



INTERNATIONAL OROMO LAWYERS ASSOCIATION (IOLA)

12711 Mankato Street NE Blaine, MN 55449; USA

Email: iola@oromolawyers.org Website: <http://www.oromolawyers.org/>

Phone: +1 571 331 83 30

UPDATE: IOLA Press Statement Regarding the Irreechaa Massacre of October 2016

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On the 2nd of October 2016, Ethiopian security forces shot live ammunition into the massive crowd (estimated in millions) and fired tear gas during the Irreechaa Festival, the Oromo's thanks giving day. As we now understand, in a matter of 30 minutes, hundreds of unsuspecting celebrant's were killed and thousands have suffered severe injuries and mental trauma. According to the statement from the opposition political party, The Oromo Federalist Congress, up until the 3rd of October 2016, the death toll has passed 678. This figure has continued to increase and the number of those injured is not yet accounted for.

The Oromo's have been celebrating Irreechaa for many years peacefully, but it has never entertained such a tragedy. This year's festival was in fact different from the previous ones on several grounds. There was unusually massive security presence from the start. The hills behind the stage and surrounding lake were all occupied by heavily armed forces. Several armored vehicles were pointing their warheads at the crowd and gunship helicopter was deployed. As the Oromo Protest (#OromoProtests) and disagreement with the government continued, political cadres from the ruling party were assigned and took central stage at this event. Given the continued protest and ongoing killings, such gross disrespect of the revered Irreechaa ceremony by the government cadres further infuriated the mass who continued to chant slogans.

According to the information available to us, the Irreechaa celebration was going peacefully with a visible sign of protests, until the police started firing tear gas followed by live ammunition in the direction of the people. Gunship helicopter flew overhead simultaneously to create the deadly havoc, confusion and panic. According to eye witness account of Mr Milkessa Midega (Lecturer at Dire Dawa University), "When the gunfire started, and tear gases rained, everyone was shocked but the wave of crowd had little options to access the exit road. Even the narrow exit itself was near the gorge. To make an already bad situation worse, the deep gorge was covered by bushes, which means people could not even see the hole in front of them, and since the gunfire came from the opposite direction (left side of the stage), the festival goers had no choice but to run toward the cliff. This suggests that the military strategically devised the scheme knowing full well that those who run away to escape bullets being fired from behind would be finished in the gorge and ditches. This is why many in the country and those of us who were there believe the Irreechaa massacre was deliberately executed."

According to Milkessa "The closing of the wider exit road on the left side and firing on a panicked crowd from the direction of the safest and more visible exit cannot be a simple case of recklessness. It was deliberately planned to absolve the government of responsibility and might have saved the military some bullets. It's a cold, calculated and inhumane military decision." Several other eye witness account, intelligence reports, photo and video evidences also confirms similar pattern of events. According to some intelligence reports, the killing was conducted with the direct order of the higher Intelligence command officials.



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This tragic event took place at a time of massive crackdown on peaceful Oromo protesters all over Oromia. The protest has claimed the lives of more than five hundred people, (according to some estimated the figures have passed over 1000) in less than eleven months. The protest is still going on. Being subjected to an unprecedented economic, political and social marginalization, and singled out for harsh systematic repression; the Oromo people have been peacefully demonstrating and demanding for the respect of their fundamental human, social, economic and political rights.

The protests and subsequent human rights violations is in fact not limited to the Oromo region. The Gambella, Sidama, Amhara, Somalia and Konso people's have peaceful protested to air their grievances and demand for respect of various legitimate rights. But almost in all occasions the government responded with mass killing, displacement and imprisonments.

In one out of thousands of recent incidents, one mother whose child was killed by the 'Agazi' forces were bitten for refusing to sit on her child's dead body in town of Dambi Dollo (Oromiya region). The right to life as a core and one of the few non-derogable rights among the long list of human rights are enshrined in International Covenants to which the Ethiopian government is a party. As a signatory of these Covenants, it is bound to do all necessary steps to fulfill its obligations. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the European Parliament demanded a neutral investigation in to the Oromo Protests killings but TPLF led EPRDF government has so far refused to fulfill by its obligations.

As the tense atmosphere remains and the cycle of violence continues, IOLA calls up on:

- 1) International community for the establishment of International investigating commission into the Irreechaa killings and these happened during the entire Oromo Protest, and bring those responsible to justice;
- 2) The Ethiopian government to immediately let the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly and other specialized UN human rights experts to visit Ethiopia to report on these situations. We respectfully ask the UN Security Council to ensure this step is carried out by the Ethiopian government.
- 3) The Government of Ethiopia to release all political prisoners and ensure the rule of law, in which Freedom, Equality and Justice are uncompromised;
- 4) The Government of Ethiopia to respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Union Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights, including the right to peaceful assembly, freedom of expression and association;
- 5) The Ethiopian government to stop suppressing the free flow of information, including by jamming media broadcasts, blocking of communication services and harassing media, including through intrusive surveillance programs, and facilitate access throughout Ethiopia for independent journalists and human rights monitors;

IOLA would also like to reiterate its readiness to support any constructive initiatives in this regard.

The Executive Board of International Oromo Lawyers Association

Note:

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