MEMBER PROFILE

OGADEN

Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF)

Last updated: October 2018
Status: Ethnic Minority

Areas: 327,068 km²

Population: 4,439,147 (2007 Census)

Languages: Somali (95.9%), Oromifa (2.24%), Amharic (0.92%) and Gurage (0.033%)

Religion: Muslim (98.4%), Orthodox Christian (0.6%) and 1% others

Ethnic Groups: Somalis (97.2%), Oromo (0.46%), Amhara (0.66%), foreign-born Somalis (0.2%) and Gurages (0.12%)

UNPO REPRESENTATION: Ogaden National Liberation Front

The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) was founded in 1984 with the aim of freeing the Somali population of Ethiopia from the Ethiopian oppression and foreign rule by leading a movement for the self-determination of Ogaden. After the fall of Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam and the Derg, i.e. the Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia, in 1991, the ONLF became a political party and ultimately the ruling party of the Ogaden region under the new federal system. It was, however, removed and forbidden from operating in an official setting by the Ethiopian regime in response to a call for a referendum on the political status of Ogaden. Following the implementation of Ethiopia’s Anti-Terrorism-Proclamation of 2009, the ONLF was termed a terrorist organisation and subsequently banned (a decision revoked by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in June 2018), but kept operating as an opposition group to the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime. It has ever since fought for the rights of the Ogadeni people and against the discrimination of the region. Since 2012, the ONLF has been engaged in various talks with the Ethiopian government to find a peaceful political solution to the conflict between the two parties. The ONLF hopes to end the grave human rights violations and political and social discrimination of the Ogadeni people after years of suffering under foreign oppressive rule. The past months, starting in April 2018 with the inauguration of Abiy Ahmed as Ethiopia's Prime Minister, have brought several advances towards a reconciliation between the ONLF and the government, such as the removal of the ONLF from the country's terror list in July 2018. This development constituted an essential step towards improving the situation of the Ogadeni people.

OVERVIEW

Ogaden, also referred to as Western Somali Region or Ogadenia, is one of the nine ethnically defined states of Ethiopia. The region is officially known as ‘Region Five’ or Somali Regional State (SRS). Ogaden is the easternmost region of Ethiopia, bordering Djibouti and Somaliland to the north, Kenya to the south-west and Somalia to the east and south. Jijiga is the capital of the Ogaden region.
The Ethiopian government's previous neglect, as well as the more recent acts of violence committed against the Ogadeni people have contributed to exceptionally precarious living conditions. The people of Ogaden suffer from a lack of official representation in the social, cultural and political fields. Government-imposed embargoes on the region have furthermore prevented Ogadeni communities from accessing trade relations and aid from foreign countries and non-governmental organisations.

The economy of the Ogaden region relies heavily on livestock and agriculture, but has been affected by catastrophic droughts and famine. Consequently, access to land as well as freedom of movement are issues of fundamental importance, particularly for the Somali, i.e. the majority population of Ogaden, who are historically rooted in a culture of pastoral nomadism. Land expropriations targeting the Ogadeni people and subsequent controversies have brought about further tensions between the people of Ogaden and the local and national authorities, particularly due to government policies of clearing and selling large tracts of land to foreign investors exploring the vast oil and gas resources of the region, and of redistributing land to farmers of non-Somali ethnicity.

In response to the many challenges the Somali people in Ogaden have been facing and the instability affecting the entire region, the ONLF was founded in 1984. Attempts to gain self-determination have so far been violently suppressed by the ruling Tigrayan elite and the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The Ethiopian military has furthermore been frequently accused of committing gross human rights violations (UNPO, 2017).

Due to the fact that the ruling elite of Ethiopia is suppressing a large portion of the country’s many ethnic groups and nations, the ONLF founded a political alliance with other opposition movements against the government’s oppression in 2015. The People’s Alliance for Freedom and Democracy (PAFD) consists of the ONLF, fellow UNPO Member Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Benishangul People’s Liberation Movement (BPLM), the Gambella People’s Liberation Movement (GPLM) and the Sidama National Liberation Front (SNLF). The alliance is working towards a political solution to the country’s conflict and an end to the suppression of the Ethiopian people.

**UNPO PERSPECTIVE**

First and foremost, the ONLF demands that the Ethiopian forces immediately end their gross human rights violations against the population of the Ogaden region. They call for an end to the EPRDF’s abuse of power and demand that the region’s right to self-determination be respected as it is formally granted by the Ethiopian constitution. Since the EPRDF overtook the Somali regional government in 1994 and replaced ONLF leaders with members closely affiliated to their own party, the ONLF has been banned from participating in elections, which they consider illegitimate. The removal of the ONLF from Ethiopia’s ‘Terror List’ in June 2018 is a commendable step towards the reinstatement of the rights of the Ogadeni people; the region is, however, still under military control and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s plans to advance oil extraction in Ogaden pose a risk to the Ogadeni people’s right to permanent and peaceful (re)settlement in their homes.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Historically, the Somali were an independent people living as pastoralists in today’s Eastern Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya and Somaliland. The Ogadeni have strong ties to neighbouring Somalia, with more than 95% of Ogaden’s population being ethnically Somali (Central Statistics Agency of Ethiopia, 2007). After the so-called Scramble for Africa, Ogaden was incorporated within Ethiopia; the effects of Ethiopian rule, however, rarely extended to Ogaden at that time.

In 1935, Italy invaded Ogaden and in 1936, the region as well as Ethiopia were officially proclaimed part of Italian East Africa. After the defeat of Italy in East Africa at the hands of British forces in 1941, Ethiopia’s sovereignty was restored, while Ogaden was administrated by Britain until 1948. Large parts of Ogaden surrounding Jijiga were then gradually assigned to Ethiopia by the allied powers. In the course of this realignment, the population of the Ogaden region was not consulted on the question of their national or cultural belonging. Up until today, the incorporation of the Somali Region within Ethiopia is widely seen as an occupation and a continued form of colonialism, particularly since the Somali population has experienced grave human rights violations at the hands of the ruling elite, and particularly by the Liyu Police, a paramilitary force based in Ogaden, as well as by the government-sponsored Agazi Commando.

In response to these oppressive tendencies, rebel movements started mobilising and ethnic Somalis from other countries supported the uprising with a vision of a united and independent Somali Democratic Republic (Hagmann, 2014). In this context, the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF, 1973-1989) was created. In 1977, the Somali National Army invaded Ethiopia in an attempt to gain control over the Ogaden region. The invaders as well as the insurgents in Ethiopia were eventually defeated by the Ethiopian regime through the support of Soviet and Cuban forces, which resulted in the end of the Ogaden War in 1978. Violence and confrontation regularly occurred in the immediate aftermath of the conflict and drove an estimated 1.5 Mio Ogadeni refugees to Somalia (Encyclopædia Britannica), while the WSLF was so weakened that it was forced to decrease its efforts of guerrilla warfare against the Ethiopian state. Thus, the ONLF was founded in 1984, with the objective of reviving the liberation movement. The ONLF has since become a major force of representing Ogadeni interests in the region.

In 1991, the currently ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) acceded to the government. Although it consists of four political parties and was intended to represent the multitude of Ethiopian ethnic groups, it is considered to be dominated by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Tigrayan elite’s interests. The new constitution (1995) and programs introduced by the EPRDF initially promised all Ethiopian peoples the right to self-determination and ultimately a referendum on secession through peaceful political means. In the first regional elections in Ogaden, the ONLF had won 87% of the votes and subsequently occupied 80% of the seats in the regional parliament, which alarmed the Ethiopian regime. Hence, in the 1995 elections, ONLF members were pushed out of the regional parliament and replaced by the Ethiopian Somali Democratic League, an ally to the EPRDF.

RECENT HISTORY

In the last fifteen years, the EPRDF has increased its grip on Ethiopian society with a series of electoral frauds and state-sponsored violence. On 15 May 2005, Ethiopia held multi-party general elections. The first official result showed that the EPRDF and the opposition had won roughly the same number of seats. After the 2010 elections, just one opposition seat was left in the Ethiopian lower house. The 2015 elections, which took place on 24 May, left all 547 seats in the hands of the EPRDF and their allies. Whenever protests against the corrupt regime took place, government forces were quick to attack. Already in 2005, 36
civilians died in violent clashes with security forces and the police detained more than 2,000 people. On 15 November 2005, EPRDF militia furthermore perpetrated the Qabri Dahar massacre, firing indiscriminately into a crowd of Ogadeni people.

The human rights violations committed by Ethiopian security forces against the inhabitants of Ogaden became particularly acute after a fatal ONLF attack on a Chinese-managed oil production facility in Obole in April 2007, which the ONLF subsequently admitted to have been “ill-judged” (ONLF, 2013, 41). The EPRDF retaliated by “deliberately and repeatedly attack(ing) civilian populations” (Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2008, 3), driving thousands to seek asylum in neighbouring countries (ibid.).

Despite their ban from politics, the ONLF continued its struggle for the rights of the Somali people and was eventually labelled a terrorist organisation in the context of the ‘war on terror’ proclaimed by the United States of America (US). An Anti-Terror Proclamation released in 2009 allowed the Ethiopian regime to use counter-insurgency measures against its people and additionally receive support from the US in fighting uprising Somali and other secessionist movements.

Throughout the years, the ONLF and the Ethiopian government made various attempts at peace negotiations. Directly after their ban from Ethiopian politics, the ONLF entered into negotiations with the government in 1995, 1998, 2012 and 2013, but all attempts failed and violent attacks against the Ogadeni people occurred at an increasing rate. Extrajudicial killings, censorship and severe restrictions on the freedom of speech were imposed, prisoners were tortured and kept in inhumane conditions and sexual violence started to be systematically used as a weapon of war.

The inauguration of Abiy Ahmed as Ethiopia’s first Prime Minister of Oromo origin on 2 April 2018 has raised high hopes among the citizens of Ethiopia. Under his rule, diplomatic relations with Eritrea were restored, multiple illegally detained prisoners were released (such as Canadian citizen Bashir Makhtal (The Star, 21 April 2018) and the notorious Maekelawi detention centre in Addis Ababa, which had hosted large numbers of political prisoners (HRW, 2013), was closed. The most internationally acclaimed sign of imminent change was witnessed on 18 June 2018, when Ahmed publically admitted that the Ethiopian government had ordered the use of torture and likened these state-sanctioned practices to terrorism. A grenade explosion during one of his rallies five days later indicates, however, that his reformist aspirations are not universally welcomed (Al Jazeera, 23 June 2018). Progress in Ogaden has furthermore been slower than initially hoped. The ONLF, the OLF and Ginbot 7 were removed from Ethiopia’s terror list in July 2018, but the Moyale Massacre on 12 July 2018, during which Oromo gunmen armed by the TPLF shot more than 50 Somali civilians, indicates that ethnic violence in Ogaden is likely to occur again. The 144th Special Report by Human Rights Council Ethiopia reports a “staggering amount of death and destruction” (Addis Standard, 31 July 2018) in the borderlands between Ogaden and Oromia. The governing party chaired by Abiy Ahmed, the EPRDF, is furthermore among the world’s most violent and repressive political parties. According to Genocide Watch (GW), the Ethiopian government, dominated by the Tigray ethnic group, has already reached stage 7 out of 8 on its scale.

**CURRENT ISSUES**

In recent years, human rights violations against the – largely civilian – population of the Ogaden region have been severe. ONLF members as well as individuals allegedly affiliated with the organisation are subject to arbitrary arrests, interrogations, torture and killings. For a more comprehensive overview over the most recent issues concerning the people of Ogaden, take a look at our Ethiopia Timeline.
Humanitarian Crisis and Embargoes

The consequences of climate change have a profound impact on the region and humanitarian crises have become more frequent and severe in recent years. To make things worse, the region has faced government-imposed embargoes on food and aid in the past, which left the population of Ogaden in a devastating situation (ONLF, 2014). The Ethiopian government has been accused of not only shutting the Ogaden region off but also using the humanitarian aid it receives from other states as a source of funding for their missions of ethnic suppression. A 2011 investigation by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) concluded that many Western donors turn a blind eye to the misuse of funds and the humanitarian blockades imposed on Ogaden.

The most recent severe drought in Ogaden in 2017 has led to famine amongst large parts of the Somali population and a high dependence on food aid and other forms of humanitarian relief. Due to the pastoralist population’s dependence on land and weather the Ogadeni have suffered vastly from humanitarian catastrophes in addition to their already low quality of life, high levels of poverty and political repression. The United Nations (UN) assess that 8.5 million people required humanitarian relief and mainly food assistance in Ethiopia in the second half of 2017 (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), 7 August 2017). Along with the drought, the crisis also has led to a wave of deaths due to a cholera epidemic that spread in the course of weeks. Yet despite the devastating situation, the Ethiopian government has failed to address the crisis and publicly admit to the spreading epidemic to avoid endangering Ethiopia’s reputation. In response to this humanitarian crisis, the Ethiopian government has furthermore limited the movement of the Somali population, thereby limiting access to healthcare facilities and food. The loss of approximately a third of Ogadeni livestock causes additional distress (ONLF, 8 March 2017).

Land Rights

An issue largely affecting the pastoralist Somali population of Ogaden as well as many other Ethiopian peoples is land rights. There is a large amount of disputes between the local and national authorities, since the livestock and agricultural sector of the Ogaden region contribute vastly to the country’s food market. The focus of the government and of foreign investors in the region lies, however, on its rich resources of gas and oil. There has been a number of proposals for pipelines backed by foreign investors such as China and South Africa that would connect the resources in Ogaden to the ports in Djibouti and would thus have severe consequences for the lands of Ogaden. In the past, similar projects have proven to lead to displacements of entire communities and villages, extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. In June 2018, crude oil extraction tests in the Ogaden basin were accompanied by massive protests, resulting in the killing of one protester by the military (Addis Standard, 4 July 2018).

Violence Against Women and Children

Ethiopian government forces have repeatedly been accused of using systematic rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war against Somali women and children. Many women have been detained, tortured, raped and maltreated for being members of the Ogaden Women’s Democratic Association or relatives of ONLF members. Additionally, children are detained, tortured and molested by Ethiopian security forces. Parents are publicly beaten when they express anger about these abuses. On 18 July 2013, news source Ogaden Online reported that “the rape of young girls has now reached epidemic proportion in Ogaden and is becoming the most potent weapon used by the Ethiopian military against the Ogaden civilians”. Moreover, human rights organisations including Amnesty International and HRW have reported on the devastating situation of women in Ethiopian prisons where they are subject to torture, rape and extrajudicial killings.
Mass Shootings and Demonstration Killings, Enforced Disappearances and Torture

The Ethiopian justice system is notoriously corrupt. Not only is the judiciary consistently in league with the EPRDF, but frequently cases of violence, abuse, torture and even execution take place with little or no contact with official legal mechanisms at all.

Conditions within prisons are also infamously brutal: in its 2014 report, the US State Department found Ethiopian “jail/prison and pre-trial detention centre conditions remained harsh and in some cases life threatening”. Despite international criticism, Ethiopia has restricted the access of international observers and journalists to Ethiopian prisons. Ethiopia has not yet signed the protocol of neither International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) nor the Convention Against Torture (CAT) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) that conducts prison observations around the world has not even been granted access to many of the Ethiopian and especially Ogadeni prisons. One of the prisons containing the largest numbers of Ogadeni prisoners is the Jijiga Central Prison, commonly referred to as “Jail Ogaden”. Detainees, most of which are accused of having an affiliation with the ONLF, report a lack of access to legal counsel. Often families are not receiving information on the detainees’ whereabouts and are thus unable to support their relatives. Other frequently reported problems are the notorious overcrowding of the prison and its unhygienic facilities. Inmates suffer from abuse including torture, as well as executions. The methods of torture range from public beatings and humiliations to forced body modifications and sexually-motivated violence such as rape (HRW, 4 July 2018).

In the Ogaden region, the paramilitary organisation called the Liyu, or “special”, police is trained to use violence against the Somali population and Oromos in the region bordering Oromia. The Liyu police is known for its ruthless violence and unconditional loyalty to the EPRDF. Between 26 May and 1 June 2015, hundreds of Ogadeni people were killed and whole villages were burned near the Shilaabo district, alongside the border to Somalia, by the Liyu police. As reported by HRW (2008, 4) and the ONLF (2013), however, it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of casualties of this massive conflict, even though bodies of executed civilians are often demonstratively left behind to act as a warning to the remaining population. A comprehensive report on the displacement and violence inflicted on the Ogadeni people, including victim accounts and photographic material, was published by the ONLF (2013).

Geopolitical Situation and Political Repression

Rights to political participation, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, though enshrined in both the UN Charter and the African Charter, to which Ethiopia is a signatory, are routinely ignored in Ethiopian society. In its 2016 report, Freedom House rated the country 43rd out of 49 sub-Saharan African countries in terms of the civil liberties and political freedoms on offer to its citizens. The government has been completely dominated by the EPRDF since 1991. Opposition to this government, both real or suspected, is grounds for arrest and imprisonment.

A common strategy of the Ethiopian regime under a state of emergency, the last of which was lifted in June 2018, has been the blocking of internet and especially social media access, as happened again in December 2017 (Ogaden Online, 14 December 2017). When PM Abiy Ahmed facilitated public access to over 260 previously blocked websites in June 2018, hopes were high that freedom of speech would be consolidated in Ethiopia. In July, however, the news crew of a state-owned media agency was attacked and their driver was killed (Committee to Protect Journalists, 23 July 2018), indicating that freedom of press is still under essential threat in Ethiopia.

Since the implementation of the Anti-Terror-Proclamation in 2009, the Ethiopian population has furthermore witnessed arbitrary detentions, torture and extrajudicial killings directed at politicians, protesters and individuals allegedly or reportedly involved with the ONLF. A
case that received international attention was that of Mr Abdikarin Sheikh Muse. An executive committee member of the ONLF and refugee in Somalia, Mr Muse was arrested on 23 August 2017 and extradited to Ethiopia, a country known to use torture and intimidation against its opponents. This constitutes a violation of the principles laid out in the 1951 UN Convention relating to the States of Refugees, to which Somalia acceded (ONLF, 31 August 2017).

Throughout years of conflict between the Ethiopian government and the ONLF there have been various attempts at peace talks, the latest in February 2018. These advances are usually facilitated by neighbouring Kenya but have all failed for various reasons. In 2014 the talks ended following the abduction of two members of the ONLF and their deportation from Kenya to Ethiopia (UNPO, March 2017).

In 2017, there have also been accumulating reports of the escalation of a conflict at the Ogaden-Oromia border. It has been reported that government-fuelled conflicts have been used to counter political protests within large parts of the Oromo ethnic group, which constitutes 30% of the Ethiopian population and which started protests against the government’s oppression after plans to extend to capital Addis Ababa into their region’s land in 2015. There are, however, also government-instigated conflicts between the Oromo and the Somali, facilitated through the instrumentalisation of the Liyu police, which have resulted in hundreds of losses on both sides and as many as 55,000 Somalis and Oromo have been displaced in September 2017 (Business Insider, 17 September 2017). This conflict has contributed drastically to the already tense political situation in Ogaden and increased the migration flows to the surrounding countries. In August 2017 in Kenya, according to the UN High Commissariat for Refugees (UNHCR), more than one out of twenty registered refugees or asylum-seekers came from Ethiopia, making Ethiopia the fourth most important country of origin for refugees and asylum-seekers in Kenya (UNHCR, August 2017).

**Foreign Relations**

As has been pointed out by HRW, Ethiopia is considered a “key ally in a volatile region” (2008, 6) by major Western governments, which have thus provided Ethiopia with billions of aid throughout the past years, yet seemingly without investigating in earnest the crimes committed by their ally. As Ethiopia’s largest trade partner and provider of development assistance, the EU could exert more pressure on the country’s government, encouraging it to follow the rule of law and respect its minority populations. At the very least, UNPO would like to see the EU persuade Ethiopia to lift the aid embargo on the Ogaden region, so that organisations like the ICRC can provide basic services to the populations. The emergence of China, a provider of trade and aid that does not attach social or political provisions to its investments does, however, challenge the EU’s ability to exert pressure. In the trade-off between economic advantage and regional stability on the one hand and the respect for human rights and democracy on the other, UNPO believes the EU has placed too much emphasis on financial gain. Moreover, there is little or no oversight on the way foreign development funds are spent, and the government often chooses to withhold trade and food aid. UNPO believes that if the EU fails to condemn the actions of the Ethiopian government, then it is implicitly allowing them to continue committing their crimes. Furthermore, the US, which have keenly supported Ethiopia’s ‘war on terror’, have also failed to use its diplomatic and financial leverage to compel Ethiopia to protect its population, rather than harming it on a massive scale (HRW, 2008, 6).

**Culture**

The Ogaden region is predominantly inhabited by members of the Ogadeni, i.e. a Somali clan. Somali is thus the dominant language of the region and most inhabitants are of Muslim (Sunni) faith. Due to these ethnic ties to other Somali people, Ogaden represents one of the five points of the white star on the flag of Somalia (World Culture Encyclopedia). The
lifestyle of the Ogadeni people is traditionally pastoralist or agro-pastoralist and has hence originally been nomadic or semi-nomadic.

**FOCUS ON EU DEVELOPMENT AID**

The country receives large development and humanitarian funds by a number of donors including the UN. The current cycle of the European Development Fund (2014-2020), providing the majority of EU development funding to Ethiopia, amounts to 745 million euros and is thus higher than the previous 2009-2013 cycle, which amounted to 674 million euros. The EU institutions are major donors of gross official development aid for Ethiopia (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)) and it is estimated that half of the country’s budget is provided through donor aid (Oakland Institute, 2013). The aid of the European Development Fund is partly provided to the Ethiopian government, especially the B-Allocation that is reserved for emergency aid, and partly implemented through projects (European Commission, 24 June 2014).