy (YMFD). In the last days of TPLF-led EPRDF, the OLA reorganised, expanded its territorial control, and used the political transition initiated by Abiy as a conducive environment to engage with the people in Western Oromia. It also benefitted from the

⁹ Semir Yusuf (2019) “Ethiopia’s power, security and democracy dilemma,” *ISS*, 15 July, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/ethiopias-power-security-and-democracy-dilemma>

¹⁰ Team Lemma was comprised of the then Oromia President Lemma Megersa and his team (Abiy Ahmed, Adisu Arega, Shimelis Abdisa, Takele Uma, Teyiba Hasen, Chaltu Sani.) partnered with the then Amhara’s President, Gedu Andargachew and his team.

¹¹ The Oromos vocally posited that Addis Ababa belongs to them (“Addis Ababa Keenyaa”) narrative, whereas the Amhara forces and elites counter-posed that (“Addis Ababa Yenyaa”) and/or belongs to the Addis Ababa residents.

¹² “Ethiopia’s Oromo party changes name, logo ahead of 2020 vote” (2018) *Africa News*, 21 September, <https://www.africanews.com/2018/09/21/abiy-s-party-opdo-changes-name-logo-ahead-of-2020-vote/>

¹³ “Ethiopia removes OLF, ONLF and Ginbot 7 from terror list” (2018) *Al Jazeera*, 5 July, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/7/5/ethiopia-removes-olf-onlf-and-ginbot-7-from-terror-list>

¹⁴ This had led to tens of thousands of Oromo youth being detained over the course of the 1990s and 2000s. See Semir Yusuf Teshale (2018) *Insurgency in Ethnically Divided Authoritarian-led Societies: A Comparative Study of Rebel Movements in Ethiopia, 1974-2014*, Department of Political Science, University of Toronto.

discontent during the Oromo protests between 2014 and 2018, and obtained additional legitimacy following the peace agreement with the OLF.

After the group was de-listed, around 1,500 OLF fighters were received by a jubilant crowd upon their returned from exile in Eritrea.¹⁵ During the rally, violence broke out on the outskirts of the capital when OLF supporters waved the OLF flag and sang Oromo songs, and twenty-three people were killed and more than 200 arrested.¹⁶ In the following months, discontent with the new administration grew within Oromia. The OLF increasingly portrayed itself as an underdog fighting for the true interests of the Oromo people, often advocating against the ODP and Abiy's political reform, which they saw as not beneficial (enough) for the Oromo people. The Oromo Federal Congress (OFC), the other main Oromo opposition party, often equated the ODP with the TPLF, putting itself forward as a mediating, third-way force between the ODP and the OLF. The competition, mistrust, and division among Oromo politicians stood in stark contrast to the unified Oromo position that had brought Abiy to power just months earlier.¹⁷ Rather than cementing the programme of political reform, the ensuing polarisation set the stage for a wider conflict in western and southern parts of Oromia.

This paper attempts to trace the OLA insurgency and its effects on the civilian population in Western Oromia. Research was conducted by the European Institute of Peace together with a local organisation working in Addis Ababa/Finfinne and Western Oromia, which due to the high level of insecurity and for fear of possible reprisals has requested to remain unnamed. The lead researcher has spent about sixteen days in Western Oromia (twelve days in Nekemte city and four days in Digga town, about ten kilometres from Nekemte in the Gimbi direction) during July and August 2022. The lead researcher was supported by research assistants in other zones of Western Oromia. The research team has conducted interviews with members of the security forces, OLA members and supporters, local government officials, community elders, religious leaders, youth, women, teachers, merchants, and opposition members. Due to the security situation are not mentioned by name, but given as much detail as possible, including their affiliation or profession, and the date and place of the interview. From the picture that emerges, the report attempts to identify a number of opportunities for peaceful settlement of the conflict.

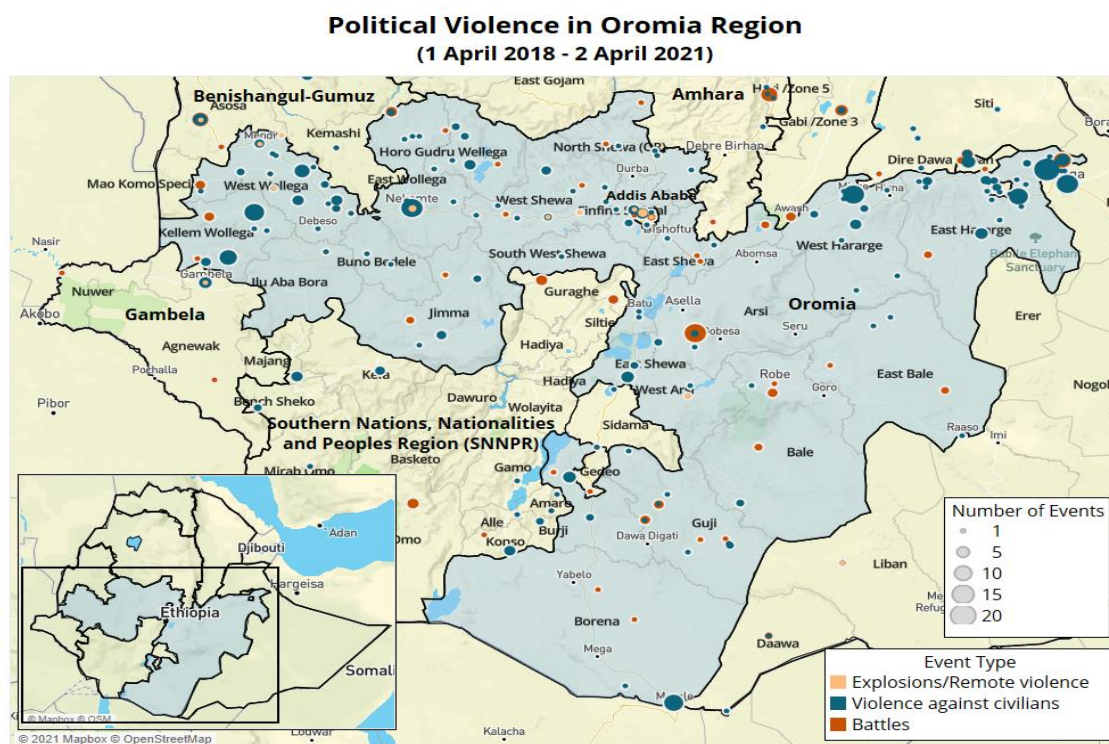
¹⁵ "Thousands of Ethiopians hail return of once-banned Oromo group," (2018) *Al Jazeera*, 15 September, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/9/15/thousands-of-ethiopians-hail-return-of-once-banned-oromo-group>

¹⁶ Paul Shemm (2018) "Ethiopia's ethnic divides rock capital as reports of killings prompt angry protests," *Washington Post*, 17 September, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/ethiopias-ethnic-divides-rock-capital-as-reports-of-killings-prompt-angry-protests/2018/09/17/8701bd0a-ba74-11e8-bdc0-90f81cc58c5d_story.html

¹⁷ Interview with a Political Scientist in Gimbi town, July 2022.

2. The seeds of an Oromo insurgency (2018-2019)

Western Oromia region is one of the four Oromia sub-regions (Western Oromia, Eastern Oromia, Southern Oromia and Northern Oromia). It shares a border with Amhara National Regional State in the North, with Benishangul Gumuz Regional State in the North West, with Southwestern Ethiopia Peoples Regional State in the South, with Gambella Regional State in the Southwest, and with Addis Ababa city (or “Finfinne” in Afaan Oromo) in the East. In the West it borders on South Sudan. The Western Oromia sub-region, like all other areas in Ethiopia, can be further divided in to zones, namely Kelem Wellega, West Wellega, East Wellega, Horo Guduru Wellega, West Shewa, South West Shewa, Buno Bedele, Ilubabor, and Jimma (see map 1 below).¹⁸ This report primarily focuses on the Wellega zones, in which both insurgency and counterinsurgency operations are conducted, although reference to other areas is made in passing.



Map 1: The Oromia National Regional State (Source: Ethiopian Peace Observatory)¹⁹

Western Oromia varies from ragged, mountainous narrow highlands (locally called *baddaa*), flat midlands (*badda-daree*), and narrowly flat lowlands (*gammoojjii*), ranging between 1,200 to 3,000 meters above sea level, with mild temperatures. The Oromo people living in Western Oromia region

¹⁸ Some understand Western Oromia to include all mentioned zones, except Jimma Zone; an even narrower understanding of Western Oromia region, however, equates the region to only former Wellega Kifle-Hager (Wellega Sub-State), one of the fourteen administrative units of the Dergue regime. In light of this, Western Oromia region constitutes the current four zones of Kellem Wellega, West Wellega, East Wellega, and Horro Guduru Wellega.

¹⁹ “Oromia Region” (n.d.) *Ethiopian Peace Observatory*, <https://epo.acleddata.com/oromia/>

are *Maccaa* and *Tuulamaa* descendants; less numerous ethnic groups that inhabit the area are Amharas, Gurages, Siltes, and others.²⁰ The ethnic diversity and the geographical location frequently led to disputes over boundaries, as well as accusations between ethnic groups of land-grabbing. The post-2015 popular movements and protests challenged the formal EPRDF governance systems and empowered ideologically left-wing opposition actors such as the OLF, as well as the OFC, to which many in Western Oromia gravitated.

In August 2018, a delegation of the Ethiopian government met with the OLF in Asmara.²¹ The agreement they worked out remains mysterious – it was not made public – but it was said to include a clause on disarming, demobilising, and reintegrating the OLF fighters in Eritrea. In September, around 3,000 OLF members returned from Eritrea, unarmed, but their return in Addis resulted in armed clashes that killed 23. It also became clear that the group had also formed militias that were armed, and already in Ethiopia.²² Shortly afterwards, in October 2018, OLF leader Dawud Ibsa said that no agreement with the government on disarmament was concluded, and the Ethiopian government announced its intention to use force to disarm the OLA if it would not disarm voluntarily.²³ This led to the re-instituting of a state of emergency in Western Oromia in late 2018.²⁴ (It had only been five months since Abiy had annulled the state of emergency he had inherited from his predecessor, a remnant of the heavy-handed approach to the Oromo protests.)

The state of emergency was overseen by a "command post" – a military secretariat to manage the implementation of the state of emergency in the area, such as the introduction of curfews, limits on public gatherings, and making it easier to detain suspects without due process. It also imposed a complete communications blackout in Western Wellega and Kellem Wellega, coupled with a more limited shutdown in Eastern Wellega and Horo Guduru.²⁵ The establishment of a military command post allowed for a profound limiting of people's movements and lives of people in Western Oromia. After 5:00 PM, no transportation could enter or leave towns, and movement of people within towns was prohibited between 7:00 PM and 6:00 AM. Oromo rebels and government forces clashed

²⁰ Tesema Ta'a (1980) "The Oromo of Wollega: A Historical Survey to 1910, pp. 21.

²¹ The Ethiopian government's delegation to Asmara was led by the then Oromia President Lemma Megersa and Dr. Workneh Gebeyehu, Minister of Foreign Affairs. The OLF was represented by Chairman Dawud Ibsa.

²² Zecharias Zelalem (2020) "Special Edition: Failed politics and deception: Behind the crisis in western and southern Oromia," *Addis Standard*, 20 March, <https://addisstandard.com/special-edition-failed-politics-and-deception-behind-the-crisis-in-western-and-southern-romia/>

²³ "Ethiopian government warns it may use force to disarm OLF," (2018) *Xinhua*, 10 October, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/africa/2018-10/11/c_137523896.htm

²⁴ During the Oromo protests, a state of emergency had been declared in the Oromia region by the Ethiopian government as a way to be able to use the military and other security agencies to enforce law and order. Abiy ended the state of emergency he inherited from his predecessor in June 2018 as it seemed that peace was returning to the country. "Command Post commences guarding Oromia-Benishangul border" (2018) *Walta*, 21 December, <https://waltainfo.com/21384/>

²⁵ Ermias Tesfaye (2020) "Amid blackout, western Oromia plunges deeper into chaos and confusion," *Ethiopia Insight*, 14 February, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/02/14/amid-blackout-western-romia-plunges-deeper-into-chaos-and-confusion/>

repeatedly during this period, for example in a November 2018 grenade attack in Nekemte.²⁶ Generally, civilians caught in the middle bore the brunt of the violence.

Meanwhile, negotiations continued. In January 2019, the OLF and the government signed a deal for an immediate ceasefire and the demobilisation of OLF fighters, who would commence reintegration training within twenty days, to eventually be absorbed into regional security forces.²⁷ Around a thousand fighters adhered to the ceasefire and reported to the rehabilitation camps; others refused as they saw the DDR process as a form of surrender to the Ethiopian government. Despite the communications blackout, reports of detention of former fighters also emerged, which likely disincentivised further rebels to lay down their arms.

The armed OLA eventually, in May 2019, announced a split from the OLF. OLF leader Dawud Ibsa, in response, disavowed all links with the armed group and declared his support for the federal and regional government. The OLF also announced its intention to participate in the elections, which then were still planned for 2020 (they were postponed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and eventually held in 2021). This meant that the OLA rebels were no longer under control of Dawud Ibsa, a politician who could easily be negotiated with; instead, they were now under direct leadership of Jaal Marroo (also known as Kumsa Diriba), a military commander. The movement established the headquarters of its “High Command” in Western Oromia and continued carrying out armed attacks in what would gradually become a full-blown insurgency.

²⁶ Ermias Tesfaye (2018) “Several killed by police in Nekemte after protest over attacks on Oromo,” 10 November, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/11/10/several-killed-by-police-in-nekemte-after-protest-over-attacks-on-oromo/>

²⁷ “News: Breakthrough as government, OLF-SG agree on immediate ceasefire, encampment of rebel army in 20 days” (2019) *Addis Standard*, 24 January, <https://addisstandard.com/news-breakthrough-as-government-olf-sg-agree-on-immediate-ceasefire-encampment-of-rebel-army-in-20-days/>

3. OLA rising (2019-2020)

At the initiative of Abiy Ahmed, in late November 2019 Ethiopia's ruling EPRDF coalition, made up of four coalition parties from Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, and the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's region, together with allied parties from other parts of Ethiopia, merged into one national party: the Prosperity Party. The TPLF, which had long dominated the EPRDF, refused to join the newly created party.²⁸ In Oromia, too, the merger was seen as an attempt to undermine ethnic federalism, and with that, the right to self-determination of the Oromo people within the Ethiopian state. Lemma Megersa of "Team Lemma," which had taken credit for the rise of Abiy, spoke out against the decision;²⁹ Jawar Mohammed, the popular Oromo activist and media mogul joined the OFC, a popular Oromo opposition party, and said he would stand in the national election, eventually giving up his American citizenship to do so.³⁰

Many Oromo were said to support their position. It certainly augmented the challenge for federal and regional forces that had been trying to contain the OLA in Western Oromia for a year, since the imposition of the "command post" in late 2018. The OLA seemed to be making gains, too. As the OLA reverted to armed struggle following the failed DDR attempt and the schism with the OLF, Jaal Marroo Dirribaa (Kumsa Diriba) emerged as the undisputed leader of the OLA. In late 2019, he called for the state of emergency, imposed a year prior, to be lifted; he requested the release of arrested OLA fighters. If these conditions were met, the OLA would be willing to negotiate a ceasefire, Marroo said, adding that his forces, in classic insurgency-style, operate "among the people" and that the government would not be able to disarm the OLA "unless it is to kill the people."³¹ On 21 December 2019, the OLA leader claimed that western Oromia was largely under OLA control, and that the military was overrun in Borena in southern Oromia.³²

The OLA's claim was almost certainly exaggerated; nevertheless, by late 2019, the insurgency and counter-insurgency operations had claimed a heavy toll. Shimelis Abdisa, who succeeded Lemma Megersa as President of the Oromia region, said that government forces suffered 670 combat losses during 2019.³³ The problem had become so big for the federal government that it stepped up its counter-insurgency operations. Security forces proceeded to cut the internet and telecom lines across much of Western Oromia, with a complete blackout in Western Wellega and Kelem Wellega, and a

²⁸ Kalkidan Yilbetal (2019) "Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed gets a new ruling party," *BBC*, 22 November, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50515636>

²⁹ "Gaaffii fi Deebii Guutuu Obbo Lammaa Magarsaa Waliin Geggeessamee fi Deebii Paartii Badhaadhimaa" (2019) *VOA Afaan Oromoo*, 1 December, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdmTqZ_xONw

³⁰ Facebook post by Jawar Mohammed, 30 December 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/Jawarmd/posts/10105071161069363>

³¹ "Ajajaa WBO Zoonii Lixaa: 'Qabsoo nagaatti deebi'uuf qabxiwwan ijoo dhugaatti guutamuu qaban jiru'" (2019) *BBC Afaan Oromo*, <https://www.bbc.com/afaanoromoo/oduu-50739625>

³² Jaal Marroo made the claims to Kush Media in a since-deleted video, but his words are quoted in Ermias Tesfaye (2020), <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/02/14/amid-blackout-western-romia-plunges-deeper-into-chaos-and-confusion/>

³³ Zecharias Zelalem (2020) <https://addisstandard.com/special-edition-failed-politics-and-deception-behind-the-crisis-in-western-and-southern-romia/>

partial shutdown in Eastern and Horo Guduru Wellega.³⁴ In parliament, Abiy said that “there cannot be two-armed forces or two governments.”³⁵

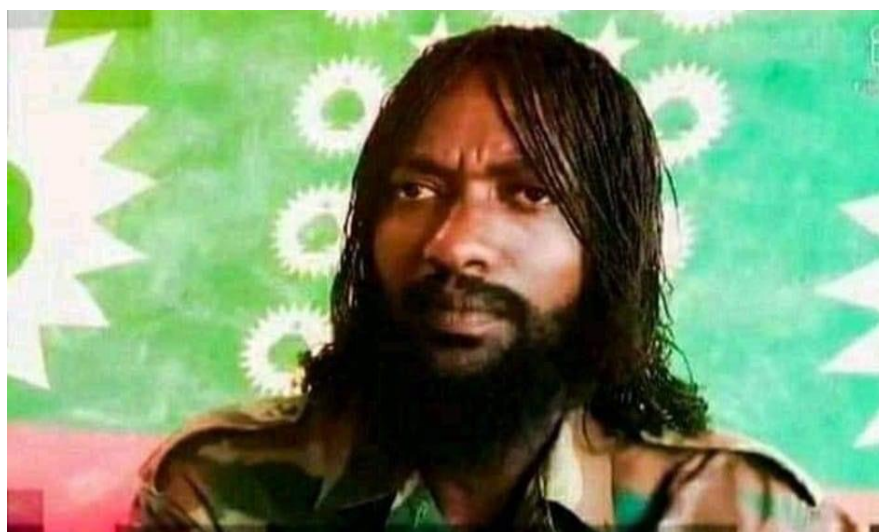


Figure 1: Jaal Marroo (Source: al Jazeera)³⁶

Despite a commitment to prevent civilian casualties, the toll of the operation was significant, although as access to the area was highly controlled, information only trickled out piecemeal. *Addis Standard* reported that dozens of unarmed civilians had been shot in Kelem Wellega.³⁷ The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, the country’s official human rights body, said the killing of Gammachu Garomsa, who was beaten to death by security forces, was human rights abuse.³⁸ The Oromia regional security chief, Col. Abebe Geresu, denied the accusations and claimed that the calls for an independent mediator were moot, because the OLA had already been “militarily dealt with.”³⁹

Government Security Forces (GSF) were larger in size and better equipped, and supplied by modern logistics providing arms, ammunition, vehicles, and other resources.⁴⁰ They could easily mobilise

³⁴ “A hidden war threatens Ethiopia’s transition to democracy” (2020) *The Economist*, 19 March, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/03/19/a-hidden-war-threatens-ethiopia-s-transition-to-democracy>

³⁵ Quotes in Ermias Tesfaye (2020), <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/02/14/amid-blackout-western-romia-plunges-deeper-into-chaos-and-confusion/>

³⁶ “Jaal Marroo On Aljazeera” (2021) Arat Kilo Daily News, YouTube, 30 March, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kjU8b7hH9Y>

³⁷ Zecharias Zelalem (2020) <https://addisstandard.com/special-edition-failed-politics-and-deception-behind-the-crisis-in-western-and-southern-oromia/>

³⁸ “Gochaan Gammachuu Gaaromsaa Irratti Raaw’atame Dhiittaa Mirga Namummaa Ti, Jedhe Koomishinarri Mirga Namoomaa Itiyoophiyaa” (2019) VOA *Afaan Oromoo*, <https://www.voaafaanoromoo.com/a/5100219.html>

³⁹ Zecharias Zelalem (2020) <https://addisstandard.com/special-edition-failed-politics-and-deception-behind-the-crisis-in-western-and-southern-oromia/>

⁴⁰ The government has deployed both federal and regional security forces in Western Oromia since 2018. The federal security forces operating in Western Oromia are Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), Republican Guard Force (RGF), Federal Police Force (FPF); the Oromia state security agencies operating in the area are Oromia Special Police Force (OSPF), Oromia Police Force (OPF), Local Militia Force (LMF). There is also the recently established division under Regulation No. 245/2015 called the “Poolisii Gaachana Sirnaa” (which loosely

multifaceted support from the state's military assets and operated from overt military camps and training areas with a coordinated security and intelligence apparatus. Well-trained special forces deployed in West Wellega were reportedly successful in killing several OLA members.⁴¹ At the same time, GSF could mobilise the federal and regional civilian administrations, aiming for a holistic approach to weakening the insurgents while bolstering the government's legitimacy in the eyes of the population. GSF could use public media when disseminating information on military campaigns. Furthermore, GSF controlled relatively strategic positions and most urban areas, which forced the insurgents to operate from the countryside, where electricity and telecoms blackouts are more common.

The perception that the government would be able to wrap up the counter-insurgency campaign proved to be a recurrent refrain. This simplistic approach has not produced an effective operation: the OLA had not been dealt a decisive military defeat. According to the interviews conducted for this report, the OLA sought to exploit the weaknesses of GSF, such as the unfamiliarity with the terrain, a lack of morale and determination, and a lack of military discipline and professionalism in dealing with communities in Western Oromia (although people generally consider the federal forces to have more legitimacy than the regional Oromo forces).⁴² Furthermore, there is a widespread perception that GSF are unable to differentiate between insurgents and ordinary people and their families, leading to the use of excessive force, extra-judicial killings, and mass detentions.

The OLA employed hit-and-run tactics, common to guerrilla warfare, to ambush GSF and logistical lines before quickly dispersing. In doing so, the group relied on intelligence gathered by informants in the federal and state security apparatus. Defensively, when faced with the overwhelming firepower of the GSF, the OLA would retreat and disperse its members to urban areas and other parts of Oromia where there is less control and scrutiny.

The insurgents drew their legitimacy more from the fact that they had earned a reputation as "freedom fighters" for the Oromo people, which allowed the group to operate with support from local communities, than from their actions and behaviour, which often threatened those same communities in which it operated. They had superior knowledge of the terrain in Western Oromia, including key routes through the heavily forested areas, which allowed them to seasonally shift areas of operation and tactics. Limited resources necessitated efficient military logistics and a careful use of ammunition and personnel. One source, who is from Nekemte city, told us that "one OLA member is equal to ten GSF; hence, when one OLA member is killed or surrendered to GSF it is a huge loss to OLA."⁴³ OLA fighters are often college or university graduates who are psychologically, emotionally and politically motivated. It takes determination and commitment to endure the hardship of a prolonged rural insurgency.

translates to the System Guard Police Force, or SGPF.) Last but not least, the Ethiopian Government has established a National Special Task Force since June 2022 following the civilians killing in Western Oromia. This task force directly reports to the national security council presided by the Prime Minister.

⁴¹ Interview, Nekemte, July 2022.

⁴² Anonymous informants from within the GSF told us that many of the government security forces are engaging in counterinsurgency operation in Western Oromia because it has become the matter of winning their bread and they were told to do so.

⁴³ Interview, Nekemte, July 2022.

The urban wing of the OLA, called “Abbaa Torbee” (which loosely translates to “Person of the Week”) has conducted targeted attacks against government officials, security agents, and civilians. An OLA associate in Gimbi town said:

“The OLA and Abbaa Torbee consider their measures as the part of their operation to limit the function of the government in Western Oromia and to provide justice to the . Before taking such serious measures, there are procedures and disciplinary measures taken by an OLA justice committee: like peer advice, oral and written warnings, monetary fines, etc. If the target person fails to comply with OLA, it takes serious – irreversible – military measures against the person through Abbaa Torbee.”⁴⁴

The existence of Abbaa Torbee points to an important aspect of the OLA insurgency: it is not one unified armed movement with strong top-down control, but rather consists of different wings, factions, and groups. According to a Wallaga University professor, there are in fact three kinds of OLA operating in Western Oromia: the “real” OLA, led by Jaal Marroo, and two other factions – one more rag-tag bandits, and one much more organised and militarised – that operate more opportunistically and engage in widespread criminal activities, such as intimidations, robbery, torture, and more. Some of these are loosely connected; others operate at cross-purposes or for their own gain, or may even in active opposition to other OLA factions. “to ordinary people these three different OLAs are one and the same.”⁴⁵

The bandits can be classified as “Bandit Armed Queero” (BAQ) – *queero* meaning youth in Afaan Oromo. They are, for example, ex-OLA members, many of whom had connections with the OLA prior to 2019. Following the failed DDR effort, this group exploited the insecurity in Western Oromia and armed themselves to benefit from it – at the expense of civilians’ lives. The BAQ don’t have sophisticated organisational structures, organise most of their activities through phones or social media, but as an organised group, they still have a capacity to intimidate, kidnap, and kill. One of our interviewees, who is a part of the BAQ, told us:

“The BAQ took any measure against whom they believe is economically worthy. In a very strange manner, the BAQ takes military measures that confuse other conflict actors and the people. For instance, sometimes BAQ kills OLA associates which government security forces want to kill; at other times, BAQ kills government security agents which OLA has in mind. Their primary intention is only economic: they trade on the economic side of chaos. There are individuals who have become rich owning houses and luxury vehicles in the cities surrounding Finfinnee [Addis Ababa].”⁴⁶

The claim of the existence of a third type of OLA force is more difficult to parse. According to interviews conducted for this research, there is a rival OLA group, referred to by some as the “Counterfeit Oromo Liberation Army” (Counterfeit OLA). This Counterfeit OLA is said to operate in Horo Guduru Wellega and East Wellega zones where its leader, Fekede Abdisa, has strong support base in Jarte Jardaga

⁴⁴ Interview with an OLA associate, Gimbi, July 2022.

⁴⁵ Interview with a Wallaga University professor, Nekemte, July 2022.

⁴⁶ Interview made with an educated and unemployed youth who has knowledge and experience of BAQ conducted in Laga Tafo, July 2022.

district (his birth place).⁴⁷ Fekede Abdisa is a former OLA member who returned and put down his arms as part of the (failed) DDR programme, requesting in turn a position in the Oromo security structure. His forces are well organised with advanced military capabilities similar to the OLA, and its members even look like the OLA, including the uniforms and the characteristic *daabee* or *guduru* hairstyle. Some of its members may even assume they are part of the “real” OLA.

Fekede’s “Counterfeit OLA” is said to oppose the existing OLA under Jaal Marroo leadership, positing that it is not the genuine OLA as it de-linked itself from OLF political leadership. They reportedly enjoy OLF support. Put differently, this armed group is closer to the OLF under Dawud Ibsa than the OLA under Jaal Marroo’s leadership. What is more, Fekede has been accused of working with government forces, allegedly after having been connected with the then federal security chief, Demelash Gebremichael, who is currently the federal police commissioner.⁴⁸ One OLF insider from Nekemte city told us that Fekede’s Counterfeit OLA works with the GSF and the OLF under Dawud Ibsa leadership, and their actions are intended to spoil the acceptance and legitimacy of Jaal Marroo’s OLA.⁴⁹



Figure 2: Fekede Abdisa (Source: screenshot YouTube)⁵⁰

This may seem overly conspiratorial; however, it may explain why many of the attacks on civilians are followed by the government and the OLA trading blame. In March 2021, for example, 42 people were killed in Horo Guduru and Eastern Wellega. When the government and civilians blamed the OLA, it categorically denied, saying: “we suggest you reach out to the residents of Horo Guduru and ask them

⁴⁷ Interview, Nekemte, July 2022.

⁴⁸ Facebook post by the Oromia Media Network, 3 September 2020, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02ZkwG1FPgNbJMg4TFNqBmo7LGycQpLYuLZRrEBBaUhjXWaAc4itJM12yLV4zBn2g6l&id=1451294128416783

⁴⁹ Interview with an OLF insider, Nekemte, July 2022.

⁵⁰ Sajeed Nadeem (2022) “Ethiopia-Djibouti road closed | Getachew Reda on Amhara-Eritrea nexus | OLA captures Fekede Abdisa”, *YouTube*, 30 March, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3TH1ro9RtM>

who Fekede Abdisa is and who sent him and his militia into Horo Guduru.”⁵¹ Perhaps it is simply a diversionary tactic from the OLA, but it is topic that merits further investigation.

As clashes continued over the course of 2020, talks faltered. Elders travelled to Western Oromia to mediate in February, but came back empty-handed.⁵² The same result befell the *Furtuu* committee – meaning “solution” in Afaan Oromo.⁵³ Meanwhile, the tensions between the Oromo nationalist parties and the federal government built. The Oromo opposition parties OFC and OLF criticised the postponement of the national elections due to the pandemic. Without seats in the legislature or power in the executive branch, the Oromo opposition were unable to organise their own elections, like the TPLF would end up doing in Tigray, against the will of the federal government.

When Hachalu Hundessa, a popular Oromo singer who was widely seen as the voice of the Oromo revolution, was killed, widespread violence broke out across Oromia, killing at least 166, mostly in the Arsi and Bale zones in eastern Oromia.⁵⁴ Jawar Mohammed and Bekele Gerba were arrested in the aftermath, allegedly for preventing Hachalu’s body from being transferred out of Addis to be buried in his hometown, but many Oromos saw this as a politically motivated move to take out an important electoral rival of Abiy.⁵⁵ Shortly afterwards, security forces killed around 30 Jawar supporters during a protest.⁵⁶ Long-time Abiy ally Lemma Megersa was dismissed as defence minister and suspended from the PP.⁵⁷ The widespread discontent among the Oromo created a fertile ground for the OLA insurgency to expand when another conflict broke out in northern Ethiopia.

⁵¹ Mahlet Fasil (2021) “News: More than 40 civilians killed in western Oromia; regional gov’t, OLA rebels trade blame,” *Addis Standard*, 12 March, <https://addisstandard.com/news-more-than-40-civilians-killed-in-western-romia-regional-govt-ola-rebels-trade-blame/>

⁵² “በኦሮሞያ የሚንቀሳቀሱ ሽማቂዎችን ለማነጋገር የሀገር ሽማግሌዎች ወደሥፍራው ተጓዙ” (2020) *Voice of America Amharic*, 10 March, https://amharic.voanews.com/a/west-romia-peace-efforts-2-10-2020/5282172.html?fbclid=IwAR05Bffcm_DkH8kTiny2ExwiUzzkpMqf8XYf0PvsbUCViBYIcjjYrenQMY

⁵³ “Siyaasa Oromoo: Mootummaa fi WBO jidduutti araari eegaluufi” (2020) *BBC Afaan Oromoo*, 5 February, https://www.bbc.com/afaanoromoo/oduu-51748688?at_custom2=facebook_page&at_custom4=7E327170-5F09-11EA-B699-85DF96E8478F&at_custom1=%5Bpost+type%5D&at_medium=custom7&at_campaign=64&at_custom3=BBC+News+Afaan+Oromoo

⁵⁴ “Hachalu Hundessa: Ethiopia singer's death unrest killed 166” (2020) *BBC*, 5 July <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53298845>

⁵⁵ Mahlet Fasil (2020) “News: Federal police accused Jawar Mohammed and others of attempts to repeat June 22 high level assassinations,” *Addis Standard*, 2 July, <http://addisstandard.com/news-federal-police-accused-jawar-mohammed-and-others-of-attempts-to-repeat-june-22-high-level-assassinations/>

⁵⁶ Etenesh Abera and Bileh Jalan (2020) “Analysis: Oromia reeling from state violence after security forces kill, injure a staggering number of protesters,” *Addis Standard*, 19 August, <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-romia-reeling-from-state-violence-after-security-forces-kill-injure-a-staggering-number-of-protesters/>

⁵⁷ “Lemma Megersa Party Membership Suspended” (2020) *Tesfa News*, 9 August, <https://www.tesfanews.net/ethiopia-lemma-megersa-party-membership-suspended/>.

4. The OLA-TPLF coalition (2020-2022)

In the night between 3 and 4 November 2020, the TPLF carried out a deadly attack on encampments on the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) in Northern Ethiopia, taking control of large quantities of arms and ammunition. To Abiy, the attack had been “the last straw” and he ordered the start of a military campaign against the TPLF, which he claimed was not the federal government’s equal. Initially, it appeared that the ENDF, which was supported by Amhara and Eritrean forces, had rapid success, as they took control of the Tigray region and the regional capital, Mekelle. After a couple of months, though, it became apparent that the TPLF was regrouping in rural Tigray, conducting out a second insurgency in the country in attacks on government forces in the region.

The conflict in Tigray had necessitated a withdrawal of many of the GSF from Oromia. The OLA benefitted, but with less government forces to target, its attacks became increasingly directed against Amhara populations. In April 2021, for example, the OLA shot fifteen people after pulling them off a bus in Horo Guduru Wellega: a witness said that the insurgents shot those who could not speak Afaan Oromo.⁵⁸ A month earlier, forty civilians were killed: the government and OLA blamed each other.⁵⁹ The targeting of Amharas led to a war of words between the regional governments of Oromia and Amhara, followed by violent clashes between Oromo and Amhara in the Oromia Special Zone and North Shewa Zone of the Amhara region.⁶⁰

The uptick in violence led the Ethiopian House of People Representatives designated OLA, alongside TPLF, as a terrorist organisation in May 2021.⁶¹ This effectively criminalised all forms of support to the group, helped the government to scrutinise the insurgency support base, and warned the general public from supporting and sympathizing with the OLA. In response, the OLA High Command said they would “engage in total war to remove the illegitimate clique from power.” This marked a considerable shift from an earlier position, a couple of days earlier, when the OLA alongside the OLF and OFC had called for national dialogue and a ceasefire before the 2021 national election. The OLA had not only closed that door, but it proceeded, in August 2021, to conclude an alliance with the TPLF, having found a goal in the overthrow of the government in Addis Ababa/Finfinne.⁶² Billene Seyoum, spokesperson

⁵⁸ “ቢያንስ 15 ሰዎች በተገደሉበት ጥቃት ታጣቂዎች “ሰዎችን በቋንቋ ችሎታ ለይተዋል” (2021) *BBC Amharic*, 1 April, <https://www.bbc.com/amharic/56954702>

⁵⁹ Mahlet Fasil (2021) “News: More than 40 civilians killed in western Oromia; regional gov’t, OLA rebels trade blame,” *Addis Standard*, 12 March, <https://addisstandard.com/news-more-than-40-civilians-killed-in-western-romia-regional-govt-ola-rebels-trade-blame/>

⁶⁰ Bileh Jilan (2021) “Analysis: Horrifying accounts of violence in Amhara region; Fed. Ombudsman slams regional govt. performance, says 303 killed so far,” *Addis Standard*, 9 April, <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-horrifying-accounts-of-violence-in-amhara-region-fed-ombudsman-slams-regional-govt-performance-says-303-killed-so-far/>

⁶¹ “News: Fed. Attorney General says terrorist designated “Shene” refers to Oromo Liberation Army; OLA responds, vows to “engage in total war” (2021) *Addis Standard*, 7 May, <https://addisstandard.com/news-fed-attorney-general-says-terrorist-designated-shene-refers-to-oromo-liberation-army-ola-responds-vows-to-engage-in-total-war/>

⁶² “Oromo Liberation Army threatens to block road linking Ethiopia to Kenya” (2021) *Nation*, 15 August, <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/africa/oromo-liberation-army-threatens-to-block-road-linking-ethiopia-to-kenya--3512666>

for Abiy Ahmed, denounced the alliance, calling it an “unusual marriage” in a clear reference to the fact that it was the TPLF that had presided over the banning of the OLA decades earlier.⁶³ A week later, OLA forces were accused of killing at least 150 Amhara in Gida KIRAMU in East Wellega.⁶⁴

Having retaken control of the Tigray region, throughout the autumn of 2021 the TPLF opened up an offensive campaign into Amhara and Afar, pushing towards Dessie and aiming to cut off the Addis-Djibouti Road. As GSFs were relocated to these areas, state capacity was reduced in Oromia, leading to increased clashes between Oromo and Amhara communities. The OLA took control of Sanbete and Kemise town in the Oromia special zone in the Amhara region.⁶⁵ Getachew Reda, spokesperson of the TPLF, announced that the two insurgent groups had now physically linked up.

Although the TPLF-OLA coalition remained hundreds of kilometres from Addis, the threat to the capital was apparent, leading the Ethiopian government to proclaim a state of emergency.⁶⁶ Getachew Reda announced they would “keep on marching towards Addis”⁶⁷; the TPLF and OLA cobbled together a nine-party coalition that signed an alliance against the Ethiopian government in Washington, DC.⁶⁸ Oromo opposition parties, however, denounced the alliance and pledged their support in fighting the TPLF. The OLF had warned the TPLF not to enter Oromia, which was significant because it placed the OLF in direct opposition to the OLA, its former armed wing.⁶⁹ As TPLF forces moved into Oromia special zone, there were reportedly some clashes between OLA and TPLF, calling into question the durability of their alliance.⁷⁰ Eventually, the advance of the TPLF-OLA coalition towards Addis Ababa/Finfinne was repelled by GSF, and the insurgents were pushed back to Tigray and Oromia respectively.

In early 2022, OLA expanded its control over territory in Oromia, including in Kelem Wellega;⁷¹ East Wellega;⁷² and even outside the Wellega zones, in West Guji. [68] According to the Ethiopian Peace Observatory, the new territorial gains “may indicate that the group is growing stronger and drawing

⁶³ “News Analysis: Fed. gov’t denounces alliance between OLA, TPLF, calls it ‘an unusual marriage’” (2021) *Addis Standard*, 13 August, <https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-fed-govt-denounces-alliance-between-ola-tplf-calls-it-an-unusual-marriage/>

⁶⁴ “ምስራቅ ወላጋ፡ የነዋሪዎችን ደኅንነት ለማረጋገጥ የአካባቢው የፀጥታ ኃይል ሊጠናከር ይገባል” (2021) *Ethiopian Human Rights Commission*, 26 August, <https://ehrc.org/am/%e1%88%9d%e1%88%b5%e1%88%ab%e1%89%85-%e1%8b%88%e1%88%88%e1%8c%8b%e1%8d%a1-%e1%8b%a8%e1%8a%90%e1%8b%8b%e1%88%aa%e1%8b%8e%e1%89%bd%e1%8a%95-%e1%8b%b0%e1%8a%85%e1%8a%95%e1%8a%90%e1%89%b5-%e1%88%88/>

⁶⁵ “Tigrayan and Oromo forces say they have seized towns on Ethiopian highway” (2021) *Reuters*, 1 November, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tigrayan-forces-say-they-have-seized-another-town-ethiopia-amhara-region-2021-10-31/>

⁶⁶ “Council of Ministers declares nationwide state of emergency” (2021) *Fana Broadcasting*, 2 November, <https://www.fanabc.com/english/council-of-ministers-declares-nationwide-state-of-emergency/>

⁶⁷ “Ethiopia: ‘we’ll keep on marching’- TPLF” (2021) *BBC Sounds*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0b31kfb>

⁶⁸ Eliza Mackintosh and Ed Upright (2021) “Ethiopia crisis deepens as nine groups form anti-government alliance,” *CNN*, 5 November, <https://edition.cnn.com/africa/live-news/ethiopia-conflict-updates-11-5-intl/index.html>

⁶⁹ See https://twitter.com/breaking_bre/status/1456304746793418763?s=20

⁷⁰ “Ethiopia -ESAT Amharic Day Time News Wed 15 Dec 2021” (2021) *ESAT TV Ethiopia*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prn3Z1gRaeE&t=95s>

⁷¹ Post on Facebook by DW Amharic (2022) 14 February, <https://www.facebook.com/dw.amharic/photos/a.507141705985597/5334150223284697/>

⁷² “ከአሸባሪው ሸኔ ነጻ የወጡ የምስራቅ ወላጋ ዞን አካባቢዎች |etv” (2022) *EBC*, 8 February, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cerWHB44Ng8>

on a wide base of support in rural and urban areas of the Oromia region.” Popular support may have increased as around this time there were a number of high-profile abuses against Oromos^[OBJ]. In East Wellega, the Oromia regional government said that “hundreds of thousands” were displaced following violence by “a radical Amhara group.”⁷³^[OBJ] In addition, there was a shocking revelation that ^[OBJ]Oromia regional forces had extra-judicially executed fourteen elders – Kerayu Gedaa – in December 2021, and attack that had initially been blamed on the OLA but later the EHRC reported that the Kerayu⁷⁴ elders were killed by government security forces. This was one of at least 40 recorded extra-judicial killings by GSFs during 2021.⁷⁵

The OLA and the Oromo opposition continued sharing similar goals. OFC and OLF, for example, lamented that the national dialogue commission, which had been launched by the Ethiopian parliament, was unrepresentative and partial.⁷⁶ Oromo and Amhara parties traded accusations during March and April following repeatedly clashes between ethnic militias in Oromia.⁷⁷ OFC also condemned the use of drone and helicopter strikes by government forces in Western Oromia, which they said contributed to civilian casualties.⁷⁸ But the means by which the OLA pursued its goals drove them apart, and after high-profile OFC members Jawar Mohammed and Bekele Gerba were released from prison, they took a more conciliatory tone. In August, the party called for a ceasefire and negotiations with the OLA, and the removal of all obstacles that would prevent for their participation in the national dialogue.⁷⁹

With a humanitarian ceasefire declared in Tigray from March 2022, the Ethiopian government had additional resources available in Oromia once again. There were attempts to mobilise local communities and organise them into local militias, such as in Najo district in West Wellega, pictured below, in May 2022. The efficiency of these efforts remains disputed. One individual from Najo said that the “OLA leadership and members understand this approach and the reason behind it; hence, OLA units retreat and hesitate to take offensive and/or defensive measures whenever the GSFs launch counterinsurgency operations through such a [community-led] approach.”⁸⁰ According to data from

⁷³ Etenesh Abera and Dereje Gonfa (2022) “In-depth analysis: Attacks by armed group from Amhara state continue to displace thousands in Western Oromia,” 22 February, [In-depth analysis: Attacks by armed group from Amhara state continue to displace thousands in Western Oromia - Addis Standard](https://addisstandard.com/news-in-depth-analysis-attacks-by-armed-group-from-amhara-state-continue-to-displace-thousands-in-western-oromia/)

⁷⁴ “News: “Reasonable ground to believe” Karrayyu Gadaa leaders’ killing constitutes “extrajudicial killing” by security forces: EHRC” (2022) *Addis Standard*, 2 February, <https://addisstandard.com/news-killing-detention-of-karrayyu-gadaa-leaders-extrajudicial-killing-ehrc/>

⁷⁵ “EPO Monthly: January 2022” (2022) *Ethiopian Peace Observatory*, ACLED, <https://epo.acleddata.com/2022/03/02/epo-monthly-january-2022/>

⁷⁶ “News Alert: OFC, ONLF say Dialogue Commission process unrepresentative, not impartial; decline Parliament invitation today” (2022) *Addis Standard*, 4 February, <https://addisstandard.com/newsalert-ofc-olf-and-onlf-say-dialogue-commission-process-unrepresentative-impartial-decline-parliament-invitation-today/>

⁷⁷ Natnael Fite (2022) “News: Oromia state doubles down on accusations against ‘Amhara extremist group’ for ‘causing damage’,” *Addis Standard*, 12 April, <https://addisstandard.com/news-oromia-state-doubles-down-on-accusations-against-amhara-extremist-group-for-causing-damage/>

⁷⁸ “News: OFC says gov’t use of “drone, helicopter strikes” in Oromia killing civilians” (2022) *Addis Standard*, 2 May, <https://addisstandard.com/news-ofc-says-civilians-dying-by-govt-use-of-drone-helicopter-strikes-in-military-campaign-in-oromia/>

⁷⁹ “News: OFC calls for all-around ceasefire, peace talks between OLA, fed. gov’t” (2022) *Addis Standard*, 29 March, <https://addisstandard.com/news-ofc-calls-for-all-around-ceasefire-peace-talks-between-ola-fed-govt/>

⁸⁰ Interview, Gimbi, July 2022.

the Ethiopian Peace Observatory, there had been an uptick in the number of extrajudicial killings against civilians by government forces, making up nearly half of all violence against civilians in Western Oromia. Most of the victims were accused of having links with the OLA.⁸¹



Figure 3: Security forces organize communities in support of the counter-insurgency operation in West Wellega Zone, Najo district, in May 2022.

Then followed two especially horrific massacres. On 18 June 2022, a mass killing took place in Tole in Gimbi district, West Wellega zone. Local eyewitnesses told us that more than 358 people were killed, the vast majority Amhara, but also fourteen Oromos. At least eight were children, and two pregnant women.⁸² A recent Human Rights Watch put the death toll at more than 400.⁸³ Eyewitnesses told us that OLA was behind this massacre, which occurred during an organised OLA attack on GSFs and military camps in Gambella, Dembi Dollo, and Gimbi towns.⁸⁴ In addition, following the Tole incident, more than 1,132 households (around 4,781 people) were displaced from their homes and temporarily settled in Digga town.⁸⁵ The OLA denied responsibility saying that “the Abiy regime’s militia are responsible” and called for an independent investigation.⁸⁶ Similar attack spread to areas of Benishangul-Gumuz too, where civilians were killed.

Just a few days later, a similar incident occurred in Mender in Hawa Gelan district in the Kelem Wellega zone. More than 300 were killed, mostly ethnic Amhara but some Oromo too.⁸⁷ Once again, both sides trading blame, although most external observers attributed responsibility to the OLA.⁸⁸ An informant

⁸¹“EPO Monthly: June 2022” (2022) *Ethiopian Peace Observatory*, ACLED, <https://epo.acleddata.com/2022/07/26/epo-monthly-june-2022/>

⁸² Interview with a community elder from Tolee area, who tried to mediate OLA with Amhara community living in the village so that OLA passes and gestures through the village. However, the Amhara community members refused to allow passage of the OLA to Nekemte town.

⁸³“Ethiopia: Civilians in Western Oromia Left Unprotected” (2022) *Human Rights Watch*, 25 July, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/31/ethiopia-civilians-western-romia-left-unprotected>

⁸⁴Interview with community elder, Digga, July 2022.

⁸⁵ Interview with Digga town administrator, Digga, July 2022.

⁸⁶ Post by OLA Public Relations on Twitter, see <https://twitter.com/WboPR/status/1538979970416005121>

⁸⁷Siyanne Mekonnen (2022) “News: Security forces shoot civilians in Gambella city two days after regional gov’t vows to ‘totally eradicate’ remaining members of Oromo, Gambella armed groups,” *Addis Standard*, 16 June, <https://addisstandard.com/news-security-forces-shoot-civilians-in-gambella-city-two-days-after-regional-govt-vows-to-totally-eradicate-remaining-members-of-oromo-gambella-armed-groups/>

⁸⁸ “EPO Weekly: 2-8 July” (2022) *Ethiopian Peace Observatory*, ACLED, <https://epo.acleddata.com/2022/07/13/epo-weekly-2-8-july-2022/>

from the area, however, told us that the GSF were behind the attack in a reprisal for the Tole attack.⁸⁹ The veracity of this account remains difficult to verify, but with Parliament having established a committee to investigate the incidents, the truth will likely come out.⁹⁰

Following the mass killings, Amhara opposition parties demanded that Western Oromia would be placed under federal administration. In addition, Fano forces have had an increased presence in Oromia State since the 27 June 2022, in particular in western and northern Oromia.⁹¹ The armed group are intent on protecting the Amhara community living in Western Oromia and training and arming members of Amhara community for self-defence against the OLA; however, they have been accused of having land-grabbing interests too.⁹²

The situation is unlikely to be resolved in the near future. On 24 August, fighting resumed between the TPLF and ENDF in northern Ethiopia. Sources told us that in the first week of August 2022, strategic discussions and understandings took place between OLA and TPLF. During this meeting TPLF provided OLA a greenlight to launch a counter-offensive military attack against the GSF and Amhara security forces.⁹³ This is in line with recent comments from the US Special Envoy, Mike Hammer, who said that the TPLF had told him on 2 August they were preparing for a return to hostilities.⁹⁴ On 2 September, a TPLF spokesperson shared an OLA press release before the OLA did, clearly demonstrating there was still coordination between the two insurgent movements. With GSF once again being drawn into heavy fighting in and around Tigray, there will be additional opportunities for the OLA to take control of territories across Oromia. The Amharas in the area will increasingly turn to their own militi“s: an “indiscriminate attack” by Fano in Horo Guduru zone at the end of August reportedly claimed 55 lives and displaced thousands. The cycle of violence continues.

⁸⁹Interview, Dembi Dollo, July 2022.

⁹⁰ House of People’s Representatives of FDRE, post of Facebook, 6 July 2022, https://www.facebook.com/hoprparliament/posts/pfbid02Rj8Dt5p5uaWQF4eJUmXSmJ9smebhbKPi87xs4CJYs_sZHtjHeyQKhdyNFh781eq93I

⁹¹ On 27 June 2022, the Presidents of Oromia and Amhara gave a joint statement on how to jointly engage and mobilize forces for the counterinsurgency operation in areas OLA actively operate, especially along the Oromia-Amhara borders.

⁹² Interview with a farmer in Gida Kiramu, whose house was burned and displaced from his land and currently lives in Nekemte city, in July 2022; interview with a University Professor whose father was killed by *Fano* in April 2022, in Jardaga-Jarte district, interviewed in July 2022. He stated how the Fano displaced rural people in three kebeles and then controlled the entire area, planted a Greater Amhara State flag, and took people’s assets.

⁹³ Interview with OLA associate in Addis Ababa/Finfinne, Aug 2022.

⁹⁴ “Digital Press Briefing with U.S. Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa, Mike Hammer” (2022) US State Department, 20 September, <https://www.state.gov/digital-press-briefing-with-u-s-special-envoy-for-the-horn-of-africa-mike-hammer/>

5. Civilians: between a rock and a hard place

In Western Oromia, civilian killings have become “business as usual”. Both the GSF and the OLA have committed massacres in the pursuit of their insurgency and counterinsurgency goals. A source from Guliso said that it seemed that the GSF have “unquestionable power and authority to take any military and security measures during counterinsurgency operations.”⁹⁵ By the same token, the OLA and other armed groups target civilians cooperating with GSF, intelligence agents, and PP officials. A source from Nekemte city told us that the OLA, as an insurgent group, could not be expected to prevent civilian casualties because of the “existential and survival threats” they face:

“It is not feasible to make assessments which takes time, hence, there is a necessity of taking security and military measures against the person or group suspected of supporting GSF in the counterinsurgency operation.”⁹⁶

According to one source from Nekemte, one aspect that supports the OLA’s legitimacy is its interactions with local communities. They are said to conduct consultations before operations and provide protection to Oromo populations along the borders of Oromia regional state:⁹⁷ for example, during clashes along Western Oromia border areas the OLA attacked Benishangul Gumuz special police forces in 2018, and Amhara special police forces and *Fano* in 2022.⁹⁸ But what is protection to some communities may be seen as terror by others, such as the majority Amhara villages across Western Oromia.

The areas of rural Western Oromia that are under OLA control often lack basic administrative services and suffer from lawlessness and anarchy. This has enabled criminal elements, such as the Counterfeit OLA, BAQ and other pseudo-OLA factions operating in Western Oromia. The failure of the OLA to effectively control and deter these factions has come at a serious cost and has led a sizeable part of the population to wonder if OLA cannot, or does not want to, deter such attacks. Some suggest they may have overlapping interests. In addition, the fact that the OLA has recruited children into its armed struggle is another serious cause of resentment among local populations.⁹⁹ Indeed, community members in Western Oromia question the purpose and tactics of OLA and its associates when it comes to the way they treat people. A development worker in Lalo Assabi district said:

“The OLA I have been hearing about since my childhood and the OLA I have been observing in the last two years must be different; otherwise, it raises a serious question in my mind when I see OLA doing the same thing what the [GSF] do to the people. I don’t see any difference between OLA and [GSF] when it comes to killing, kidnapping, and torturing people; looting properties and violates fundamental human rights.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Interview with a Guliso high school teacher, July 2022.

⁹⁶ Interview with an OLA associate in Nekemte city, July 2022.

⁹⁷ Interview in Nekemte, July 2022.

⁹⁸ Interview with a local farmer in Jardaga Jarte district, who witnessed a Fano attack on Oromos in Alibo town: GSF were in the town but did not respond. Interviewed in July 2022.

⁹⁹ Interview with Wallaga University Professor, Nekemte city, July 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Interview in Gimbi, July 2022.

There have been reports of extra-judicial killings of people suspected of having links to the OLA; similarly, the OLA has executed people for collaborating with GSF during counterinsurgency operations. According to one source, the corpses of OLA victims remained in the forest, unidentified and without having been buried.¹⁰¹ Both the GSF and the OLA have also conducted public executions in order to deter individuals from joining their rivals. One example was Amanuel Wondimu, a seventeen-year-old singer and youth deacon in the Orthodox Church, whom the Oromia Special Police Forces publicly executed on the Dembi Dollo roundabout of the Kelem Wellega zone on May 11, 2021 on suspicion of being linked to the *Abbaa Torbee*, the OLA's urban assassin squad.

Other forms of extra-judicial killings have included targeted shootings, often committed by GSFs in reprisal to OLA hit-and-run operations;¹⁰² burning people alive, such as in Gida Ayana, KIRAMU, Amuru, and JARDAGA Jarte districts in East Wellega and Horo Guduru Wellega, where more than 28 people burned to death as 82 houses burned down;¹⁰³ kidnapping officials or wealthy individuals for information, warning, or as a way of raising funds, often ending with the murder of the kidnappee, such as the kidnapping of administrators of the Kamashi Zone in Benishangul-Gumuz;¹⁰⁴ and the killing of children on suspicion of providing logistical support (food, intelligence information, messages, money, etc.) to OLA.¹⁰⁵

The killing of civilians is often followed by a blame game to escape accountability. Our research showed that both the GSF and the OLA were perpetrators of such abuses. The government usually accuses "OLF/Shene" – as they call OLA – whereas the OLA blames the GSF. Data received from the West Wellega Zone command post office alone claimed that about 756 people were killed by OLA; about 248 were kidnapped; about 404 were wounded; and 30 were raped. It is worth recalling that this is just one of the several zones in Western Oromia in which the OLA is active. No similar figures are available for abuses committed by GSF.

Item	Killed		Kidnapped		Wounded		Raped	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Total	708	48	241	7	379	25	8	22

Table 1: Causality caused by OLA in West Wellega zone.

Source: West Wellega Zone Office of the Command Post Administration, July 2022

¹⁰¹ Interview with a religious leader, Digga, July 2022.

¹⁰² Interview with a youth member from Gimbi Town, July 2022.

¹⁰³ Interview with an eyewitness, Nekemte city, July 2022; according to the recollection of a farmer in Gida KIRAMU, those responsible were the GSF and Fano, interviewed July 2022.

¹⁰⁴ Interview made with OLA associate in Shambo, July 2022 and a West Wellega community elder in Gimbi town, July 2022.

¹⁰⁵ A source from Digga town told us that in Western Oromia more than 47 children were killed by the GSF for failing to provide information. One example was the case of Chara Eliyas Balcha, a 12 years old boy, killed by GSFs in Jimma Horo district on 30 April 2021. GSF learned that he provided logistics to OLA after having questioned him; Chara told them that he didn't know where OLA was. Afterwards, he was shot to death in Sichawo village.

One especially horrendous aspect of the conflict in Western Oromia have been the mass killings, many of which have been conducted by OLA forces against Amhara settlers in the area. In November 2019, more than 230 Amhara community members living in Guliso District, at Gawa Kanka kebele were killed (two months before declaring the coordinated counterinsurgency operation in January 2020).¹⁰⁶ According to the informants, before the incident an armed Amhara community member refused to allow OLA to pass through his land, and attacked and killed an OLA member.¹⁰⁷ Two weeks later, the mass killing happened: the government accused the OLA for this civilian attacks. OLA on the contrary, blamed the government security forces, suggesting that the GSF had conducted the operation in order to justify its counterinsurgency and delegitimize the OLA's struggle. There seems to be little evidence to support the OLA's version of events in this case. Other high-profile attacks attributed to the OLA in Tole and Mender 20 have been discussed above.

That government forces have been involved in mass killings previously has been reported, for example by *Addis Standard*, which detailed how Oromo civilians were killed in Gambella and Wollo by regional security agencies, without much international accountability or attention.¹⁰⁸ Fano forces too have been involved in mass killings, such as between October to December 2021, when the Amhara armed group conducted a coordinated civilian attack along adjacent Western Oromia borders in which more than 138 people were reportedly killed.¹⁰⁹

Some abuses have not directly resulted in civilian deaths in Western Oromia but have equally had an enormous impact on life in the area. There has been widespread destruction of residences in the area, implemented by GSF as a form of collective punishment for supporters of the insurgency and their (extended families).¹¹⁰ In a similar fashion, the OLA has burned houses of government officials, security agents, and civilians supporting the GSF. Moreover, the Counterfeit OLA and BAQ also destroyed the properties of the people who refused to pay ransoms or other sums of money requested. Finally, Fano have burned farmers' houses, destroyed properties, and looted cattle in the East and Horo Guduru Wellega zones.

The armed conflict has led to the politicisation and securitisation of all aspects of life – individual, family, and communal and religious.¹¹¹ People discouraged each other from visiting friends and family;

¹⁰⁶ "'Rebels massacred 200 people" in western Ethiopia" (2020) *APA News*, 3 November, <http://apanews.net/en/news/rebels-massacred-200-people-in-western-ethiopia/>

¹⁰⁷ Interview with a Guliso high school teacher, Gimbi, July 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Siyanne Mekonnen (2022) "News: Security forces shoot civilians in Gambella city two days after regional gov't vows to 'totally eradicate' remaining members of Oromo, Gambella armed groups," *Addis Standard*, 16 June, <https://addisstandard.com/news-security-forces-shoot-civilians-in-gambella-city-two-days-after-regional-govt-vows-to-totally-eradicate-remaining-members-of-oromo-gambella-armed-groups/>

Another video clip circulated widely on social media of about 30 Oromo youth who were executed in Wollo in December 2021. This was one of many executions reported in Etenesh Abera and Bileh Jelan (2020) "In-depth Analysis: Spate of targeted attacks, excessive use of force by security in Oromia leave death trails, destruction," *Addis Standard*, 15 July, <https://addisstandard.com/in-depth-analysis-spate-of-targeted-attacks-excessive-use-of-force-by-security-in-oromia-leave-death-trails-destruction/>.

¹⁰⁹ Chala Dandessa (2022) "Oromia regional state blames 'radical Amharic speaking armed group', BPLM, OLA for violence in East Wollega Zone," *Ethiopians Today*, 3 January, <https://ethiopianstoday.com/2022/01/03/oromia-regional-state-blames-radical-amharic-speaking-armed-group-bplm-ola-for-violence-in-east-wollega-zone/>

¹¹⁰ Interview with an extended family member of Jaal Marroo, in July 2022.

¹¹¹ Interview with a religious leader, in July 2022.

funeral and wedding ceremonies were kept small; and important religious celebrations and cultural events, like the traditional Oromo *Irreechaa* ceremony were limited. Meanwhile, social services and social infrastructure were co-opted into the (counter-)insurgency efforts as both GSF and OLA used schools and hospitals as (temporary) military bases. Social service centres were often targeted or destroyed in the process, and prevented or discouraged from providing services. A UN report from May 2022 provided additional detail:

The population's access to essential services such as education, healthcare or water and sanitation in recent years has been highly compromised because of violence and the destruction of existing infrastructure. Through Western Oromia, 426 health facilities are reportedly non-functional due to looting and destruction. In East Wellega zone only, about 144 schools remain closed and over 62,000 children are out-of-school. Similarly, in West Wellega zone, about 184 schools are closed and 89,000 students are out of school (of these dropouts, female students' number is high).¹¹²

Youth are often forced to join either GSF or OLA, although many seek to prevent this by migrating to other parts of Oromia, even if they may be targeted and persecuted there because of where they came from. They drop out of school, by choice or because their school has closed down, and pick up addictions such as chewing *chat*, a plant that contains an alkaloid cathinone stimulant – chewing it gives a sense of euphoria. Some respond to the insecurity and uncertainty by joining or organising themselves into small groups of bandits armed *queero*, become arrogant, cruel, closed-minded and short-sighted.

The impact on women in Western Oromia has been largely negative. Women and girls have been exposed to sexual harassments, including rape.¹¹³ Many have remained as single parents after their husbands joined conflict actors or have been killed.¹¹⁴ School dropout rates among girls have exponentially increased since 2018 while teenage marriages have increased.¹¹⁵ An interviewee from Amuru district said “some of my friends married Oromia Special Police Forces, or at least they have had personal affairs with them, simply to save the lives and properties of their families.”¹¹⁶ Others have been forced in prostitution, including in cities like Dembi Dollo, Gimbi, Nekemte, Shambo, and Bako. Those who could have migrated to Addis Ababa and surrounding cities and often end up working as daily laborers, house workers, waitresses, or even sex workers.

In general, local residents, especially those in rural communities, live in continuous fear and extreme distress, and experience a sense of futility and a crisis of morale.¹¹⁷ The story of the conduct of an Oromia special police force commander in Haroji-Dongoro in West Wellega zone illustrates this.

¹¹² OCHA. (2022). *Ethiopia: Access Snapshot, Western Oromia (Oromia Region) As of 15 April 2022 - Ethiopia / ReliefWeb*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-access-snapshot-western-romia-romia-region-15-april-2022>

¹¹³ Interview with a Lalo Assabi district development worker, Gimbi, July 2022.

¹¹⁴ Interview with a community elder from Guduru district who left his home and now lives in Laga Tafo, July 2022.

¹¹⁵ OCHA. (2022). *Ethiopia: Access Snapshot, Western Oromia (Oromia Region) As of 15 April 2022 - Ethiopia / ReliefWeb*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-access-snapshot-western-romia-romia-region-15-april-2022>

¹¹⁶ Interview made with BSc graduates in Economics from Rift Valley University, Nekemte, July 2022.

¹¹⁷ Interview with a Nekemte resident, July 2022.

Sources alleged that he has conducted at least fourteen public executions at Dongoro Town roundabout, killing people suspected of having links with OLA. Community representatives and elders begged the commander to stop, but he disrespectfully declined the elders' request. One of the elders boldly responded “As per our culture, we consulted and begged you to stop killing our sons and daughters. If not, kill us first and then kill our sons and daughters.”¹¹⁸

The conflict has also led to a proliferation of hard-to-verify rumours and conspiracy theories. The murders of many high-profile individuals – such as Hachalu Hundessa, the Kerayu Gedaa leaders, Burayu Commissioner Solomon Tadesse, and Commander Tesfaye Dinku¹¹⁹ – has led to suspicion that within the Oromia state security agencies there is a “assassin squad” tasked with silencing critics of the Oromo regional government and keeping its officials in line.¹²⁰ Mr. Taye Dendea, State Minister in the Ministry of Peace, has said that “there is a small faction in the leadership of Oromia Regional State” that operates like a “mafia” and that there was evidence that they were involved in the killing of Commissioner Salomon and the Kerayu Gedaa leadership.¹²¹ According to the state minister “there is a group that openly says, ‘you speak up, we will shoot you’”, likening this behaviour to the tactics of the OLA. Taye said “crimes are committed on both sides,” one of which happens to be in government, while the others are fighting an insurgency.¹²² Others claim that the OLF operates a similar clandestine force to target defected OLF leadership.¹²³ More information about these allegations, which are widely believed across Oromia, may come to light in the future, as investigations into the murders, many of which remain unsolved, continue.

The political insecurity has directly contributed to food insecurity. A study done in Western Oromia, indicated that the prevalence of food insecurity was 74.1% and it had association with children underweight.¹²⁴ As the research witnessed, local residents are suffering from conflict-induced food insecurity – a tragedy in the highly fertile Western Oromia area. One source from Wanjo area in the Lalo Assabi district said that local residents are prohibited to plough their land and plant their vegetation, even for their subsistence.¹²⁵ During counterinsurgency operations, GSF have targeted civilians while they are working on their fields; in some cases, GSF prohibited farmers to plant maize and other crops because it could provide cover for OLA forces.¹²⁶ Bridges and key infrastructure for irrigation were destroyed; mills, coffee farms, and other small traders and shops were discouraged from operating in Western Oromia.

¹¹⁸ Interview with a Dongoro town resident, in July 2022.

¹¹⁹ “News: Burayu police commissioner shot dead, colleague injured” (2020) *Addis Standard*, 21 February, <https://addisstandard.com/news-burayu-police-commissioner-shot-dead-colleague-injured/>

¹²⁰ Another notable and unsolved murder case is the killing of the Chief Engineer of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Simegnaw Bekele in July 2018; prior to 2018, there were long-standing accusations the TPLF-dominated security structures assassinated government critics in Oromia and elsewhere.

¹²¹ “Rakkoo Oromiyaa keessaaf itti gaafatamummaa olaanaa kan fudhatuu qabu mootummaadha” (2022) *BBC Afaan Oromoo*, <https://www.bbc.com/afaanoromoo/articles/czkl1pyk5xxo>

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ According to an OLF source, the OLF security and political leaders set up a clandestine body within the OLF before it left Asmara for Addis Ababa to help Oromo revolution and protest alive. It is rumoured that the body receives directions and blessings from OLF Leader, Dawud Ibsa.

¹²⁴ Yazew, T. (2022). Are Dietary Diversity and Food Insecurity Associated with Nutritional Status of Children in Western Oromia, Ethiopia? *Journal of Biology and Today's World*, 2, 5.

¹²⁵ Interview made with a Lalo Assabi district development worker, Gimbi, July 2022.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

A UN report from May 2022 described the impact on humanitarian operations:

Partners are unable to re-stock essential health and nutrition supplies due to insecurity and other restrictions. Access to markets from rural areas is hindered, while woreda centres are facing shortages of essential supplies due to road blockage. Food deliveries to the affected population are intermittent and incomplete due to a combination of insecurity and budgetary/logistical challenges faced by authorities. Partners are considering ways to ensure food aid is delivered to remote locations.¹²⁷

The violence has also led to widespread internal displacement. More than 228,200 people became IDPs in West Wellega and East Wellega zones following the assassination of Kamashi Zone administrators in September 2018.¹²⁸ Following the violence in late 2021 after Fano attacks, about 43,139 IDPs were reported in East Wellega and Horo Guduru Wellega zones in August 2021. Likewise, whenever armed conflict takes place between GSF and OLA, a significant number of people around the incident leave their homes. Moreover, there also significant number of Amhara IDPs in Western Oromia following OLA's and other armed attacks against Amharas: for instance, about 20,500 IDPs were reported in Western Oromia following the continuous OLA and UAGs.¹²⁹ These IDPs have not gotten sufficient attention and resources to provide for their needs are lacking.¹³⁰ Worse yet, IDPs are another factor influencing food insecurity in the area. Migration from rural to urban areas is high, leaving the countryside depopulated. Youth, normally involved in farming and harvesting, have left, and the work has often fallen to the elderly who remain. The conflict has also prevented any business investments in the area, further exacerbating the food insecurity.

¹²⁷ OCHA. (2022). *Ethiopia: Access Snapshot, Western Oromia (Oromia Region) As of 15 April 2022 - Ethiopia / Relief Web*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-access-snapshot-western-oromia-oromia-region-15-april-2022>

¹²⁸ "Ethiopia: East and West Wellega, Benshangul-Gumuz Access Snapshot" (2019) OCHA, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/ocha_access_19520_wellegas_bgr_snapshot_may_2019.pdf

¹²⁹ Getahun Tesfaye (2022) "Analysis: Survivors of recent atrocities in Western Oromia seek help to regain livelihoods; more than 20,000 IDPs arrive in Amhara region," *Addis Standard*, 15 July, <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-survivors-of-atrocities-in-western-oromia-seeking-help-to-regain-shattered-livelihoods-more-than-20000-idps-arrive-in-amhara-region/>

¹³⁰ Interview with Digga resident, July 2022.

6. Unforgetting a forgotten conflict: towards a peaceful Western Oromia?

Timing is of great importance to the success of peace processes.¹³¹ A conflict is considered ripe for peace when both parties perceive there to be a mutually hurting stalemate and the parties find themselves locked in a conflict from which they cannot escalate to victory.

Is Western Oromia ripe for peace? On the one hand, it seems that both sides remain convinced they can gain further advantage and have other options than negotiating a peaceful resolution. For one, the federal government does not recognise the OLA insurgents as their equals: Parliament has even labelled them a terrorist organisation. After the Tole Massacre, the ruling PP issued a directive to intensify “law enforcement measures to eliminate terrorist groups.”¹³² The OLA, too, signalled its intent to continue fighting. In a recent press release it extended “an open call to all members of the security forces to leave your camps and join the OLA as thousands of your comrades have already done...Peacefully relinquish your arms and save your life.”¹³³ With security forces being diverted from Oromia to the frontlines of the conflict in Tigray, Amhara and Afar, the OLA may see opportunities to make further territorial gains.

On the other hand, both sides have periodically signalled their willingness to come to a negotiated solution. The regional government of Oromia, in 2021, said that the government would welcome OLA members “who agree to a peaceful struggle” and that it would be ready to pardon OLA members rather than prosecute them on terror charges. In June this year, OLA leader Jaal Marroo requested a neutral, experienced and independent international body to mediate a peace agreement in Western Oromia, albeit understanding that this could not be acceptable to either the regional or federal governments.¹³⁴ In August, the insurgents proposed a humanitarian truce to facilitate aid deliveries across Oromia.¹³⁵

More importantly, the people in Oromia are tired of conflict. As detailed in this report, civilians have borne the brunt of the cruelty of the insurgency and counter-insurgency operations. They have faced extra-judicial killings, massacres, the burning of houses and villages, the disruption of public services including education and health care, the disruption of economic activity, displacement, disruption of aid deliveries, and psychosocial issues related to prolonged fear and anxiety. Local people are longing for peace and their calls may persuade actors to come to the table and end the conflict. The OFC opposition party has already taken this position, urging “the federal government to commit without delay to ending the conflict with the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) through peaceful means, in the

¹³¹ Zartman, I. W. (2008). “Ripeness”: The importance of timing in negotiation and conflict resolution. *International Relations*, 6

¹³² “News: Ruling party executive sets direction to intensify ongoing “law enforcement measures”” (2022) *Addis Standard*, 22 June, <https://addisstandard.com/news-ruling-party-executive-sets-direction-to-intensify-ongoing-law-enforcement-measures/>

¹³³ Post by OLA Spokesperson of Twitter, <https://twitter.com/OdaaTarbiiWBO/status/1565336379172999171>

¹³⁴ Jaal Marroo’s interview with Riyot Media, June 2022.

¹³⁵ Cara Anna (2022) “Ethiopian rebels propose humanitarian truce amid drought,” *AP News*, 17 August, <https://apnews.com/article/africa-droughts-famine-kenya-ethiopia-704ea086fd25aaa9e78185a88f811a58>

same way it extended an olive branch to the Tigray region.”¹³⁶ Jawar Mohammed re-iterated his support for a ceasefire and talks with the OLA in June.¹³⁷

One of the problems is that the voices from people in Western Oromia are so rarely heard. Information remains extremely limited, and as a result, rumours about abuses and massacres are often hard to verify. The National Dialogue, which has intended to start holding its first meetings later in 2022, could provide a platform for the voices of Western Oromia to be heard. In first instance, this may not necessarily focus on the conflict parties but it should provide opportunities for ordinary people from Western Oromia – elders but also youth, men and women, religious and community leaders, civil servants, and others – to share their stories. This would also include politicians from within the PP from Western Oromia, who in recent years have faced suspicion or mistrust for being OLA sympathisers, with many getting fired or demoted as a result, and at the same time the victimisation of local PP members by the OLA. Such participation is low-hanging fruit for the national dialogue commission and would be relatively easy to organise even if conflict is still ongoing – although it may be necessary to protect participants against possible reprisals – while signalling that the situation is high on the agenda and the plight of people in Western Oromia is not forgotten.

The direct participation of OLA (as well as the TPLF) members in the national dialogue remains a highly controversial issue. From the start, the dialogue commission has been seen as unrepresentative, untransparent, unable to address the real issues in the country when conflict parties such as the OLA are excluded due to their terrorist designation. In June, a ten-party caucus that includes the OFC and OLF called for a “cessation of hostilities” before start of the dialogue that would involve “all parties.”¹³⁸ Removing OLA from the list of terrorist organisations would likely face great opposition from Amhara parties and elites. The Ethiopian House of People’s Representatives, which was responsible both for designating the OLA and TPLF as terrorist and for setting up the national dialogue commission may decide to review to what extent the benefits of the terror designation outweigh the impediment this poses for a truly inclusive national dialogue process in which the designated organisations cannot participate. It is clear that the issues that are at the core of the OLA’s struggle, such as self-determination of Ethiopia’s ethnic groups, are among the most important debates the national dialogue is expected to have.

Even if the terrorist designation of the OLA remains, the willingness of the Ethiopian government to talk to the TPLF while it was designated shows that *a priori* this cannot be an impediment to negotiations. If the OLA is serious about declaring a humanitarian ceasefire, it should cease offensive operations and its attempts to regain further territory. It should immediately cease targeting civilians in the region, including Amharas, and cooperate with the investigation into the massacres at Tole and Mender. And to show it is serious about negotiations, the OLA should re-evaluate the goals for its struggle, most importantly the objective of the armed overthrow of the Abiy government, which is an

¹³⁶ “News: OFC calls for all-around ceasefire, peace talks between OLA, fed. gov’t” (2022) *Addis Standard*, 29 March, <https://addisstandard.com/news-ofc-calls-for-all-around-ceasefire-peace-talks-between-ola-fed-govt/>

¹³⁷ Post by Sajid Nadeem on Twitter, https://twitter.com/sajid_nadeem78/status/1535955743429599233

¹³⁸ “News: Newly formed caucus sets conditions for restructuring, reforming planned national dialogue” (2022) *Addis Standard*, 6 June, <https://addisstandard.com/news-newly-formed-caucus-sets-conditions-for-restructuring-reforming-planned-national-dialogue/>

increasingly unrealistic goal (if it ever was) that has largely been abandoned by the OLA's TPLF allies during their talks with the Ethiopian federal government.

The Ethiopian government, for its part, may want to consider that years of counter-insurgency operations in Western Oromia have not brought a decisive military victory against the OLA while leading to immense civilian suffering, at least part of which has been directly caused by the actions of government security forces. While the recent massacres have fuelled calls for a stepped-up security response, the governments, regional and federal, should take great care to prevent the targeting of civilians in such operations. This can possibly be done by deploying federal forces to the border of Western Oromia with Amhara, as well as Amhara villages inside Western Oromia, where significant clashes have taken place, thus alleviating the insecurity of Amhara villages and their reliance on Amhara militias to guarantee their security. For their part, to facilitate dialogue and a negotiated resolution of the conflict, Amhara forces should cease crossings into Oromia and the Ethiopian government should prevent such crossings. Amhara militias in Oromia should avoid undertaking any offensive military operations that could endanger civilians. In addition, the Ethiopian government should conduct investigations into the abuses committed by its security forces in Western Oromia, and hold those responsible to account.

If there is a willingness on the part of the Ethiopian government to return to talks and consider pardoning OLA fighters, the focus could initially be on negotiating and agreeing on a ceasefire before demanding the disarmament of OLA fighters. Allowing humanitarian aid to flow into Western Oromia and restoring public services would be important confidence-building measures that would show the population the direct benefits of such ceasefire. A subsequent political dialogue may include a thorough evaluation of the failed DDR initiative for OLA fighters across Oromia and returning from Eritrea in 2018/2019. Such an evaluation would be required in order to prevent a repeated DDR failure in an environment where trust between the two sides is already much lower than it was back then.

Concurrently, the Ethiopian government will need to implement a wide-ranging package of measures to improve the economic prospects of people in Western Oromia, including but not limited to the provision of public services such as education and health care. In many cases that will entail reconstruction facilities that have been destroyed during the conflict. More broadly, there is a need to provide a public safety net, which could be organised through extensive investment in infrastructure projects that create good jobs for people in the region. One specific possibility is the construction of safe all-weather roads, which would enable mobility and trade and create economic opportunities, but also enable a level of security that cannot currently be provided.

While recognising that this remains primarily an internal Ethiopian affair, if requested there is a possible role for the international community in supporting talks and mediation efforts, as has been the case in the Tigray conflict. Another possible role could be through the provision of international expertise, for example in the area of DDR or human rights investigations, either through direct engagement or through the provision of financing. Finally, there is a need to raise awareness and provide accurate information about the situation in Western Oromia in a way that highlights the plight of ordinary people as a result of this protracted, complicated insurgency. For the moment, the end of their suffering is not yet in sight.

Appendix 1: Conflict actor mapping in Western Oromia

SN	Conflict Actors	Area of operations	Interest	Alignment
Federal security forces				
1	Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF)	Settled in military camps & its head-quarters is in Nekemte town. Directly engaging with OLA and other adversarial actors through counter-insurgency operations.	Defending and ensuring the existing constitutional system and order so that the government will have absolute control of violence.	Aligned with RGF and FPF.
2	Republican Guard Force (RGF)	Settles in certain areas for limited time during special operations.	To protect and fill the possible military and security gaps of federal government security agencies.	Aligned with ENDF and FPF.
3	Federal Policy Force (FPF)	Settled in zonal towns of West Oromia.	To protect urban areas from possible insurgents' insurrection and attacks.	Aligned with ENDF and RGF.
Regional security forces				
1	Oromia Special Police Force (OSPF)	Settled in Western Oromia from kebeles to zones level.	To protect the existing Oromia state government institutions against all insurrectionary forces.	Aligned with OPF, SGPF & LMF.
2	Oromia Police Force (OPF)	Settled mostly in urban areas in Western Oromia.	Focuses on formal police activities and criminal cases.	Aligned with OSPF, SGPF & LMF.
3	System Guard Police Force (SGPF)	Settled in all rural and urban kebeles in West Oromia.	To gather security and intelligence information within the community and to keep the safety and security of the community.	Aligned with OSPF, OPFF, & LMF.

4	Local Militia Force (LMF)	Settled in rural kebeles in Western Oromia.	To keep the safety and security of the local people in the kebeles.	Aligned with OSPF, OPFF, & SGPF.
Insurgent forces				
1	Oromo Liberation Army (OLA)	Operates in rural areas in Western Oromia. Engages in insurgency operations.	Believes in armed struggle as a means to political struggle so that the Oromo People decide their fate.	Aligned with BLA & GLA.
2	Counterfeit Oromo Liberation Army (COLA)	Operates in East and Horo Guduru Wellegga zones.	Filling the gap which the OLA created by splitting itself from OLF.	Unofficially aligned with OLF & GSFs.
3	Bandit Armed Qeerroo (BAQ)	Operates in Western Oromia like <i>Shiftas</i> ("Bandits").	Fulfilling its economic interest by engaging in criminal activities.	Unclear.
4	Fano	Operates in the Amhara region and along Western Oromia borders.	Keeping the safety and security of Amhara community in Western Oromia; arming the Amhara community. Accused of land- grabbing.	Aligned with Amhara state security agencies.
5	Benishangul Liberation Army (BLA)	Operates in Benishangul Gumuz region and along Western Oromia borders.	Believes in armed struggle as a means to political struggle for self-determination of the Benishangul People.	Aligned with OLA & GLA.
6	Gambella Liberation Army (GLA)	Operates in Gambella region and in Western Oromia borders.	Believes in armed struggle as a means to political struggle for the self-determination of the Gambella People.	Aligned with OLA & BLA.
Clandestine forces				
1	Oromia Irregular Security Forces (OISF)	Allegedly engages in clandestine operations and assassinations.	Allegedly serves the vested interest of the Oromia regional state.	Unaligned
2	OLF Irregular Security Forces (OLF-ISF)	Allegedly engages in clandestine operations and assassinations.	Is claimed to be working to keep Oromo struggle and revolution alive on behalf of the OLF.	Unofficially aligned with OLF security agency.

Opposition parties				
1	Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)	Peacefully operates in Ethiopia, Oromia and abroad.	Engages in peaceful politics advocating for the self-determination of Oromo people. Allegedly maintaining relations with armed actors.	Aligned with OFC, allegedly aligned with COLA & OLF-ISF
2	Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC)	Peacefully operates in Ethiopia, Oromia and abroad.	Engages in peaceful politics on behalf of the Oromo people, advocating for multi-ethnic federalism, and has at times put itself forward as possible mediating force.	Aligned with OLF and, on certain issues, the PP.

Source: Developed by the Research Team, August 2022

Appendix 2: Summary of key issues and actor narratives

The below table attempts to provide insight into the complex, sensitive, and dynamic nature of conflict in Western Oromia, providing a summary of key findings. Five key research questions are listed in the Y-axis. The government narrative, OLA narrative, and community narrative are on the X-axis.

Key Issues	Government Narrative	OLA Narrative	Community Narrative
Facts of the current situation on the ground in Western Oromia	The government is making efforts to reinforce rule of law and destroy the OLA (“OLF-Shene”) through coordinated counter-insurgency operations. in a very short period of time. The coordinated government security forces take action against terrorist forces and its associates so that the people in Western Oromia will live in peace and prosperity like other peoples. Accordingly, more than 1,255 kebeles were freed out of 1,739 kebeles under OLA control. ¹³⁹	OLA is striving to put an end to the long-awaited Oromo people freedom after a deceptive Abiy regime and opportunists hijacked the fruits of Oromo struggle during in the aftermath of the Oromo protests. The OLA is expanding its territorial control and earning public support for its military, security and political activities. Every day, OLA is ambushing, kidnapping, and killing government security forces and its agents.	The armed conflict between GSF and OLA leads communities to express grief over the situation of ordinary and civilian population. Innocent civilians were sacrificed their lives, businesses, displaced from their residences; human rights violations; food insecurity, etc. Moreover, the people are sandwiched in between the GSF and OLA as the two elephants continue fighting.
Analysis of the current strength and modus operandi of government forces and armed groups	GSF have public support, are capable, and disciplined in raiding OLA and destroying this bandit group in a very short period of time. The OLA cannot militarily engage with GSF; therefore, it targets civilians.	GSF only operate in urban areas and along asphalt roads as its members are lacking courage, commitment, and skills to engage with OLA forces. OLA has overwhelming community support and is very successful in ambushing GSF.	Both GSFs and OLA are violent, leading to crimes against civilians: kidnappings, killings, executions, burning shelters, intimidations, fines, etc. Both have some level of community support.
Assessment of the impact on civilians (youth and women in focus)	GSF accuse and blame OLA for making life difficult to civilians in Western Oromia. OLA forcefully mobilize the youth to meaningless armed struggle; dictate the women for its vested interests; and halt operations of key	OLA posits itself as freedom fighters, providers of safety and security, and as sacrificing its soul for the people so that civilians live peacefully. OLA’s primary and only targets are GSF and government officials. The civilian situation is a concern for them	In the last four years, all aspects of burdens fell on the shoulders of civilians who were killed, kidnapped, and tortured more than the conflict actors. The youth remain hopeless whereas many women have faced sexual abuses and lost

¹³⁹ The Ethiopian Nation Security Council led by PM Abiy Ahmed stated that GSF have retaken about 1,255 rural kebeles out of 1,739 kebeles from OLA in Western Oromia, EBC, 8:00pm News on August 8, 2022.

	social services. Expelling OLA from among the people is number one priority and all others come secondary.	and hence OLA is open to compromise anything for civilian lives intervention. In early August 2022, OLA expressed its readiness to temporarily stop the fighting for civilian and humanitarian truce.	their sons, daughters, and husbands. Life has become much more difficult to the civilians than it is to GSF and OLA.
Opportunities for and impediments to peace agreement	Destroying and clearing out OLA in Oromia rural areas and from among the Oromo people. The government has so far refused to negotiate with what it considers terrorists although there have been periodic statements about a possible pardon for OLA fighters. This could be built upon.	The only opportunity to peace agreement is through a transitional government or regime change in Ethiopia. The OLA does not want to waste its energy and time talking with deceptive government. It demands a withdrawal of GSF from Western Oromia. It offered a humanitarian ceasefire in 2022 because of an alleged drought and famine.	At any cost, a peace agreement and return to normal is urgent and should be prioritised by all actors involved.
Amplifying voices from Western Oromia	Guaranteeing peace and order as soon as possible: kicking out OLA and bringing its members to justice and disarming moderate OLA members are key precursors to resuming key social services. There is little input from civilians into policy-making processes and investigations into abuses have not been conducted.	OLA demand independent investigations with regards to civilian killings, gross human rights violations; humanitarian interventions for conflict affected people. It is unclear if the OLA would accept the results of investigations as it has challenged EHRC reports.	The people want to share information about gross human rights violations, food insecurity, securitization of human lives, civilian killings, land grabbing, property looting and destruction of shelters, and internally displaced people. The National Dialogue could be an avenue for their voice to be heard.

Source: Developed by the research team, August 2022



EUROPEAN
INSTITUTE
OF PEACE



European Institute of Peace (EIP)
Rue des Deux Eglises 25
1000 Brussels, Belgium

www.eip.org
info@eip.org

