

## From Eritrea's Ona Massacre of 1970 to Mai-Kadra: Region's Endless Story of Murder of the Innocent

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Child-survivors, family members, relatives, Kerenites and compatriots of Eritrea's worst single-day massacre at Ona, in the outskirts of Keren, came together this 28 November via a Zoom conference to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that extremely sad occurrence. On the other hand, their neighbors in Ethiopia were this weekend mourning and still counting their dead of their own **Ona: Mai-Kadra**, 440 kms away down in north western Tigray.



In both Ona and Mai-Kadra, estimates of the victims are put at around 800 each. Also in both places, the victims were innocent citizens who had very little to do with the big politics of their leaders - their blindfolded elite - who failed and continue to fail to resolve differences through civilized means. We cannot deny that the peoples of the entire region share a history of endless wars and their legacy of a mindset that wrongly values a meaningless bravado 'earned' through violence. Unfortunately, those bad legacies are not behind us. We may be condemned to live counting more and more of Onas and Mai-Kadras for decades to come unless we decide to change our ways.

For now, let us have a quick look at Eritrea's Ona Massacre and related mass murders that Ethiopia and its army mercilessly inflicted upon so many innocent lives for so many years in Eritrea: 1961-1991.

### **Eritrean Massacres Were/Are Little known to Ethiopians**

Today, many Eritreans join their Ethiopian neighbors in mourning the dead of Mai-Kadra and the thousands of young Ethiopians on both sides of the war in Tigray province. On the other hand, very few Ethiopians knew what went on in Eritrea during its 30-year war for self-determination and national independence. Among the few Ethiopians who knew were people like the former Ethiopian president, Negasso Gidada, who was told the massacre in Ona and Besik-Dira by his then classmate Michael Ghaber, who lost his aunt with eight family members at Ona.

The late Negasso Gidada wrote in his memoirs that it was from the story of Ona and Besik-Dira that he heard for first time about the war in Eritrea. My press colleagues at Addis Ababa's Berhanen Selam and our daily contacts in those years would also have said the same about having heard from me on the wanton killings that raged in Eritrea in those years. Their list would include fairly well known names like Baalu Ghirma, the author of 'Oromai; Abbe Gubegna, the author of 'Aliweledim;' Menghistu Ghedamu, Yacob Woldemariam, Yohannes Disasa and a few more. In other words, it was very few Ethiopians of our generation who knew about the numerous Mai-Kadras inflicted upon innocent Eritreans by the Ethiopian army. Sadly, those remain unrecognized by many Ethiopians. This is mainly because of the failure of the failed party misruling Eritrean for the past 29 years.

### **The Ona and Basik-Dira Massacres**

These two sad incidents are usually mentions together because they occurred within 24 hours shared between 30 November and 1 December of 1970. Although killings and burning of innocent villagers was the norm in those days in Eritrea, the immediate cause for the Ona and Besik-Dira massacres is attributed to an ELF ambush and killing on 21 November of General Teshome Ergetu, the commander of Ethiopia's second division in Asmara. He was in a convoy towards Keren to re-launch a wave of scorched-earth operations in the lowlands following intensification of guerrilla activities that year, including the de-railing of a train near Keren.

#### **Besik-Dira: 119 dead**

Within a few days of the General's death, killing and burning contingents of the Ethiopian army were deployed in the region north of Keren. Villages were burned and scattered human corpses were to be found in every dale and hill of the region.

On 30 November, 1970, it was the turn of Besik-Dira, 8 kms north of Keren. Christians in the village were asked to stand on one side and Moslems on the other. But the villagers refused to do so saying that they were one people inseparable on religious grounds and that they were willing to die or live together. All of them, estimated at 200, were then forced to enter into the small village Mosque, one body over the other. Machine guns planted at the two windows opened fire, and continued doing so until complete silence reigned. Later on, those who died instantly were counted at 119 children, men and women. The rest, who miraculously survived death lying beneath dead body, were left with their painful wounds and life-time and disabilities.

#### **Ona: Over 800 Dead**

That Black Monday of 30 November in Besik-Dira was immediately followed by Black Tuesday, 1 December 1970, when it was decided to be the turn of Ona, a village only 4-5 kms north of Keren. It was in fact not one village by then but a huge concentration camp

for peasant farmers who were earlier forced to come to Ona after their villages were burned down in the previous months. Gunning down of innocent citizens near Ona was started in the eve although the major assault with heavy weapons and machine guns started in the early morning of 1<sup>st</sup> of December 190. By late afternoon, the once big 'village' of Ona was not there together with about two-thirds of its inhabitants.

The corpses buried in mass graves on the second day, 2 December, numbered 713. Of about 300 souls, who did not die immediately, were left with severe wounds and many died in succeeding days and weeks.

Some of the infants who were found on the breasts of their dead mothers 50 years ago were among the Zoom conference attendants of 28 November 2020.

### **Eritrean Victims of Ethiopian Massacres.**

Eritreans today easily list over 20 major massacres inflicted by the Ethiopian army, although the worst one-day such incident was that of Ona. Countless persons continued to die in prisons and smaller groups through the years. Unfortunately, the exact count of Eritrea's innocent victims had not been known, as we also don't know the victims of the past 29 years under the homegrown dictator. They all remained rough estimates.

Ethiopia's earliest admission of killings in Eritrea was made in June 1978 by Colonel Menghistu Haile Mariam, then head of Ethiopia's military junta, when he said that up to 50,000 civilians had been victimized in the war till that year. Major Dawit Woldegiorgis, who as a governor in Eritrea, admitted in his book, Red Tears, that up to 280,000 civilian Eritreans were killed between 1975 and 1983.

Journalist-author Michela Wrong, in her book on Eritrea entitled I Didn't Do it for You, put the figure of 200,000 civilians killed. On its part, a known British magazine, The Economist of 20 October 1990, estimated civilian victims of the 30-year war and related consequences at about 500,000.

Yet, all those war crimes and genocidal acts of the Ethiopian army in Eritrea remain widely unknown, unrecognized, let alone to be compensated or apologized for. This is one of the inexcusable failures of independent Eritrea. But let us hope the day will come when justice will be served and all actors of war crimes and genocides are put to accountability.

May the victims of today's Mai-Kadra in Ethiopia, the victims of Ona and Beskik-Dira of 50 years ago this month, and all other victims of mass killings of in our region rest in peace.