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Mob action costs two researchers' lives

By Dawit Endeshaw October 27, 2018



With the growing level of sporadic violence happening around the country, three researchers became the latest victims of mob attack where the two were stoned to death and one was critically injured in West Gojjam Zone of the Amhara Regional State, *The Reporter* has learnt.

The incident occurred in the afternoon of October 23, 2018, where Wossen Tafere, a researcher and a PhD candidate at the Ethiopian Institute of Water Resources and his friend, Mandfero Abi, were killed while conducting a research at a school in West Gojjam Zone, Gonji Kola Wereda at a town called Addis Alem.

In addition, Hailyesus Mulu, a lab technician who works in the same town where the attack had occurred and was assigned by the woreda health office to assist the two researchers, was also critically injured in incident and is now receiving treatment in Feleghiwot Hospital in Bahir Dar.



The main researcher, Wossen, was conducting a field research entitled "Estimation of Disease Burden Attributable to Poor Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WaSH) Provision in Two Districts of the Amhara Region, Ethiopia – A Comparative Study".

"For this purpose, Wossen went to the area in July, 2018," Mamo Kassegn, a colleague of Wossen told *The Reporter*.

Born and raised in the same area where he was killed, Wossen's research was inspired by his childhood experience where he wanted to explore the reasons behind why children in the area always suffer stomach pains, said Mamo.

"He was a very committed and hardworking person and the news of his tragic end was very shocking for us," he said.

Upon his travel to the area, Wossen went to schools in Gonji Kola Wereda, mainly to gather saliva and feces from primary school students. Particularly, on the day of the killing, he and his friend Mandefero, along with the aforementioned lab technicians were collecting samples in Addis Alem Primary School.

Mandfero, upon recently returning from Europe receiving his PhD was there just to help his friend, according to sources from the area.

"The deceased researcher came to our wereda with all the needed legal requirements which include letters from Ethiopian Public Health Institute and Zonal Health Bureau," Achu Abebaw, head of health office at the Wereda told *The Reporter*.

"We know them and we gave them the permission to conduct the research," said Anemaw Dagnachew, communication director of West Gojjam Zone.

"I wrote a letter to all concerned offices in our wereda, including schools, to cooperate with the researcher," Achu told *The Reporter*.

However, things took a turn to worst following the unfounded rumors circulating in the town on the day of the killing.

A group of youths in the area spread a rumor about the two researchers saying that they were administrating injections and vaccinations to students. The youth also disseminated a false claim that the students who received the injections form the researchers were filling ill and dying, according to multiple of sources from the area.

This unfounded and totally false information agitated the public, *The Reporter* has learnt.

Following this, hundreds of people went to the school where the researchers were taking samples and began attacking them. They were attacked by stones and dragged on to the streets.

"The situation was very difficult and it was beyond the capacity of the woreda police force," Achu recalled. They even tried to attack the director of the Addis Alem Primary School.

After the killings, there was also an attempt to burn the body of the deceased. Finally, the mob was dispersed by a special police force.

In the same day, a couple by the name Elias Abdi and Tsedy Chekol, who lives in Addis Ababa and went to the area for unrelated reasons were also attacked by the same mob. The couple nearly escaped but the car they were driving was burnt down by the mob, according to Anemaw.

Just a few months back, researchers who went to study the level of HIV Prevalence in Bahir Dar were also attacked in the same way, according to reports.

Moreover, two health workers in the same woreda were also reported to be badly beaten by a mob.

Such incidents are deterring health extension workers to conduct their work. "No health extension worker in our woreda is now willing to go to rural areas," Achu said.

"We heard about the incident. It was caused by lack of awareness," Abebaw Gebeyehu, head of Amhara Health Bureau told *The Reporter*.

Both of the deceased were born and raised in the same Zone where the incident had occurred.

In the meantime, the woreda police arrested close 30 individuals who are allegedly accused of orchestrating the attack.

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