

## **Ethiopia; The Dirty War**

Human Rights Watch

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While the west agonises over Darfur, another humanitarian and human rights disaster is brewing in the Horn of Africa.

In June, the Ethiopian government launched a major military campaign in the Ogaden, a sparsely populated and remote region on Ethiopia's border with Somalia. The counter insurgency operation was aimed at eliminating the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), a rebel group which has been fighting for years for self-determination for the Ogaden's predominantly Somali population.

In less than two months, Ethiopia's military campaign has triggered a serious humanitarian crisis. Human Rights Watch has learned that dozens of civilians have been killed in what appears to be a deliberate effort to mete out collective punishment against a civilian population suspected of sympathising with the rebels.

Villages have been attacked, sacked and burnt. Livestock - the lynchpin of the region's pastoralist economy - have been confiscated or destroyed. A partial trade blockade has been imposed on the region leading to serious food shortages. Relatives of suspected rebels have been taken hostage. Thousands of civilians have been displaced, fleeing across the borders of Ethiopia into northern Kenya and Somaliland.

Last week, with little objection from the international community, the Ethiopian government expelled from the Ogaden the International Committee of the Red Cross, one of the few neutral observers of the crisis left in the region.

This is not Darfur. But the situation in Ogaden follows a familiar pattern of a counter insurgency operation in which government forces show little regard for the safety of the civilian population and commit serious abuses, including deliberate attacks on civilians, mass displacement of populations and interference with humanitarian assistance.

Unlike in Darfur, however, the state that is perpetrating abuses against its people in Ogaden is a key western ally and recipient of large amounts of western aid. Furthermore the crisis in Ogaden is linked to a military intervention by Ethiopia in Somalia that has been justified in terms of counter terrorism and is firmly supported by the United States and other western donors.

Ethiopia has often justified military action in Somalia on grounds of cooperation between what it calls "terrorist" groups in Somalia and the rebellion in Ogaden. The ONLF certainly has strong ethnic and political links to Somali insurgents now fighting against the Ethiopian military presence in Somalia. It may have decided to escalate its rebellion in Ogaden in response to Ethiopia's full-scale military intervention in Somalia in December last year.

Now there are reliable reports that, as a result of Ethiopian military pressure inside Somalia, Somali insurgents including members the militant Islamist al-Shabaab have sought refuge in Ogaden where they could be regrouping. Thus instead of containing and calming the situation in Somalia, the actions of Ethiopia's forces there may well be exacerbating the conflict and regionalising it.

The emerging crisis in the Ogaden is indicative of an increasingly volatile political and military situation in the Horn of Africa. Predictably civilians are bearing the brunt of the crisis both in the Ogaden and in Somalia where hundreds of thousands have been displaced by fighting since the Ethiopian intervention. Predictably human rights abuses and violations of the laws of war are being perpetrated by all sides. It could all get a lot worse, especially if it leads to a resumption of the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

So why isn't the international community doing more to address this crisis. Hasn't the UN been saying for years that crisis prevention is better than cure?

The EU and the United States have significant leverage over Ethiopia in the form of foreign aid and political influence. They should use it instead of turning a blind eye to abuses carried out by the Ethiopian security forces in the name of counter terrorism.

Western support for Ethiopia's counter insurgency efforts in the Horn of Africa is not only morally wrong and riddled with double standards, it is also ineffective and counterproductive. It will lead to the escalation and regionalisation of the conflicts of the region and may well help to radicalise its large and young Muslim population.

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