

In Minnesota, Ethiopians brace for a dreaded visit

Written by Douglas McGill, The McGill Report
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MINNEAPOLIS, MN – Pulling up folding chairs to round tables, sipping hot sweet tea out of styrofoam cups and arguing politics into the afternoon, the men at the Horn Afrik café here last weekend all had the name of one man on their lips. Every time that man's name was mentioned, the volume of chatter was deafening.

I was the one native Minnesotan in the café, and a journalist, and when the men there learned that I wanted to hear about this man who was causing such a commotion, they gathered around me, eager to tell their stories and to show me their wounds.

Osman had a scar that runs from his lower lip to the tip of his jaw. Mohamed had a raggedy star-shaped scar in the center of his forehead, and another at the crown of his head. With a dozen men standing around me, I asked how many had scars that they associated with this man whose name was inciting them so much.

Four quickly raised their hands and the others looked at me shyly, sadly, their heads faintly nodding.

Jailing Innocents

The dreaded name is that of Mohamed Daud, the President of the Somali Regional State of Ethiopia, also known as Ogaden.

According to the men at the café, Daud's government, implementing central Ethiopian policy, has transformed the Ogaden into a brutal police state committing crimes against humanity including the jailing of thousands of innocent citizens, torture, rape, killings and the destruction of entire villages.

One specific bit of news set off the agitation I witnessed at the café: Mohamed Daud may visit Minnesota soon, perhaps this week.

"Why is he coming? What does he want to tell us?" asked Hassan, a native of the Ogaden town of Kabridahar, who came to the U.S. in 1996. "The suffering of the Ogaden people is astronomical, so for him to come here is hypocrisy at its peak."

Razed Villages

Widespread crimes against humanity in the Ogaden – many bluntly call it a genocide and "the new Darfur" – are hardly a secret by now.

The Internet is teeming with documentary videos smuggled out of the region (journalists are banned in the Ogaden); the American Association for the Advancement of Science has shown satellite photographs of razed Ogaden villages; and Human Rights Watch has documented "mass detentions without any judicial oversight" which they called "routine;" as well as "widespread and systematic attacks on villages," "killings, torture, rape and forced displacement" for which "the Ethiopian government bears ultimate responsibility."

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About 5,000 refugees from the Ogaden live in Minnesota today, making it one of the biggest diaspora populations of Ogaden refugees in the world. Several other Ethiopian ethnic groups, such as the Oromo, the Amhara and Anuak, also have among the world's largest Ethiopian refugee diasporas in the state.

Minnesota Visit

That makes Minnesota a prime target for visits from Ethiopian leaders eager to build support – and to tamp down opposition – among the many Ethiopian refugee groups here.

Last August, Ogaden leaders traveled to Stockholm and London to meet with the Ogaden refugee populations living there, announcing later they had plans to visit North America soon, with Minnesota mentioned in one government announcement.

Then, last week, the Minnesota-Ogaden grapevine, which is fed by people close to the Ethiopian government who live in Minnesota, relayed news that Daud might arrive in Washington as early as this week – and might visit Minnesota soon thereafter.

Fierce Letter

In response, members of Minnesota's Ogadeni community last Friday delivered a fierce letter of protest to Daud's visit from the "Ogaden-American Community" to the Minnesota offices of Senators Al Franken and Amy Klobuchar, Governor Pawlenty, U.S. Congressman Keith Ellison, and others.

Speaking of the visiting Daud delegation the letter said: "These individuals are the very reason why we came to the United States, to escape with our lives. Now they are here with the sole reason to intimidate and strike fear in the hearts of Ogaden citizens who are living in Minnesota."

"These men are directly responsible for the continuous man-made drought, raping women and young girls, indiscriminate killing, burning of homes, destroying farms, and many other atrocities going on in Ogaden," the protest letter said.

"Running a Genocide"

The letter encouraged Minnesota officials to reject any overture made to them by the Daud delegation; to recognize the Ogaden tragedy as a genocide; and to hold Daud and other Ethiopian leaders accountable for crimes against humanity in the Ogaden.

The chaos inside the Horn Afrik cafe on Sunday was precisely the effect that Daud wishes to have on the Minnesota diaspora, some men at the cafe said, because emotional outbursts tend to neutralize an otherwise potentially focused and effective Ogaden diaspora.

"He wants to confuse us and intimidate us," said Siyat. "He might want to change our minds, but we can't accept that because he is running a genocide against our people."

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International Opinion

None of the men interviewed gave their last names, saying their family members and friends still living in the Ogaden would be at risk of their lives if they did.

In recent years, Ethiopia has engaged its refugee diasporas more, recognizing their increasingly large role in shaping international opinion about Ethiopia.

International opinion is critically important to Ethiopia because its economy is relies largely on foreign aid. Ethiopia was the world's 7th largest recipient of foreign aid in 2006, receiving \$1.57 billion in annual aid in the early 2000s, according to the Brookings Institution. Aid revenues could dry up if concerns about human rights abuses increase, and in recent years they have done so dramatically, especially in the Ogaden.

The Ogaden crisis has been sending refugees to Minnesota for more than a decade.

All-Out War

But the crisis worsened dramatically in 2007, when the Ethiopian government stepped up a counter-insurgency campaign against a separatist group, the Ogaden National Liberation Front, which it calls a terrorist organization with ties to Somali jihadists.

Today, nearly every Ogadeni refugee in Minnesota has friends or family members who are in jail, or who have spent significant time in jail, on suspicion supporting ONLF fighters. This is notwithstanding that the ONLF draws members from virtually every Ogaden town and village, so that declaring all-out war on the ONLF and every last one of its supporters is tantamount to declaring war on the entire Ogaden, its people and culture.

When asked how they got their scars, the men at Horn Afrik café all gave the same answer – they were beaten by Ethiopian soldiers, usually struck by their guns.

Fear for Family

“We are all afraid of Daud, even though we live here now,” said Osman, a 65-year-old clan elder, who says that he lost two sons killed by Ethiopian soldiers. According to his network of clan members with whom he stays in touch, roughly 8,000 Ogadeni citizens are now being held in military prisons in virtually every city in the region.

They don't fear for themselves so much as for their friends and family back home, other Ogadenis at the café said.

“Daud wants to identify the activists in Minnesota,” said Abdi. “He will write down our names so he can then go back and find our family members and put them in jail.

“Of course, he will have his picture taken with a few people here who support him, so he can go back and say his mission to Minnesota was a success.”

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