



## **An identity-based massacre of Amhara civilians in Uke Kersa town, Guto Gida Woreda, East Wollega Zone in Ethiopia’s Oromia Region by Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) militants on September 9th, 2022**

### **Historical Context**

It has been three decades (from 1991 onwards) since a constitutionalized ethnic apartheid system was imposed on the Ethiopian people without meaningful public consultation and inclusive political dialogue and consensus. Specifically, the Amhara people were not represented in the political processes which ushered the apartheid-like ethnic federalism. The ethnic federalism system unique to Ethiopia, known as Zenawi-ism, creates regional states (units of the federation) along ethno-linguistic lines, and a certain ethnic group exclusively owns a regional state that consequently becomes an ‘ethnic homeland’. However, other groups living in the regional states are unjustifiably labeled as ‘settlers’ and have experienced apartheid-like treatment. According to the constitution, they are not rightful owners of the regional states and are unrepresented in each regional state’s government apparatuses. The ethnic-based structure has politicized ethnic identities, fueled ethnic-based conflicts

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and attacks, and pits the so-called “indigenous” community against the non-indigenous ones by promoting a “sons of the soil vs. settlers” mentality. Ethnic groups labeled as ‘settlers’, in most cases, the Amharas, have been persecuted and left unprotected for over three decades in regional states such as Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz, regardless of their relatively significant populations in both regions.

When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali, from the Oromo Prosperity Party, OPP (formerly known as the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization, OPDO), came to power in 2018 promising reform to respond to Amhara resistance and other movements against the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF)-led Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition. Many Ethiopians, including Amharas, hoped that the structural causes of ethnic-based discrimination and persecution would be finally amended. However, as time passes, not only has Abiy refused to reform the constitutional order but also actively implemented a project of a new Oromo hegemony to replace the pre-2018 Tigrayan hegemony which predominated in Ethiopia. In addition, Abiy’s Government granted amnesty to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and invited them to enter the Oromia Region armed. Later on, a segment of the OLF refused to be disarmed and continued to mount armed resistance in the Oromia Region and surrounding area calling themselves the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) [the term OLF “Shene” was later popularized by the Ethiopian Government and state media apparatus]. OLA continued freely recruiting fighters and committing gross human rights violations, including the mass killings of innocent Amharas with state complicity and absolute impunity across the Oromia Region. This report prepared by the Amhara Association of America (AAA) presents one of the massacres OLA committed against Amhara civilians in early September 2022.

## **Uke Kersa Massacre: Perpetrators and the Government’s Complicity**

In many of the atrocities, massacres, and attacks on ethnic Amhara civilians in the Oromia Region, there is a handful of evidence that undoubtedly shows the complicity of the

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Ethiopian Government at different levels of administration such as the federal, regional, zonal, and woreda levels. Before almost all attacks against the Amhara civilians in the Oromia Region, government officials have been made aware of impending attacks as residents have reported them in advance. Despite this, the government neglects the civilians' right to protection and officials have been known to collude with the OLA militants in the Oromia Region. Besides the compliance and negligence of the government towards the atrocities against the civilian Amharas in the Oromia Region by OLA militants, Oromia Regional Special Police Forces (OSF) have been implicated in violations against Amhara civilians as well.

Likewise, the government, specifically the administration of East Wollega Zone, was well informed ahead about the planned attacks and atrocities against civilian Amharas in Uke Kersa town of Guto Gida Woreda. According to AAA's sources, three days before the attack (on September 6th, 2022) the kebele's leaders (i.e. bureaucrats of the lowest administrative unit in Ethiopia), and victims consistently reported to the East Wollega Zonal administration about possible attacks in Uke Kersa town. They testified the preparation and the imminent attack by the OLA militants in Uke Kersa town was public to everyone despite the government being negligent as usual. Witnesses and survivors re-counted that the Zonal Administration ignored their request for more forces before the attack had been perpetrated. As the OLA militants encircled the town, the government forces stationed in the town were few in number, not more than twenty [5 Oromia Region State militias and 15 OSF members]. As soon as the OLA began encircling the town, they immediately evacuated the town without trying to confront them. An eyewitness who observed the situation there explained how government forces were pushed back from Uke Kersa town as follows:

*“Three days before the attack (on September 6th, 2022), we provided a security update to the Zone (East Wollega) Administrator and requested to assign security forces in the area since we saw they (OLA militants) were gathering around*

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*the town (Uke Kersa). Because we noted that the government forces that were stationed in Uke Kersa were few in number. I think it is not more than twenty [5 Oromia Regional State militias and 15 OSF members]. However, the administrator, whose name is WaWangari (I couldn't remember his last name), responded to us by saying 'we don't have additional forces, you have to defend yourself'. They (OLA militants) effectively encircled the town (Uke Kersa) at around 1:00 AM (on September 9th, 2022), and then in the morning around 5:00 AM (on September 9th, 2022), they controlled a camp that belonged to the OSF without any fight on the outskirts of the town (Uke Kersa). I can say that they (the zone administrator and the OSF) let the OLA militants overtake the military and take their weapons easily. Then, they (OLA militants) robbed a local bank (Uke Kersa branch, formerly known as Oromia Credit and Saving Institution and recently named as Siinqee Bank). Simply, the government sponsored the attack with financial and material (weapon) support. The local youth group, the Qeerro, also participated in the attack actively by providing updates and leading the militants (OLA) while the town was vacuumed as the government forces left the town. Finally, OLA militants entered Uke Kersa town at 6:00 AM (on September 9th, 2022) and started the massacre of Amhara civilians."*

Similarly, a survivor who lost his wife and child witnessed that the OLA militants attacked Amhara civilians in collaboration with the local youth group known as 'Qeerro'. According to the survivor, this Qeerro was responsible to identify and trace civilian Amharas for the massacre in Uke Kersa town. The survivor explained to AAA how the OLA militants and the Qeerro worked closely and collaborated to perpetrate the Uke Kersa massacre as follows:

*"It is obvious that the OLA militants are not the residents in Uke Kersa town. They (OLA militants) are a terrorist group who move around and kill Amhara*

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*civilians in the Oromia Region. This terrorist group would not be able to detect the Amhara civilians in Uke Kersa town easily. But Qeerro, the Oromo youth group who live in the town, took the assignment to screen out the Amhara civilians in Uke Kersa town for the massacre. I saw the Qeerro group was here to locate hiding points, Amhara civilians, and their houses. Then, the OLA militants executed victims by gunshots and sometimes by slaughtering them (presumably with bladed weapons). It was not difficult to distinguish the Qeerro from the (OLA) militants. The Qeerro wore civilian clothing but the OLA militants wore different uniforms including those of the OSF, Ethiopian National Defence Force, and Oromia Regional State militias. Some of their shoes were also not alike. Their (OLA militants) hairstyles as always were dreadlocked and plaited as well as overgrown.”*

The massacre perpetrated on Amhara civilians in Uke Kersa town, is one of the most insightful pieces of evidence that clearly shows the state-sponsored attacks and atrocities against Amhara all around the country, most significantly in the Oromia Region. Even though the Ethiopian Government is responsible to protect citizen, evidence indicated that the Ethiopian Government at all levels neglected the attacks and atrocities perpetrated on civilian Amharas in the Oromia Region. Not only the negligence and complicity, but the government is also actively participating in the attacks and atrocities against Amhara civilians by providing financial and material support, such as firearms, to the perpetrators in the Oromia Region. Moreover, the involvement of the local youth group, Qeerro, in the attack against Amharas in Uke Kersa town confirmed that it is an ethnic cleansing project that involved various stakeholders in the region.

## **Details of the Uke Kersa Massacre**

After the OLA militants gained brief control of Uke Kersa town, they perpetrated an identity-based attack (including killings of civilians and property looting and destruction)

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against Amhara civilians with the assistance of the local Qeerro. According to AAA's sources, after the OLA militants robbed the Siinqee Bank and the government forces' military camp in Uke Kersa town, they began searching for Amhara civilians and killing them. The Qeeroos helped OLA militants by identifying civilian Amharas and houses owned by Amhara residents. Once they (OLA militants) identified the Amharas, they immediately killed them and set fire to the Amhara houses and properties. Survivors and witnesses confirmed that men were killed by gunshots while the women were found dead with their throats slit. The sources estimate the killed Amhara civilians to be at least 35 in number. They also verified that at least 5 others were injured.

An eyewitness described the scale of the massacre to AAA as follows:

*“I have counted at least 34 dead Amhara civilians. I saw dead bodies across streets and homes. In a single home alone, we found dead bodies including of children, elderly people and women. Misgie Abebe was killed with his five other family members including his wife, two boys, and two girls but I did not know his family members’ names. There are dead bodies that were taken to Medalo Woreda Kebele, Sibu Sirie Woreda, where they were buried at St. Kidane Mihret Church. Two of the massacred civilians were religious fathers, Merigeta Asteray and Priest Andualem Fisseha, who was buried at Kidist Se-lassie (Holy Trinity) Church in Medalo Woreda. In addition, seven dead bodies were also sent to their family in Anger Gutin town (Gida Ayana Woreda located in East Wollega Zone). Though many more remained unburied, I do not know exactly where some others were buried. We have also found a six-month-old dead baby whose name is Alem [last name unknown]. I am certain five more were injured.”*

A female survivor who lost her husband witnessed the scale of the ethnic-based massacre in Uke Kersa town which she describes as follows:

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*“The way I escaped from the attack feels like a miracle to me. When they (OLA militants) encircled the town, I instinctively got out of my house and ran away to a nearby bush with two of my children. Then, I found a way to escape to the neighboring kebele to save our lives. My husband remained home. Later, I heard my husband, Jemberu Asnakew, was killed inside our house. I heard they shot him in his chest [survivors says this while crying and mourning]. His brothers buried him, but unfortunately, I could not. It happened in the early morning on Pagume 4, 2015 EC (September 9, 2022). After I heard about the death of my husband I returned to Uke Kersa with my relatives from other kebeles in the afternoon around 4 PM. I saw dead bodies fall across streets, homes, and bushes. In one place, I saw up to 4 or 5 dead bodies fall together.”*

### **Cleansing of Amhara civilians from Uke Kersa town (East Wollega Zone, Oromia Region)**

In the Uke Kersa massacre, Amhara civilians were targeted irrespective of their age, gender, and health status, only based on their ethnic identity, i.e. being ethnic Amharas. In this attack, children as young as six-months-old, have been targeted and killed. Girls and women, who were in no condition to defend themselves and their children, were also attacked. Amhara civilians whose health conditions were in critical situations including those with mental disabilities were also identified based on their identity and massacred. The Uke Kersa attack has been characterized by the mass killing and displacement of Amharas from the town. These mass attacks on the Amhara are part of the overarching aim to cleanse Amhara in the Oromia Region.

One of the survivors of the Uke Kersa massacre, who lost his wife and a 2-year-old daughter, told AAA what the perpetrators were doing to exterminate Amhara civilians, including women and children. The source narrated how he lost his wife and two-year-old daughter as follows:

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*“The OLA militants and local Qeerro (extremist Oromo youth) had a list of Amharas to be killed. I was in my house with my family members. When they (OLA militants) approached my house, I jumped over the window and hid inside a maize field in the backyard. I saw and heard all that they were doing. First, the Qeerro forcibly dragged my wife and my two-year-old daughter out of the house. The OLA fired two bullets at my wife, one hit her on the chest and the second on her groin. One of the OLA members requested not to kill my two-year-old child. But the other militants swore not to spare any Amhara by saying ‘we should not let any Amhara survive here.’ They were merciless to shoot at my daughter around her neck. My wife’s name is Zerfie Admassu and my two-year-old child is Mekdes Haile.”*

The Uke Kersa town is an area where residents from the Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups were living together for many years. However, in the Uke Kersa massacre, only Amhara civilians were targeted. The AAA sources confirmed that the OLA militants were specifically killing residents who are Amhara in ethnic background. The survivor continued to report to AAA how the civilian Amharas were targeted in the Uke Kersa massacre as follows:

*“As I watched, a woman here named Emey Geze was spared because she pretended to belong to the Oromo ethnic group. She spoke to the militants in the Oromiffa language (language spoken by ethnic Oromo people) and told them that she is Oromo. Surprisingly, her 80-year-old father, Geze Workneh, who didn’t speak Oromiffa was attacked by a single gunshot around his leg as they believed he was from the Amhara ethnic group. Fortunately, he survived with an injured right leg. They thought that a single shot would be enough to kill such an old man. Despite his survival, he is now in pain since he has not received any medical treatment so far. When the OLA left the area, I collected and took the dead bodies to Medalo (in Sibu Sire Woreda of the same Zone). I*

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*saw many dead bodies on my way. Among those I know were Abiye Beliku and Muluset Belete along with her ten-year-old child, whose name is Setiye Addis.”*

In the Uke Massacre, not only women and children are targeted, but also civilian Amharas who are suffered from mental disabilities and older adults who cannot defend themselves. An eyewitness reported to the AAA that the OLA militants killed a woman who was suffering from a serious mental health condition. According to the witness, she lived on the street and no one treated her for more than a year. The witness explained her situation as follows:

*“While the OLA militants attacked Amharas in Uke Kersa, the (OLA) militants found a woman with a serious mental illness condition on the street as none could take care of her. The militants identified that her ethnic identity is Amhara since she was speaking the Amharic language (language spoken by ethnic Amharas but also the national language). Then, they immediately killed her with repetitive gunshots. Her corpse was left on the street for days as no one could take care of her. No one knows her background such as where she is from, her name, age, and related personal information.”*

Senior citizens and older adults were also massacred in the Uke Kersa attack. According to the sources, some of the massacred civilian Amharas were older than fifty years old, which include Enaniye Beliku (55), Alem Kebede (60), Merigeta Asteray (51), Abiy Beliku (50), and Priest Andualem Fisseha’s mother (65). At least five children who are below the age of 18 were also massacred in the Uke Kersa attack. Some of these include Alem (last name unknown) (six-months old), Mekdes Haile (two), Mamar Tesfaw (two), Tigist Debalkie (12), and Setiye Addis (10). Moreover, eleven (11) of the victims killed in the Uke Kersa massacre are women aged between 20 to 65-years-old. In total, most of the victims (18) are civilians who could not defend themselves by any means. This shows that the massacre was perpetrated on a door-to-door basis that embattled the Amhara civilians

who could not defend themselves or escape from their perpetrators. On the other hand, the way the massacre has been perpetuated indicates that ethnic cleansing of Amhara is the ultimate goal of the Uke Kersa attack, which becomes the distinctive feature of every attack and atrocity on Amhara civilians in the Oromia Region.

The table below shows the list of the victims massacred in Uke Kersa town.

No.	Name of deceased victim	Sex	Age	Remarks
1	Alem [last name unknown]	F	6 months	
2	Mekdes Haile	F	2	
3	Mamar Tesfaw	F	2	
4	Tigist Debalkie	F	12	Daughter of Agerye Getu
5	Setiye Addis	F	10	Daughter of Muluset Belete
6	Tigist Yibeltie	F	20	
7	Muluset Belete	F	30	
8	Zerfie Admassu	F	30	
9	Kassu Alamrew	F	35	She was the wife of Priest Andualem.
10	Agerye Getu	F	48	
11	Zeyba Eshete	F	40	
12	Gidisa Ayana	F	42	
13	(Name Unknown)	F		She suffered from mental illness <sup>1</sup>
14	Enaniye Beliku	F	55	
15	Alem Kebede	F	60	
16	Merigeta Asteray	M	51	
17	Priest Andualem Fisseha	M	40	His wife and mother (65-years-old) were also killed
18	Abiye Beliku	M	50	
19	Wondim Tesfaw	M	25	
20	Fasikaw Techane	M	42	
21	Misgie Abebe	M	35	Lost 5 family members
22	Amare [last name unknown]	M	31	
23	Jemberu Asnakew	M	31	
24	YiIekal Firew	M	22	
25	Abiye Beliku	M	40	
26	Aynamaw Debalkie	M	39	
27	Memori Kassahun	M	35	
28	Meseret Mihretu	M		

<sup>1</sup>She was referred to as 'Ibid'. It was difficult for sources to identify her personal and background information since she lived in the town only for a year.

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## **Injuries as a result of the ethnic-based massacre of Amharas in Uke Kersa town**

In addition to the massacre of many civilians, there were at least five injured Amharas in Uke Kersa town. According to AAA sources, none of the injured have had any access to health care facilities and medical treatment since the roads to health facilities are occupied and closed by the OLA militants. Instead, they have been taken to rural areas and treated by local community members using traditional means. One of the witnesses explained the situation facing injured Amharas as follows:

*“There are at least five injured Amhara in the Uke Kersa attack. Among the injured is Geze Workneh, 80-years-old, who injured his leg after he was shot by the OLA militants. The perpetrator believed the target had died with a single shot and they left him without checking the victim. The other one is Belete Shambel, who is 37-years-old, another victim of the Uke Kersa attack. He also injured his right leg and is currently receiving treatment in a neighboring rural Kebele. There are also another three injured Amharas whom I couldn’t identify by name.”*

According to AAA’s sources, the injured Amharas are suffering without access to medical treatment. Sources confirmed that the OLA militants blocked off the way to medical facilities such as Nekemte and the road leading to the Amhara Region. As a result, victims are forced to live with their severe acute pain and wait for their death. The eyewitness explained the situation as follows:

*“All the injured Amharas are denied medical treatment. The way to Nekemte and Amhara Region are blocked by the OLA militants. There is no possibility they can visit health facilities at the moment. They all are suffering from the pain of their injuries. If the situation continues like this, they will die soon.”*

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## **Looting and Destruction of Amharas' Property**

Besides the massacre and injuries inflicted on Amharas, properties owned by Amharas faced looting and destruction in Uke Kersa town on September 9, 2022. According to AAA's sources, some of the Amharas were left with only the clothes that they were wearing. The sources estimated that the total amount of looted and destroyed property is worth well over two and a half million ETB. One of the survivors, whose house had been fired, stated that the OLA militants had destroyed all they she had, except the clothes she was wearing. She added her survival is the only indication of her existence in the moment. She describes the property destruction as follows:

*“In Uke Kersa I had a very good house, where everybody was served. I used it as a home and business center, part of the house had been used as a restaurant. The OLA militants burned my house and all the property inside it. Right now, I am left empty-handed. I have been left with only the clothes I was wearing. I escaped the massacre since I heard about a potential attack one day prior to the massacre (on September 8, 2022) while some strangers were talking about it. Then, I locked my house and ran away from home to escape the massacre.”*

A witness also reported that two other Amharas also had property looted by the OLA militants. According to AAA's sources, the properties of two other Amharas were also destroyed and looted by OLA militants. An eyewitness reported the destruction and looting of resources as follows:

*“Besides Tigist, there are two more Amharas whose properties were also destroyed and looted, targeted by the OLA militants. The first one is Tariku Ebabu who had a restaurant and grocery shop. The (OLA) militants targeted his property for looting and destruction. They looted and destroyed everything inside the restaurant. All the equipment has been damaged. Thanks to God, his life and house have been saved. In addition, Jemberu Asnakew, who had a store of*

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*merchandise which was looted and destroyed by the OLA militants. Jemberu attempted to defend his family and properties. However, he has been killed, and his property was destroyed and looted.”*

List of Amhara property owners whose property sustained looting and destruction during the massacre in Uke Kersa town.

No.	Name of Victim	Types of property destroyed	Remarks
1	Tigist (last name unknown)	Residential and restaurant	The house was burned down and all the property inside the house was destroyed.
2	Tariku Ebabu	Restaurant and Grocery	All the property in his restaurant and grocery store was looted and destructed.
3	Jemberu Asnakew (deceased)	Business (Store of Merchandise)	The store was completely looted and destroyed. The owner was killed trying to protect his family and property.

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## About Amhara Association of America (AAA)

The Amhara Association of America (AAA) is a non-profit civic organization located in Charlotte, North Carolina that investigates and documents human rights atrocities and repression against Amharas in Ethiopia. AAA seeks to inform U.S. policymakers, international human rights organizations, media, and all Ethiopian stakeholders to pressure Ethiopian leaders to change laws, policies, and practices in Ethiopia so perpetrators are held accountable and victims receive justice. AAA also collaborates with Amhara organizations in the U.S., supports independent Amhara organizations in Ethiopia, and provides humanitarian aid for Amharas impacted due to targeted ethnic attacks. AAA's funding comes directly from members and supporters; the organization is not affiliated with any Ethiopian or American political or governmental entities.

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