

## ***Seven Days*, Vol. 19 No. 3, March 19, 2012(\*)**

### ***Destroyed three camps, defense official says***

According to *state media* (March 15), the Ethiopian Defense Force announced Thursday that it has destroyed Eritrea's three mercenary camps. The Head of the Indoctrination and Public Relations Center in the Ministry of Defense, Col. Gebrekidan Gebremariam, told journalists on Thursday that the Ethiopian defense force successfully annihilated the destructive forces of the Eritrean government based in Ramid, Gelahben and Gembe areas which are close to the Ethiopian border. Col. Gebrekidan said the Ethiopian defense force would continue to take such measures until the Eritrean government and its mercenaries refrain from their subversive activities. He said detailed information concerning the issue would be made official soon.

Col. Gebrekidan said that the Eritrean government is engaged in an activity bent on destabilizing the peace and security of Ethiopia. He also recalled that Eritrea's mercenaries had killed foreign tourists who were visiting Afar State. Ethiopia has been examining the situation and has now taken an appropriate counter attack to stop the Eritrean government from such destructive acts. The U.N. Security Council, the African Union and other international organizations have condemned Eritrea for its subversive activities bent on destabilizing the East Africa region.

### ***„Will not entrap us“ - Eritrea***

*Reuters* (March 16) reported Eritrea said on Friday an attack by Ethiopian forces inside its territory was provocative but would not "entrap" it, signaling reluctance to be sucked back into armed conflict with its bitter foe. "The objective of the attack ... is to divert attention from the central issue of the regime's flagrant violation of international law and illegal occupation of sovereign Eritrean territories," Eritrea's Foreign Ministry said in a statement. "Eritrea ... will not be entrapped by such deceitful ploys that are aimed at derailing and eclipsing the underlying fundamental issues." A vicious row over the position of Eritrea and Ethiopia's shared border was not resolved at the end of the war. The Hague-based Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission ruled in 2002 that the border village of Badme belonged to Eritrea. However, the village remains in Ethiopia and Eritrea blames the international community, and the United Nations in particular, for not forcing Ethiopia to accept the border. Shimeles Kemal, Ethiopia's government spokesman, said Eritrea has used the bases to train an Ethiopian rebel group that Addis Ababa says killed five foreign tourists and kidnapped two others in Ethiopia's remote Afar region in January. Eritrea denies any involvement. "As we underlined at the time, the recent deplorable killing and abduction of tourists has also been misconstrued by the ... [Ethiopian] regime and its backers as a 'blessing in disguise' to rationalize its unlawful acts," the Foreign Ministry said. According to *AP* (March 16), Eritrea says the attack on its military outposts by neighboring Ethiopia is meant to divert attention from a border dispute between the two countries. Eritrean Foreign Affairs Minister Osman Saleh said in a statement Friday that Ethiopia would not have carried out the attack without the protection of the United States and the U.N. Security Council. Ethiopia said Thursday it carried out the attacks on the military outposts because Eritrea was training "subversive groups" that carried out attacks inside Ethiopia. Osman says such attacks have been going on for the last 10 years and Thursday's assault is meant to divert attention to the fact that Ethiopia occupies Eritrean territory.

### ***More attacks***

Ethiopian troops have carried out more attacks on Ethiopian rebels inside Eritrea on Saturday, a day after Eritrea urged United Nations action against Ethiopia for a previous attack inside its territory. "We've carried out further attacks on targets inside Eritrea. This time it's in the north section around Badme," a senior Ethiopian government official told *Reuters* on Saturday. "We were once again successful. This strike was part of our plan to take proportional measures that included the attacks in Eritrea's southeast." The official did not give details about who the troops targeted, but said Ethiopia's government would make a more detailed announcement later in the day.

### ***Gunmen attack bus in Ethiopia***

An attack by gunmen on a public bus in western Ethiopia has left 19 people dead and eight others injured, an official said Tuesday. "The attack took an anti-peace element we consider as rebels," regional president Omot Odeng Olol told *AFP* (March 13). Omot said the suspected rebels armed with machine guns stole money and clothes from the passengers before opening fire on them. He said the gunmen have not yet been caught. "We deployed a number of forces and we are still looking, and they are not yet caught," he said, adding that he does not expect that assailants to launch further attacks in the area as security has been beefed up since Monday. Omot said when police arrived at the scene bodies were strewn on the ground as the injured were taken to a nearby hospital. "That kind of thing is the very worst you can imagine," he said. No one has claimed responsibility for the attack. Ethiopia's Gambella region, which lies some 700 kilometers (430 miles) to the west of the capital Addis Ababa, is one of the most fertile and resource-rich areas of the country. According to the *BBC* (March 13), one report said the attackers kidnapped five female passengers during their assault on the bus, 20km (12 miles) from the town of Gambella. Some of the other passengers were injured. Officials did not speculate as to a reason for the attack. Gambella province has a history of conflicts between communities. State-

owned Ethiopia TV said the attack happened early on March 12. The report said there were 34 passengers on board at the time. Security forces have been sent to the area to track down the gunmen and try to find the hostages. Omod Obang Olum, head of the local government, was quoted by the *AP* news agency as saying the bus was ambushed near a town called Bonga, and that the attackers were carrying machine guns. The *AP* report did not mention any hostages being taken. According to *Reporter* (March 14) the armed gangs separated the male passengers and shot and killed them. Seventeen of them died instantly while the rest were taken to hospital where they died later.

#### ***Prisoners request pardon***

The private weekly *Addis Admas* (March 17) reported journalists and politicians, including journalist Wubishet Taye, who were recently sentenced to various terms of imprisonment on charges of terrorism have asked for amnesty and full pardon. But one of the prisoners, female journalist Re'eyot Alemu, who was sentenced to 14 years in prison, said she would not ask for pardon. Wubishet Taye and Hirut Kifle as well as Ato Zerihun Gebre Egziabher have submitted an application for pardon to the Ministry of Justice by dropping their appeal. Reliable sources said the government is expected to reply to the pardon requests soon.

#### ***Human rights work crippled by restrictive law - Amnesty***

A press release by Amnesty International on March 12 indicated a law in Ethiopia is crippling human rights work in the country, forcing organizations to cut programmes, close offices and lay off staff, according to an Amnesty report published Monday. "Stifling human rights work: the impact of Ethiopia's civil society legislation" describes how the 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation puts in place restrictions on organizations working on human rights and allows for excessive government interference. The result is that people in the country have less access to independent human rights assistance. "Rather than creating an enabling environment for human rights defenders to work in, the government has implemented a law which has crippled human rights work in Ethiopia" said Michelle Kagari, Amnesty International's deputy Africa director. "The space to make legitimate criticism is more restricted than ever." The law places severe funding restrictions on organizations working on human rights which are at the same time vaguely worded and therefore open to interpretation. Human rights defenders risk imprisonment if they violate these vaguely defined provisions. They are afraid to speak out, and often resort to self-censorship, in order to avoid repercussions.

The Charities and Societies Proclamation violates Ethiopia's constitution and international human rights obligations. The law has changed the face of civil society in Ethiopia. Human rights organizations have shrunk in number and in size, having to cut programmes, close offices and lay off staff. The law has been used by the government to freeze assets of more than US\$1 million belonging to the country's two leading human rights organizations. "The claim of the Ethiopian government that they want to protect human rights cannot be taken seriously while this law continues to be implemented," said Michelle Kagari. "The government must amend the law and remove restrictions on human rights activities." The Ethiopian people suffer most as a consequence of the law because human rights organizations cannot reach the most vulnerable. There continue to be unabated allegations of human rights violations, often linked to the Ethiopian security forces. For example, during 2008, before the law was passed, the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) provided free legal aid to over 17,000 women in addition to other activities that tens of thousands of participants benefited from. Today, EWLA is barely functioning, with limited legal aid for women provided by volunteers. The Charities and Societies Proclamation, together with the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation and the Mass Media Proclamation have all severely limited Ethiopian individuals' freedom of expression and, specifically, their ability to criticize their government. In this context the government of Ethiopia continues to be responsible for widespread human rights violations, under ever-decreasing scrutiny. Amnesty International is urging the government of Ethiopia to amend the law to remove the restrictions on human rights activities, and to recognize, respect and protect the vital work of human rights defenders.

#### ***Dozens killed in clashes***

Al Shabaab rebels attacked Ethiopian troops in southern Somalia and dozens were killed in hours of fighting, residents, regional officials and the Islamist rebels said. *Defense web* (March 13) reported there were differing accounts of which side bore the brunt of the fighting in the small town of Yurkud, the worst involving Ethiopian troops since they returned in force to Somalia last year after withdrawing in early 2009. The fighting came the day after the African Union said Ethiopia planned to pull its troops out of the Horn of Africa nation by the end of April with soldiers from Djibouti, Uganda and Burundi taking their positions, Reuters reports.

The governor of Bay region in Somalia, Abdifatah Mohamed Ibrahim Gesey, told *Reuters* that 130 al Shabaab fighters were killed, with minimal losses on the government and Ethiopian side, after the rebels tried twice to seize Yurkud. Al Shabaab's spokesman for military operations, Sheikh Abdiasis Abu Musab, told *Reuters* its forces had killed 73 Ethiopian soldiers, captured two along with many weapons, and lost 5 of its fighters before the Ethiopians fled. A spokesman for Ethiopia's foreign ministry said he would comment on the reports later on Saturday. Residents of Yurkud told *Reuters* that dozens of bodies from both sides littered the streets and that Ethiopian soldiers remained in control after the fierce fighting. It is difficult to get accurate accounts of casualties from clashes in Somalia as all sides tend to exaggerate their successes and underplay their losses. "At

about 6 a.m. al Shabaab attacked Yurkud. A fierce battle with the Ethiopians continued for hours. Ethiopian troops now control the town," said 56-year-old resident Halima Aden. "Parts of the town have been destroyed. Some residents fled and others are hiding in the houses," she said, adding that bodies from all sides littered the streets.

### ***Lou Nuer tribesmen flee to Ethiopia***

*Alertnet* (March 13) reported thousands of Lou Nuer tribespeople from South Sudan are seeking refuge in western Ethiopia. Most are women, children and elderly people who fled from Akobo County in Jonglei State following clashes there earlier this year. An estimated 15,000 people have entered Ethiopia since mid-February. They cite clashes with rival Murle tribesmen and fear of reprisal attacks as the main reason for their flight. Many of them say they were displaced for weeks in Jonglei before they managed to reach Ethiopia. In Jonglei State Murle and Lou Nuer tribespeople have been engaged in deadly attacks and counter-attacks over cattle, grazing land and water points for several years. Clashes between these two tribes in December and January have affected some 120,000 people in the Jonglei region. Fresh fighting between the two tribes was reported last weekend in Akobo, and UNHCR is concerned at the possibility of further forced displacement. In Ethiopia, the new arrivals are settling around the border town of Matar in the Gambella region, some 500 kilometers west of Addis Ababa. Most of them are living in makeshift huts, according to a team of UNHCR and partner agencies that visited the area twice with the Ethiopian authorities. The local communities in Matar have been sharing their meager resources with the new arrivals, including food and water. The influx has stretched water and sanitation facilities beyond capacity. The World Food Programme is extending food distribution to this area to benefit both communities. UNHCR is helping the Ethiopian authorities to set up a reception center near Matar, where the new arrivals are being screened by the Ethiopian refugee agency (ARRA) before they are relocated to Fugnido refugee camp, some 110 kilometers from Gambella. We have so far transferred 1,300 new arrivals to the camp, where they are registered as asylum-seekers and issued with food ration cards. UNHCR has also dispatched additional staff to support the governments registration efforts in Fugnido. Fugnido refugee camp was opened in 1993 and hosted some 40,000 refugees at one point. Before the new influx, it was home to some 23,000 refugees, mainly from Sudan. Now these long-staying refugees are hosting and extending their help to the new arrivals from South Sudan.