Scholars at Risk’s Submission to the Fourth Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review of

Ethiopia

47th Session of the
United Nations
Human Rights Council
INTRODUCTION

1. Scholars at Risk (SAR) is an international network of higher education institutions dedicated to protecting threatened scholars, preventing attacks on higher education communities and promoting academic freedom worldwide. SAR has Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC (2013), and welcomes the opportunity provided by the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights to comment on conditions relating to academic freedom and attacks on higher education communities in Ethiopia.

2. As part of its advocacy work, SAR monitors and analyzes attacks on higher education around the world, including within Ethiopia.

3. Since Ethiopia’s last Universal Periodic Review in 2019, SAR has continued to monitor the threats to academic freedom in Ethiopia, particularly within its educational institutions.

4. The incidents described herein occurred against the backdrop of significant ethnic conflict, especially between factions within the Amhara and Oromo populations; as well as the Tigray War, which saw fierce hostilities between the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front and their allies and the Ethiopian National Government. As described in detail below, these conflicts have taken a massive humanitarian toll, including destruction of thousands of education institutions and the disruption of the education of millions of students and hundreds of thousands of education personnel.

LEGAL STANDARDS

5. Ethiopia is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and is also a member of UNESCO.

6. Academic freedom is fully and independently grounded in rights to freedom of opinion and expression, the right to education, and the right to the benefits of science, as articulated, respectively, in ICCPR Article 19, and ICESCR Articles 13 and 15(3).1

7. With particular regard to ICESCR Article 13, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) has clarified in General Comment No. 13 that “the right to education can only be enjoyed if accompanied by the academic freedom of staff and students.”2

8. Violations of academic freedom also frequently result in violations of other rights, including the right to non-discrimination (ICCPR Art. 2), the right to liberty and security of person (Art. 9 ICCPR), freedom of movement (ICCPR Art. 12), the right to a fair trial (ICCPR Art. 14), freedom of assembly (ICCPR Art. 21), and freedom of association (ICCPR Art. 22).

9. UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997) highlights in Paragraphs 18-19 that “[a]utonomy is the institutional form of academic freedom and a necessary precondition to guarantee the proper fulfillment of the functions entrusted to higher-education teaching personnel and institutions” and that “Member States

---

2 CESC, General Comment No. 13: The Right to Education (Article 13) (December 8, 1999), para. 38.
are under an obligation to protect higher education institutions from threats to their autonomy coming from any source.”

10. Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (ACHPR) protects the right to receive information and to “express and disseminate…opinions within the law”. The African Commission of Human and People’s Rights has likewise highlighted academic freedom as a fundamental freedom in a democratic society.³

11. Article 29 of the Ethiopian Constitution provides the “right to freedom of expression without any interference,” which includes “freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds.” Article 15 of the revised Higher Education Proclamation (Proclamation 1152/2019) further guarantees the academic freedom for every institution “in pursuit of its mission and consistent with international good practice.”

12. Ethiopia’s Constitution likewise protects the right to security (Art. 16), freedom of movement (Art. 32), the right to assembly (Art. 30) and freedom of association (Art. 31).

13. Ethiopia is a High Contracting Party of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and its Additional Protocols I and II, and is bound by relevant international humanitarian law obligations where applicable – including with respect to the Tigray War, which has been qualified by the UNHRC as a Non-International armed conflict.⁴ Among other things, relevant provisions require humane treatment for all persons in all circumstances; and prohibit collective punishment, attacks on civilians and civilian objects, and indiscriminate attacks on civilians and noncombatants.

DISCUSSION

Oromo-Amhara Ethnic Tensions

14. Widespread ethnic tensions, including between factions within the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups, have led to significant violence and other incidents on university campuses. Among them:

- On November 11, 2019, ongoing ethnic tensions between factions within the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups reportedly led to violent clashes among students on the campus of Woldia University. Two students were killed and ten were injured as a result.⁵

- On November 12, 2019, Oromo-Amhara tensions reportedly led to violence among students on the campus of Dembi Dollo University. A third-year student was stabbed and died of his wounds. Following the incident, dozens of students reportedly left campus.⁶

---

⁴ United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), Comprehensive investigative findings and legal determinations by the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia (13 October 2023) UN doc A/HRC/54/CRP.3
● On December 4, 2019, unidentified men abducted at least a dozen Dembi Dollo University students from the Amhara region, as they were en route to their homes amidst heightened ethnic tensions and violent clashes in the region.\(^7\) The exact circumstances of the abduction remain unclear, although it has been alleged that the perpetrators were members of the Oromo Liberation Army – a group which has been labeled a terrorist organization by the Ethiopian government. While some of the students were reportedly released, a number of the students reportedly were held in captivity years after being abducted.\(^8\)

● On January 11, 2020, ethnic tensions reportedly led to violent clashes among students on the campus of Hawassa University. One student was killed and several others were wounded as a result. Police arrested roughly forty students involved in the violence.\(^9\)

● On February 14, 2021, police arrested an Oromo student, lecturer, and faculty member after the student shouted a pro-Oromo slogan during a graduation ceremony at Jimma University. The three men were reportedly accused of inciting violence and affiliation with an armed group. All three were ordered released from custody several days after the arrest. However, only the lecturer and faculty member were released; the student was held for months, and eventually transferred to an undisclosed location, with his family unaware of his whereabouts. Following his release in July 2021, the student indicated that he had been assaulted while in custody.\(^10\)

● On March 13, 2022, violent clashes between students reportedly broke out on the Sidist Kilo campus of Addis Ababa University, amid a week of tensions after someone distributed materials that allegedly reflected “hatred toward ethnic Oromos.” Sources indicate that an unspecified number of students were injured during the clashes. State security forces arrested as many as eight individuals in connection with the clashes.\(^11\)

● On June 25, 2022, Ethiopian police attacked Addis Ababa University students as they protested against ongoing ethnic violence against Amhara communities in the Wollega region of the country. At least 150 students had gathered for the protest, with police preventing others from joining them. Police engaged students directly as they marched, beating and forcibly dispersing them. At least three students were hospitalized as a result.\(^12\)

15. The toll exacted on higher education as a result of these ethnic tensions was severe. In 2020, as the tensions were ongoing, Ethiopia’s Ministry of Science and Higher Education


\(^8\) Institute for Security Studies, *Intelligence-led investigations can curb Ethiopia’s Kidnappings*, available at [https://issafrica.org/iss-today/intelligence-led-investigations-can-curb-ethiopias-kidnappings](https://issafrica.org/iss-today/intelligence-led-investigations-can-curb-ethiopias-kidnappings)


reported that ethnic unrest on campuses had caused 35,000 students from 22 universities to quit their classes. \(^{13}\)

**The Tigray War**

16. As noted above, the conflict in the Tigray region, between the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and their allies and the Ethiopian National Government took a massive humanitarian toll, including on higher education. Civilian deaths during the war – which lasted from November 2020 to November 2022 – are estimated to number as high as 600,000. \(^{14}\) The war had a dramatic impact on education at all levels. According to a September 2022 report from Ethiopia’s ministry of education, the war “destroyed 2,681 institutions and damaged 4,158 others.” \(^{15}\) Further, according to the ministry, the war impacted more than 4.2 million higher and secondary education students, as well as about 200,000 teachers and faculty. \(^{16}\) Specific incidents include the following:

- On November 3, 2021, unidentified gunmen killed a Bahir Dar University chemistry professor who was a member of the Tigrayan ethnic community, just outside his home after he returned from campus. \(^{17}\)

- On November 17, 2021, it was reported that Ethiopian state authorities had arrested Addis Ababa University a law professor amidst the state of emergency established after the start of the war, under circumstances that raised due process concerns. The professor was reportedly one of 1,000 people, predominantly ethnic Tigrayans, who were arrested since the state of emergency began. \(^{18}\)

- In November 2021, militants associated with the TPLF-occupied the campus of Wollo University during a period of intense armed conflict with Ethiopian government forces. Reports indicate that TPLF forces fired weapons that struck and damaged university structures, leading to an evacuation of the campus. Drone strikes by Ethiopian government forces targeting TPLF forces on the campus also caused damage to university infrastructure. During their occupation, TPLF forces reportedly looted the campus, taking computers, medical equipment, and other items. Images of the university show windows smashed and doors blown out, empty classrooms strewn with trash and debris, and caved-in roofs.

---


\(^{16}\) *Ibid.*


The total cost of the damage, according to the university, was about US$200 million.19

- In November 2021 Addis Ababa University issued a broadly-worded statement effectively forbidding graduates from acts that constituted “supporting the TPLF”, and threatening to revoke degrees from those who did so.20

- On December 20, 2021, it was reported that members of the TPLF had raided, looted, and damaged Woldia University. The university was one of many that had been shuttered the previous month due to the ongoing civil war.21 Mekdelta Amba University reportedly sustained similar damage.22 All told, the total cost of the damage sustained by Woldia, Mekdelta Amba, and Wollo Universities (see above) was estimated at US$384 million.23

- On September 13, 2022, Ethiopian military forces conducted drone strikes on Mekelle University in the Tigray region. One person was reportedly injured and university facilities were damaged during the attack. This was the third attack the university suffered since the war began.24

**The Current Conflict in the Amhara Region**

17. Following the Tigray War, a conflict has developed between the federal government and a militia known as the Amhara Fano over control of certain sections of the Amhara region. The region is home to roughly 23 million people. Hundreds have been killed in the war to date, and the ongoing fighting has massively disrupted universities in the region. Indeed, in September 2023, it was reported that ten universities, Bahir Dar, Gondar, Debre Berhan, Debre Markos, Wollo, Woldia, Debre Tabor, Mekdelta Amba, Injibara and Debark, had been forced to postpone graduation and cancel summer classes due to ongoing fighting.25 And in December 2023, it was reported that “undergraduate students enrolled in universities in the Amhara region have been unable to commence the 2023-24 academic calendar due to ongoing conflicts.”26

---


CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

National authorities should:

1. Publicly affirm Ethiopia’s commitment to the protection of higher education communities, institutional autonomy, and academic freedom, as recognized by UDHR, ICCPR, ICESCR, ACHPR, and UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel.

2. Publicly endorse the Principles of State Responsibility to Protect Higher Education from Attack, which provides that States should:
   a. Abstain from direct or complicit involvement in attacks on higher education;
   b. Establish mechanisms to protect higher education against present and future attacks;
   c. Conduct investigations on attacks, including killings to hold perpetrators accountable;
   d. Assist victims of attacks.

3. Adhere to international standards, particularly Article 4 of the ICCPR, when declaring a state of emergency, upholding human rights and the rule of law.

4. Review all arrests and prosecutions of scholars and students that appear to stem from the non-violent exercise of their rights to academic freedom, freedom of expression, and freedom of association, and reverse any wrongful convictions.

---