



CONFLICT TREND ANALYSIS

WESTERN OROMIA

MARCH 2023

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This paper provides an analysis of the conflict trends in western Oromia – the western part of Ethiopia’s Oromia regional state – over the second half of 2022 and the first two months of 2023. As well as providing an overview of the conflict, its main actors and a timeline of major events over the past six months, it highlights the potential for negotiations between the regional and federal governments and the Oromo Liberation Army, which may now be emerging.

SUMMARY

- In the second half of 2022, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) temporarily expanded its control over rural districts and towns in the west and southwest of Oromia. This was partly possible due to a security vacuum resulting from the Ethiopian National Defense Forces’ (ENDF) involvement in the Tigray war.
- In the latter part of 2022, particularly following the signing of the cessation of hostilities with the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) in early November, government forces intensified their counteroffensive in the Oromia region, causing the OLA to retreat from previously held districts and towns into rural areas of western and central Oromia.
- The retreat of the OLA has led to a spillover of the conflict into Benishangul-Gumuz region, further adding to its cross-regional dynamics, which had already seen Amhara Fano militias and OLA deploying to protect their own ethnic communities who live as minorities in neighbouring regional states.
- The OLA’s insurgency, as well as recurrent Fano and OLA militia incursions across the Oromia-Amhara borderlands, and finally the government’s late-year counteroffensive in western Oromia, led to multiple massacres and revenge attacks on both Oromo and Amhara communities.
- It is often difficult to identify which armed groups are involved in different conflict events. This has been particularly true in the second half of 2022 when a series of massacres of civilians in different zones of western Oromia were blamed on OLA and Amhara militias, with the groups generally denying involvement.
- Civilians were the main casualties of the fighting in 2022 but the exact figures are difficult to determine. Over the whole year, an estimated 740,000 people were displaced within western Oromia and its borderlands with the Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz regions. The lack of security has meant that IDPs have generally not received the humanitarian assistance they need.
- In 2022, there was little progress towards a peace process as the main conflict parties sought to strengthen their positions militarily, despite numerous calls for peace talks. However, in early 2023 statements by the Oromia regional government and the OLA high command suggested a potential opening for peace negotiations this year.

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INTRODUCTION

Western Oromia makes up about a third of Ethiopia's largest regional state, Oromia. The seven zones generally considered to be part of western Oromia – Kellem Wollega, East and West Wollega, Horru Guduru Wollega, Illubabor, Buno Bedelle and Jimma – border three of Ethiopia's other regional states: Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella, as well as Upper Nile state in South Sudan. Since 2019, western Oromia has been the site of insurgencies, counter-insurgencies and cross-border attacks, leading to hundreds of deaths and thousands of people displaced. These conflicts are mostly, but not exclusively, related to the activities of the OLA and militia forces from the Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz regions.

Conflicts in western Oromia initially flared up in late 2019 following a failed reconciliation agreement signed in August 2018 in Asmara, Eritrea, between the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP).² The agreement was intended to enable the OLF – previously listed as a terrorist organization by the Ethiopian government and mostly exiled during EPRDF rule – to return to Ethiopia, disarm its fighters and engage in peaceful opposition politics. But an orderly disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programme did not take place and a split within the OLF over the agreement quickly emerged.³ Refusing to disarm, in October 2018 the western military wing of the OLF – the OLA led by Jaal Marroo⁴ – severed ties with the party and built up its command in Wollega, from where it then waged an insurgency for Oromo self-determination. By May 2021, Ethiopia's government listed the OLA, which it calls 'OLF Shene', as a terrorist organization.⁵

The political tensions that led to the conflicts in western Oromia go beyond the mismanaged disarmament agreement. A plethora of different political and armed actors have been involved – not only limited to different factions of the OLA, the Ethiopian federal and Oromia regional governments and their respective military forces, but also neighbouring ethnic militias, particularly from the Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz regions.⁶ The Ethiopian government's handling of civil strife in the Oromia region turned increasingly authoritarian since the middle of 2020, after protests broke out across the region in the wake of the assassination of Oromo singer Hachalu Hundessa on 29 June 2020. Violence and looting continued into the following year.⁷ In western Oromia, the government's relative inaction

2 Previously called the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO), a coalition party of the EPRDF since 1994, OPDO was briefly renamed ODP in September 2019, before it was absorbed into EPRDF's successor, the Prosperity Party, in December 2019. ODP was thereafter renamed Oromia Prosperity Party (OPP).

3 Marew Abebe, 'Ethiopia's bungled 2018 deal with Oromo rebels is the cause of current turmoil', *Ethiopia Insight*, 24 April 2021, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/04/24/ethiopias-bungled-2018-deal-with-oromo-rebels-is-the-cause-of-current-turmoil>

4 The OLA refers to itself as *Warraqa Bilisummaa Oromoo* (WBO) in Oromiffa. For background on Jaal Marroo, see Jaysim Hanspal, 'Who is Jaal Marroo, the military leader in charge of the OLA?', *Africa Report*, 11 November 2021, <https://www.theafricareport.com/144673/ethiopia-who-is-jaal-marroo-the-military-leader-in-charge-of-the-ola/>

5 'Council Of Ministers Approves Resolution Designating TPLF and Shene As Terrorist Organizations', Embassy of Ethiopia, Washington D.C., 1 May 2021, <https://ethiopianembassy.org/council-of-ministers-approves-resolution-designating-tplf-and-shene-as-terrorist-organizations-may-1-2021/>

6 Tsegaye Bihanu, 'Conflict Trend Analysis, Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State: May–November 2022', Conflict Trends Analysis, Peace Research Facility, Rift Valley Institute, <https://riftvalley.net/publication/conflict-trends-analysis-benishangul-gumuz-regional-state-ethiopia>

7 Ermias Tesfaye, 'Chaos in the Rift—a microcosm of Ethiopia's brutal polarization', *Ethiopia Insight*, 5 January 2021, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/01/05/chaos-in-the-rift-a-microcosm-of-ethiopias-brutal-polarization/>

in response to kidnappings and attacks on civilians,⁸ cross-border attacks by unidentified armed groups and retaliations from within Oromia, allowed the conflict there to spiral out of control.

Prior to the war in Tigray, federal and regional military forces had coordinated to push OLA to the fringes of the region, limiting its activities to the forests and rural parts of Wollega. But when the war broke out in November 2020, the ENDF and Amhara regional and ethnic militias were re-deployed to fight in the north. The resulting security vacuum allowed the OLA to regain strongholds in all of the Wollega zones and expand to other parts of Oromia, especially the south-west, over the next two years. In August 2021, the OLA announced that it had entered a military alliance with the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) and in November 2021 joined the United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Forces, though their forces failed to link up on the battlefield.⁹ Only a year later, as the TPLF entered peace negotiations with the Ethiopian government, government forces redoubled military operations to combat the OLA in western Oromia. The intensification of the government's counterinsurgency resulted in further human suffering inflicted by air and ground assaults, including on civilian targets, aggravating the displacement crisis in the region.

This briefing focuses particularly on events during the second half of 2022 when the OLA made significant military advances in western Oromia, gaining partial control over West Wollega and Kellem Wollega zones, parts of East Wollega zone (Limu Gelila, Ebantu, Gidda Ayana and Haro Limu districts) and south-west Oromia (Chewaka and Dabo Hana districts of Buno Bedelle Zone) and two districts of Illubabor zone (Darimu and Mako).

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS

2022

MARCH

Government begins offensive to push OLA from Wollega zones.

JUNE

14: OLA forces undertake simultaneous attacks in Gimbi, Dambi Dollo and Gambella towns

18: Massacre in Gimbi Tole, West Wollega zone, 250 Amharas killed; OLA denies attacks.

JULY

4: Attack in Hawa Gelan, Kellem Wollega zone, over 150 persons killed; Ethiopia Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and government blame OLA.

AUGUST

30-31: Over 50 civilians killed in massacre in Agamsa (Amuru woreda); 20,000 displaced in attacks allegedly by Fano militias; Amhara activists blame OLA.

8 For example, the controversial kidnapping of Amhara students from Dambi Dollo University, see: 'Analysis: More questions than answers as news of kidnapped university students turns into political ping-pong', *Addis Standard*, 13 January 2020, <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-more-questions-than-answers-as-news-of-kidnapped-university-students-turns-into-political-ping-pong/>

9 The OLA-TDF military alliance effectively ended with the cessation of hostilities signed in Pretoria between TPLF and the Ethiopian federal government in November 2022. The OLA has since also stated that it is open to peace negotiations with the federal government in the presence of a neutral local mediator.

SEPTEMBER - DECEMBER

Attacks on civilians following OLA take-over of Jardega Jarte; killings of Amharas and Oromoa blamed on OLA and Fanos.

MID OCTOBER - EARLY DECEMBER

Attacks in Kiremu, East Wollega zone, including massacre in Kiremu district with dozens killed; Oromos flee to Gida Ayana, fearing further attacks from Fano militias.

OCTOBER

23-25: Drone strikes in Chobi, West Shewa zone; more than 60 killed.

31: UNOCHA estimates up to 740,000 IDPs in western Oromia and border areas of Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz regions.

NOVEMBER

6: Ethiopian Evangelical Church in Galo, Sasiga, East Wollega reports 15 members killed during service.

9: Drone strikes in Mendi town, West Wollega zone, at least 30 persons killed.

23-25: Fano units accused of carrying out attacks in Kiremu district, East Wollega, killing dozens; scores flee to Gida Ayana district.

DECEMBER

3-4: Anger Gute, East Wollega, multiple attacks, more than 30 persons killed; OLA and Fanos accused according to different accounts.

7: EHRC report on West Oromia crisis published, calls for immediate government action to find lasting solution to conflict.

Mid: Representatives from the Oromia region write letter to PMO demanding peace deal be negotiated between the Ethiopian government and OLA.

2023**JANUARY**

23: OLA manifesto, 'From Armed Struggle to the Prospect for Peace,' published.

FEBRUARY

Early: Oromia regional president suggests government and OLA should end the conflict in West Oromia peacefully.

Mid: Oromia regional president calls for reconciliation with 'OLF Shene'; OLA high command demands talks with federal government mediated by third party.

CONFLICT DYNAMICS

The dynamics of the conflicts in western Oromia vary depending on the actors involved and their geographic location. The broad faultlines of the conflict are between OLA, Amhara ethnic militias and government forces (and their affiliates) in a struggle over territorial and administrative control of parts of the region, differing positions vis-a-vis the Ethiopian federation (split between unitarian, federal and secessionist ideologies), as well as over national and regional power – particularly between the Amhara and Oromo constituents (see below).¹⁰ However, it is frequently very difficult to determine

¹⁰ T. Østebø and K. Tronvoll, 'Interpreting contemporary Oromo politics in Ethiopia: an ethnographic approach', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 14/4 (2020), 613–632.

which actors are involved in different conflict events, particularly massacres of civilians.¹¹ A trend has emerged where conflicting narratives over who committed or permitted violent crimes – most often against unprotected civilians – only exacerbate the situation and complicate the picture of who is to be held accountable.¹²

With respect to the motivations of different groups, Amhara nationalists and activists claim that their regional or ethnic militias are fighting to defend Amhara communities, and regional territories or ancestral lands from attacks by OLA. Federal, Amhara and Oromo regional communication bureaus routinely accuse ‘OLF Shene’ of attacking civilians and luring Oromo youths (*qeerroo*) into their fight. Oromo nationalists and activists, including the OLA’s high command and spokespersons,¹³ maintain that their fight is not directed against any ethnic group but mainly against the central government, its unitarian ideology¹⁴ (sometimes referred to as *ethiopiawinet*) and a repressive administrative system in Oromia that, according to their recently published political manifesto, violates ‘the Oromo people’s right to self-determination’.¹⁵ Attacks against civilians, they repeatedly claim, are perpetrated by Amhara regional Special Forces, ethnic militias (‘Fanos’), or even Oromia’s own regional Special Forces. All parties to the conflict thus operate in a polarized environment where periodic attacks and revenge-attacks against civilians are normalized and rarely independently investigated, while perpetrators can act with impunity as long as they are not identified and penalized.

The conflict has left civilians extremely vulnerable as local and especially border communities are caught in the cross-fire or forced to choose ethnic allegiances.¹⁶ This has resulted in mass killings and internal displacement – a trend that intensified in the latter half of 2022. A report by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission found that, by the end of 2022, there were 740,000 internally displaced peoples (IDPs) in western Oromia and border areas of the Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz regions.¹⁷ The humanitarian situation in west and south-west Oromia deteriorated over 2022, compounded by droughts that affected 3.5 million people and a lack of humanitarian access due to the volatile security situation.¹⁸

11 Attackers are often vaguely described in local accounts as speaking a specific language (Oromiffa or Amharic) or belonging to an ‘unidentified armed group’. Following a massacre there are often contrary accounts about whether the attackers were OLA, or a splinter group not under its command, or whether they were instead Amhara ethnic militias, or even impersonators from Oromia’s regional military forces. See also: Ermias Tesfaye, ‘Amhara civilians were massacred in Tole, but questions remain’, *Ethiopia Insight*, 8 July 2022, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2022/07/08/amhara-civilians-were-massacred-in-tole-but-questions-remain/>

12 ‘Conflicting narratives as violence hits East Wollega again, claiming hundreds of civilian lives’, *Addis Standard*, 26 August 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-conflicting-narratives-as-violence-hits-east-wollega-again-claiming-hundreds-of-civilian-lives/>

13 OLA’s international spokesperson is Odaa Tarbii: <https://twitter.com/OdaaTarbiiWBO>

14 Unitarism refers to an emphasis on the national unity of the Ethiopian nation and its diverse peoples. Counter to those forces favouring a multinational or multiethnic federation (up to and including the right to secession), the unitarian ideology – applied by Abiy Ahmed’s Prosperity Party – aims to build a unified nation-state with a central government that foregrounds one common national identity over that of multiple other ethnic identities. See also: Asebe Regassa, ‘Self-Determination, Multinational Federalism and an Emerging Threat in Ethiopia: A Decolonial Approach’, *Northeast African Studies*, 21/2 (2021): 57–82.

15 OLF-OLA High Command, ‘A Brief Political Manifesto: From Armed Struggle to the Prospects for Peace’, 23 January 2023, <https://www.olf-olahq.org/post/announcing-the-oromo-liberation-army-s-brief-political-manifesto>

16 ‘Ethiopia: Civilians in Western Oromia Left Unprotected’, Human Rights Watch, 31 August 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/31/ethiopia-civilians-western-oromia-left-unprotected>

17 ‘Ethiopia: Access Snapshot, Oromia region (south-west) (As of 31 October 2022)’, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 9 November 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-access-snapshot-oromia-region-south-west-31-october-2022>

18 ‘Ethiopia: Access Snapshot’.

The conflicts have also led to mistrust between communities that historically coexisted, and inter-communal relations between neighbours of different (ascribed) ethnic identities have deteriorated. Ethnic identities along the western Oromia borderlands have hardened – not least due to violent attacks on and forced displacement of communities labelled as ethnic ‘others’. The federal and regional government’s failure to provide protection for civilians and to hold perpetrators to account has also contributed to a mistrust of Oromo communities in government authority and regional security forces.

Over the last two years, many districts of western Oromia were placed under military command – a localized *de facto* state of emergency – during the counter-offensives against OLA forces in what the government, repeating the narrative applied in the Tigray war, called a law enforcement operation.

Table 1: Conflict parties in Western Oromia

ZONE	COMBAT FORCES	MAJOR ETHNIC GROUPS
Horo Guduru Wollega	Amhara Fano, Amhara Special Force, OLA splinter group, OLA, multiple government forces, private security forces and unidentified gunmen	Oromo, Amhara
East Wollega Zone	Amhara Fano, OLA splinter groups, OLA, multiple government forces, Gumuz militias and unidentified gunmen	Oromo, Amhara
West Wollega and Kelem Wollega	Government forces, OLA, and (Gumuz militias in West Wollega)	Oromo and other minorities, including ethnic Amhara

In addition to these measures, the civilian population of much of western Oromia lived under a government imposed communications blackout, making it difficult to obtain local accounts and report on the conflict.¹⁹ Related human rights violations against civilians accused of being insurgents have instilled a fear of the authorities among civilians in some parts of the region. In the early phase of the conflict, this resulted in the growth of armed civilian responses, including disaffected *qeerroo* youths joining various OLA factions, as well as the creation of a clandestine hit-squad network called *Abba Torbee*, which targeted government officials and other individuals for assassinations.²⁰

ARMED GROUPS

As outlined above, the conflict situation in western Oromia is complex with several different armed actors operating in the area. This includes, conventional armed forces – the Oromia and Amhara Special Forces, federal police and ENDF – plus non-state actors, such as the OLA (‘OLF Shene’) and Amhara ethnic militias (‘Fano’) whose motives and allegiances are more difficult to determine. The government has also armed civilians in some areas as a means to enable community self-protection, but such a tactic

19 Ermiyas Tesfaye, ‘Amid blackout, western Oromia plunges deeper into chaos and confusion’, *Ethiopia Insight*, 14 February 2020, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/02/14/amid-blackout-western-romia-plunges-deeper-into-chaos-and-confusion>

20 While the government saw ‘OLF Shene’ as being behind the network, the OLA command denied having any links. Oromo youths from the Wollega zones were seen as potential members and a threat to authorities. Tsehaay Daamxoo, ‘Dhimma Namoota Garee Maqaa Abbaa Torbee Jedhamuu Wajjin Wal-qabate Hidhamanii’, VOA, 5 April 2019, <https://www.voafaanoromoo.com/a/4864041.html>

can simply promote revenge attacks by poorly trained and un-coordinated vigilante groups.²¹

The structure of **the OLA** itself is highly decentralized and is organized into multiple, semi-autonomous regional commands. The western command under OLA Commander-in-Chief Jaal Marroo Diriba is the most significant, but a similar structure exists for the southern command under Deputy Commander Gemechu Aboye, and the central regional command under Sagni Negassa. The regional structures and hierarchies are however relatively clandestine and are only loosely connected to and directed by a so-called ‘OLF-OLA High Command’.²² While other splinter groups claim to represent or to be affiliated with the OLA, the high command spokesperson, Odaa Tarbii, believed to be based abroad, routinely denies such associations. For example, one breakaway group – often referred to as Shene mootummaa under the command of former OLF member Fekade Abdisa – operates in the rural areas of East Wollega and Horo Guduru, apparently outside of OLA’s command structure. It has been accused of carrying out atrocities under OLA’s name to divide the Oromo opposition and, for this reason, some of the group’s supporters and advocates have sought to distance themselves from it. In March 2021, following an attack on an Orthodox church in Horo Guduru zone that reportedly saw over twenty people killed, the OLA spokesperson denied the group’s involvement: ‘Reach out to the residents of Horo Guduru and ask them who Faqadaa Abdiisaa is and who sent him and his militia,’ he wrote in a letter to the Addis Standard newspaper.²³ Government critics as well as victims of attacks in West Oromia claim that community self-defence units (known as Gaachana sirna) – allegedly created by Oromia’s regional government – have on occasion impersonated the OLA (for example by braiding their hair in a style typical of OLA fighters) before carrying out revenge attacks. One former Oromo Democratic Party/Oromia Prosperity Party government official-turned-critic makes similar claims,²⁴ describing such armed community guards as a state sponsored ‘shadow OLA’, whose fighters act as paid ‘conflict entrepreneurs’.²⁵

The Fano are an Amhara paramilitary force consisting of locally decentralized militia units. Unaccountable to the federal or Amhara regional government and forces, their units operate in majority Amhara populated towns in western Oromia and make routine incursions across the Amhara-Oromia borderlands. The training and militarization of Amhara paramilitary forces for the Tigray war – to fight alongside the ENDF against TDF from 2020 to 2022 – created a threat to civilians in Oromia districts bordering the Amhara region. Sources from Kiremu district (East Wollega Zone) report that Fano units have training centres in the area and accuse them of attacking Oromia’s regional Special Forces there, as well as in Endode in Gidda Ayana districts of the zone in early December 2022. A number of Amhara nationalists have made public statements claiming that Wollega is part of Amhara’s ancestral land. Similarly, there has been advocacy among Fano sympathisers to establish a committee – akin to the Wolkayt Tsegede Amhara Identity Restoration Committee – that would work to institutionally reclaim Wollega for the Amhara as a precondition for stopping Fanos from trying to take control of these territories by force.

East and West Wollega zones both border the Benishangul-Gumuz region (Kamashi and Assosa zones) and **Gumuz militia forces** and OLA have clashed on multiple occasions on either side of the border.

21 ‘Regarding the humanitarian crisis caused by attacks on civilians in various areas of the Oromia region’ (title transl. by ed. from Amharic), Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 7 December 2022

22 The OLF-OLA high command releases its press statements here: <https://www.olf-olahq.org/news>.

23 Oda Tarbii, ‘OLA’s spokesperson deny allegations against OLA for Abe Dongoro attack’, *Addis Standard*, 12 March 2021, <https://addisstandard.com/news-more-than-40-civilians-killed-in-western-oromia-regional-govt-ola-rebels-trade-blame/>

24 These claims cannot be verified but are common. There is no clear evidence to indicate Oromia regional government actually instigates and funds violence at the hands of OLA impersonators or splinter groups.

25 Tsedale Lemma, ‘Understanding the war in Oromia w. Ezekiel Gebissa, Milkessa Midega and Bileh Jelan’, Twitter Spaces, 30 November 2022, <https://twitter.com/i/spaces/1yNGaNIadBJ?s=20>

The conflict is rooted in Gumuz discontent with ‘highlanders’ – referring both to Amhara and Oromo residents who control most of the economic resources in Kamashi. Conflict there started in September 2018, when four Gumuz officials were killed at Maka Najjo in Billa district of West Wollega.²⁶ A cycle of retaliatory attacks then began with Gumuz gunmen launching violent attacks on Oromos in Haro Limu, Sasisa and Limu districts of East Wollega zone, as well as in Mana Sibuu village, and the Lalisa Sibuu and Nedjo districts of West Wollega.²⁷ The OLA then blamed Gumuz officials for instigating the attacks and engaging in combat with Gumuz forces.²⁸ Since then, inter-communal relations between Gumuz and Oromos have deteriorated.

CONFLICT ZONES

Up to now, the conflict in Western Oromia has mostly been focused on four zones – East Wollega, Horu Guduru Wollega, Kellem Wollega and West Wollega. More recently however, following a government counterinsurgency in the second half of 2022, the OLA was increasingly forced to retreat from towns and villages in these areas and is now mainly present in rural areas and forests across central Oromia, particularly East and West Shewa, North Shewa, parts of South West Shewa, and also West Guji zones.²⁹

Before that, the conflict in East Wollega and Horu Guduru Wollega zones in particular was characterized by alternating tit-for-tat attacks on both Oromo and Amhara civilians. The presence of multiple operatives in East Wollega and Horu Guduru Zones (see above) adds to the complexity of the conflict. Beyond the regional and federal forces, in both zones there are unaccountable actors that are hard to identify, including OLA splinter groups, various Amhara Fano forces (most operating autonomously or under a loosely decentralized command structure), as well as armed civilians often comprised of local farmers and youths. Furthermore, as the EHRC has reported, civilians in districts with some of the deadliest attacks – including in Agamsa, Jardega Jarte, Amuru and Kirumu areas – have been left unprotected by regional and federal forces. This has resulted in civilians arming themselves and combatants committing atrocities with impunity. The Wollega zone regional border-crossings are largely uncontrolled, allowing Oromo and Amhara ethnic forces unhindered access across regional borders.

EAST WOLLEGA

Initially home to OLA’s base, the zone has been the epicentre of the conflict in West Oromia since 2019. Fighting in the zone has been exacerbated by the involvement of armed groups from the neighbouring Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz regions, including Amhara regional Special Forces, ‘Fano’ militias, vigilante groups of militant Amhara nationalists, and ethnic Gumuz forces. Amhara forces mainly operate within the Amhara region, but also in majority Amhara-populated villages in East Wollega zone, including in Anger Gute, Gutin (Gidda woreda), Haro Addis-Alem and Sire Doro (Kiremu woreda).

26 Dawit Endeshaw, ‘IDPs number rise as violence hits Benishangul, Oromia’, *The Reporter*, 6 October, 2018, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/6527>

27 Ermias Tesfaye and Solomon Yimer, ‘Tens of thousands flee Benishangul after Oromia border dispute flares’, *Ethiopia Insight*, 4 October 2018, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/10/04/tens-of-thousands-flee-benishangul-after-romia-border-dispute-flares>.

28 See also: Tsegaye Bihanu, ‘Conflict Trend Analysis, Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State: May–November 2022’, Rift Valley Institute, <https://riftvalley.net/publication/conflict-trends-analysis-benishangul-gumuz-regional-state-ethiopia>.

29 The federal government has had most difficulty with its operations against OLA in North and West Shewa zones, which are extremely rural and afford the rebels with opportunities to escape federal government forces in forests, particularly in Gindberet woreda, West Shewa. Extensive cave systems in the Mogor area of North Shewa are also, reportedly, being used by OLA groups to hideout and shelter.

OLA splinter groups also operate in Gida Ayana and Kiremu, where ethnic Oromos have repeatedly been targeted, allegedly by Amhara Fano forces. Amhara and Oromo civilians have repeatedly been subject to ethnic attacks, some of which can be characterized as massacres. The most recent incidents in the zone include:

- **15 October:** A massacre in Kiremu district, where dozens of residents were reportedly killed in four villages (Gudina Jiregna, Cheffe Soruma, Burka Soruma and Nachino), and scores fled from nineteen kebeles fearing further attacks,
- **6 November:** An evangelical church in Galo, Sasiga of East Wollega reported that more than ten of its members were killed on their way to prayer on Sunday.
- **Early December 2022:** Fighting in Anger Gute, Gutin (Gidda woreda) claimed hundreds of lives and caused severe property destruction, with both Amhara and Oromo activists accusing each side – OLA ‘Shene’ or Amhara ‘Fanos’ – of the killings, before regional and federal troops arrived.

HORO GUDURU WOLLEGA

This zone shares a border with the Amhara region, mainly the West Gojjam zone. It has a large number of Amhara inhabitants, many of whom maintain strong ties to the Amhara region.³⁰ Amhara regional forces and Fanos exploit this to gain access to and operate in parts of West Oromia. Recent incidents in Horo Guduru Wollega zone include:

- **August 30-31, 2022:** More than 50 civilians were killed during a massacre in Agamsa (Amuru woreda) and approximately 20,000 were temporarily displaced in attacks allegedly by Fano militias in the absence of Oromo regional and federal forces.
- **September - December 2022:** Several attacks on civilians took place in Jardega Jarte. Oromo regional and Amhara forces were allegedly involved in fighting in the Jardega Jarte, where OLA was thought to have operated and received support from local civilians.

WEST WOLLEGA

The zone shares a border with Benishangul-Gumuz region and has been a hot-spot for cross-border conflicts between the regions. Government forces have repeatedly clashed with OLA in the area. The latter claims that it operates in West Wollega to protect its Oromo inhabitants from cross-border attacks by ethnic militias. Recent incidents include:

- **18 June:** A massacre at Tolle kebele in Gimbi woreda claimed hundreds of lives, the majority of them Amhara civilians. The massacre resulted from what the EHRC saw as clashes between Oromo regional and OLA forces.³¹ Both the government and OLA blame each other for the massacre.³²
- **30 November:** A drone attack followed OLA’s presence in Mendi town killing dozens.
- **Early November:** A drone strike in Bila town left scores dead. The attack by government forces came after the OLA had previously gained control of Bila, Mendi and Kiltu Karra towns, with mostly Oromo civilians killed in the strike.³³

³⁰ The livelihoods of Amharas in districts of Horo Guduru zone and those in Gojjam are closely interrelated.

³¹ ‘Attack on Civilians in Tole kebele, Gimbi woreda, West Wollega zone’, (title transl. by ed. From Amharic) Ethiopian Human Rights Council, 19 June 2022, <https://ehrc.org/>

³² The OLA spokesperson claimed that atrocities were committed by ‘*Gaachana sirna*, [a] militia created by the Oromia State itself’. See: https://twitter.com/OdaaTarbiWBO/status/1538568286790631426?s=20&t=7_-qiAkRF-BzjfG0m2W7Mw

³³ ‘Wallagga Lixaa magaala Biilaatti haleellaa ‘diroonitiin’ lammiilee nagaan ajjeefamuu jiraattonni himan’, BBC, 5 November 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/afaanoromoo/articles/cnkjn94400qo>. See also: <https://twitter.com/ameyuetana/status/158886308084255392>

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Fighting in the zone has mainly been between government security forces and the OLA. Both Oromo and Amhara inhabit the area with Oromo being the majority. An attack in Hawa Galan in July 2022 was one of the most devastating in the second half of 2022 with over 100 people, mostly civilians, killed.³⁴ The government and OLA exchanged blame for the attack, as human rights groups called for an independent investigation.³⁵

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

During 2022, the conflict in western Oromia escalated to its greatest intensity since it began in 2019. Neither the OLA nor federal government until recently voiced an interest in peace negotiations. In April and November 2022 Oromia's head of the Communication Affairs Bureau, Hailu Adugna, vowed to fight rather than negotiate with 'extremist groups' in West Oromia, referring to 'OLF Shane' and 'Fano' Amhara militias.³⁶ At the end of 2022, after the signing of the cessation of hostilities between the federal government and the TPLF, the federal government redoubled its military offensive against the OLA, and the group became strategically isolated by the TPLF's decision to end its armed struggle.

In mid-December, a group of representatives from the Oromia region wrote a letter to the Prime Minister's Office demanding that a peace deal, akin to the one with the TPLF, be negotiated between the Ethiopian government and the OLA.³⁷ However, with the military threat of the OLA, and the resources needed to fight them significantly less than was the case during the high-point of the Tigray conflict, there is less incentive for the federal government to do so. PM Abiy Ahmed is also wary of further damaging relations with the Amhara region³⁸ – already under pressure due to perceived concessions made to the TPLF as part of the cessation of hostilities – by demanding an end to the cross-border attacks by Amhara Special Forces and Fanos against Oromo communities in the Oromia–Amhara borderlands. Welcoming the 'Mekelle–Finfinnee peace making process' and calling for a containment of the war with OLA through negotiations, the Oromo opposition politician Jawaar Mohammed warned that Abiy's Oromo-led government's rapprochement with the TPLF could enhance an Amhara 'sense of exclusion', resulting in further deterioration of the already strained Oromo–Amhara relations.³⁹

Similar calls for a 'comprehensive peace solution' in West Oromia by Jawaar's party, the Oromo Federalist

34 'Ethiopia leader reports new massacre in Oromia region' Associated Press, 4 July, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/africa-kenya-ethiopia-abiy-ahmed-massacres-a4c91decf560a7756ea30d7e90324c92>

35 Jorge Engels and Nimi Princewill, 'Ethiopian Prime Minister and rebel group blame each other for apparent civilian massacre', 6 July 2022, CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/06/africa/civilians-reportedly-killed-ethiopia-romia-intl/index.html>

36 Natnael Fite, 'Oromia state doubles down on accusations against Amhara extremist group for causing damage', *Addis Standard*, 12 April 2022, <https://addisstandard.com/news-romia-state-doubles-down-on-accusations-against-amhara-extremist-group-for-causing-damage/>; 'Oromia region announces that it will not negotiate with guerrillas operating in the region', (title transl. by ed. from Amharic), VOA News Amharic, 28 November 2022, <https://amharic.voanews.com/a/6853576.html>

37 'Lawmakers from Oromia region request Tigray peace deal redo between govt, OLA armed group', *Addis Standard*, 13 December 2022, <https://addisstandard.com/news-lawmakers-from-romia-region-request-tigray-peace-deal-redo-between-govt-ola-armed-group>

38 Tom Gardner, 'Ethiopia's new rift: Amhara vs Abiy', *Africa Report*, 2 June 2022, <https://www.theafricareport.com/210237/ethiopias-new-rift-amhara-vs-abiy/>

39 Jawaar Mohammed, 'Let's avoid a Deja Vu', Facebook, 11 January 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/215693/posts/pf-bidoy8xnLmpjAePBHMYVHXzany5EXUfrf9Yjr877AuHa4ksESE89bDBHJJdpoYZj6FEL/?mibextid=cr9uo3>.

Congress (OFC),⁴⁰ were countered by the Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZAMA), a unitarian opposition-party, calling for the ‘armament of civilians’ as a means for achieving security in the region.⁴¹ While the OLF’s exact relationship with its former military wing, the OLA, remains ambiguous and strained, the party called on Oromo civilians to defend themselves against the Prosperity Party-led government and its military forces in western Oromia.⁴²

Despite the government’s advantage in the military conflict, some influential politicians are doubtful that it can bring an end to the conflict through military solutions alone.⁴³ While the government may claim that the OLA is poorly organized with no centralized military command or structure, they have continued to demonstrate their effectiveness through attacks across the western Oromia region, including taking control of significant urban centres such as Dembi Dollo, where the group released hundreds of inmates from prison, in the last six months.

The OLA’s manifesto published in January 2023, titled *From Armed Struggle to the Prospect for Peace*, maintains that its various groups are collectively prepared to engage in a peace process with all stakeholders.⁴⁴ However, this is dependent on the government demonstrating its own readiness for a negotiated settlement through a number of confidence and security building measures in Oromia. In February, Oromia regional president, Shimelis Abdissa, suggested in an interview that he wanted to end the conflict in western Oromia peacefully, while pointing out the difficulty of negotiating with multiple forces (‘the Shenes’) that make up or claim to be part of OLA.⁴⁵ A week later, in front of Oromia’s regional council (*Caffee Oromia*) Shimelis officially called for reconciliation with ‘OLF Shene’ but vowed to continue the law enforcement operation should any forces seek to destabilize the peace process.⁴⁶ A day later, the OLA high command responded affirmatively but demanded the mediation of a third party for the peace process on neutral ground.⁴⁷ These are the first signals of a potential peace process in the Oromia region – which only a few months ago seemed elusive.

40 ‘Opposition OFC calls for comprehensive peace solution to Oromia war to avert looming national crisis’, *Addis Standard*, 9 December 2022, <https://addisstandard.com/news-opposition-ofc-calls-for-comprehensive-peace-solution-to-romia-war-to-avert-looming-national-crisis/>. See also: Jawar Mohammed, ‘Ethiopia needs comprehensive peace’, 10 November 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/OromoFederalistCongressParty/posts/671363287910313>.

41 ‘EZAMA recommends arming civilians at risk, group of opposition parties ask military command post in east Wollega’, *Addis Standard*, 7 December, 2022, <https://addisstandard.com/news-ezema-recommends-arming-civilians-at-risk-group-of-opposition-parties-ask-military-command-post-in-east-wollega/>.

42 ‘Protests erupt across Oromia after latest violence in East Wollega, OLF calls on Oromos to “defend” themselves’, *Addis Standard*, 6 December 2022, <https://addisstandard.com/news-protests-erupt-across-romia-after-latest-violence-in-east-wollega-olf-calls-on-romos-to-defend-themselves/>.

43 Mulatu Gemechu, a senior leader of OFC party, is doubtful whether military actions can bring a solution in Oromia. He rather suggests dialogue for peace. See: Samson Berhane, ‘Oromia in dire straits’, *The Reporter*, 3 December 2022, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/28306/>. Despite being on the back-foot militarily in western Oromia, the OLA’s southern command has shown that it can still effectively resort to guerrilla attacks on government forces and institutions. The latest example of this was on 7 January 2023, when its fighters freed hundreds of prisoners from a detention facility in West Guji.

44 ‘A brief Political Manifesto of the OLF-OLA’, 23 January 2023, <https://www.fnnmedia.org/blog/2023/1/24/brief-political-manifesto-olf-ola/>

45 “‘Enough! Let them come to peaceful path”: Oromia president wants to end fighting peacefully, but remains vague on how’, 8 February 2023, *Addis Standard*, <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-enough-let-them-come-to-peaceful>

46 ‘Oromia Region President calls for reconciliation with OLA’, 17 February 2023, *Addis Standard*, <https://addisstandard.com/breaking-romia-region-president-calls-for-reconciliation-with-ola>

47 ‘OLF-OLA High Command ‘Regarding the Call for Peace Made by the Regional Government of Oromia’, 18 February 2023, <https://www.olf-olahq.org/post/regarding-the-call-for-peace-made-by-the-regional-government-of-romia>



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