



News: At least six people killed in Goba, Bale after controversy over monument led to inter-communal tensions

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Addis Abeba, July 23/2018 – A controversy surrounding a new monument planned to be built in Goba city in Bale zone of the Oromia regional state, located around 446 km southeast of the capital Addis Abeba, has led to three days of inter-communal tension between residents of the city and its environs, which in turn resulted in the killing of at least six civilians over the weekend. More than two dozens were also wounded, many of them beaten by contesting crowds, according to locals who spoke to Addis Standard by phone.

The monument in question is one that was planned to commemorate Haji Adam Saddo, a prominent advocate and freedom fighter from the area who is revered by the local Oromo people. A few weeks ago elders, community leaders, the youth and other members of the community have requested the city administration to build the monument, which was accepted by the administration.

The main opposition against the building of the monument came from residents who contested its location, a roundabout where a statue of a twin Red Fox, endemic to the region, were already standing; and those who said the place was used for religious events during the Ethiopian orthodox Tewahido Church's annual celebrations of epiphany, according to two eye witnesses.

However, since Tuesday last week, several unfounded information began circulating in the area via mobile phones claiming that those who were protesting the monument, mainly Christians, do not want a monument of Haji Adam Saddo "to defile" the place. This has led to anger brewing among the youth in the city and its environs, who started to flock to the town as early as Wednesday and Thursday. "The decision to replace the twin Red Fox statue by the new monument was made by the local administration but it is not clear who proposed it first or why it was proposed. But since the information began circulating, together with several misinformation, the situation seemed to take some sort of religious and ethnic tension," said Amanyihun, a resident who only wanted to be identified by his first name.

On Saturday morning hundreds of youth who came from the surrounding local villages and the city itself started dismantling the Red Fox statue. "Then a fight ensued between the youth and residents. Some of the residents came out with rifles to protest against the youth who were taking down the Red Fox statues. The city police came to control the chaos but it was beyond their capacity. Already on Saturday two people were killed one from each of the confronting sides," Amanyihun said.

Zeinaba Taha, the mayor of the city, told Addis Standard that "part of the residents in the town have opposed the proposal from the very beginning." City officials have held several meetings to address the differences, but to no avail. This, she says, has "led to anger." "Part of the community wanted the monument, and part did not; this has created unnecessary rift and caused anger," she said.

The mayor also admitted that there were a host of other causes, including deliberate distribution of misinformation "by some actors," which fueled the tension. In a similar vein, in a Facebook message posted yesterday, Adanaech Abeebee, former mayor of Adama city who was recently appointed as head of the OPDO secretariat, the party governing Oromia regional state and whose chairman is Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, complained that as of late there were coordinated attempts from various groups to incite violence throughout the region. According to her, this is partly aimed at blaming the OPDO as a party unable to govern the region; partly to taint the name of the Oromo as one incapable of governing Ethiopia; and to portray the Oromo as a disunited society.

Dr. Negeri Lencho, head of the region's communication bureau, has also posted several updates on his Facebook page including one with a general message and appeal for calm, as well as assuring residents that Haji Adam Saddo, who is known for his involvement in the Bale Peasant Movement and who was one of the founders of the Mecha and Tulama foundation, the earliest form of an Oromo centered civil society organization, was a "hero of the Oromo people," and that a monument commemorating him will be build. He also promised senior officials of the regional state were working to address the issue.

More reinforcements from the federal army were called in late Saturday afternoon and on Sunday morning. But tensions persisted and four more people were killed on Sunday. Zeinaba also says there were shootouts between armed residents and the police until more reinforcement arrived from the federal army on Sunday evening.

The situation has "returned to some form of calm now but it remains fragile", according to the second eye witness who doesn't want to be named. He also said the city administration failed to respond to the crisis before "it reached this point. Now I fear no one wants to listen to no one," he said.

Meanwhile, according to Ethiopia Live Update, a twitter news handle, people who came from Goba and are residents of the capital Addis Abeba, have gathered around the office of Lemma Megerssa, president of the Oromia regional state, located on Bole road this morning. Ten representatives went inside the president's office and have discussed the matter. The administration promised to the representatives to send a team of inquiry to Goba city, according to the portal, which also said the representatives have voiced their concerns about the mayor and her handling of the situation and asked for her to be removed. By the time Addis Standard reporters reached the office, the gathering has already dispersed. Our attempts to get information from the president's office were to no avail. However, in the earlier interview, the mayor said the city administration has finalized preparations to hold community discussions starting from tomorrow. AS

Editor's note: Several phone call conversations with residents of the city since Saturday produced contradictory and highly polarized responses of two different views. Addis Standard decided to quote only the two sources above who have given answers in a seemingly impartial manner. Similarly, Addis Standard refrained from using pictures sent by activists as many of these pictures seemed to have been altered and/or taken at deliberately staged incidents.

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