



# The Escalating Attacks on Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia





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## **The Escalating Attacks on Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia**

The following report addresses a matter of pressing concern: the escalating religious persecution targeting Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia. In recent times, Orthodox Christians have faced a surge in harassment, discrimination, and violence, posing grave threats to their safety, fundamental rights, and religious freedoms. This report aims to provide a detailed examination of the underlying factors contributing to these attacks, particularly the association of the Orthodox Christian faith with the Amhara people. By analysing trends, incidents, and impacts, this report seeks to shed light on the severity of the situation and emphasise the urgent need for intervention and action to safeguard the rights and well-being of Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia has a long and rich history of Christianity, with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church being one of the oldest Christian denominations in the world. However, in recent years, and most notably in the past six years, Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia have faced increasing persecution, discrimination, and violence. Ethiopia has historically been known for the peaceful coexistence of Orthodox Christian and Muslim communities, making the recent rise in religious tensions particularly alarming.

Reports indicate that Orthodox Christian communities in various regions of Ethiopia have been targeted by extremist groups, including factions within the Ethiopian Federal Army predominantly constituted by the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), the Oromo Liberation Front/Army (OLF or OLA), and Oneg Shene. Orthodox



Christians have been subjected to attacks on their churches, clergy, and congregants, endangering lives and undermining the fundamental principles of religious freedom and tolerance necessary for a harmonious and inclusive society.



## **1. Tragic Incidents in Somali, Jijiga, and Sidama Zone**

Since July 2018, approximately 30 Orthodox churches have been attacked, with more than half of them burned to the ground, particularly in eastern and southern Ethiopia. Tragically, church members have been killed while attempting to protect their places of worship.

An outbreak of violence in Ethiopia at the end of October has

manifested a worrying new trend in one of the world's most religious countries, with reports of Christians targeted during the mayhem that left around 80 dead.

In August 2018, an estimated 10 churches were burned in Ethiopia's eastern Somali region, resulting in 29 deaths, including those of eight priests. This March and April, another two churches were attacked in the region's capital, Jijiga, resulting in 12 deaths. In July, five churches were attacked with three torched in the southern Sidama zone - killing three people. The most recent attacks compelled Pope Francis to speak out.

## **2. Abo Church Massacre: Tragic Attack by Oromo Liberation Army Shocks East Wollega**

One of the most horrifying incidents occurred in March 2020 when members of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) killed 29 individuals at Abo Church in Debos Kebele, East Wollega, during a period of fasting. The assailants stormed the church, brutally murdering victims, including the church administrator, and then proceeded to kill others in a nearby forest.

## **3. Attacks on Churches and Christians Surge After Hachallu Hundessa's Assassination in Ethiopia**

Coordinated attacks targeting Christians of various ethnic backgrounds, including Oromo Christians, have intensified following the assassination of popular Oromo singer Hachallu Hundessa on June 29, 2020. Members of the Oromo ethnic group, traditionally Muslim, associated with the Qeerroo movement, have engaged in door-to-door attacks on Christian households, resulting in gruesome deaths and extensive property damage

#### **4. Government-Induced Divisions Threaten Ethiopian Orthodox Church Unity**

Government interference in the governance of the church has led to the formation of a breakaway Synod group by breakaway Archbishops who refer to themselves as the Holy Synod of Oromia and Nations and Nationalities. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church declared fasting for 3 days on February 3rd, 2023, and wore black to protest against what it said was a government-supported coup attempt to overthrow the Holy Synod by the "illegal group." The breakaway Archbishops have taken over dioceses in different cities of the Oromia region with the support of officials. In various places, people and religious leaders who opposed the breakaway bishops were beaten, harassed, kicked out of churches, violently restricted from the right to move, and illegally arrested. In total, eight people were killed, and many who participated in the fasting were fired from their jobs.



Now, these divisive efforts are extending to Tigray, where bishops are initiating the formation of a separate Holy Synod. This move threatens the unity of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which



historically has served as a unifying force across ethnic lines, promoting tolerance and peace. The escalating conflict underscores the pressing need to safeguard religious institutions and uphold unity in Ethiopia amidst growing political agendas.

## **5. Cultural Heritage Under Constraint: Government Restrictions on Orthodox Christian Celebrations in Ethiopia**

Most Orthodox Christian celebrations in Ethiopia are outdoor events, with one of the most famous being the Epiphany festival, a UNESCO recognized celebration due to its significant cultural and religious heritage. During the festivities, church regalia is prominently displayed, typically in the tri-color of the church, which coincides with the colors of the Ethiopian flag.



However, the government has placed restrictions on celebrations, such as limiting access to some places of worship and preventing members of the religion from wearing anything that connects them to the colours of the Ethiopian flag.

## **6. Attack on St. George Church in Addis Ababa**

On March 2nd, 2024, St. George Church in the heart of Addis Ababa faced a harrowing attack, leading to the death of one person and injuries to many. The incident occurred during the Ark procession of St. George's Day, where tear gas was thrown into the church premises by government security forces.

The attack unfolded as Ethiopians gathered at Menelik Square for a celebration, which was abruptly disrupted by unnecessary tear gas fired by security forces. Subsequently, tear gas was thrown into St. George Church during the religious ceremony, causing the event to be halted. One person died from suffocation, and numerous others were injured.

His Grace Abune Henok, Archbishop of Addis Ababa, condemned the government's actions, citing previous instances of tear gas fired inside churches. He criticized the government's failure to address the root causes of such attacks, exacerbating tensions with the populace.

## **7. Massacre of Orthodox Christians in Shashemene**

The death toll from the massacre of Orthodox Christians in Shashemene has risen to over 30, with dozens more injured and hospitalized in Hawassa, some in critical condition. Abune Petros, Secretary of the Holy Synod, confirmed the fatalities during an interview with Anchor Media.

The violence erupted when Oromia region security forces opened fire on churchgoers heading to St. Michael Church to protect it from an unauthorized group attempting to break in. Initially, three were



killed and many wounded. The repression continued on Sunday, resulting in additional casualties.

In addition to the killings, heads of dioceses in various areas of the Oromo region have faced harassment, with reports of multiple arrests. Two archbishops from Jima and Arsi Dioceses were arrested.



## 8. Ethiopian Orthodox Priest Stoned to Death

On March 24, 2023, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, **Kesis Abay Melese**, a priest of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, was stoned to death on his way home from a church service. The incident, near Haile Garment's locality, underscores a disturbing trend of violence against the church under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's administration. Despite ongoing threats and attacks, authorities have yet to comment on the priest's killing.



## **9. Assaults on Ethiopian Monasteries: Threats to Religious Heritage and Live**

In May 2023, the Debre Elias Monastery fell victim to an assault by Oromo Forces, resulting in significant damage to the church and injuries, fatalities, or displacement of over 600 monks and students. Similarly, in February 2024, four monks at Zequala Abune Gebre Menfes Kidus Monastery were killed, threatening the rich religious heritage of Ethiopia.





## **10. Targeted Violence: Ethiopian Orthodox Church Members Killed in Oromia's Arsi Zone**

In November 2023, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church reported the killings of 36 church members across various districts of the Arsi zones in the Oromia region. These killings were accompanied by reports of damage to church property and possessions belonging to church members and parishioners. At the time, the head of Oromia Regional Communications stated that the attack was perpetrated by the Oromo Liberation Army, a faction referred to as Shane by the government.

Additionally, a church leader in the eastern Arsi zone informed the BBC that no fewer than 80 people have lost their lives in the area since September 2023 in attacks targeting the church and its members.

## **11. Priest Shot While Serving at Church in Addis Ababa**

Abba Ermias Weldetsadik, a renowned priest and head of Bole Bulbula Holy Abba Samuel Church in Addis Ababa, was shot while serving at the church, according to sources. Abba Ermias, who previously served as head of Debre-Tshai St. George Church, was attending a two-day conference at the parish on November 11, 2023. During an evening meeting after the conference, while blessing the congregation, he was shot and sustained severe injuries. He is currently receiving medical treatment in a hospital.



## **12. Deadly Attack Targets Ethiopian Orthodox Pilgrims Returning from Feast**

In a tragic incident on December 29, 2023, gunmen ambushed Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church pilgrims returning from the annual feast of the Archangel Saint Gabriel at Kulubi, a renowned pilgrimage site in East Hararghe Zone, Oromia Regional State. The ambush occurred outside Metehara town, specifically at Lege Benti in East Shewa Zone.

According to a report by Mahibere Kidusan Television on Sunday, December 31, 2023, one pilgrim lost his life in the attack, which took place around 11:00 PM, while four others sustained injuries. The pilgrims were reportedly from Arba Minch, located in Southern Ethiopia. Witnesses disclosed that additional buses carrying Orthodox passengers sought refuge at St. Michael's Church in Metehara town until the security situation improved. These witnesses also recounted similar attacks that occurred three days earlier in the same area, targeting civilians leaving the town for work.

### **13. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians Under Siege: Religious Students Slaughtered, Systemic Discrimination Persists**

Additionally, over 20 religious students aged 11 to 18 were brutally murdered by the OPDO army in February 2024, with their teacher critically injured. Furthermore, Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia have faced systemic discrimination and marginalisation, including restrictions on their religious practices, interference in their religious affairs, and denial of their rights to worship freely and openly. Such discriminatory practices not only violate their basic human rights but also perpetuate division and discord within Ethiopian society.



## **14. Tragic Massacre at Zikwala Debre Kewakibt's Abune Gebre Mefes Kidus Monastery: Clergy and Students Brutally Slaughtered in Appalling Attack**

Just recently, on February 20, 2024 in the horrific attack on Zikwala Debre Kewakibt's Abune Gebre Mefes Kidus Monastery, (approximately aged 500 years old) beloved members of the clergy were brutally murdered along with more than 20 students and their teachers.

Among the victims were:

1. ***Aba Tekele Asrat***, the Head Priest of the Monastery,
2. ***Aba Kidanemariam Tilahun***, the Monastery's administrator,
3. ***Aba Gebremariam Abebe***, the Book instructor at the Monastery, and
4. ***Aba Hailemariam Wolde Senbet***, an employee of the Monastery.

Before the attack the monastery security equipment and thier food was taken by force. And then the victims were slaughtered in the same manner Ethiopian christians were slaughtered in 2015 by ISIS in Libya.

## **15. Coercive Agenda: Prime Minister's Intimidation Tactics Against the Ethiopian Orthodox Church**

During the meeting, Church leaders raised concerns about the illegal removal of the secretary of the Holy Synod, the recent killings of four monks from Zequala monasteries, and the deaths of Abnet students at the hands of government soldiers. However, the Prime Minister's responses appeared dismissive and controlling.

In addressing questions about the killings of monastic community members, the Prime Minister implied that some monasteries near Addis Ababa were involved in training armies. This response is seen as potentially increasing the vulnerability of the Church, particularly in the Oromia region.

## **16. Tragedy at St. George Church: Priests Abducted and Murdered by ONG Shene Forces**

In the South West Showa Diocese, Ilu District, Asgori Repa, tragedy struck at the St. George Church during the commencement of mass. Just as the priests were preparing to begin the service following a prayer covenant, armed forces belonging to the ONG Shene stormed the temple premises, abducting five priests and eight parishioners who were on duty. Afterwards, the eight parishioners and the parish manager were released, albeit only after the payment of a demanded ransom. However, despite similar efforts to secure the release of the remaining priests, they were mercilessly murdered by their captors on Saturday, March 23, 2024.

The names of the slain priests are as follows

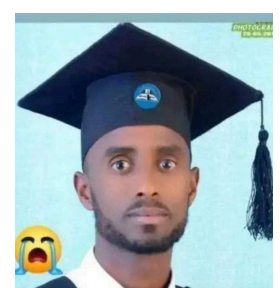
1. **Kesis Cherenat Muluwork**, Kesis Gebez
2. **Kesis Samuel Wedajo**, Kadash Kahn (mass leader)
3. **Marigeta Jared**, the parish priest and;
4. **Deacon Beza Baye** who is in charge of the general services of the parish.

In particular, eyewitnesses stated that they cut off the hands of the parish priest and gave them to a dog, and then cut each of his

body parts with a dagger. In addition, the other ministers were killed in the same manner in a very gruesome manner. In addition, in Becho District, a priest named Kesis Melaku was kidnapped on the night of March 26 2024, from Soyema Egziabher Ab Church. It was known that they kidnaped a Deacon from Tole District and demanded 1 million Birr ransom money for his release.

### **17. Two Orthodox Church priests and their families were killed by gunmen in the West Arsi and East Arsi zones of the Oromia region on March 25, 2024**

Two Orthodox Church priests and their families tragically lost their lives in the West Arsi and East Arsi zones of the Oromia region on March 25, 2024. According to church sources, the incident unfolded on Monday, March 25, 2024, around 9:00 PM, when two priests from the Church of Debre Kidusan Gebre Kirstos in Dodola, accompanied by five family members, were brutally attacked by unidentified assailants. Among the victims were five family members, including a leader and a deacon, who served as ministers of Debre Kidusan Gebre Kirstos Church, all of whom were mercilessly massacred. The victims, comprising two church priests, **their wives, and children**, fell prey to a despicable act of violence that has left communities overwhelmed with grief and apprehension. Identified victims include Merigeta Simret, his wife, and two children; Deacon Daniel and his wife. A third victim, whose identity remains unknown, also perished in the attack. The assailants callously riddled their victims' bodies with bullets.







## **18. Government Interference and Ecclesiastical Turmoil: The Case of Abune Lukas and Abune Petros**

His Grace Abune Lukas, Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Abune Lukas, a prominent member of the Holy Synod, faces opposition and government interference following his vocal criticism of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's administration. Despite being scheduled for a visit to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Diocese of Washington DC, Abune Lukas finds himself embroiled in controversy as a memorandum issued by Patriarch Abune Phanuel prohibits his reception. This move, seemingly influenced by government pressure, stems from Abune Lukas's condemnation of the administration's actions, including military orders to harm civilians and target the church.

In response to the regime's actions, Abune Lukas delivered impassioned sermons denouncing the government's drone strikes, targeted attacks on monasteries, and deceptive rhetoric. Subsequently, legal proceedings were initiated against him, accusing him of obstructing justice and peace. Furthermore, the government called on the Holy Synod to condemn Abune Lukas, and his salary was suspended.

The government's interference extends beyond Abune Lukas, as evidenced by the refusal of entry to Abune Petros, the secretary of the Holy Synod, upon his return to Ethiopia. These incidents underscore the challenges faced by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in maintaining its autonomy and addressing government overreach.



## Conclusion:

The escalating attacks on Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia represent a dire humanitarian crisis that demands urgent attention and action from the international community. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, one of the oldest Christian denominations in the world, is under siege, facing systematic persecution, violence, and discrimination. The perpetrators of these atrocities view the Orthodox faith as synonymous with the Amhara people, thereby targeting its adherents as part of the ongoing Amhara genocide.

It is evident that Orthodox believers from various ethnic backgrounds are being persecuted simply for their affiliation with the faith, with attackers considering them sympathisers of the Amhara population. Shockingly, the assailants have explicitly stated their intention to destroy the Orthodox Church as a means to eradicate the Amhara people. Such genocidal actions against a religious group that is not a minority in Ethiopia underscore the gravity of the situation and the urgent need for intervention.

**1. Independent International Investigation:** We call upon the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom to spearhead efforts for an independent international investigation into these egregious violations of religious freedom and human rights in Ethiopia.

**2. Resolution Imposing Sanctions:** Additionally, we urge the U.S. Congress to draft a resolution imposing sanctions on the Ethiopian government if it fails to cooperate with the investigation and take meaningful steps to address the persecution of Orthodox Christians.



The international community must stand in solidarity with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and its followers, condemning these heinous acts of violence and ensuring that those responsible are held accountable. Failure to act swiftly and decisively risks further deterioration of the situation and perpetuates the suffering of innocent individuals and communities. It is imperative that we uphold the fundamental principles of religious freedom and tolerance and work towards ending the persecution of Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia.



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