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EHRCO stands for democracy, the rule of law and the respect of human rights.

Another Ethnic Conflict in Bench-Maji Zone **66th Special Report**

15 October 2003

Introduction

In an ethnic conflict which flared up in Toom, Jebba and Surma weredas of the Bench- Maji zone in the year 2003, 40 people had been killed and a considerable amount of property was looted and destroyed. The residents of the locality in the zone are in serious anxiety because of the ethnic clashes that have escalated lately. It is to be recalled that in July 2001 a serious clash has occurred in those areas. As a result 31 people were killed 5 were wounded, 152 homes were burnt down, 1300 people were displaced from their homes and 166 heads of cattle were looted. This was reported in the 59th Special Report of EHRCO that was issued and disseminated in February 2003.

The Cause of the Present Conflict

The Dizzi, Menit and Surma tribes live in Maji, Jebba, Toom and Surma weredas. The Menit and Dizzi tribes live in Maji, Toom and Jebba weredas, whereas the Surmas live in Surma wereda. EHRCO had learnt that the surmas used to live near the Sudanese border in areas called Tirmatid and Mardur. However, as they are nomads, they do not live in a fixed place. They also used to live as pastoralists different in areas in Surma wereda.

Recently, the Surmas have encroached the areas that are known to belong to the Dizzi and Menit tribes. And the main cause for this encroachment is the absence of government soldiers that used to guard the boarder with the Sudan and Kenya during the Derg regime. This fact made the Surmas vulnerable to attacks and looting from heavily armed Sudanese nomads who overstep the Ethiopian boarder and forced them to leave their localities and migrate to Jebba and Toom weredas.

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EHRCO has an observer status in the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, is a member of World Organization Against Torture and is also a corresponding member of the International Federation of Human Rights.

The Surmas who migrated to these weredas had attacked the Dizzis and the Menits and taken over the latter's villages. This has caused repeated clashes between the Dizzis and the Surmas. Though local government authorities repeatedly asked the Surmas to evacuate the areas they took over from the Dizzis and the Menits, they persistently refused to do so. The reason for their refusal was that they had been exposed to attacks by the “Bume” tribes from the Sudan as there had been no government soldiers assigned to guard the Ethio- Sudanese border since the present government took over political control.

So, even recently the Surmas have alleged that they became victims of attacks by an organized group originating from the neighboring countries. As an evidence to their allegations they show uniforms and bullet cartridges left by the fighters of the Sudanese People Liberation Army (SPLA). The Surmas repeatedly appealed that if the government can give them guaranties that it will stop the attacks from external forces, they will evacuate the areas that belong to the Dizzis and the Menits and move back to their former villages. However, as there were no measures taken by both the regional and the Federal governments, the situation has tuned from bad to worse.

It has been learnt that the tradition of the Surmas is another cause of conflict between the Surmas on the one hand and the Dizzis and the Menits on the other. According to Surma culture, a Surma man has to give more than 10 heads of cattle, two guns and other goods to the parents of his fiancé as a dowry. So, a Surma man who wants to get married would go and loot cattle from the Dizzi and Menit villages. In the process, one or two people of the Dizzi or Menit tribes are usually killed. And in retaliation, the families of the victims would kill any member of the Surma tribe. This has long been the situation between the tribes. These factors have contributed to the worsening of the problem.

There have also been occasional conflicts between the Surmas and the Agnwaks who live in the neighboring Gambella Regional State. In a conflict that flared up between the Surmas and the Agnwaks in August (2003) 21 people have been killed, scores of others were wounded and property was looted.

The Conflict and the Casualties Between the Surmas and the Dizzis

In the months of March and June 2003, the Surmas in Surma woreda at a place called Tulkit killed two individuals of the Dizzi tribe. The victims are:-

1. Seid Mohammed: - 20 years old, shot to death in March in Surma woreda at Tulkit.
2. Tsuni Wurmuna: - 36 years old, shot to death in early June in Surma woreda at Tulkit.

EHRCO learnt from government officials in the area that on the 23rd of June 2003 around 8:00 am. a Dizzi by the name of, Kidad Gacha, who is the chairman of the Beru Kebele shot and killed two men and a woman with her child and wounded another man who were all members of the Surma tribe for reasons that remain unknown. This incident created

resentment among the Surmas and led to an all out ethnic clash. According to information gathered by EHRCO, the list of people who were killed in the conflict from both tribes is presented in the table below.

No	Full Name of Victim	Age	Details
1	Kudbu Mulu	65	A Surma shot to death on June 1, 2003 by Kidad Gacha, chairman of Beru kebele. Wild animals ate the body and only the remains could be found.
2	Hunate Dalul	70	A Surma shot to death on June 1, 2003 by Kidad Gacha chairman of Beru kebele. Wild animals ate the body and only the remains could be found.
3	W/O Kassine Chelemkeyz		A Surma shot to death on June 1, 2003 by Kidded Gacha, chairman of the Beru kebele. Only part of the body could be found
4	Babu Akuh	2	Shot and killed while on his mother's back by Kidad Gacha, chairman of the Beru kebele. The body could not be found as it was totally eaten by wild animals.

In addition to these, a Surma by the name of Ato Arkiyo Dirbalon was shot and wounded by the same individual.

Incensed by this, the Surmas starting from 23 June mobilized and invaded the Beru Kebele and launched a heavy attack on the Dizzis. They looted property and especially they broke into the house of the kebele chairman who is said to have killed the four Surmas and took 7 goats and a machine gun. The residents of the kebele fled the attacks and went to the town of Jebba and reported the situation to the Woreda police. The police went to the place the same day and tried to stabilize the situation by talking to representatives of the Surmas. The Surmas requested the police that they should hand over to them the kebele chairman who has killed four Surmas on the 23rd of June 2003. Otherwise, they will continue attacking the Dezzis. The kebele chairman disappeared for a few days but was apprehended by the police. As the kebele chairman was not handed over, Surmas launched a new wave of attacks on the Dizzis starting from 24 June 2003. According to information gathered by EHRCO, the names, age and sex of people killed by are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 People Killed in Beru Kebele

NO	Name	Age	Sex	Details
5	Lidu Yelu	70	M	A farmer shot to death by two bullets on 24 June 2003.
6	Babayka Gostu	15	F	A young girl shot to death by 16 bullets on 25 June 2003. A long stick was found inserted in her vagina
7	Damena Zeku	37	M	A member of the Surma tribe killed by the Dizzis on 26 June 2003
8	Arkaw Wetalo	36	M	A farmer shot to death on 26 June 2003

9	Adsar Ardi	40	M	Shot to death in the back by two bullets on 28 June 2003 at 8:00 A.M
10	Binku Kuri	40	M	Shot to death in the right hip on 28 June 2003
11	Akukulu Burd	35	M	Shot to death in the left hip on 28 June 2003
12	Gasa Eyame	25	M	Shot on the head and killed on 28 June 2003
13	Aku Mula		M	Shot to death at a place called kera on 29 June 2003
14	Kuri Regassa	30	M	Shot to death on 30 June 2003 at 4:00 PM in Beru kebele at a place called Dibsen.
15	Kashu Kiyam	24	M	Shot on the back and killed on 30 June 2003
16	Tsedeke Kulu Burji	28	M	Shot to death 30 June 2003
17	Kache Gache	26	M	A Dizzi who is the brother of the chairman of the Beru kebele who had killed four Surmas. The Dizzis themselves killed him on Aug. 2003 for he was the brother of the man who initiated the conflict that resulted in the killings of Dizzis.

From 24 June 2003 up to 19 Aug 2003, a total of 17 people were killed in the conflict. Of this, 13 are from the Dizzi tribe and 4 are from the Surma tribe.

As a result of the conflicts that kept flaring up now and then, many farmers were displaced from their homes in Toom and Jebba weredas since July 2002. 1116 Dizzis that were displaced from Saay and Kolu kebeles are temporarily settled in a vacant field near the town of Toom. These people have been getting relief food from the government. An EHRCO team has visited these displaced people. Table 3 shows the number of these displaced persons and their general situation as per the information provided to EHRCO team by the displaced persons.

Table 3. People Displaced From Kolu and Saay Kebeles
FROM KOLU KEBELE

Age	Heads of families			No of household			Total		
	M	F	Tot.	M	F	Tot.	M	F	Tot.
0 –5 years	-	-	-	51	31	82	51	31	82
6–17 years	1	2	3	54	31	85	55	33	88
18-55 years	66	30	96	13	71	84	79	101	180
Above 55 years	6	4	10	1	3	4	7	7	14
Total	73	36	109	119	136	255	192	172	364
FROM SAAY KEBELE									
0-5 years	-	-	-	88	64	152	88	64	152
6-17 years	2	3	5	127	129	256	129	132	261
18-55 years	98	47	145	47	133	180	145	180	325
Above 55 years	10	1	11	-	3	3	10	4	14
Total	110	51	161	262	529	591	372	380	752
Total no. of displaced people from the two kebeles	183	87	270	381	465	846	564	552	1116

The Surmas confiscated all the property that belonged to these displaced people. A few of the displaced people have built houses in their new place of settlement near the town of Toom whereas the majority of them live in tents provided to them by the government. They have been given a monthly ration of 15 kilos of wheat or maize per head since they settled in the new place. The ration was lowered to 12 kilos per head as of May.

Conflict Between Agnwak and Surma Nationalities

According to reports that reached EHRCO:

- The guard of a camp in Dima Wereda was shot dead by unidentified gunmen on 28 Sep. 2003.
- On the next day, an Agnwak woman living in Surma Woreda, Naimeri kebele was killed by the Surmas and her killers took her belongings away.
- Angered by this, armed government militiamen of the Agnwak nationality killed 21 Surmas who were engaged in gold mining. This happened on 30 Sept. 2003 in Surma wereda, Naimeri kebele. According to the information provided to EHRCO by the Commander of the Bench-Maji Zone Police the militiamen went to the gold mine and killed the Surmas who were working in the gold mines after telling the other people to go and watch TV. Afterwards, the militiamen buried the bodies in a well dug for mining gold. The names and addresses of the victims are presented in Table 4.

No	Name of Victim	Age	Sex	Details
1	Barmillegna Kijaw	35	M	A farmer from Surma wereda Moga kebele 200 Birr and 6 bullets belonging to him was taken away.
2	Sinokiyo Jikaw	40	M	A farmer from Surma wereda Moga kebele. His 200 Birr was taken away.
3	Rekuya Dimerlogo	17	F	A woman from Surma wereda Moga kebele. Her 90 Birr was taken away.
4	Jarken Koreberi	9	M	A child from Surma wereda Moga kebele
5	Birgna Koreberi	40	F	A house wife from Surma werede Moga kebele
6	Molle Dongalle	15	M	A farmer from Surma wereda Moga kebele
7	Talamu Akilugu	30	M	A farmer from Surma wereda Moga kebele. A kalashinkov with 24 bullets belonging to him was taken away.
8	Ziwugna Telimu	50	M	A farmer from Surma wereda Moga kebele. His 120 Birr was taken away
9	Namirya Bana	40	F	A housewife from Surma wereda Moga kebele. Her 60 Birr is taken away.
10	Bayu Oriyamare	40	M	A farmer from Surma wereda Naimeri kebele. His kalashinkov with 11 bullets was taken away.
11	Naguy Oriyamare	12	F	A resident of Surma wereda Naimeri kebele
12	Bermule Oriyamare	18	M	A resident of Surma wereda Naimeri kebele
13	Bargango Naberia	35	M	A farmer from Surma wereda Naimeri kebele
14	Banabume Naberia	25	M	A resident of Surma woreda Naimeri kebele. His 15-gram gold was taken away.

15	The wife of Banabyme Naberia (No 14 in table 4)	24	F	A resident of Surma woreda Naimeri kebele. Her 8 years old boy.
16	Nagrari Marakolle	25	M	A farmer from Surma wereda Naimeri kebele
17	Kongo Benta	35	M	A farmer from Surma wereda Naimeri kebele. His Kalashnikov gun was taken away
18	Kune Ewa	12	M	A resident of Surma woreda Naimeri kebele
19	Keretegu Tuya	20	M	A resident of Surma woreda Najmeri kebele shot to death by several bullets in the chest.
20	Arkiyo Batana	22	M	A farmer from Surma Woreda Moga kebele shot to death by several bullets in the stomach.

On the same day of those killings, Kibegu Dengndole, 25, a man from Surma woreda Moga kebele managed to escape the attackers after sustaining a wound on the chest.

Conclusion

It is becoming common to see Ethiopian tribes who have lived in peace and harmony for ages, killing each other for the slightest of pretexts. EHRCO had issued repeated reports on these ethnic conflicts. And it had always appealed to the government to take precautionary measures before these conflicts worsened. EHRCO urges in this Special Report to all those concerned to share its concern about the ethnic conflicts that recently broke out in Bench Maji Zone in Toom, Surma and Maji woredas and give due attention and help in bringing an end to such violence before more serious and devastating conflicts occur.

Therefore, the government is expected to take urgent measures to bring together the different nationalities in the area with a view to helping them deliberate and seek amicable solutions by identifying the causes of the conflicts.

In addition to this, the government:

- has to protect the people in the area from attacks of forces from neighboring countries by assigning guards to the country's borders with the neighboring countries near the Bench Maji zone.
- has to bring to justice those illegal armed men who have been murdering and attacking innocent civilians.
- has to take appropriate measures to help resettle those who are displaced because of the conflicts.
- especially has to take an urgent legal measure on the Agnwak militiamen who murdered and buried in a well 21 Surmas who were working in a gold mine in September 2003.

Finally, EHRCO calls upon the government to bring to justice the perpetrators of the above mentioned human rights violations and conduct studies on the causes of the conflicts and take corrective measures. EHRCO also urges individuals, governmental and non-governmental organizations and representatives of international organizations to transmit their calls by writing to the government bodies listed below so that the human and democratic rights of citizens is respected and rule of law prevails.

Copies to:

- House of the Peoples Representatives
Po.Box. 8001, fax (252-1) 55 09 00, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
- House of the Federation
P.O. Box 8001, Fax no. (251-1) 50 07 722
- H.E. Lt. Girma Wolde Giorgis, FDRE President
P.O.Box 1031, fax (251-1) 55 20 20, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
- H.E. Ato Meles Zenawi, FDRE Prime Minister, Addis Ababa
P.O. Box 8001, Fax no. (251-1) 50 07 722
- H.E. Ato Harqa Haroye, FDRE Minister of Justice
P.O.Box 1370, fax (251-1) 52 08 74
- House of Southern Nation Nationalities
P.O.Box 18 fax (251-6) 20 19 50 Awassa, Ethiopia