

## **Clan conflict between Oromos and Somalis and border tensions between Somaliland and Ethiopia**

**19 September 2017**

### **INFORMATION**

In recent clashes between Somalis and Oromos in Ethiopia, hundreds were reportedly killed. This clan violence has spilt over to Somaliland and may cause increased tensions along the Ethiopian border, also in areas outside Somaliland.

News from Ethiopia is scant and unreliable, as the authorities deny the (extent of the) issue and make reporting by independent journalists difficult. The following information, however, seems quite certain:

The current, intense phase was triggered by an effort to delimitate the border between Somali and Oromo regions in Ethiopia, in response to previous low-intensity conflict. This effort led to clashes early August. Since early September it has steadily become more violent.

Both Somali and Oromo populations are partially pastoralist, and habitually graze their livestock in the same areas, following rainfall patterns. The effort to define the border predictably fanned tensions on both sides.

The first large-scale violence was triggered by Liyuu Police killing of Oromos, reportedly because they refused to pay taxes to the Somali region, claiming they were inside the Oromiya region. The Liyuu Police, a tribal paramilitary force set up to secure the Somali region and Ethiopia's border with Somalia/Somaliland, were accused of killing seven villagers and dumping their bodies in another Oromo village early September.

The flashpoints are around Moyale (close to the Kenyan border), Harar and Mieso. A reported 130 Oromos were killed in Asebe Teferi near Mieso and 97 Somalis were killed in the khat capital Awoday, near Harar, according to local and UN sources. These figures were impossible to confirm and may be on the high side. Around Moyale some villages have been surrounded by opposing forces.

Oromo grievances are directed not only at Somalis in general, and against the Liyuu Police in particular, but also against the Ethiopian federal government, which they see as siding with the Somalis, giving them more land and funds for development as well as political opportunities.

Ethiopian federal authorities were slow in intervening, leaving local authorities to handle these problems. However, the governments of the Oromo and Somali regions are obviously partisan and have accused each other of fomenting the violence. On 15 September the Ethiopian government announced it was sending federal troops to some of the areas which have seen most violence.

Communities living among their opponents – such as the Oromo in the Ethiopian Somali capital Jigjiga – have fled or have been expelled, for the first time in decades.

The conflict spilt over the border on 12 September, when prominent khat dealers hailing from Isaaq, Gadabursi and Essa clans were killed in Awoday, the main khat market of Eastern Ethiopia. Reportedly, traders of the main Djiboutian khat import company (Sosote) as well as prominent buyers for the Somaliland khat distribution companies Faraaska and 571, were shot dead by their Oromo khat

providers. Somaliland sources confirm that 17 Gadabuursi, 12 Isaaq and 4 Essa were killed in Awoday. These killings may be related to business interests and turf wars, and not only ethnically motivated.

As a result, there were retaliations against Oromo people in Somaliland. A brother of the Faraaska manager shot in Awoday shot dead two Oromos in Abaarso, on the road from Hargeisa to the Ethiopian border at Tog Wajaale. In Hargeisa and Burco (on 17/09) youth gangs attacked Oromos, but no victims were reported. Beyond these cases, there have been no verified cases of violence against Oromos.

Many Oromos reside in Somaliland, most of them working in jobs Somalis scorn, such as barbers, garbage collectors, waiters, construction workers, cleaners, watchmen, vegetable salesmen and agricultural labourers; most of these reside in Somaliland legally. There are also Oromo refugees and businessmen. In general Somalilanders don't distinguish between the different Ethiopian nationalities, and they welcome their presence.

Some Oromo people in Somaliland's towns have sought refuge in police stations and other public buildings, appealing to the Somaliland government for help. Some Oromo aid entrepreneurs have approached international agencies, and rumours circulated among Oromos that the UNHCR or IOM would provide repatriation packages, which might have encouraged some of them to embark on a return journey.

Although fear has gripped sections of the Oromo community in Somaliland, most of them returned to their jobs days after the killings in Awoday and Abaarso.

Somaliland's Minister of Defence publicly stated on 17/09 that Oromos in Somaliland need not worry and are safe. Nevertheless, local authorities provided free transportation by bus to the border crossing at Tog Wajaale, where about a hundred Oromos are reportedly now stranded. It is not clear how they could safely cross the Somali region towards Oromo areas; in addition the Ethiopian authorities want to screen the 'refugee-returnees' before letting them in.

On 17/09 the Minister of Health of Ethiopia's Somali region reported that 23 people had been admitted into hospital after consuming toxic khat. The Oromo were accused of poisoning khat destined for the Somali market. In any case, khat exports to Somaliland and Djibouti have ground to a halt, causing severe shortages in both countries. Kenya has taken to export khat ('miraa') to Hargeisa, but Kenyan 'miraa' has a different taste and is much more expensive than Ethiopian khat.

## **ANALYSIS**

The conflict between Oromos and Somalis in Ethiopia will likely continue, and even increase, in the near future, for reasons that have to do with internal/ federal Ethiopian politics, and might take months or even years to resolve. This conflict has several consequences:

Difficulty to cross from Ethiopian highlands into the Somali region, and thus across the border into Somalia. This may affect humanitarian assistance to refugee camps along the Somalia/ Ethiopia border, such as Dollo Adde. Oromo trucks in the Somali region, and Somali transports in the Oromo region have already been attacked many times in the recent conflict.

Economic consequences: the Oromo and the Somalis do a lot of business together; besides khat, Oromos export fruit, vegetables and other agricultural produce to Somaliland; on the other hand Somalis sell many items imported from the Gulf and beyond to Oromo businessmen, in Tog Wajaale and elsewhere. If the Oromos were to flee massively from Somaliland, there would be a labour force shortage as Somalis are unwilling to take these jobs.

If Oromos become targeted by communal violence they might appeal massively to the international community for help, as they are not able to flee through Ethiopian Somali regions where they are most at risk, besides not being wanted by federal authorities and the Liyuu Police who control the border.

If conflict along the border between Oromos and Somalis increases, the Liyuu Police currently maintaining a buffer zone along many sections of the Somali border may be called to other duties; this could deconflict some border areas that have suffered under the excessive force used by the Liyuu police, but also reduce security in other border areas.

There is no indication of the involvement of organized armed groups such as Al Shabaab or the ONLF in the current conflict. As both sides to the conflict are seeking to arm themselves, there may however be an increase in cross-border arms trafficking.

The possibility of Somali states or the federal government being drawn into this conflict are at present very low.