

15 Priests Slaughtered Last Week—But That's Just the Beginning

Ethiopia's prime minister visited the leader of the country's Orthodox Church on Saturday to express his condolences after 15 priests were killed and ten Orthodox churches damaged in the eastern Somali region last week.

Among the priests killed were Rev. Kidane Mariam Nibretu, Rev. Yared Hibu, Father Gebiremariam Asfaw and Abreham Tigabu, a local source told World Watch Monitor, adding that four of the 15 priests were found burned together.

Nine evangelical churches were also vandalized or looted. Although state media reported the deaths of at least 30 people, according to local sources, the number could be as high as 50.

Orthodox parishes in the regional capital, Jijiga, are supporting more than 20,000 displaced Ethiopians, sources close to the Tewahedo Orthodox Church told Catholic news agency Fides.

Voice of America reported that nearly 1 million people have been displaced since April as part of an ethnic conflict between Oromo and Somali people that has been going on for years.

Earlier today, 40 people were killed when armed men, allegedly members of the Somali region's paramilitary Liyou forces, carried out cross border-attacks in Oromia's East Hararghe district, according to Al-Jazeera.

New Man in Charge

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has moved quickly to implement a

reformist vision for the country since he came to power in April on the back of a revolt against the old regime, which was largely controlled by a small group of former liberation fighters, who had been ruling the country since 1991.

Ahmed has fired a number of officials and generals accused of corruption, curbing the military's power and lifting government monopolies on key industries, to dismantle the grip on power by the Tigrinya People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

His agenda created tension with the Somali Regional President Abdi Illey, who resigned last week after federal forces stopped his paramilitary Liyou forces from entering Dire Dawa, a federal city outside of the Somali region's jurisdiction.

Illey flew to Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, where he was reportedly arrested. The former president was known to govern the region with an iron fist, using political positions and his paramilitary Liyou police to commit widespread human rights abuses.

On Sunday (Aug. 12) the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), a rebel groups which has been fighting for self-determination for the Somali Region for years, declared a unilateral ceasefire. The group said it had made the decision in response to prime minister Ahmed's call for peace and the offer of talks towards a negotiated settlement.

Ahmed's new political approach has also led to the historic reconciliation with neighbor and long-time foe Eritrea. Eritrea's leader, Isaias Afwerki, is ethnically Tigrayan but after the decades-long war and Ethiopia's occupation of the Eritrean border, he supports Ahmed in seeking to curb the power of the TPLF.

'Tensions Bubbling Under the Surface'

Eritrea is 6th and Ethiopia 29th on Open Doors International's 2018 World Watch List of the 50 countries in which it is most

difficult to live as a Christian.

Ethiopia's Protestant communities face challenges from fanatical elements in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and, where ethnicity and Islam are interconnected, Christians can experience hostility from family and community.

In mid-June, 20 Christians were killed in the Bale Goba area of Oromia, west of the Somali region. Although some observers blamed TPLF sympathizers, a local source told World Watch Monitor that it took place after Christians opposed the installation of a monument for a prominent Muslim leader in the area.

Some locals pinned the blame on the government, saying they were warning Christians against opposing such moves in future.

"Similar tensions are bubbling under the surface in other parts of Oromia," said World Watch Monitor's source. "We have even heard of places where Muslims had asked Christians to vacate the area. And though this call is veiled as ethnic rivalry by some media and observers, it is at its very core a religious matter."

In Eritrea, Christians Still Meeting in Secret

Eritrea passed a law in 2002, prohibiting churches other than the Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran Churches and also Sunni Islam.

Father Thomas Reese, of the U.S/ Commission on International Religious Freedom, told a US Human Rights Commission hearing in April that Eritrea remained "one of the worst examples of state-sponsored repression of freedom of religion or belief in the world," where an estimated 1,200-3,000 people are detained on religious grounds.

Despite the thaw in relations with Ethiopia, all Eritrean high-school students who have completed 11th grade must still

report for the compulsory and indefinite military service.

A church leader in Eritrea told World Watch Monitor: "Don't think the government is changing. Yes, there are a few improvements. We are able at least to know where believers are being jailed. Their families and parents can send food to prisons. But, that doesn't mean everything has changed. We continue to meet secretly, and the surveillance is still in place." {eoa}

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