

# Human Rights Watch

## Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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(Nairobi) - In its battle against rebels in eastern Ethiopia's Somali Region, Ethiopia's army has subjected civilians to executions, torture, and rape, Human Rights Watch said in a new report released today. The widespread violence, part of a vicious counterinsurgency campaign that amounts to war crimes and crimes against humanity, has contributed to a looming humanitarian crisis, threatening the survival of thousands of ethnic Somali nomads.

The 130-page report "[Collective Punishment: War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity in the Ogaden Area of Ethiopia's Somali Regional State](#)," documents a dramatic rise in unchecked violence against civilians since June 2007, when the Ethiopian army launched a counterinsurgency campaign against rebels who attacked a Chinese-run oil installation. The Human Rights Watch report provides the first in-depth look at the patterns of abuse in a conflict that remains virtually unknown because of severe restrictions imposed by the Ethiopian government.

"The Ethiopian army's answer to the rebels has been to viciously attack civilians in the Ogaden," said Georgette Gagnon, Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "These widespread and systematic atrocities amount to crimes against humanity. Yet Ethiopias major donors, Washington, London and Brussels, seem to be maintaining a conspiracy of silence around the crimes."

Human Rights Watch researchers located and interviewed more than 100 victims and eyewitnesses to abuses, as well as traders, business leaders, and regional government officials located in neighboring Kenya, the semi-autonomous region of Somaliland in northern Somalia and in Ethiopia. The research, largely carried out between September and December 2007, was further supplemented with [satellite imagery that confirmed the burning of some villages](#). In chilling accounts, witnesses and victims described to Human Rights Watch nightly beatings with the barrel of a gun, public executions, and the burning of entire villages.

The report describes the army's response to the April 2007 attack by the rebel Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) on a Chinese-run oil installation in Obole that killed more than 70 Chinese and Ethiopian civilians. During the peak of the army's counterinsurgency campaign from June to September 2007, witnesses described how Ethiopian troops forcibly displaced entire rural communities and destroyed dozens of rural villages; executed at least 150 civilians, sometimes in demonstration killings to terrorize those communities suspected of supporting the ONLF; and arbitrarily detained hundreds of civilians in military barracks where they experienced beatings, torture, and widespread rape and other forms of sexual violence. Thousands of civilians fled the conflict-affected areas for neighboring countries. Some of the patterns of violence are ongoing, and Human Rights Watch believes its findings represent only a fraction of the actual abuses.

Ethiopian authorities also stepped up their forced recruitment of local militia forces, many of whom are sent to fight against the ONLF without military training, resulting in large casualty rates.

The rebel ONLF has also been responsible for serious violations of the laws of war, including the summary executions of Chinese and Ethiopian civilians during the April 2007 attack on the Obole oil installation and killing suspected government collaborators, which are considered war crimes.

Many civilians living in the conflict zone are nomads who must move to fresh grazing areas and regional markets to sell their livestock. Since mid-2007, Ethiopian forces have imposed a series of measures aimed at cutting off economic support to the ONLF, including a trade blockade on the war-affected region, restricted access to water, food and grazing areas, confiscation of livestock and trade goods, and obstruction of humanitarian assistance. In combination with the drought produced by successive poor rains, this economic war is threatening the lives of thousands of civilians, yet many of them lack access to food aid due to government manipulation of food distribution.

"The government's attacks on civilians, its trade blockade, and restrictions on aid amount to the illegal collective punishment of tens of thousands of people," said Gagnon. Unless humanitarian agencies get immediate access to independently assess the needs and monitor food distribution, more lives will be lost."

The Ethiopian government did not respond to Human Rights Watch's requests for access to the conflict-affected area, and has tried to stem the flow of information from the region. Some foreign journalists who have attempted to conduct independent investigations have been arrested and residents and witnesses have been threatened and detained in order to prevent them from speaking out. In July 2007, the government expelled the International Committee of the Red Cross from Somali Region, although it has since permitted some UN and nongovernmental humanitarian organizations to operate, albeit under tight controls.

The report also analyzes the Ethiopian government and international community's responses to the continuing abuses. Ethiopia continues to deny the allegations but has yet to investigate them or hold anyone accountable. Human Rights Watch says that donor governments are failing to demand human rights accountability, despite the substantial economic aid to Ethiopia and its partnership in regional counterterrorism efforts.

Western governments and institutions alone, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union, give at least US\$2 billion in aid to Ethiopia annually, but have remained silent on the widespread abuses being committed in the Ogaden area. The US government, which views Ethiopia as a key partner in regional counterterrorism efforts, has failed to use its significant leverage, including military aid, to press for an end to the crimes.

Human Rights Watch called on major donors to press Ethiopia to end the violence and recommended that:

"Influential states use many excuses such as lack of information and strategic priorities to downplay the grave human rights concerns in Somali Region," said Gagnon. "But crimes against humanity can't be swept under the carpet. Donor governments should reconsider their policies on Ethiopia until these abuses end and those responsible are brought to justice."

#### **Witness accounts from the report:**

"The soldiers came to Aleen, after they burned down Lahelow. Then they burned Aleen. We were there at the time. The soldiers arrived and ordered the people out of their homes. They gathered all of the people together. Then the commander ordered the village burned. The commander told us, I have told you already to leave these small villages, and then they forced us out. Then they burned down all the homes. The houses are just huts, so it is easy to burn them."

Villager, September 23, 2007

"I was taken away with two men, Hassan Abdi Abdullahi and Ahmed Gani Guled. First, they pulled ropes around the necks of the two men and pulled in opposite directions, and both fell down. They put me in a ditch while they were strangling the other two. One soldier tried to strangle me with the metal stick used for cleaning the gun [by pushing it down on my throat], but I twisted his finger until he released me. Then two other soldiers came and they put a rope around my neck and started pulling. That is the last thing I remember, until I woke up, still in the ditch. A naked body was on top of me, it was Ahmed Gani Guled, who was dead. I couldn't move out of the ditch until I was found by some women who came to the waterhole."

Ridwan Hassan-rage Sahid, October 30, 2007

"They started beating me with the backs of their AK-47 guns. They hit me once with the gun in my face, and then started beating me. They also hit me with the gun barrel in my teeth, and broke one of my teeth. Then they started beating me with a fan belt on my back and my feet. It lasted for more than one hour. Then they tied both my legs and lifted me upside down to the ceiling with a rope, and kept beating me more, saying I had to confess. For two months, we underwent this same ordeal, being taken from our rooms at night and being beaten and tortured."

Thirty-one-year-old shopkeeper, September 20, 2007

"They wanted to intimidate the rest of us, so they brought the two girls who they said were the strongest ONLF supporters. They made the rest of us watch while they killed the two girls. First they tried to get them to confess, saying they would kill them otherwise. Then they shot both of them with their guns. Their names were Faduma Hassan, 17, and Samsam Yusuf, 18. Both were students."

Student, September 23, 2007

"We have a well in Qoriley which is surrounded by wire. The army has prohibited us from using it, so you have to sneak in at night. All these things have been imposed on us this year. At nighttime, we will try and get some water to store in our houses. But if the soldiers see you are fetching water, they can kill you."

Villager, September 22, 2007

"If [the federal government] followed the law, it would be good, but even the law they've created is not being followed."

Former regional court judge, December 5, 2007

Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing in Ethiopia's Western Tigray Zone

Unlawful Detention and Abuse in Unauthorized Places of Detention in Uganda

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