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Attacks in Arsi, EHRC's Report and Politics of Manufactured Conflict

(OLF-OLA Press Release)

We have spent weeks carefully investigating the October attacks in Sirkaa, Arsi. Beyond the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), about four armed forces operate in the area: the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), counter-insurgency forces, state militia, and armed ethnic Amhara civilians. The latter maintain ordinary civilian lives but take up arms when called upon or lured in by regime forces.

The latest incident that claimed lives began on October 18, 2026, when an Oromo mother returning from a marketplace was shot and killed in the street by one of these armed civilians.

Knowing that these armed civilians operate at the behest of regular regime forces, OLA fighters subsequently took action against their encampment in Birboof Collee, Sirkaa District. In addition to proper combatants, the exchange has regrettably led to civilian deaths. The civilians who fell there were, however, part-time combatants—plucked from private life by the ENDF and counter-insurgency forces. They were not simply civilians caught in the crossfire. That, in brief, is the sequence of events that led to the attack and the circumstance under which it occurred.

Under normal circumstances, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission's (EHRC) November 3 report on the incident could—and should—be takes seriously and carefully scrutinized on its merits as an effort to protect civilian lives and establish accountability for the loss of human life. For example, in a country experiencing daily attacks on civilians across multiple fronts of a protracted civil war, why single out Arsi for investigation? Even in Arsi, the regime has orchestrated multiple attacks over the past few years. Why only now? Why have ongoing attacks, such as the one in Moyale, attracted zero attention from the Commission? More troubling still, the EHRC lists "relevant government bodies" among its sources without any apparent recognition of the inherent conflict of interest. Its choice of sources, investigative priorities, and methodology all warrant scrutiny.

Yet, there is a deeper contradiction in treating the report as though it was the work of an independent human rights institution. The EHRC is an extension of the regime and operates within a political order whose security forces stand accused of perpetrating the very abuses it is supposed to investigate. To debate its findings as if institutional independence were established is to grant it a legitimacy that its conduct has yet to earn. The question is not simply even whether this particular report is credible; it is whether the Commission can ever meaningfully hold the regime to account when it remains structurally compromised by the very regime it is meant to scrutinize.

In addition, the broader political context must not be obscured. Arsi is not an isolated episode. It belongs to a wider pattern in Abiy Ahmed's political playbook: the deliberate cultivation and instrumentalization of ethnic and religious fault lines to prevent a common front against his regime. That playbook rests on three interlocking pillars: suffocating meaningful economic life while diverting resources toward the machinery of war; silencing independent media and opposition voices to deny society the space to organize and breathe; and inflaming inter-communal and inter-religious tensions to fracture potential alliances before they can mature into a unified challenge to his rule.

Through the securitization of virtually every political question, the suppression of public life, and the deliberate aggravation of internal divisions, the regime is pushing the country toward a breaking point. The consequences will not stop at its borders. A further destabilized Ethiopia would impose an enormous burden on an already fragile Horn of Africa.

Nor does Abiy's destabilizing posture end at home. His conduct beyond Ethiopia's borders increasingly bears the hallmarks of a regional agenda, one that risks serving the interests of forces both near and far while exporting instability across an already volatile region.

The danger, therefore, is not merely another episode of violence in Arsi, nor another compromised report from the EHRC that obscures more than it reveals. It is a governing strategy that turns communities against one another, institutions into instruments of political convenience, and national crisis into a source of regional insecurity.



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