

Famine, Genocide and Media Control in Ethiopia

by

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Abstract

In Ethiopia, we show how the ruling elites have long understood the reality that their donor nations have abhorred the horrific violence that is common in their country. Our analysis of media attention shows rapid shifts in government policy in response to global publicity and the global public understanding of massive death, especially of children and civilians. The pattern of government response to media attention by sudden changes in policy, the pattern of intimidating journalists and the policy of destroying infrastructure needed for communications may be evidence of ongoing genocide. This information may be helpful to those who seek markers for the presence of genocidal activity and who wish to halt the progress of genocide without armed intervention by using the shaming effect of global publicity.

Key words: famine, media control, genocide, genocide prevention, genocide denial, Oromo, Ethiopia, Horn of Africa

Background to Defining Genocide by Attrition

In order to maintain power in Ethiopia, the ruling elite need to maintain the flow of cash and weapons. But, in order to keep their foreign donors happy, they deny genocidal acts against their targeted peoples, and they need to create a believable cover-up to explain the presence of mass deaths. The Abyssinian rulers had no choice but to be satisfied with the slower genocide of hunger and deprivation that could be more easily denied as being deliberate. In order to perpetrate genocide that was mostly funded by foreign aid, the government needed to destroy information flow.

We observe that in Ethiopia constant famines are blamed on climate or drought, but other factors, including destructive government policies, are conveniently avoided. Yet, Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze unequivocally stated, “The points of overriding importance are: that there is no real evidence to doubt that all famines in the modern world are preventable by human action; that many countries—even some very poor ones—manage to consistently prevent them; that when people die of starvation there is almost invariably some massive social failure (whether or not a natural phenomenon had an initiating role in the causal process); and that the responsibilities for that failure deserve explicit attention and analysis, not evasion.”¹ Ideally, one should expect that chronic hunger and multiple episodes of mass deaths should no longer exist. One should especially expect that sophisticated, educated people working at the international level would know that fact. Yet, even today, Ethiopian rulers create and ruthlessly carry out policies including forced deportations known to be causing mass starvation and death among some of its ethnic groups, and have not been blamed by foreign observers and donors.

Finding 'Intent to Destroy' in the Patterns of Policy and Denial

The United Nations Genocide Convention (UNGC) is the defining global law that relates to genocide. The protected groups are defined as “national, ethnical, racial or religious” and so would include the Oromo, the Ogadeni, and other conquered nations of the South of the country. The act, or ‘actus reus’, committed might include outright killing, but also might include, according to UNGC IIc “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part”, which would tend to lead to a slow type of genocide. The act could also refer to a negative act, for example, the perpetrators might ignore the problem and not call for aid while people in the target populations are dying. Ethiopian ruling elites have always denied knowledge of famine episodes, and even as they were committing acts destructive to the lives of their peoples, they continued to deny knowledge and culpability.

The first task in defining genocide is to recognize that a major defining boundary set by the writers and signers of the UNGC is the term “intent”. The prosecutor must prove destructive acts against certain defined groups, but those acts must be committed with ‘dolus specialis’, “intent to destroy” a particular protected group, in whole or in part.² If intent to destroy a group cannot be determined, there may be crimes against humanity, but there is no genocide.

However, intent can be inferred. Genocide scholar Jerry Fowler wrote, “Inferring intent from conduct in the absence of direct evidence is widely accepted.”³ In this paper, we show that the special “intent” of the minority Abyssinian rulers to destroy Oromo, Ogadeni and peoples of the south can be inferred from the way government responds to media attention to hunger in order to mitigate negative responses of donor governments and reduce global embarrassment.

Government action taken with knowledge of media attention before, during and between the famine episodes should show that, in Ethiopia, there is government understanding of wrongdoing that needs to be hidden. The conduct required to change direction quickly demonstrates the centralized organization required to do so.

In addition, the mass deaths from famine and forcible deportations that cause destruction and death result from organized repetitive acts from which one also could successfully infer "intent" and so also satisfy the requirements of Article 2. These famines and forced deportations are repeated down the decades, as is ever-stronger media control. What appears to be failed policy to outsiders is actually successful policy to the elite leaders for whom deadly outcomes without negative repercussions to them is the desired goal. In other words, the desired policy outcome is the secret mass death of the conquered population.

These tactics include denial of hunger and distortion of the facts to outsiders, refusal to ask for aid and refusal to accept aid (depending upon whatever tactic might work best at the moment), removing food stores from the affected area, repeating food production policies that have failed, preventing victims from pursuing proven coping mechanisms, physically isolating the area, denying minimal medical care, mass deportations and targeting the specific subject people who have been chosen to lose their right to food among other tactics.

Haile Selassie Government and Famine (1892-1975)

Emperor Haile Selassie was the son of Ras Makonnen, who was Governor of Harar Province and cousin and advisor on foreign affairs to Emperor Menelik II. Haile Selassie was mentored by Menelik II during his teens after his father died of cancer. Both Ras Makonnen and the Emperor were cognizant of the benefits and dangers of media attention and certainly must have transferred that understanding to the young boy.

For example, in 1891, when Italian travelers noticed the devastation of the Imri area not far from Harrar, because of raids from Harar, Ras Makonnen "confiscated all their luggage, notes, and sketches" before sending them home."⁴ Today the Ethiopian government confiscates photo cameras, video cameras and sound recorders from journalist and tourists to hide its actions. After the battle of Adwa in March of 1896, there were many among the defeated Italian army who were mutilated as punishment. Many were castrated; others lost a hand and foot. About 7% of Italian soldiers who returned home had been castrated.⁵ Jonas related that visions of mutilated people in the streets of Italy sent a message of Ethiopian barbarism and undermined Ethiopia's reputation among nations. Chris Prouty related that, "the fact that a few Italian bodies were emasculated by the 'trophy'-collecting Ethiopians appalled readers of the European press."⁶

Haile Selassie valued his global persona as an exemplary and almost mythical father figure of Ethiopia and even Africa. He could lecture world leaders at the League of Nations one day, appear as *Time* magazine's 'Man of the Year' another day, and another day he was recorded as teaching his troops to refrain from castrating captured soldiers. He was seen by the West as an important ally worthy of receiving substantial aid from the U.S.⁷ He was always concerned about protecting his and the country's reputation.

Yet, Haile Selassie had a dark side that he needed to hide. Haile Selassie exhibited the components of intent to destroy a group because of the ethnical, religious and racial hatred which he, as an Amhara Emperor, felt towards the subject Oromo people. He refused to acknowledge that he was not Caucasian, while at the same time he despised Islam and the traditional Waaqeffannaa religions. The Oromo are the people who suffered most from the famine of 1973. With sufficient food in the country, the Oromo were the people who were specifically chosen to starve and perish.

According to Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze, the province of Tigray, home to Abyssinian political rivals of Haile Selassie, was a central area of the famine of 1973. And Harerghe province, inhabited by the Oromo, was affected a year later. It was the province of Wallo, an Oromo area, which was hardest hit by the famine, with most of the 1973 mortality.⁸

Haile Selassie denied the existence of famine. Finally, missionaries and physicians saw the starving masses. It was no longer possible to deny the hunger. A TV documentary showing starving children, *The Unknown Famine*, by journalist Jonathan Dimbleby, broke the floodgate of denial. The truth was out and cover-up was impossible. Dimbleby would recall, "The film of this holocaust...ricocheted around the globe."⁹

Although global media became aware of the plight of the victims and had documentation to prove it, the government exhibited the now familiar pattern of denial. The government reacted "absolutely negatively and ferociously."¹⁰ When denial was no longer a viable option, Selassie attempted to obstruct relief efforts. Ryszard Kapuscinski wrote of aid supplies disappearing before reaching the starving victims. Kapuscinski wrote, "His Sovereign Majesty had accepted the aid unwillingly because of all the publicity that accompanied it; all the sighing and headshaking over those who were wasting away spoiled the flourishing and imposing image of the Empire."¹¹ The decision to depose the Emperor was taken on September 10, 1974, by a small group led by Mengistu Haile Mariam's military Dergue regime. They used scenes from Dimbleby's film, interposed with scenes of the Emperor's dogs feeding from silver platters in order to enrage the public in Addis Ababa. Haile Selassie was quietly deposed on September 12, 1974, quietly.¹² The lesson of the strength of global media was evident.

The Famine of 1984

After the fall of the Emperor and the rise to power of Mengistu Hailemariam, there was great hope for some semblance of democratic government. This hope was short-lived. Again, there would be oppression and atrocity. Again, an Ethiopian regime would use starvation and death to harm targeted populations. By the time of the extravagant 10th anniversary of the new regime, conditions were again ripe for another major famine. This time, however, because of similar conditions in Kenya, it was easily evident that this famine was intentional. Food exports from areas within Ethiopia, in which people were starving, combined with distribution of food to friends of the new regime effectively led the way to mass death by hunger.

At the same time, over the border in Kenya, then President Daniel Arap Moi took steps to ameliorate problems that might arise from the drought. Moi's 'drought response committee' began to purchase imported food and also accepted donor food contributions, which sold at market prices, so those actions successfully prevented a crisis.¹³ Thomas Downing also noted that Kenya was a "success story" because of the action of its leaders.¹⁴

Still, in order to determine if famine in this context in Ethiopia actually rose to the crime of genocide, one would need to find the existence of intent to destroy, in whole or in part, whether stated openly or implied by continuous deadly policy decisions that affected a targeted civilian population. Again, we must ask and answer, was famine caused intentionally by Abyssinian targeting of the subject peoples of Ethiopia and was it used as a weapon of death and slow destruction of the selected group? Information is required in order to answer this question accurately. Although truthful information was in short supply, one can infer from the way the regime manipulated the media, and reacted to the media, that something was amiss.

The tenth anniversary of the revolution was approaching and there would be foreign visitors and media arriving in great numbers. Like Haile Selassie, Mengistu did not wish to acknowledge the existence of a very embarrassing famine that would show, in this case, the failure of a decade of Marxist ideology¹⁵, and, if hunger did exist, Mengistu said, "it was best to let nature run its course."¹⁶ Giorgis complained, "our own government refused to acknowledge the presence of this ever-widening circle of death."¹⁷

In August, 1984, with "ragged mobs of skeletons"¹⁸ approaching the capital the police were ordered to keep them out of the city and safely away from foreign visitors. Giorgis reports that in early September few outsiders were aware that 14,000 people were dying per week. However, in late September, the Christian Relief and Development Association made the international community aware of the dire situation.¹⁹ Finally, in October, media were permitted to view the truth and consequent visions of starvation shocked the globe.²⁰

It was reported that the number of deaths would reach 200,000 by the end of 1984 with the expectation of an even greater number during 1975. The publication, News Weekly, decried the government's policy of refusing travel permits for journalists.²¹ The BBC reported “nearly one million people”²² and the Telegraph reported “over one million and millions left destitute and on the verge of starvation.”²³

The game was over, for the moment. Media and donor countries believed that food and supplies would arrive and the targeted groups would soon be cared for. Media attention would now cause a major change in the policy of starvation, from simple famine to a different, but donor acceptable process of starvation caused by forced deportation.

Three weeks later, government announced a resettlement program with the promise that resettlement would end starvation.²⁴ But this was only a sop. The resettlement program became just another means of killing targeted people by extending hunger. Researchers said that “Resettlement certainly killed people at a faster rate than famine.”²⁵ According to Alex De Waal, a social anthropologist who studied famine in Ethiopia, “The resettlement program was the *coup de grace*. It appeared to prove the genocidal intent of the government.”²⁶

In order to maintain the necessary flow of foreign cash, government must now change the tactic of famine murder to one that would be accepted by an unquestioning media as beneficial, but that would still continue to kill the target populations. Denial of famine deaths was over, but denial of violence and coercion during eviction of peasants from their homes and denial of high death rates due to resettlement and villagization would begin.

The Next Big Lie

Resettlement was a program of forcibly moving peasants long distances away from their homes. In comparison, the villagization program also forced people out of their homes and relocated them usually somewhat nearer to their original homes than resettlement programs did. But conditions in both cases were deplorable. Promised services such as clean water and health services were not available.

These programs were carried out far from the curious eyes of media and foreign diplomats. Peasants were brutally forced to a new location- one without mosques and churches, schools or clean sources of water. Mosques were razed or made into toilets, women were raped systematically by soldiers and children were taken to “far-off schools”, separating them from their families. Food production declined dramatically. Many fled when they had a chance.²⁷ The harvest of these policies was more famine. Those researchers and observers who were present were not surprised when a 1987-1988 famine occurred in Oromo areas where government policy had been implemented.²⁸ The Oromo areas of Bale, Hararghe, Shoa, Wollega and Illubabor now suffered hunger and death.

Forced resettlement elsewhere has a history that is associated with mass deaths—perhaps due to carelessness on the part of those who carry out the mission—or perhaps intended by those who order the deportations. Raphael Lemkin described the mass movement of hundreds of thousands of Polish people in midwinter using unheated vehicles which caused the “decimation ” of those who were expelled.²⁹ Such an episode of transportation with conditions not conducive to life also occurred during the Boer War of 1899 when the British relocated 150,000 people, with the subsequent deaths of 20,000 people from malnutrition and disease.³⁰

Mass deportation accompanied by massacre was used to perpetrate the genocide of Armenians in Turkey. The estimate of Armenian deaths accepted by Turkish sources is 600,000, but estimates from other data run as high as 1.2 million Armenians dead. People were promised that there would be “places prepared for them in the interior provinces” if they remained peaceful during their journey.³¹

In Ethiopia, mass resettlement has been common³² and associated with agricultural failures and high death rates³³A 1978 resettlement of people from Wollo to Bale resulted in a severe decline in population of three quarters of the original settlers, according to Jason Clay.³⁴ The official reason for the renewal of this policy of relocation included improvements in the lives of the targeted population, but this was merely stated for public relations purposes. In an interview with German reporter Hannah Gadatsh in December of 1986, Mengistu openly stated that he, “had to save the lives of people in deadly danger.”³⁵ But that was for media consumption and was intended to placate foreigners. The obvious reason was that the resettlement programs were a proven destroyer of people, but could be hyped to donors who would now fund another program to salve their need to act.

Government required as much stealth as possible in order to kill without recrimination and loss of donor funds. Medecins Sans Frontieres describes “model sites” and “guided visits” of foreigners³⁶ and the “climate of secrecy” that built a wall around the atrocities that were perpetrated by the government operatives. Rony Brauman³⁷, president of MSF, said that journalists and foreigners were not permitted to observe the Dessie transit center where there were 25-30 deaths per day. He described the “rare, limited and supervised visits” that were permitted to foreigners and said that at least on one occasion the “happy peasants” seen by foreign media were actually “militiamen disguised as farmers!”³⁸

Those weakened people who survived the holding camps were then forced into overcrowded planes and buses. Many more perished during the journey.³⁹ One cup of water was given although more was available.⁴⁰ Dawit Giorgis, a defector and Deputy Foreign Minister of the Dergue who was in charge of famine relief operations between 1983-1985, relates that a staff member who was present during a bus transport asked to be transferred so as to not participate in a “genocide of helpless people.”⁴¹ Dr. Claude Malhuret, of MSF, asks, “if it really was the peasant's well-being that the government was looking for, why use unbelievable transportation methods that in themselves cause so many deaths?”⁴²

Those who survived the transport arrived at unfamiliar locations at unprepared sites. In some locations, for example, the Asosa region, “not a single installation awaited the peasants, and food and water were scarce.”⁴³ Many were forced again to sleep outside. Many perished from diseases from which they had no resistance.⁴⁴

As was usual, media was prevented from observing the transportation and arrivals of resettled peasants. *The Washington Post* complained that government had restricted access to resettlement areas.⁴⁵ One would expect that the reason for that is a governmental attempt to control the media and prevent the truth from confirming again that the Ethiopian government was still maximizing the number of deaths by withholding life necessities. It becomes obvious that the elite rulers did not intend to improve the sites in order to mitigate the problems. Clay and Holcomb report horrific numbers of deaths after victims arrived. “In one camp 1,500 out of 7,000 died in the first two and a half months...In one site near Asosa, people from Wollo who had been resettled in the area three years before had died in great numbers, but the government used the site again anyway. New people were brought in to replace those who died and the site continued to experience high death rates.”⁴⁶ Except for a few courageous researchers and even fewer reporters, little of this history would now be known.

The Dance between Media and Government

Outsiders totally failed to visualize that the timing of the resettlement program of 1984 just three weeks after it became impossible to continue denying the famine, and that the temporary halt to the resettlement program in November, 1985 and again in January, 1986 was a nonverbal shout to the globe of intent to destroy a group without putting the flow of precious foreign aid at risk. The government played the media in order to keep the flood of aid flowing from donor countries. Like a naughty child caught in a forbidden act, they stopped the act until they were safely alone again. They were aware that their policies were causing dislocations of families and many deaths. They knew that the forced relocations of the targeted populations were destroying the fabric of society. They knew that food production was declining.

The government certainly knew those things, and yet they returned to those policies again and again, making excuses for the unacceptable outcomes, and promising to improve the situation. Again and again, they were forgiven. And as soon as media turned elsewhere and they could continue without interference or financial loss, they repeated the policies that would lead to mass death.

The media, NGOs and foreign governments almost totally accepted the government line that resettlement was required in order to improve the lives of the peasants in drought prone areas. However, there was negative comment when they were confronted with the fact that the peasantry did not wish to leave their homes and that violence was required to force the relocations. Although government for a while successfully denied using force, it finally could not deny the number of deaths which occurred before, during and after the move.⁴⁷

The resettlement program that was instituted in November 1984 three weeks after the global media discovered famine was temporarily suspended in May, 1985, when Medecins Sans Frontieres went public with the numbers of the dead and the fact that the move was forced upon the populace. *The NY Times* picked up the story and reported that 100,000 of 600,000 had died.⁴⁸ Medecins Sans Frontieres gave the figure as 100,000 out of "more than 500,000" already transferred and stated that the estimated projection of mortality if the project was to be completed would be 300,000.⁴⁹ MSF reported that the deportations were forcible and that families were separated despite "virulent denials" by government⁵⁰, a situation that was of great concern to global media and the US government.⁵¹

Then the program "was hastily stepped up" in October, 1985, despite some early criticism from Survival International. Survival International relates that a UN operative saw a "ghost village", a village emptied of inhabitants, yet with grain ready to be harvested.⁵² The program soon was suspended, again in January, 1986. Human Rights Watch writes that "it is widely agreed that the main reason for this were the huge expense and low returns."⁵³ Yet Jason Clay, an anthropologist who studied famine in Ethiopia, suggests that the program was suspended "following widely publicized cases of human rights abuses."⁵⁴

Robert Kaplan also suggested that media attention created the on-again off-again deportation/resettlement project. He wrote regarding the resettlement program, "the program was resumed again in 1987 after the last unsteady flickers of the media spotlight had been snuffed out."⁵⁵ This media attention developed because after being expelled by the government, the NGO MSF began a global publicity campaign to explain its actions.⁵⁶

The riveting details of the harmful results of the program from the NGO MSF was effective in embarrassing the regime because MSF could not be intimidated into silence. Medecins Sans Frontieres described a relationship with the Ethiopian government that was adversarial, at best, rather than one of mutual support, as one might expect at a time of crisis.⁵⁷ They related that the government initially refused access for media relief workers to affected areas.⁵⁸ They explained that they were prevented from distributing tents and 20,000 available blankets "despite severe cold temperatures at night on the high plateaus."⁵⁹ In Kobo, Wello province, April, 1985, while dealing with a cholera epidemic, they were allowed to treat adults only.⁶⁰

Medecins Sans Frontieres tried to open a feeding center for children at Kelela, Wello province, but was not given authorization. With children 60 % -70 % of their normal weight, thousands of children were dying. The MSF held a press conference in Paris, causing embarrassment to the government.⁶¹

Also, Medecins Sans Frontieres describes an aura of secrecy⁶² in holding areas where deportees, forcibly separated from family, awaited transportation with little or no food, no sanitation, no clean water or medical supplies. Foreign media were not permitted into these areas. Clay and Holcomb report that those who tried to escape were shot and that as many as 20% of individuals died in the holding areas. They write, "It is not clear from reports whether the captured individuals' malnourished states or the camp conditions [sleeping outside, little food or water] contributed more to the deaths."⁶³ Soldiers guarded the camps to prevent occupants from leaving.⁶⁴ Death rates approached 140 per 1,000 in the camps.⁶⁵

As journalists, we would like to suggest that our observations of the timing of the genocidal acts of government and government's sensitivity to publicity could be part of the answer to those seeking to end or mitigate genocide. A press corps that is able to properly interpret data and that has the will to report a difficult truth could save many people. Those who commit genocide and similar crimes know that they are doing wrong and can often be controlled by a global parent withholding goodies. James Mace relates the stories of *NY Times* reporter Walter Duranty who won a Pulitzer Prize despite slanting facts and aiding in the denial of the famine genocide in Ukraine. The implication of Stalin's denial, even before the UNGC was a thought in the mind of Raphael Lemkin, is that perpetrators understand that publicity can be harmful.⁶⁶

One is able to deduce the genocidal intent of the Dergue by the pattern of forcibly and systematically removing people of targeted groups from their homes in order to create conditions of life which brought about many deaths and caused irreparable harm to surviving victims. These deaths occurred generally in secret, as media were only permitted to visit areas acceptable to the regime. According to the Akayesu decision, one can infer genocidal intent to destroy by the pattern of targeting particular groups which, in the case of Ethiopia were the Oromo, the Ogadeni, and the Southern nations.⁶⁷ Ethiopia appears to be actively genocidal as its leaders target, not only their political enemies, but the conquered peoples who inhabit the vast country. The lack of open communication or rather the actual fear of open communication, can also lead one to infer the presence of intent to destroy a group.

Meles Zenawi and Hailemariam Desalegn: 1991 to Present

One would expect that donors, NGOs and the Ethiopian government would finally get it right. Famine should not exist today. David Marcus proposes, "That a government forcing certain policies on its own citizens that are clearly creating mass starvation is criminally reckless or intentionally murderous if it continues to use these policies to coerce its citizens."⁶⁸

Meles Zenawi belonged to the Tigray segment of the Abyssinian ethnic group. If the previous famines were truly accidental products of poor planning and sloppy government, then one would expect to see an end to famine. That is not what happened. The locations of hunger changed, but not its existence within the Oromo population and other peoples of the south. Hunger was rampant in Oromia early in Zenawi's regime and by 2008, another crisis became evident. Dawud Ibsa Ayana, Chairman of the National Council of the Oromo Liberation Front, asked why "Oromia is starving while Tigray is prospering?" And he answers his own question, "Since it came to power in 1991, the current regime has dispossessed, displaced, and disenfranchised tens of thousands of the Oromo people, which is the real root cause for the underdevelopment and starvation in Oromia today."⁶⁹

Again, an Ethiopian regime denied the existence of famine. In August, 2008, Time Magazine interviewed Meles Zenawi. He said, " There has not been a famine on our watch—emergencies, but no famines."⁷⁰ When finally faced with the facts, Zenawi apologized, "There was a failure on our part. We were late in recognizing we had an emergency on our hands. We did not know that a crisis was brewing in these specific areas until emaciated children began to appear."⁷¹ The Oromo Liberation Front complained that aid was diverted from the victims to the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray, which was headed by Zenawi's wife, Azeb Mesfin.⁷² William Easterly confirmed that when help arrived at famine areas, Zenawi diverted the aid from the starving victims to his supporters.⁷³

More recently, major displacements of indigenous communities are again being carried out in the south in the Omo Valley and in Oromia State, surrounding the capital city of Addis Ababa. While government statements indicate that only benefits to the people will follow, examples from the past might lead one to be skeptical of those benefits. The devil was always in the details of past Ethiopian programs, so even though there might be benefit to the wealthy elite, an attempt to find out how the programs are progressing could show that there might be devastation to the lives of the conquered peoples.

In the south, there is now again a great deal of government secrecy and there are already hints of hunger and indications that violence is the tool being used to move the people, so we can only assume a disastrous outcome for the future. In the lower Omo Valley large tracts of land are being leased to foreign investors and the construction of the Gibe III dam has already displaced many. At least 200,000 people are being violently forced to relocate and change their life styles.

A new life-destroying program is in progress under the guise of development. Pastoralist peoples are being forced into sedentary lives in squatter camps and tents set up in forests out of sight of foreign visitors. Although they were promised food security that has not happened.

People and their cattle are already hungry. Illness is rampant, with HIV and Hepatitis B becoming commonplace. Forcible evictions from ancestral homes, killings and rapes are leading the way to a transformation of the area.⁷⁴ People are fighting amongst themselves for scarce resources. In order to quell the unrest, the Ethiopian army has attacked the local communities, firing live ammunition into the civilians.⁷⁵

According to Human Rights Watch, foreign journalists are not permitted access and the local populace have been warned to not speak to foreigners.⁷⁶ Because of the secrecy surrounding the program, it will never be possible to know how many deaths were or will be caused by government policy. In addition to policies creating hunger and illness, the ruling elite have said many times that pastoralist populations are not welcome in Ethiopia. An official 1957 report from the Governor of Maji Awraja said, "The men don't put on clothes and they go about naked. When they go naked, it is difficult to identify them as human beings."⁷⁷

Presently, in parts of Oromia state surrounding Addis Ababa (Finfinne), peaceful student demonstrations have been met with violence and killings by government forces. The problem is that government is attempting a land grab around the city with the stated intent of controlling, guiding and preventing haphazard growth. However, 1.1 million hectares will be transferred to city jurisdiction, more than twenty times the current size of Addis Ababa. Thirty six towns and small cities will be affected.

In the past, those affected were required to abide by the city codes which require high rise structures. The less wealthy Oromo could not afford to compete in this uneven playing field. Forced into selling their property at bargain basement prices, the new regulations "turned a one-time self-sufficient community into street beggars and day labourers." There was no help for the displaced and no one to ask about their outcome.⁷⁸ While it is not possible to predict how many will eventually starve in Addis Ababa and in the Omo valley, these government policies have proven to be faminogenic and have the potential to cause many deaths. Because the fruits of these policies have so often resulted in mass death in the past, one should expect the same outcome in the future. The famine affecting more than ten million people in Ethiopia is still being mischaracterized, as "drought", but not as an outcome of deliberate policy.⁷⁹

Since Meles Zenawi's regime came to power in 1991, these atrocity crimes still appear to be genocidal in character and centrally coordinated. Aside from the knowledge of horrific acts occasionally leaking out, high-ranking government officials have shockingly declared their intentions on state controlled media to destroy a group, leaving themselves open to the charge of genocide. As an example, Getachew Reda, Ethiopia's Communication Minister, built on the threat narrative and categorized the Oromo people in its entirety in non-human terms.

He labeled the Oromo people as devils. “Oromo are forces of darkness invited by devil. These are demons requiring organized government actions to exterminate them. Since these devils are beyond the control of the witches that invited/charmed them, the only way we can “*liki masgebat*”⁸⁰ them is through organized government.

Nevertheless, as long as the ruling classes can control global media, Ethiopian government and friendly foreign governments can continue to maintain current policies of ignorance and Ethiopia can continue to receive financial aid. As long as sympathetic global masses remain ignorant of the actual criminals, these genocidal policies will continue.

Government Techniques of Media Blackout

We have shown why Ethiopian media have been so tightly controlled. As time passed, the elites learned to lend an aura of legality to justify media blackouts. Killings, maiming, detentions, rape and other crimes against humanity that federal police, local police units named Agazi, and the army have been committing against unarmed Oromo civilians remain hidden. Human Rights Watch noted the government’s tight chokehold on information as follows: “Ethiopia’s pervasive restrictions on independent civil society and media mean that very little information is coming from affected areas although social media are filled with photos and videos of the protests.”

In the summer of 2014 Ethiopian government police, security forces and the military shot live ammunition into crowds of peaceful protesters in Ambo town killing at least 100.⁸¹ The protesters were opposed to a city planning scheme known as the Addis Ababa Integrated Development Master Plan (IDMP), which had already displaced 150, 000 families of Oromo farmers⁸² and plans to displace millions more across Oromia, Ethiopia.

The Strategy: The Strategic Laws

In order to give some semblance of legality to the kind of media control that can successfully impede the flow of information, even if such efforts must resort to destruction of national infrastructure, three laws were passed.

One of the earliest laws restricting citizens right to impart and receive information was Ethiopia’s “Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation”, which was conceived in the early 1990s and enacted as a legislation in July 2008 (Dugo, 2008; Ross 2010, Article19).⁸³ This law has been used to silence criticism by incriminating journalists and media workers when they do their jobs. Ross⁸⁴ writes that this law put restrictions on freedom of speech and expression by allowing the government to criminally prosecute journalists and media workers.

The second law was passed soon after the first law because the first law was insufficient to silence dissent.⁸⁵ The EPRDF parliament created the Anti-terrorism Proclamation in August 2009 and used it to criminalize journalists and media workers. Article 6 of the ATP equates journalism with ‘terrorism’ and journalists with ‘terrorists’. Many journalists, bloggers and media workers have been swept up and jailed or were exiled because of fear of being prosecuted under this law as “terrorists.”

And still not satisfied with the degree of its information control, the government acted again by passing the Charities and Societies law. At this crucial time when human rights and humanitarian workers are supposed to be granted access to the neediest poor by the Ethiopian government in Oromia and Ethiopia, they have been banned from the scenes since Ethiopia passed its controversial Charities and Societies Proclamation in 2009. The CSP’s impact ranges from decimating domestic human rights NGOs by limiting their foreign funding and by coercing them into changing their core activities into non-human rights areas.⁸⁶

Since prominent journalists were jailed, exiled or intimidated into silence, there were few local reporters who have dared to cover the popular protests in Oromia and the ensuing state violence inflicted upon civilians, including school children. Jailing and exiling journalists obviously limits the production of news and information on key events, which is in keeping with the wishes of the regime.

The Tactics

Tactics of media blackout include, but are not limited to killing, arresting and jailing journalists, bloggers, singers and artists, jamming diaspora-based satellite television stations, blocking diaspora-based online news outlets, limiting the penetration of the internet, violently cracking down on dissidents, and using gullible foreign journalists to misrepresent domestic conflicts and politics.

Reflecting on the challenges of doing human rights research in Ethiopia at the summer 2015 Oromo Studies Association conference in Washington DC, Human Rights Watch’s Felix Horne, outlined the problems as follows:

I have some of the most difficult challenges getting information.... First of all the country is largely closed to international human rights organizations. It's very difficult for Amnesty, for Human Rights Watch and The Committee to Protect Journalists to go in and do research. When we do go in, we are harassed, we are followed, and there are huge concerns over our own personal safety. More importantly for the individuals that we speak with, there are huge concerns over their safety. In many cases we documented individuals who were arrested for allegedly speaking to Human Rights Watch and other organizations....Similarly we documented that individuals who spoke to reputable media outlets such as the Voice of America, Deutsche Welle and the BBC were arrested shortly after speaking with them.

The government has been very successful at casting Human Rights Watch and Amnesty as groups that are trying to overthrow the government, that are trying to destabilize the country, that are trying to stop Ethiopia from developing, none of which is of course true...The Oromo protests kind of encapsulate just the control the Ethiopian state has on the flow of information and how it is very difficult to get information out.⁸⁷

And sadly, we note that during the 2015-2016 ongoing crackdowns on Oromo demonstrators, it has become a highly risky business for individuals to answer even phone calls from relatives overseas who are concerned about their welfare.

When it is unable to physically stop journalists and media organizations, jamming broadcasts and blocking websites have been among the regime's most favorite methods of restricting the flow of information regarding peaceful Oromo demonstrations. Citizen Lab indicates that the Ethiopian government installs malwares/spywares onto computers of Ethiopian journalists based in the Washington DC metropolitan area. This transnational espionage also means that Ethiopia was conducting surveillance outside of its jurisdiction in the United States. Nate Cardoso, a US lawyer, told The Washington Post that "attempting to hack someone located in the United States is illegal."⁸⁸ Cardoso added, "It's absolutely a violation of US law, probably both the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act and the Wiretap Act."⁹⁰

The regime also resorted to numerous coercive tactics, including confiscating private cell phones, turning off power to towns in Oromia, and destroying some cell phone towers. Human Rights Watch documents that where there have been military deployments, the government "cut mobile phone coverage"⁸⁹ to curtail the capability of eye witnesses and citizen journalists. By cutting off mobile phone coverage and by confiscating cell phones from Oromo citizens, government security forces have been attempting to ensure that information about the heavy military presence and gunfire, and especially sensitive visuals of bloodied victims, are not leaked to the outside world.

Social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook have become alternative ways of sharing information for people in Oromia despite the problems associated with Ethiopia's being a laggard when it comes to the penetration of the Internet.

Despite restrictions on information, the youth, even with limited access to mobile phones and the Internet, managed to share images, sound and videos of gruesome killings, maiming and other forms of abuses by the state security forces. Youths' use of social media and cell phones, at great risk to their personal safety, is creative, commendable and very courageous.

The extreme behaviors of the Ethiopian government to control the free flow information contravene universal human rights of citizens to "hold opinions without interference, and to seek receive and impart information and ideas through and regardless of frontiers."⁹⁰

This calls for key international actors to urge the Ethiopian government to loosen its totalitarian control over information and the means of information production and dissemination. The state propaganda makes it appear that the rulers have little regard for the intelligence of the international community.

Conclusion

Because of this information blackout, statements by government officials, which attempt minimize or misrepresent the amount of violence or blame helpless civilians for the violence should not be accepted or believed. They often use city-based foreign journalists and media to mischaracterize the violence as ethnic-based conflict.

In this paper we showed how media control has been used to prevent global understanding of how the various regimes repeatedly foisted faminogenic policies upon Ethiopia's conquered nations. Despite millions of deaths, the policies did not change. Although there need not have been such massive death and destruction of the civilian populace during the programs, the regimes acted as if the people were insects or devils who needed to be exterminated, rather than as people whose lives needed to be improved. We chose only a narrow set of policies designed to cause death by hunger and we examined only several of the many that occurred over the decades. We showed that the various regimes were concerned that their intent to destroy the Oromo and the peoples of the South would be revealed to the rest of the world. If the people of the globe had knowledge of events and the numbers of deaths of civilians, charges of genocide would be made and the civilized world would become aware that Ethiopian rulers were closer to genocidaires than to sophisticated admirable world leaders.

Even though the mass atrocities and multiple deaths of the victims due to starvation were partially known by some of the aid agencies and some NGOs, most of the media, the NGOs and donor governments failed to acknowledge the problems or even to take sufficient action to stop the carnage. Despite some occasional foreign refusal to continue the charade of famine and the need for development aid, the Abyssinian rulers cleverly excused their way out of global retribution by claiming ignorance and even incompetence when necessary. Despite rumors of mass graves, little information escaped the borders of Ethiopia, certainly not enough to reveal the truth.

Aid funding continues to flow while victims continue to perish from the funded programs. Global networks continue to blame hunger on natural causes.

One would expect that moral choice would have prompted a few to take a stand against the government policies, and indeed, a few did make that choice. However, if we would prefer to see a world free of genocidal atrocities and crimes against humanity, we must work to insure that those voices claiming to have witnessed such hidden atrocities must not be ignored. In the case of Ethiopia, that has not happened, and is not happening now.

Genocide scholars whose philosophy begs to minimize the number of named genocides should recognize that calling a repeated set of policies and acts by the proper name could in the long run work on behalf of those victims chosen to die. Because there is reluctance to violate the doctrine of sovereignty, piercing state boundaries with enough power to control the genocidal actions of that state is not often an available solution. However, in the case of Ethiopia, merely ending aid monies would go a long way to prevent harmful government policies. And the very term "genocide" is itself a weapon that can be used, if there is a will to take action that can make a difference. However prudent one seeks to be with the term, judicious scholars should expect that the word itself has the power to light areas darkened by governments trying to hide uncomfortable facts.

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