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 **By Birhanu Fikade** February 1, 2020

Nearly three months after the news of kidnapped university students broke; the government has given a presser regarding the fate of the hostages, this week.

Nigusu Tilahun, Head of Press Secretariat with the Office of the Prime Minister, was joined by Endeshaw Tassew, Commissioner-General of the Federal Police, and Samuel Kifle (PhD), State Minister of Science and Higher Education on Wednesday, to brief reporters about the incidents that took place some 30 kilometers out of the town of Dembi Dollo, 600 kilometers west of Addis Ababa. The students were claimed to have been kidnapped on their way back to home.

Both Nigusu and Samuel explained about the number of students abducted and the status of those remaining in captivity. They countered earlier statements of Asmraa Shimye, a female student who had managed to escape her captors. She told media outlets that some 17 students had been kidnapped. Following media reports, public outcry and mass protests was held in many parts of the Amhara Region, the authorities came out to confirm dozens were abducted. However, Nigusu and Samuel said only 12 students were taken and the remaining five were not university students but rather residents. According to the accounts given by the Commissioner-General, an unknown number of residents, local leaders, high school students, elders, and business people have also been taken captive.

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The Federal Police Chief said the whereabouts of the kidnapped people has been identified. However, he declined to provide proof of life and reports suggesting cruelty and abuse, orchestrated against the kidnapped are yet to be confirmed.

Despite the names of abducted students circulating on social media, the authorities have refrained from releasing their names. “Not to jeopardize ongoing investigations, we prefer not to mention their names. We know the location and where they are held,” Endashaw said. It is to be recalled that last year, the former president of Dembi Dollo University was abducted and later released without any physical harm.

On Thursday, Deputy Prime Minister Demeke Mekonnen met and consoled parents of abducted students. And according to Nigusu, the deputy PM has explained the undertakings of the government to dismayed parents.

The authorities did not mention who the forces behind these incidents are, nor provide any clues of what measures they are considering to secure the safe release of the students, of whom most are females. *The Reporter* has approached Nigusu to ask whether negotiations are part of the process to free the hostages. He simply declined to comment. Several questions remain unanswered. For instance, the motives of the kidnapers, and why no one has claimed a responsibility remain unknown.

A few weeks ago, a group of teenagers were kidnapped in Amhara Region and the abductors had demanded hefty ransom money. And when the parents failed to pay, at least six of the kidnapped children were heinously murdered.

Earlier in the week, a team of Officials visited Dembi Dollo and have spoken with residents. According to Nigusu, the environs of Dembi Dollo and the extended areas

of the Kellem Wollega Zone are witnessing relatively calm situations.

In Gonder and Gojam, several members of the families of the abducted students told *The Reporter* the roller coaster ride they have been through since the kidnapping became public late last year.

Parents have since been forced to spend scarce resources for brokers who offer false hope, taking money from them for the promise of having their children returned.

One family has spent 15,000 Birr, sold some of its livestock's and when the promise never materialized, the father trekked all over Dembi Dolo University but came back empty handed. Some of the family had celebrated when the news of their release came via the Office of the Prime Minister. Nevertheless, they have neither been contacted by either authorities, nor have the children returned to their homes.

“Since I have been told of the news, I have not slept, my family has been crying, literally begging the local and national government to help us, but we have not been successful. Now, I do not know where to go. I feel hopeless, tired, defeated and saddened with what have become of my children,” a father in the City of Addis Zemen said.

Contributed by Birhanu Fikade and Samuel Getachew



