



## Statement on the Gaps and Omissions in the latest Amnesty International Report

May 30, 2020

Human rights organizations play a crucial role in defending marginalized communities in these unprecedented times of rising authoritarianism and conflict. Often being one of the few venues for silenced voices, reports by international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International establishes the foundation for the credibility of affected communities. Their accuracy, focus, and timeliness have important role in ensuring accountability and justice. Thus, communities whose basic human rights and dignity were violated often await such reports with great enthusiasm.

It is with this spirit that we read the recent report by Amnesty International entitled “Beyond Law Enforcement Human Rights Violators By Ethiopian Security Forces in Amhara and Oromia”. The report focused on “*the communal violence that took place in the Amhara and Oromia regions of the country in 2019*”. We appreciate Amnesty International producing this report at a critical juncture for the country and we thank them for their engagement on human rights issues in Ethiopia. However, we have discovered serious gaps and omissions in this particular report that necessitates a response. It is imperative Ethiopians, policy makers, and the broader public is presented with all the facts, proper contexts, and omitted human rights violations that occurred in both regions not reflected in this report. The inaccuracies, lack of balanced investigation, and omissions makes one question the intent of this report. Human rights organization such as Amnesty must be challenged when material and work is inaccurate or incomplete. Else, the mission of Amnesty, which is to bring awareness and improve the state of human rights in affected areas will diminish, along with Amnesty’s credibility, which would be consequential. With this background, we would like to share the following gaps and omissions particularly in the sections of the report that cover human rights issues in Amhara region:

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<sup>1</sup> Amnesty international (AI) report P.8.

## **1. Events Triggering September – October 2019 Conflicts in Gondar Zones and Azezo**

The report omitted relevant facts on what triggered the September - October 2019 conflict and frames what happened in Azezo as a reprisal attack. The report reads:

*“According to Tseda<sup>2</sup> the attack in Azezo was a reprisal for the killing of a young Amhara man in Chilga. He was a driver and grew up around Azezo. Immediately, his body was brought back from Chilga, the youth in Azezo started attacking the ethnic Qimant living in Azezo... they were roaming around in groups burning and destroying homes belonging to Qimant.”*

In reality, the cause of the conflict in September 2019 was an intense insurgent attack by the Qimant committee and militias. The tension started when the Qimant militia attacked and killed several Amhara Special Forces in Gulalgie while they were on the road transporting food to their colleagues camped in Chonchek. A few days later, on September 29, 2019, Qimant militia ambushed a civilian minibus on the road from Metema to Gondar. Several Amhara civilians were killed during this attack, including the driver from Azezo, Tewodros Mulugeta and his assistance Abidulkador<sup>3</sup>. The militia identified the Amharas among the passengers by checking their identity cards before killing them and mutilate their bodies. [In his interview with Reuters<sup>4</sup>](#), the head of the Qimant Identity Committee did not deny the killings instead arguing the Committee did not oversee the killings and insisting individual Qimants carried out the attacks. Findings by the International Crisis Group described the situation as; “renewed violence between Amhara security forces and militia comprising Qimant people left tens dead”<sup>5</sup>. However, the AI report only mentions the death of the driver and never mentions Qimant militia in the whole report, an incomplete account of the violence and cause of the rising tension.

The Qimant militia later ambushed and killed several Special Forces who were heading to investigate and restore peace in troubled areas. The bodies of these Special Forces were mutilated and disfigured by Qimant militia members and left on the road for several days. The military subsequently managed to bring the remains of the Special Forces to Gondar. Tensions went high after Azezo residents witnessed the disfigured bodies of the Special Forces and civilians (especially the driver from Azezo

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<sup>2</sup> Amnesty’s report states: “Pseudonyms have been used in some cases to conceal the identities of the interviewees for security reasons” (p.1).

<sup>3</sup> A report of this incident was emailed to the Amnesty Staff responsible for Ethiopian research based in Nairobi, Kenya on October 2, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-violence/attacks-kill-22-in-ethiopias-amhara-region-party-official-idUKKBN1WI20I>

<sup>5</sup> ICG, Keeping Ethiopia’s Transition on the Rails, December 16, 2019, p, 8

who was particularly popular and loved in the community). The AI report did not reference these atrocities and missed a key incident that eventually triggered the violence, a shoot-out between security forces and Qimant militia in Azezo. Since Qimant militia regularly hide in Gondar city after conducting insurgent attacks, the Special Forces frequently conduct surveillance in the city. After receiving a report of a member of a Qimant militia in Azezo, a Special Forces unit approached the house requesting the Qimant militia member cooperate with the investigation of the reported atrocities. Instead, the Qimant militiaman launched an attack against the Special Forces that lasted for several hours. Bystanders were killed and wounded from bullets fired from the Qimant militia sheltered in the house. One of the dead, Tewodros Assefa, was a leader of the local Amhara Youth Association. When Special Forces eventually broke into the house, they found heavy artillery, several fake identity cards, car plates from several regions, and allegedly human bodies that implicated the individual in human trafficking and illicit gun trading. This context is vital, so the reader has an understanding of the circumstances that led to tensions in Azezo. Presenting what occurred in Azezo as an incident provoked by an isolated killing of an individual Amhara is disingenuous and a serious miss representation of facts.

## **2. On how the Conflict Expanded to other areas of Gondar**

Without providing additional context, the report claims “*Shortly, the violence targeting ethnic Qimant people in Azezo spread to parts of Gondar city, mainly neighborhoods commonly called Kebele 18 and Ayer Tena*”<sup>6</sup>. However, as was reported in many media outlets and our own sources, while tensions were still high due to the above described conflicts, the Qimant militia mounted an attack on several fronts of Gondar City, such as the districts of Keuskam, Welleqa, and other areas. The attacks through different entry points of the city was intended to drive the fighting towards the center of town and thereby increase casualties. As the city was besieged, normal life was completely disrupted, and people frightened for their lives. Security forces tried to counter the attack but were overpowered by the Qimant militia and suffered massive losses, including the death of one of their commanders. Amharas in Gonder region were displaced by the fighting and more than 500 students in Kuskam Orthodox Church were forced to abandon their studies. Upon concluding Amhara security forces are unable to contain the attacks, community members organized to defend themselves, family, and property and bring stability to the city. While it is difficult to know whether these organized groups attacked Qimant civilians or not, not mentioning how the conflict evolved, the Amhara lives lost, and displacements

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<sup>6</sup> AI Report, p.42

omits important context. Again, the omission of the report on the role of the Qimant militia in instigating the conflict by indiscriminately attacking civilians and property; and expanding the same to Gondar city is perplexing and disappointing. Furthermore, the section of the AI report on reprisal attacks against Amharas by Qimant militia in Weleqa is scant and does not do justice to the victims. AI should not play favoritism to victims of violence be it by security forces or non-government actor.

### **3. Reprisal Attacks and Displacement of thousands of Amharas (silenced in this report)**

The section of the AI report on displacement and lost livelihoods start with a rather vague and confusing statistic: The AI report reads as *“As of December 2019, there were more than 1,000 internally displaced families in and around Gondar city due to the violence in West Gondar Zone and Central Gondar Zone. According to figures from the Protection Cluster of Ethiopia, there were 57,000 internally displaced people (IDP) - 7,000 in West Gondar Zone and 50,000 in Central Gondar Zone - by March 2019. In December 2019, there were 255 ethnic Amhara households displaced from Arbaba Kebele based on data from the Ethiopian Red Cross Society branch office in Gondar and the representatives of the displaced.”*<sup>7</sup>

The AI authors extracted the above statistics from the Protection Cluster -Ethiopia report <sup>8</sup> and from interviews with the Red Cross in Gondar that confirmed there were tens of thousands of Amhara IDPs. This information is consistent with sources that verified that Amharas fled Qimant dominated kebeles such as Guntire, Meqomia, SchaMengie, Atsie Godana, Chan Diba, Gele Diba, Anker, Qeneawuta Amanuel, Shartia, Daza, Laza’amba, Dadu, Aykel No.1&2, Gana Yohannes. Their properties were set on fire by the Qimant militias, and their pleas for protection and rescue was denied by the federal security forces who blocked the Amhara Special Forces from traveling to the area. Reports received from area contacts indicate many Amharas were killed as a result of the violence. However, in narrating causes, incidents and stories of IDPs, the report presents almost all quotes from Qimant IDPs and silences the numerous Amhara IDPs. The displacements and killings of Amharas happened at almost the same time the displacement of Qimants in Metema. It is unknown why AI neglected to report on the humanitarian crisis afflicting thousands of Amharas in the area especially in light of the details provided about their dire situation in the IDP centers in Protection Cluster report<sup>9</sup> This lack of balanced investigation and reporting is disconcerting and irresponsible.

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<sup>7</sup> AI Report, P.44

<sup>8</sup> Protection Cluster- Ethiopia : Interagency Rapid Protection Assessment - Gondar, Amhara Region, March 2019

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

#### **4. Ethiopian National Defense Forces Accused of favoring Qimant Militia**

The 24<sup>th</sup> Division of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces exacerbated the conflict by actively providing assistance and cover for the Qimant militia. The killings of Special Forces by the Qimant militia is believed to be a result from leaked intelligence by the 24<sup>th</sup> Division of the Federal Forces. Admitting to the leaked information, the federal government replaced the 24<sup>th</sup> Division with the 33<sup>rd</sup> Division. Again, the Protection Cluster report cited in the AI report states: “*the Amhara community accuse the EDF for favoring the Qimant community. The 33rd EDF division replaced the 24 EDF division after the Amharas made claims accusing the EDF of allegedly committing crimes against the Amharas*”<sup>10</sup>. While having the clear focus on behaviors of government security forces, the AI report did not call out EDF adequately for this irresponsible action of exposing Amhara civilians to militia attacks and violating their right to life and safety. The Federal Government never held commanders of the 24<sup>th</sup> Division accountable for their role in destabilizing Gondar.

#### **5. Inaccurate Description of Fano**

The AI report concludes, “*In Central Gondar and Western Gondar Zones of Amhara Region, the regional security forces were complicit in multiple instances of intercommunal violence between the ethnic Amhara and the Qimant from September 2018 to October 2019. While the armed Amhara vigilante youth group, commonly called Fano, was at the center of attacks on the Qimant, members of the regional police Special Force and the kebele militia played an active role in the violence targeting the Qimant*”<sup>11</sup>

This description and the image included to support the claim are inaccurate for at least two reasons. First, as known to any one conversant to Amhara culture, Fano are cultural groups that have existed for centuries with no political agenda. Fanos are farmers and community members who organize during a time of crisis to defend their communities from aggression. Fanos are not affiliated with any political party nor are illegitimate vigilante groups. While it is legitimate to call for the government to play its role of maintaining peace and order, there should be care in equating Fano with illegitimate vigilante groups. It is important that AI be aware of local cultural dynamics to be able to adequately present facts on the ground and not to endanger the very people in need of protection. The report calls on the government to “*investigate and prosecute leaders and members of vigilante groups responsible for*

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<sup>10</sup> Protection Cluster- Ethiopia : Interagency Rapid Protection Assessment - Gondar, Amhara Region, March 2019 , p.2.

<sup>11</sup> AI report, P.46.

*unlawful killings, causing bodily injuries, and the displacement of people.*”<sup>12</sup> While supporting an independent investigation, the inaccurate description and labeling of Fano as illegitimate vigilante groups in this report is misplaced. We are concerned the mischaracterization of Fano by AI in this report will embolden government security forces to wage further attacks against innocent farmers and communities. Second, the report included an erroneous picture of what it calls Fano on Page 43. However, as the photo and the uniform description suggests, what the report calls “Fano” are units of the Amhara Special Forces. The uniforms were introduced by the regional security Bureau in 2018/9. Inaccurate description of Fano and misattribution of the regional security forces uniform to Fano is a reflection of utter incompetency among the researchers and lack of commitment to verify facts. We have alerted the AI staff in Nairobi, Kenya on more than one occasion of the possible contextual misunderstanding of Fano.

#### **6. TPLF’s role in Supporting Qimant Militia**

The report outlines how the conflict was widespread and how Gondar, a city of several hundred thousand with a heavy presence of security forces, endured a siege for weeks due to the attacks from Qimant militia. However, the report fails to point out that Qimant forces are heavily armed militia responsible for the killings and mutilations of civilians as well as regional and federal security forces. Reports by other organizations determined the Qimant militia were wearing uniforms and armed with heavy artillery. There have been public statements by regional and local leaders that the Qimant militias were receiving support (financial, training, intelligence, and equipment) from Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). Regardless of the availability of evidence to charge TPLF legally (and politically) for its role in the conflict, the belief that Qimant militia are receiving support from TPLF was the main contributor to the expansion of the conflict between Qimant militias and security forces. The AI report did not acknowledge the role of TPLF, and disregarded statements made by regional leaders on the role of TPLF for the violence. It is very hard to believe this was a simple oversight, as this is a core issue that continues to fuel the conflict. Especially in light of the fact that the report went to present inaccurate information about what it refers as Amhara vigilant groups.

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<sup>12</sup> AI report, p.48

## **7. Number of Kebeles Demarcated to be part of the Qimant Zone**

The report states:

*“The Qimant ethnic identity committee originally claimed that 126 kebeles (official administrative units) in the Amhara region belong to the Qimant ethnic group. After a lengthy process, which included negotiation, ethnographic assessments, and a referendum, 72 kebeles were re-zoned to form part of the Qimant self-administration unit.”*<sup>13</sup> The AI report did not cite any sources for these figures. Only 69 kebeles are identified to be included in the Qimant zone although the Committee has continued to instigate conflict insisting on the inclusion of three additional kebeles that are physically disconnected from the Qimant areas. Perhaps the 72 number of kebeles claimed by the Qimant committee is being erroneously presented as factual in the report.

The report also links the violence to the outcomes of the referendum held in eight kebeles stating *“the results of the referendum cut out three Qimant majority kebeles – namely Gubay, Meqa and Lencha - from the rest of the Qimant kebeles. Because these three kebeles are physically disconnected from the other Qimant kebeles, Amhara regional government officials argued that they could not be part of the yet-to-be-formed Qimant self-administration unit. However, Qimant activists insisted that the three kebeles are part of the Qimant self-administrative unit.”*<sup>14</sup> However, a referendum was never held in these three kebeles, the conflict preceded the referendum, and has continued a long after the referendum. Thus, the cause of the conflict is the unreasonable claim of the Committee, its resort to force including against civilians, and continued collaboration with forces such as TPLF that would like to destabilize the region. The long duration of the conflict forced the regional government to make an administrative decision to add the 27 kebeles to the Qimant Zone without holding a referendum or proper public consultation, hoping the Committee would be willing to put down arms. This appeasement by the Amhara Regional Government towards a violent militia group was done at the expense of innocent Amharas and Qimants who suffered immeasurably at the hands of Qimant Committee. However, the Committee continued to insist on having more kebeles and particularly the three kebeles physically disconnected from Qimant areas. Among the 27 additional kebeles added without proper consultation or referendum, many Amhara dominated areas such as in Aykele kebele 1 and 2 have taken their complaint against their inclusion into the Qimant zone to the Prime Minister’s office. Their complaint has yet to be resolved.

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<sup>13</sup> AI Report, p. 15

<sup>14</sup> AI Report, p.16

## **8. Intercommunal Conflict?**

The report presents the violence in relation to the self-determination question of Qimants and as intercommunal. However, the report fails to mention the number of unfair decisions the regional government took over the years suppressing Amhara and Amhara interests, and how the Qimant Identity Committee has continuously rejected any proposal from the region. For instance, while only one out of eight kebeles voted to be part of the new Qimant administrative zone, an outcome that reflected in the negative role the Qimant Identity Committee has in the intercommunal relationship, the region added more than 27 kebeles without a referendum. The zonal and regional governments have issued calls for the Qimant Committee to give up arms and come to the table to resolve any remaining issues in the new administrative zones. The Qimant Democratic Party criticized this request in a statement, the Committee has continued to wage insurgent attacks, and the area remains unsafe. As has been reported by other humanitarian agencies, both Qimant and Amhara communities have stated several times that the insurgents are instigating this conflict and security bridge for financial gain. The repeated reconciliation conferences have emphasized this and how the Qimant and Amhara people have a peaceful relationship outside of the inter-communal conflict. While communities are affected by the conflict, it is misleading to label this as inter-communal dispute rather than a conflict between Qimant militia and government security forces.

## **9. Missed Recommendations**

As pointed out above, this conflict is not between two ethnic communities but driven by an identity committee group turned in to a militia that would like to use the pretext of self-administration of Qimant to wage instability supported by third-party actors. This group is behind heinous crimes, such as the still continued kidnapping of innocent people including children with the intent of generating financial gain through ransom demands as well as a foiled attempt to commit terrorist acts as reported during the last Epiphany celebration. Thus, resolving this conflict requires putting pressure on the Qimant militia to abandon these anti-peace practices, come to the table and work with the regional government to address the self-administration question in a way that does not suppress Amhara and Qimant communities' rights and freedoms to choose the districts they would like to be part of. We believe the AI report should have called out the Qimant militia for their role in instigating the conflict and human rights violations.

## **10. Human Rights Violations Omitted in the Report**

Given the report focused on two regions that arguably have had the most serious human rights violations in the period covered, it is unfortunate that the report left out several human rights violations. A comprehensive list would not be possible, but we would be remiss not to point out two major violations omitted:

### **A. Killings and Arrests of Amharas after the killings of Army Chief and Amhara Leaders in June 2019.**

After the killings of Amhara regional leaders in Bahir Dar and army chief in Addis Ababa, federal and regional security forces arrested hundreds of Amharas enmass in Amhara, Oromia, Addis Ababa, Harar, Dire Dawa, and Benishangul-Gumuz regions. Many of the arrested were civilians accused of supporting National Movement of Amhara (NaMA) political party, NaMA leaders and members, journalists, activists, and Balderas Council leaders and members. NaMA offices in Oromia, Addis, and Benishangul Gumuz were shutdown without case, and materials confiscated. Despite several reports sent to AI detailing the names of the arrested, locations, charges, etc. and where possible, the number of Amharas killed, the AI report excluded a widely known human rights episode. This was a significant event in the Amhara region that resulted in serious human rights violations of Amahras across the country, especially in Amhara and Oromia region. By omitting this from the report, AI has failed the victims of arbitrary arrests and killings instead of bringing awareness and seeking justice.

### **B. October 2019 Security and Intercommunal Violence**

The report fails to mention the violence and severe security deterioration in October 2019 following Jawar Mohammed's social media statement that his life was at risk. Protests broke out in several cities in Oromia, over 80 people were killed, Churches attacked, and security forces accused of using deadly force. The incident was widely covered by the media and Human Rights Watch investigated this incident and released a report on April 1, 2020.<sup>15</sup> Fisseha Tekle, AI's Ethiopia Researcher, was interviewed by France 24 News Station and confirmed the communal violence, including attacks against Churches. Again, this major incident is omitted in the AI report.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/01/ethiopia-justice-needed-deadly-october-violence>

## **Conclusion**

Amhara Association of America values the mission and work of Amnesty International. We commend the role AI has played in defending human rights in Ethiopia and globally. Our engagement with AI and other human rights organizations is based on a firm belief and high expectations that these institutions be exemplary in promoting and defending human rights. For the sake of demonstrating its values including impartiality and commitment to truth and protecting its organizational image, we hope AI will rectify the gaps identified in its latest report and consider the methodology and data sources for its activities in Ethiopia. Doing so will open up avenues for ensuring accountability for all actors involved in infringing basic human rights of Ethiopians and retain the public trust of Amnesty. Amhara Association of America we will continue to collect and analyze information about human rights violations against Amharas and share the data with all human rights organizations. Finally, we would like to express our sorrow to all Ethiopian who have endured atrocities and express our commitment to continue to promote democracy and human rights in Ethiopia.