

Sidama: A Nation under Siege

An Overview of Gross Human Rights Violations and a Deliberate Policy of Under-Development by the Current Ethiopian Regime.

By Gabiso Kada¹

February 2004

I. Background.

The Sidama people live in the southern part of the present day Ethiopia. The capital city of Sidama, Awassa, is located 275 kms south of Addis Ababa. At present Sidama has an estimated total population of 4.5 million people. 98% of the total population living in Sidama land is ethnic Sidama and speak one language, Sidamic, (Sidaamu afoo) and have a unified culture and a unified socio- economic life. Total area of the Sidama land is estimated to be about 15-16000 km sq.

Administratively, the Sidama land is divided in to 10 large districts. Land features range from low lands of about 1500 m a.s.l in the Great East Africa Rift Valley up to 3000 m a.s.l in the Great Eastern Sidama High Lands. The Sidama land is one of the most ever green and fertile lands in Africa. As a result, for centuries, the Sidama people led one of the most stable and self sufficient life as an independent nation state in the North eastern Africa.

However, this was reversed when king Minelik II of Shewa, motivated by the possession of modern weapons from Europe and encouraged by rivalries between the two colonial powers of Britain and France to control East Africa, led his own conquest to the Sidama and neighboring lands in the early 1890s. By 1897 Sidama has for the first time lost its independent nation hood. Subsequently it lost control over its natural resources, notably land. The people were converted in to slavery characterized by feudal serfdom. This continued until the end of the monarchy in 1974.

The socialist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam, ended a direct slavery of the Sidama people. However, it perpetuated an indirect slavery through its inappropriate social and economic policies of collectivization, villagization and destruction of private entrepreneurship and initiatives for development. Heavy handed repressions of the Sidama resistance movements were other brutal features of the socialist regime.

¹ Gabiso Kada is a Sidama Scholar and Human Rights Activist currently living in Awassa, Sidama land. This article is dedicated to the commemoration of the Second Year of the Genocide in Awassa.

However there was one thing positive about the rules of the feudal as well as the socialist governments. They maintained the Sidama administrative identity. Sidama as a society had never lost its administrative status as a society. The Sidamo province and administrative region included not only the present day Sidama land but also other neighboring small states. It is the so called “revolutionary democratic” regime of Meles Zenawi which for the first time in the history of the Sidama society has decided to abolish the identity of the Sidama nation and the existence of its people once and for all.

This paper attempts to present an overview of the nature and the scope of the destructive social, political and economic policies of TPLF/ EPRDF aimed at destroying the Sidama people as a society.

Section 2 presents the essence of Meles Zenawi’s deliberate policy of socio-economic underdevelopment in Sidama. Section 3 deals with the May 24, 2002 genocide on the Sidama people by the defense and police forces of the regime and the subsequent gross human rights abuses.

Section 4 assesses the nature of the recent systematic uprooting and depopulation of the Sidama people in the name of resettlement. Finally, in section 5, an appeal is made to international community to intervene and stop the suffering of the Sidama people.

II. Deliberate Policy of Scio- economic Underdevelopment in Sidama by TPLF/EPRDF regime.

2.1 Current socio- economic conditions.

In spite of its natural endowments, the Sidama land is one of the poorest areas in the poorest country in the world. In terms of social and economic development this means that the Sidama people are the poorest people in the world. The available statistics on the access to basic social and economic services is a testimony to this. Only as recently as 1994 primary school enrolment in Sidama was an amazing 18% which was the lowest in the world. Through the concerted efforts of the local development initiatives and the support of the Irish government during the past decade, school participation rose to about 40% which still is the lowest even by the sub- Saharan standard. At present access to health services is about 35%. Access to clean water is less than 30%. The reader has to note that even these achievements were the result of the support of the Irish Government.

Economic infrastructure is severely underdeveloped. Many of the capital towns of the main districts do not have electric supply connected to the national grid. All whether roads are not more than 400 kms. Asphalted roads are non existent except for the 90 kms stretch of the Kenya-Addis Ababa-Gaborone road that passes through the Sidama land.

Private sector is severely curtailed. There are insignificant private sector investment and business activities in the area.

Unemployment and underemployment is rampant. An estimated 0.75 million people in rural Sidama are either unemployed or under employed.

Sidama is one of the major coffee producing areas in the country. But the benefits of coffee have never trickled down to the area. The recent fall in international coffee price coupled with the deliberate policy of the government to underdeveloped Sidama has reduced the people in to virtual dependants on food hand out from the TPLF regime. The Sidama people have never faced hunger and famine in the history of their society because they had always produced enough for themselves. Even the 1984 great famine that hit all other parts of the country did not affect the Sidama land. However the subsistence nature of agricultural production which is dependent on archaic technology and vagaries of nature coupled with massive rural population growth and inimical government policy made the Sidama land prone to frequent hunger and famine that characterizes the country. Thus it is not surprising to see that today about 1/3 of the total population in Sidama is dependent on food aid from the international community.

No attempt has been made by the government to develop industrial sector to create jobs for the massive redundant labour force in the rural area. In fact the TPLF regime did not build a single manufacturing industry in Sidama region in its 13 years of rule while it built over 10 big manufacturing industries and enormous number of small industries in the Tigray region alone.

2.2 Deliberate Dismantling of the Local Development Initiatives. The Case of the Sidama Development Corporation (SDC)

It was stated earlier that the Sidama people have been neglected by the successive Ethiopian regimes for the past century. Thus the Sidama land remained highly underdeveloped. However, the establishment of the Sidama Development Program funded by the government of Ireland in 1994, led to massive development activities never matched in the history of the Sidama society. Although meager given the size of the Sidama population, an injection of about 380 million birr (about 29 million British pounds) worth of capital between 1994 and 2001 has made a tremendous contribution to the socio-economic advancement in the Sidama land. Hundreds of primary schools were built. Thousands of springs were protected to enable the rural community have access to clean drinking water. Hundreds of rural health posts and several health centers were constructed. Over 400 kms of labour based all whether rural roads were built. Rural towns got electric supply and milling facilities.

On top of addressing the issues of rural infrastructure the program assisted in addressing the root causes of poverty in the Sidama society. Lack of community empowerment was identified as one of the obstacles to development in the area. To address this problem at all level capacity building training and microfinance program has been launched. The latter also specifically targeted at social and economic empowerment of women in Sidama society.

Thousands of civil servants at all levels and community members got skill upgrading training as well as training on the concepts of participatory development. This process helped to shape the Sidama society to be ready to work for self reliant and sustainable development in the area.

To ensure the continuity of this process, a local development initiative called the Sidama Development Corporation (SDC) was established in 1997. This organization took over the key activities of the Sidama Development Program to ensure their sustainability. These were programs on capacity building at all levels and community empowerment at grass roots level. SDC was able to generate local resources and mobilize international funds to work for sustainable development in the Sidama area. It has achieved a lot in its 5 years of operation. It built an excellent multipurpose training center in Yirgalem called the Furra Institute of Development Studies, the best of its kind in the country. It provided microfinance services to over 15000 rural poor in its short period of operation.

However, the government of Meles Zenawi has deliberately blocked the activities of the SDC and dismantled the organization. The Sidama scholars have learnt that Meles Zenawi has officially asked the government of Ireland to stop funding the development activities in Sidama when he visited Ireland in 2000.

As a result, at present, SDC is dismantled and the Irish Aid support to social and economic development in the area is completely suspended. The Sidama people have lost about 45 million birr (\$6million US dollars) worth of net development assistance provided per year from the Irish government and other international NGOs aimed at reducing poverty and sustaining the development activities in the area.

Such is a deliberate policy of under developing a nation by a decadent Ethiopian regime. And this is not only an economic genocide but is a crime against humanity.

III. The May 24, 2002 Genocide of the Sidama People and its Aftermath.

Following the genocide on the Sidama people carried out by Meles Zenawi's defense and police forces in Awassa on May 24, 2002, in which hundreds of the Sidama people were massacred, the Sidama nation has witnessed unprecedented violations and abuse of the rights of its citizens. Mass imprisonment, torture, harassment and intimidation became orders of the day.

3.1 The Awassa Town.

Awassa town was established in 1964, virtually 40 years ago, on the graves of the Sidama people. The Sidamas have been living in their present land including Awassa for over 1000 years. However, the current regime in Ethiopia tries to re create history. It wants to ethnically cleanse the Sidama ethnic group from their land of Awassa. The cause of the May 24 massacre is simply a popular opposition to this unpopular and illegal action of the regime.

After the massacre the Sidama people living in the town were considered as second class citizens. Most of the people were systematically removed from the town and sent to districts in the name of restructuring of the civil service.

The federal TPLF regime has taken over the administration of the town which has always been under the Sidama regional administration and effectively excluded the Sidama people from benefiting from their land. For instance, thousands of plots of land were said to have been sold to non Sidamas. This is the same policy of ethnic cleansing perpetrated by Slobodan Milosevic in Bosnia Herzegovina in the early and mid 1990s.

3.2 Mass Imprisonment and Torture

Hundreds of Sidamas were imprisoned in all the ten districts immediately after the massacre. Most of them were brutally tortured. In the case of Awassa, many people sustained permanent physical damage due to severe torture. Although some were released others are still languishing in prisons. In the past three months some prisoners were transferred to the most notorious prisons in the desert of Omo in South Ethiopia to disguise the extent of the abuse from international community.

3.3 Retrenchment of Ethnic Sidama civil servants and police force.

About 500 ethnic Sidama civil servants were removed from their jobs following the massacre. Some civil servants have fled the country. Moreover, over 200 ethnic Sidama members of the police force have been removed for alleged support of the cause of the Sidama people. Rendering hundreds of ethnic Sidamas jobless due to the genocide for which Meles Zenawi's regime is fully and solely responsible is an indication of an absolute lack of the rule of law in TPLF dominated Ethiopia.

What is more pathetic is that the Sidama bandits who are members of the ruling party and who were coordinators of the genocide were promoted to higher posts regardless of their capacities. Thus one has to note that this is not an issue of a one time massacre but it is a part of a well thought long term strategy to under

develop the area and enslave the people. The Sidama people are fully aware of the intentions of Meles Zenawi and the Sidama bandits recruited by him.

The International community has to note that the so-called constitution of the country which is written and interpreted by Meles Zenawi only states that nations and nationalities have the right to self determination up to and including secession if their rights are violated. Compare this with what is practically happening in Sidama land at present.

IV. The policy of Depopulation: Systematic annihilation of the people or resettlement?

Intoxicated by its temporary success of under developing the Sidama land, the TPLF regime has begun to completely uproot the people from their very home land. According to an anonymous Sidama reporter on the SNLO web site, thousands of Sidamas have been forcefully uprooted from their home lands and taken thousands of Kilometers away to places known as Bench and Maji near the Ethio-Sudanese border in the name of resettlement. It is crystal clear to the TPLF as well as the international community that such resettlement programs have miserably failed in Ethiopia during the Mengistu regime and should never be repeated. According to this anonymous reporter several people were battered by wild animals when they attempted to return back home. This is the cruelest form of yet another genocide on the Sidama people.

The genuine solution to the over population of a given area is to establish an alternative employment schemes by investing on alternative manufacturing, mining and services sectors. Deportation of the people from their home lands to an area which is less developed than their own home land can not be justified by any reason. We in Sidama feel that this is comparable to some aspects of the Nazi deportations of the Jewish people during the holocaust. This is the policy of systematic annihilation of a people and must be stopped immediately.

V. Call for International Intervention

In the preceding sections an attempt has been made to highlight the plight of the Sidama people in Ethiopia. The problems are ghastly. The situation is beyond comprehension. The problems are comparable with some aspects of the sufferings of the Jewish people under the Nazis. This will plant more seeds of hatred and retribution among the different communities in Ethiopia in the future. One day more serious genocide is inevitable in Ethiopia if the international community continues to allow the current situation to continue in that country. In particular:

- 1) The government of USA has to immediately stop rewarding Meles Zenawi who is as an evil murderer as Sadam Hussein is. For the Sidama people and other

oppressed peoples in Ethiopia, it makes no sense if the Bush administration punishes Saddam Hussein and rewards Meles Zenawi

2) The governments of other G8 countries should review their relations with Meles Zenawi's regime in Ethiopia.

3) The EU as a major trading partner and donor to Ethiopia should reconsider its policies on Ethiopia, and finally,

4) The international Human Rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other humanitarian organizations should not ignore the plight of the 4.5 million people in Ethiopia. They should continue with their usual non partisan advocacy to stop the violations of human rights in Ethiopia.

Gabiso Kada, Sidama
February 2004