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Male Rape as a Political Tool in Ethiopian Prisons

Or

Rape and Sodomy in Oromia Prisons, An Ethiopian Tragedy

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**INTRODUCTION**

In recent months, it has come to be recognized that male and female activists, prisoners of conscience, and critical journalists in Ethiopia have been sexually abused in detention. This abuse is not a deplorable ‘part and parcel’ of prison life among hardened criminals, but instead a calculated method of submission. In Ethiopia, torture and humiliation are a means to an end. Admittedly, we do not know how common this abuse is: few current or former prisoners are willing to disclose their experiences. Instances of rape, genital maiming and mutilation, and acts of sexual violence including sodomy are under-reported by both men and women. Male survivors of sexual violence are less likely than women and girls to disclose assaults (Callender & Dartnall 2011) due to a combination of cultural and religious reasons manifested through shame, confusion, and guilt. This ongoing study uses personal accounts and anecdotal evidence to investigate the alleged abuses. The limited data indicate that genital maiming and rape have been practiced in an attempt to silence dissent and humiliate the victims. This study highlights the urgent need for the international community and local human rights organizations to address seriously the needs of victims of sexual violence such as genital maiming, rape, and other obscene and sadistic, ill-treatment in prisons. The human cost of silencing and the marginalization of survivors can only be estimated at present.

The project is underway and the conclusions that we can draw from this work are tentative. For many years during the TPLF regime, there have been rampant rumors that prison officials and interrogators in Ethiopia abused prisoners of conscience, journalists, and members of the opposition party. These prisoners have been exposed to unspeakable violations and are at the same time incapable of public expression in Ethiopia, where sexual abuse remains a taboo subject. Rape and the maiming of genital organs as a method of torture are part of this tragedy. Abuses are not only sexual. They are multifold: dehydration, starvation, and solitary confinement; refusal to provide basic medical care; ignoring cries for help; and varied forms of psychological abuse. We thought that such acts were a thing of the past, a distinct signature of Woyane thumb on Ethiopians willing to speak out.

However, currently, a similar but less recognized abuse is conducted in Oromia regional prisons. I am compelled to write this short article based on the latest abuse conducted on an Ethiopian Orthodox Church priest. The priest is from Yabello (Kibre Mengist), Oromia Regional State, and testified to the attempted sodomy by an Oromo police officer last week. As I write this note, the video is viral on social media[[1]](#footnote-1).

**OBJECTIVE OF THIS STUDY AND CHALLENGES**

The objectives of this study are (a) to document the magnitude of this tragedy; (b) to create public awareness; (c) to assist the victims; and (d) to encourage survivors to come forward and share their stories with researchers and human rights activists. As there is no possibility of obtaining recognizable justice in Ethiopia, this documentation is essential to helping the victims gain access to international judicial mechanisms. Survivors could file suit and pursue criminal prosecution and trials for both the perpetrators and those who ordered the sexual torture. It has been demonstrated on many occasions that the federal judiciary in Ethiopia lacks the independence and determination to prosecute these crimes. As a result, an international system would provide hope to the survivors and their families in pursuing criminal prosecution. There are several challenges to realizing the above objectives and goals. The first is a lack of credible evidence. It is next to impossible to induce survivors to talk about their ordeals, so most of the evidence and data in this report are anecdotal. Two of the personal accounts lack rigor because survivors were not willing to share their experiences in detail. A second challenge lies in the ability to prove systematic abuse. Zawati (2007) observes, “The International Criminal Court Statute states that sexual abuse is a crime against humanity if they can prove that it was done in a systematic way”.

Theoretically, one ought to regard these atrocities or acts in their context and verify whether they may be regarded as part of an overall policy or a consistent pattern of inhumanity, or whether they instead constitute isolated or sporadic acts of cruelty. The limited data in this study indicate that the atrocities are planned, systematic, procedural, and omnipresent. The study is still underway, but the limited findings show that obscene and sadistic forms of torture are used in prison against Ethiopians considered influential activists, the Orthodox faithful, Orthodox priests, and Amhara nationals. The purpose of the abuse is purely to humiliate the victim and intimidate others. Sexual abuse has consequences far beyond the event itself. Harms include physical damage, psychological insult, sexually transmitted diseases, depression, and intrusive memories. In a country where psychological and psychiatric treatment, counseling, and emotional support are not common, it is very difficult for the survivors to reassemble their lives and to function as socially adequate and occupationally competent citizens. The gravity of this problem can be even more complicated among male victims because of cultural beliefs and deep-seated traditions. A cardinal reflection and overwhelming surprise in this study is the widespread rumor among Ethiopians that sodomy is also practiced in prison by government agencies as a method of torture. More research and investigation are required to substantiate such rumors. At present, the data are quite limited and diffuse. However, other forms of sexual abuse, such as genital maiming, rape, obscene, sadistic, and ill-treatment are documented practices.

**POSSIBLE PURPOSES BEHIND THESE ATTROCITIES**

Whether rape is conducted in the heat of war or within the cold boundaries of a prison, the purpose is to humiliate the victim and intimidate others. It may be to obtain information from a third party. These are the reasons why the authorities seem to condone or encourage the rapes, which are never purposeless. Rape is committed for a combination of motives including the exercise of power, the infliction of humiliation, and lust, and even the perpetrator is not likely to know which is predominant. Unwanted sexual activity, by its nature, is always humiliating and degrading, which is not necessarily the case for non-sexual assault. When it is carried out in an organized manner it aggravates the humiliating and degrading treatment such that it can be considered torture. The evidence in this report testifies to the fact that Ethiopia has also become a hub of this evil practice which can be characterized as a true crime against humanity if victims dare to speak about their ordeals.

Reports of torture, sadistic cruelty and other ill-treatment are never investigated and those suspected of criminal responsibility are never brought to justice. Criminal proceedings in Ethiopia continue to place the burden of proof on an individual complaining of torture, or other ill-treatment, something which flies in the face of international human rights law and standards. The law rightly places the burden of proof on the authorities to prove that confessions were lawfully obtained, but judges (extension of the corrupt Oromumma political system) continue to give primacy to evidence presented by a public prosecutor without questioning its legality and are failing to exclude evidence obtained under acts of enforced sodomy, other forms of sexual torture and ill-treatment. This is a hidden horror, untold by the victims and undocumented by local and international bodies— Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, or investigative journalists/researchers. Sexual violence used as a form of torture seems to have become a routine part of interrogations. Rumors are rampant that one way of torturing devices by security forces in Ethiopian prisons is raping women activists and sodomizing men dissidents. The purpose of rape as a method of torture is twofold: one is to coerce these innocent dissidents or political activists to secure confessions for crimes they have not committed; and the second and most important of all is to dehumanize, terrorize and cripple the activism and motivation of the activists to fight for justice and democracy. My objective is that this preliminary report should be a call to action for us all starting today. In my opinion, today we must form an independent commission consisting of international and national human rights activists to investigate sexual abuse in prison, as well as to develop the cases, inform the public, and pursue the main agents of these crimes within the international system. The commission I am suggesting here cannot materialized without the help of every single victim or the help of a close relation to the victims. This will not be possible without breaking the silence or without the will of everyone to end the darkness and silence of the victims and all the other unknown men and women that are not among us today and have been the victims of ethnic apartheid and horrific sexual abuse in prisons.

**THE CULTURAL, RELIGIOUS, AND IDENTITY ASPECTS OF THE ATROCITIES AND LIFE AFTER PRISON:**

I am outraged! While I say I am outraged, I know this quiet consuming rage has uplifted me to passionately involved in this terrain: “Rage — whether in reaction to social injustice, or to our leaders’ insanity, or to those who threaten or harm us — is a powerful energy that, with diligent practice, can be transformed into fierce compassion.” ― Bonnie Myotai Treace. My overall impression and observation of life, if we ever call it life, in Ethiopia after the fall of the TPLF (EPRDF) regime, is rather than justice for all, we are evolving into a system of justice for those who belong to a privileged ethnic group and who can afford it. We have a network of complex institutions that are not only too big to fail~~,~~ but too big to be held accountable. However, as we stand up for an ideal, or genuinely act to improve a lot of our long-suffering Ethiopians, or strike out against injustice, we sweep down these walls of oppression and resistance. What saddens me equally is the reaction of some good friends and relatives when I told them that we need to expose this particular crime perpetrated by the Abiy government. Their reaction/statements may be well meant but crippling. Some of their statements were: “Ethiopians are too sensitive to the concept of obscene sexual practices”; It causes uncomfortable feelings for a society unprepared to hear these stories”; “Our society is deeply religious, what terms are you going to use to unravel these?”; “What use does your work have”; “Be careful! These evil forces can harm you”; “The victims will never talk openly about it because of shame and societal values, and how do you collect reliable data in this situation, better focus on other injustices” etc. These types of reactions have three consequences 1) the victims never get the support that they deserve upon their release 2) This ‘political and justice apathy’ prolongs the life of the oppressive system 3) The perpetrators escape justice. Many people seem to forget that exposing the crime would inject a threat of accountability into power and upend the impunity these security apparatuses had operated for years. In the international law of human rights, it refers to the failure to bring perpetrators of human rights violations to justice and, as such, itself constitutes a denial of the victim’s right to justice and redress. Impunity is especially common in countries like Ethiopia which lack a tradition of the rule of law, suffer from corruption or have entrenched systems of patronage, or where the judiciary is weak, or members of the security forces are protected by special jurisdictions or immunities.

The main problem for most of the victims is to openly talk about the abuse. Ethiopian society is still traditional in many ways. There is shame associated with sexual abuse~~s~~ creating a sense of shame and guilt. The devastating scale of this sexual violence against political activists is being exposed today by sporadic evidence which indicates that almost no victims report perpetrators to the police or the judge as these forces are part of the machinery of torture. Negative social attitudes to rape and sexual assault victims, in particular, Sodom performed on male inmates, play a big part in the reluctance of victims to come forward, according to my observation. The issue of sexual abuse in general and an act of sodomy in particular is an extremely taboo subject in Ethiopia as in many other countries. The stand-out fact is that almost none would report it to officials or even to loved ones, because of this general perception that society is unsympathetic or lacks understanding.

A similar observation has been documented in other countries. In the last decade alone, sexual violence—including rape, sexual torture and mutilation, reproductive violence, sexual humiliation, forced incest and forced rape, and sexual enslavement—against male civilians and combatants, both adults and children, has been reported in 25 conflicts across the world (Lewis, 2009; Peel, 2004).

**SUMMARY AND PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION**

The project is underway and the conclusions that we can draw from this work are tentative. For many years there have been rampant rumors, particularly over the last 32 years, after the TPLF took power in 1991 right though to this day, prison officials and interrogators in Ethiopia abuse prisoners of conscience, journalists, and members of the opposition party. These prisoners have been exposed to unspeakable violations and are at the same time incapable of public expression in Ethiopia where sexual abuse is a taboo subject. Rape, sodomy, and the maiming of genital organs as a method of torture are part of this tragedy in particular during the TPLF regime. Currently, the Abiy government and its security apparatus appear~~s~~ to have intensified the practice. Abuses are not only sexual. They are multifold: dehydration, starvation, and solitary confinement; refusal to provide basic medical care; ignoring cries for help; and varied forms of psychological abuse. Rape, Maiming, and Medieval Barbarism in Oromo Region’s Concentration Camps is the order of the day! All these crimes against humanity are perpetrated by the regime in power in the name of "violent overthrow of the constitutionally elected government" accusations. Besides, Ethiopia's Tribalist Despotism is entrenching itself like tribalist corruption in Nigeria. It is becoming THE system, and for a young generation of youngsters, particularly in South and West Ethiopia,.... an accepted normality... a mindset on which to advance at the expense of others.

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1. <https://youtu.be/G1i3afh2oEk> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)