



WILL THE DEATH OF 700 PEACEFUL PROTESTORS IN ONE DAY AT THE IRREESHA RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL SHAKE ETHIOPIANS TO STAND TOGETHER TO BRING PEACE AND JUSTICE TO ALL?

Press Release.
October 5, 2016.

We in the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) are deeply shocked and grieved by the loss of hundreds of Ethiopians in our Oromo family, in Bishoftu, Ethiopia on Sunday, October 2, 2016 during a celebration of the Irreecha Festival, a traditional day of thanksgiving for the Oromo in Ethiopia and worldwide.

Despite ruling regime's reports of 60-70 deaths, reliable sources using body counts and names, allege deaths numbering nearly 700 persons. Most of these victims were young people, dressed in traditional clothes, joining together outdoors for celebration, speeches, dancing and in open appreciation for God's provision. The festival is widely celebrated following the rainy season and draws millions to join in the public gathering, considered one of the largest in all of Africa.



However, this year the numbers of participants were estimated to be around two million, down by two million from last year, likely due to the regime-sponsored violence and killing of peaceful civilian protestors in Oromia over the last eleven months.

Based on reports from the ground and videos widely circulating on the social media; in the midst of the celebration, the regime authorities took over the stage as festival speakers were addressing the crowd, even forcefully taking the microphone away from a speaker. The speakers and people in charge of the festival had been elected by the people, creating a strong reaction to this government intrusion that essentially hijacked one of the Oromos' most important cultural days of the year. Adding insult to injury, the regime authorities who replaced them included some known to be complicit in past killings of peaceful protestors in recent months.



Some members of the crowd began to protest by crossing their arms together above their heads, signifying the gesture of protest that has now become widely known and accepted. In response, security forces fired tear gas at the crowd and shot their guns into the air; but some also shot into the crowd, as evidenced by the gun shot wounds on the bodies of some of the dead and wounded. At the same time, numerous military hummers were present with masked security agents pointing their guns at the crowd, while multiple helicopters circled overhead, again with similar masked soldiers pointing guns at the crowd. The crowd panicked under the threat and began to run for safety, causing a massive stampede. As they ran, many fell into deep ditches, body upon body, causing numbers of people to suffocate from the weight of others on top of them.

Authorities knew these festival participants were unarmed and did not have the intention of using violence because all of them had gone through a security check gate before entering the area so as to ensure they had no weapons. **So, why did these forces use tear gas and fire their guns, some into the crowd? Why were they masked? Why was a helicopter circling overhead with guns pointed downward? Why were there tanks with security men directing their machine guns at the crowd? Why were they also masked?**

It all was intimidating to the crowd and ignited a reaction from the people that would not have otherwise happened. Yet, the TPLF are now minimizing the numbers of dead and wounded and instead, are blaming the victims for running away in a fear-caused stampede.

In addition to the report of nearly 700 deaths, it was also alleged that nearly 900 more people were injured, some critically. The nearby hospital could not cope with the numbers and seriousness of the injuries as one can see from some of the many surfacing videos where many bodies cover the floors for lack of beds. It is likely the number of dead will increase.



This is a tragedy that should not have happened; yet, TPLF/EPRDF leadership, when panicking, continues to resort to bullets, brute force and bloodshed whenever they sense increasing vulnerability to the growing opposition against them. In this case, those participating in the festival were all peaceful, despite some speaking out for freedom and justice, accompanied by the gesture of crossed arms. The TPLF/EPRDF fears that any of these public gatherings could morph into public resistance that could catalyze the public to wider resistance. Yet, the strong-armed reaction over the last year has empowered and intensified the public protests rather than curbed them. Nearly 1,000 lives have been lost prior to this and already we are seeing the increasing and intensifying reaction of the people.

We are deeply saddened by the loss of so many lives. Grief and hardship from these losses are affecting families, communities and Ethiopians throughout the country and world. The last eleven months have been dark months for the majority of Ethiopians; it is hard to imagine how the TPLF and others who are guilty of these crimes feel. How would they feel if these were their own children?

No one would have thought this kind of religious celebration would end up being the scene of such great bloodshed. Who among them expected never to return home; yet, there were nearly 700 who would never make it. Their families must now face their loss. What happened?

Violence has never been part of the Irreecha celebration until now. The TPLF/EPRDF regime is responsible for terrorizing and killing the people as well as the deaths of those from the stampede; yet they take no responsibility. We are not surprised. Most everything the TPLF/EPRDF claims are filled with lies to cover up the truth or to create a more desirable or less negative image than exists in reality. Ask the people about the double-digit economic growth and you will discover holes in their claims.

The TPLF/EPRDF goes through an elaborate process to hold an election; yet, the outcome— a 100% victory for them— is predetermined. They currently have more political prisoners in jails, detention centers, and prisons than most any other African country other than Eritrea; yet they claim to be a free country; however, according to Freedom House, Ethiopia under the TPLF is close to the bottom of the scale regarding basic freedoms.

Outsiders sometimes accept their claims or numbers, not having a means to double check the statistics, but then the TPLF/EPRDF uses the information they themselves supplied to these foreign media and institutions to verify their own claims.

The killing of innocent people has become the trademark of the TPLF. When the TPLF went to the bush to try to overthrow the oppressive government of the Derg, killing was their way to power, even killing those among them, some of whom were competitors. There is nothing new about the TPLF killing more innocent people.

Mr. Obang Metho, Executive Director of the SMNE states:

“To the people of Ethiopia:

The whole families of Ethiopians are mourning the loss of these people. To those who lost your close family members, we are with you and also grieving for the loss of your loved one. We are praying for you and those who are injured for a speedy recovery. Now is the time to reflect on the death of these people and to pray that God uses their death to wake up a country to stand together to create a home where people will live in harmony and with respect towards each other.

Those left behind must take responsibility to bring reconciliation among our people and to help heal the wounds dividing us. To do so, we must reject the regime's primary means of survival— seducing us to endlessly remain embittered and isolated from each other based on ethnicity, religion or other identity factors. We must understand, we have to agree to do so for them to win, while putting humanity before ethnicity or any other differences, is the way to a better Ethiopia. Becoming complicit with them in something that is wrong, will bring destruction on all of us and this is what we are now facing.

Let us work together in calm; not reacting emotionally with rage and vengeance. In such a wrong state of mind, great destruction can be perpetrated with great regrets later. Let us rise to a higher standard. Justice will be done in a court of law, not in the street.

Do not harm another or their property because they belong to a certain ethnic group or political group. We need to be better than they are. Destruction will not bring life, but take it. We have to avoid that. We have to see a bigger, better and more common vision based on what is right that will bring a lasting solution. Whatever we do, let our actions not be reckless so we end up like Syria, Rwanda and other places of death and destruction we need not become.

We have a calling to stand for what is right, moral and good, not just in our own eyes— which could change overnight— but in a way that will honor the way we live together. Then we will be more able to create a country where we are valued by our humanity instead of only “considered human” if someone else thinks we “possess” the “right” identity factors. Justice, freedom and opportunity is for all Ethiopians not only one ethnic group.

To the TPLF leadership:

You cannot get away with this. Ethiopian people know who has done it; there were many witnesses. It is a matter of time and the sooner you stop, the better for you and your own future. You should come to the table of dialogue before the public forces you to come to ours. Destruction of the other is not the outcome for which we seek; but instead, we seek “real freedom and genuine development” of a society that will help us rise above the hate, injustice, the dehumanization of self or others, untruth, theft of the property of others, violence, killing and the failures of the past.

To the EPRDF:

Your future is not in your hands, but increasingly in the hands of the Ethiopian people. Yet, we do not suggest you leave this dying regime behind and be on the side of the people unless you believe what the people are doing and seeking is right, moral and good in the eyes of our Creator. If you see it is, we invite you to become part of such transformational change and reforms in Ethiopia.

To Tigrayans:

I encourage you who are supporting the TPLF leadership to abandon them and take the side of the people. The TPLF has purposely alienated you from the rest of Ethiopians to make sure you have no choice in the matter but to support them, even if privately you adamantly disapprove of what they are doing and reject their rule.

Some have succumbed to the perks and privileges that have bought your souls and your cooperation while others among you have suffered from neglect and lack of opportunity to ensure there are poor to be put on display in Tigray to keep the development and aid money flowing. Those in between are struggling with the difficulty of living in the midst of corruption and wrong, but finding it dangerous to oppose those so close to you. At the same time, a minority at the top has erected a system where they have been able to deplete the banks, the resources and opportunities while others' hands are crossed over their heads and tied. I invite you to come out with us to stand against what is wrong and to stand up for what is right.

What kind of future do you want for yourselves, your families and your descendants? The material gains some of you have made, may eventually be lost and what is left is the people, so we call you to side with the people.

If the TPLF really loved you, they would have made the other people love you; but instead, they have tried to alienate you so you will support them, but later, what they have done will make you the object of hatred and shame as a legacy.

What did your leader, the mastermind of ethnic hatred politics and division, Mr. Meles Zenawi leave for you, but hatred from others. Reject it, like a father who instead, seeks to leave a legacy of good to his children that will bring benefits to them in the future. Speak up to the TPLF leadership and say, "Not in my name! Condemn their actions. If what has been done in Bishopftu had taken place in Adwa or Mekelle, would there be mute silence from the TPLF or the Tigray? If not, speak out! Wrong is wrong; break the silence and be on the side of the people".

In conclusion, this massacre of nearly 700 people in one day, which has just occurred in Bishopftu, can be compared to others horrific massacre in the world that resulted in global outrage, like at the Hungarian Revolution Massacre in 1956, the Soweto massacre on June 16, 1976 in South Africa, the Mendiola massacre in January 22, 1987, the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 4, 1989 in China and the Rabaa or Tahrir Square massacre in Egypt on August 14, 2013. It must be condemned and stopped. Each of us should do our part.

May we humble ourselves to become compassionate, principled and ready to forgive and to seek the freedom, justice and well being of others as we seek our own.

Please do not hesitate to email me if you have comments to: Obang@solidaritymovement.org