

# Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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## Responses to Information Requests

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Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment, please email the [Knowledge and Information Management Unit](#).

7 May 2015

### ETH105146.E

Ethiopia: The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), including origin, mandate, leadership, structure, legal status, and membership; treatment of members and supporters by authorities (2014-2015)  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

#### 1. Origin

Sources indicate that the OLF was established in 1973 (OLF n.d.a; MRG n.d.; AE 8-15 Dec. 2010). According to their website, the OLF was formed with the purpose of leading "the national liberation struggle of the Oromo people [1] against Abyssinian colonial rule" (OLF n.d.a). Other sources similarly indicate that the OLF was formed to promote Oromo "self-determination" (START n.d.a; AE 8-15 Dec. 2010).

Regarding the OLF's origins and history, Amnesty International (AI)'s 2014 report entitled '*Because I Am Oromo: Sweeping Repression in the Oromia Region of Ethiopia*', states the following:

The OLF (and its armed wing the Oromo Liberation Army, OLA), formed in the 1970s, was one of a number of armed groups that fought against the previous government of Mengistu Hailemariam. When Mengistu Hailemariam was overthrown in 1991, the OLF was briefly part of a transitional government led by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition. However, the OLF always had an uneasy relationship with the TPLF [Tigray People's Liberation Front] - the strongest political party in the EPRDF coalition. These tensions led to the OLF leaving the transitional government in 1992. Subsequently, thousands of OLF fighters, supporters and suspected supporters were arrested.

Since then, the OLF has continued to wage a low-level armed struggle against the government, stating that its fundamental objective is to exercise the Oromo peoples' right to self-determination. (AI 2014, 19)

The *Political Handbook of the World (PHW)* indicates that the OLF left the EPRDF coalition in 1992 due to "alleged electoral fraud, harassment of its members, and perceived inadequate tribal representation in the government" (PHW 2015, 468).

#### 2. Mandate

According to the OLF's website, the OLF defines itself as a political organization that is involved in the struggle for the "realization of the national self-determination of the Oromo people" and the "establishment of an independent state of Oromia" (OLF n.d.b). The *African Executive (AE)*, a daily newspaper based in Nairobi, similarly indicates that the objective of the OLF is to exercise the Oromo's rights to national self-determination because it "believes the Oromo people are still being denied their fundamental rights by Ethiopian colonialism" (AE 8-15 Dec. 2010). START, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, a research initiative based at the University of Maryland and funded by the US Department of Homeland Security (START n.d.b), describes the OLF as "an ethnic separatist guerrilla group" whose goal is "to

carve out a separate state within the current borders of Ethiopia as a homeland for the Oromo people" (ibid. n.d.a). According to IHS Global Insight, an organization that provides economic and financial information on countries, the OLF "has been waging a secessionist battle in Ethiopia for nearly four decades" (5 Jan. 2012).

### 3. Leadership

*PHW* indicates that OLF leaders include: Daud Ibsa [also spelled Dawud Ibsaa], Chair; Gelasa Dilbo, former Chair (in exile); Hassan Hussein, Spokesperson; Shigat Geleta, (a resident in Berlin, Germany); and Beyan Aroba (*PHW* 2015, 469).

AI indicates that the OLF has experienced leadership divisions (AI 2014, 20). IHS Global Insight indicates that the OLF has been split into two groups since 2008: one group that considers itself the main faction, led by Daud Ibsa; and another faction led by Kamal Galchu [also spelled Kemal Gelchu] (IHS Global Insight 5 Jan. 2012). The same source reports that in January 2012, a faction of the OLF that claimed to be from its National Council, and led by Kamal Galchu, announced that it was ending its demand for secession from Ethiopia (ibid.). However, the article indicates that the announcement was rejected by a rival faction in Asmara, Eritrea who labelled the Kamal Galchu faction as "a splinter group" (ibid.). Sources indicate that in February 2013, General Kamal Galchu was detained and placed under house arrest in Asmara, Eritrea (*PHW* 2015, 469; *Ethiopian Review* 5 Feb. 2013). Sources indicate that in October 2014, the OLF executive committee removed General Kamal Galchu from his position as chairman, citing the reason as "poor leadership qualities and dictatorial actions" (Ethiomeia 24 Oct. 2014; OLF 23 Oct. 2014).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, Nuro Dedefo indicated that the OLF has different factions and that he is chairman of one faction, while Daud Ibsa leads another faction based in Asmara, Eritrea (Dedefo 30 Apr. 2015). According to Nuro Dedefo, Gelasa Dilbo is a former chairman of the OLF (ibid. 29 Apr. 2015).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a researcher at Human Rights Watch, who specializes in the Horn of Africa region, indicated that most of the OLF leadership is in the US and Europe (27 Apr. 2015).

### 4. Structure

Nuro Dedefo indicated that the OLF is made up of the General Assembly, "the highest decision-making body," followed by the next highest body, the National Council, which has 45 members and implements the decisions made by the General Assembly (Dedefo 30 Apr. 2015). He further indicated that the National Council elects nine executive members, including the chairman (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

On 27 June 2014, it was announced on the OLF website that two organizations that are part of their group, and known as OLF National Council (OLF Shanee Gumii) and OLF Transitional Authority (OLF Qaama Ce'umsaa), agreed to combine their leaderships, unify their members, and merge their organizational structures (OLF 27 June 2014).

### 5. Legal Status

Sources indicate that in June 2011, Ethiopia classified the OLF as a terrorist organization (Human Rights Watch Jan. 2012; AI 2014, 9). START, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism, indicates that the OLF is not officially designated as a terrorist group by the US, UK, Australia, Canada, EU or Russia (START n.d.a).

### 6. Membership

The Researcher at Human Rights Watch stated that it is "difficult to know who is an actual member" of the OLF because the organization is "underground" (Human Rights Watch 27 Apr. 2015). He further said that the OLF soldiers remaining in the region are "known to be in the Ethiopian and Kenyan border areas" (ibid.). AI reports that the OLF has been "relatively inactive" in recent years, and that the number of OLF fighters are estimated at "a few thousand" (AI 2014, 20). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

### 7. Treatment of Members, Supporters and Perceived Members of the OLF

Nuro Dedefo indicated that members of the OLF face "persecution" by Ethiopian authorities, including "arrest, interrogation, torture and extra-judicial killing," and that supporters of the OLF also face similar treatment (Dedefo 30 Apr. 2015). In 2010, the UN Committee Against Torture reported that it was concerned about "numerous, ongoing and consistent allegations concerning the routine use of torture by the police,

prison officers and other members of the security forces, as well as the military," against "alleged supporters of insurgent groups," including the OLF (UN 19 Nov. 2010).

The AI report indicates that many Oromo people are critical of the Ethiopian government's treatment of the Oromo and that they have "long been subject to repression based on an imputed opposition to the government" (AI 2014, 18). The Human Rights Watch Researcher commented on the treatment of politically active Oromos, who are perceived to be part of the OLF by the government, as follows:

In the vast majority of interrogations involving Oromos, there are accusations that they are either members of OLF, or are involved in the Oromo opposition, which many take to mean OLF. There is very rarely any evidence that there is a connection to the OLF, rather anyone who expresses dissent, mobilizes for mainstream politics, or is involved in Oromo cultural associations, are at risk of being associated to the OLF. If you have a family connection from the past to OLF, you are at particular risk. Torture and mistreatment in detention is common among the Oromo, particularly those who have been accused of having connections to the OLF. (Human Rights Watch 27 Apr. 2015)

The AI report similarly indicates that a "significant majority of Oromos arrested for their actual or suspected opposition to the government are accused of supporting the OLF" and in a high proportion of those cases, the person arrested is not charged with a crime (AI 2014, 19). AI further explains that the government equates participation in protests, membership in a political opposition party, or refusal to join the ruling political party, as an indication of OLF support (ibid., 20).

Sources indicate that in March 2011, the government arrested 121 Oromos over accusations that they were part of the OLF (Reuters 5 Sept. 2011; Human Rights Watch 6 Apr. 2011). According to a Human Rights Watch news report, the government said that it had obtained court orders to detain them while it gathered evidence (ibid.). Sources indicate that members of the Oromo People's Congress (OPC) and the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) [the largest Oromo opposition political parties (AI 2014, 40)] were among those arrested (Human Rights Watch 6 Apr. 2011; AI 2014, 40), and that 89 of them were accused of supporting the OLF, charged and tried (ibid.). According to the AI report, they were accused of making financial contributions to the OLF, participating in the OLF, or organizing training and recruiting other OLF members (ibid., 41).

Sources indicate that the government arrested 29 people in August 2011 due to their alleged links to the OLF (Reuters 5 Sept. 2011; AFP 5 Sept. 2011). A 5 September 2011 Reuters article cites the deputy commissioner of the federal police as saying that those arrested were trained by the OLF and were planning to bomb targets. Sources indicate that nine of the people arrested are members of the OPC or OFDM political parties (ibid.; Reuters 5 Sept. 2011; IHS Global Insight 5 Sept. 2011).

AI reports that Bekele Gerba, deputy chairman of the OFDM, and Olbana Lelisa of the OPC were arrested in August 2011 shortly after meeting with AI (AI 31 Aug. 2011). Gerba was accused of belonging to the OLF, while AI said charges against Lelisa were not made public (ibid.). However, in a 31 August 2011 article, the Agence France-Presse (AFP) quoted a government spokesperson as saying that "[t]hese people were arrested because the police had found evidence that had linked them with clandestine activities carried out by the OLF." According to the *Sudan Tribune*, a news website based in Paris, Gerba and Lelisa were convicted by the Ethiopian Federal High Court for having links with OLF, recruiting students to the OLF, and using their membership in a "legally recognized opposition political party as a disguise" (*Sudan Tribune* 13 Dec. 2012). Lelisa was sentenced to 13 years in prison and Gerba was sentenced to 8 years (ibid.). The US Department of State *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013* indicates that the Federal Supreme Court upheld the convictions but reduced Gerba's sentence from eight years to three years and seven months and Lelisa's sentence from 13 years to 11 years (US 27 Feb. 2014, 9).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

#### Note

[1] Sources indicate that the Oromo people are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia (AI 2014, 18; MRG n.d.), and account for approximately 35 percent (US 21 Apr. 2015; AI 2014, 18) or 40 percent of the population (START n.d.). Minority Rights Group International (MRG) indicates that the Oromo are mainly located in the south-east, south, and south-west regions of Ethiopia (MRG n.d.).

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## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** The following were unable to provide information for this Response: Assistant Professor, Center for African Studies, University of Florida; Professor, Center of African Studies, University of Cambridge.

Attempts to contact the following were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: departmental representative, UN Development Programme (UNDP) in Ethiopia; Ethiopian Human Rights Commission; Professor and author of African studies; Professor of African studies, Pennsylvania State University; Professor of African studies, University of Tennessee; Professor Emeritus, political science, City College of New York; Professor of political science, California State University; Senior Researcher, African Studies Centre, Leiden; Senior Researcher, Human Rights Watch.

**Internet sites, including:** Africa Confidential; Africa Research Bulletin; Al Jazeera; All Africa; Associated Press; *Awramba Times*; *Ayyaantuu News*; BBC; *Bloomberg News*; ecoi.net; *Ethiopia First*; Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme; Freedom House; *The Indian Ocean Newsletter*; International Crisis Group; IRIN; Press TV; UN – Refworld, ReliefWeb; US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants; *Voice of Oromo Liberation*; *World Politics Review*.

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