

## **Analysis: Mass arrests, unknown number of casualties reported in Amhara state as law enforcement operations by gov't lead to confrontation with local armed group**

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**Addis Abeba** – Reports of unrest, widespread detentions as well as casualties and deaths emerged in the past few days in connection with clashes between security forces and armed groups in some parts of the Amhara region. Tensions were running high after the regional government announced that law enforcement measures were being taken against what was described as a lawless group that is working to destabilize the region. However, the residents of Mota town, in the East Gojam zone, where casualties were reported said that the clashes were due to the government's attempts to disarm Fano, [a group of armed militia in Amhara state](#).

### **Attempts to disarm Fano vs Law enforcement operation**

Hailu Ayele, a resident of Mota town, told *Addis Standard*, "The conflict began when government security forces attempted to arrest a Fano member then the residents came out to the streets in protest. The security forces then started shooting against the crowd." He added, "A lot of people were taken to the hospital. There were people who were killed too."

Describing the situation of the town over the weekend Hailu said, "Many business centers have been shut down despite a few. Public transportation services were partially halted as well." He added, "It's not looking good. All of the residents are on the lookout." On Saturday, the security council of Mota city administration [imposed a curfew](#) and restricted movement between 6 AM and 6:30 PM local time.

*Addis Standard* spoke to a member of the Fano from Merawi town, which is located 30 km south of Bahir Dar, Amhara Region's capital. Speaking on the condition of anonymity, he said, "The Fano played a crucial role in averting the aggression of the TPLF yet the treatment we're getting from both the Amhara regional government and the federal government is disappointing. We have been portrayed as looters and killers while we were the ones who shed our blood to save the country from the invasion of TPLF."

The regional government however defended the actions as [law enforcement measures](#) taken against what was described as lawless groups who are working to destabilize the region. The President of the Amhara Region, Yilkal Kefale (Ph.D.), said, "The regional government has no intentions of disarming or attacking Fano." He explained that the measures targeted those who are involved in criminal activities such as illegal arms trafficking, killing, and robbery.

He noted that lawlessness and illegal activities have been rampant in the region following the conflict with Tigrayan forces. Without specifying the perpetrators, the president also underlined that corrective measures would be taken against individuals who are trying to create religious and ethnic strifes.

He further asserted that the regional government is willing to respond to demands and resolve issues in a peaceful way and called on the Amahara people to join the security forces in ensuring the rule of law. The president, however, said that the regional government won't tolerate any attempt by the government security forces to hide suspects in unknown places outside the Amhara region and stressed the need for cautiousness while enforcing the law.

[The federal government](#) on its part said that the operation in the Amhara region is a part of the ongoing law enforcement efforts by the federal and the regional security forces in Addis Abeba, Oromia, Somali and other regions of the country. "Extensive measures are being taken against groups involved in arms trafficking, money laundering, looting, destruction of property, suspicion of murder, and wreaking havoc in the Amhara region," the federal government said.

### **“One of the worst times for the Amhara people right now”**

*Addis Standard* spoke to a member of the Amhara Special Forces who is currently deployed to Debre Markos, the administrative seat of the East Gojjam zone. Speaking on the condition of anonymity he stated that, there has been a lot of confusion among the Amhara special forces in connection to the said law enforcement operation. “Some of us refused to partake in the operation while others did,” he said, adding, “It is one of the worst times for the Amhara people right now. Had I had another option, I would have left this job. I don’t want to raise arms against my brethren,” he stated.

He further testified that deaths and casualties were from both the Fano and the security forces. Though he was not sure of the numbers, he also said that there have been arrests of the Fano members.

### **Continued arrests**

The head of the Amhara region peace and security bureau, Desalew Tassew, [announced that](#) 4, 552 individuals have so far been arrested in connection with the ongoing “rule of law operation” in the region over the past week. More than 1,780 of them, including members of the regional security forces, are suspected of failing to perform their public obligations, according to Desalegn, who also added, “The detainees include those suspected of attempting to further destabilize the region by exploiting social media.” *Addis Standard’s* several attempts to speak to concerned government officials of the Amhara regional government were unsuccessful.

The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) on its however cautioned against unlawful detentions and said, “Such arrests are not in line with the principles of human rights and are not appropriate.” [In a statement released on Sunday](#), the commission highlighted the arrests of journalists and Social media activists over the past few days.

Daniel Bekele, Chief Commissioner of EHRC “In particular, federal and state security forces should refrain from arresting suspects before criminal investigations [are held], arresting journalists for their work, and detaining people without a court order.” Daniel called for the whereabouts of all detainees to be immediately communicated to families and to be brought to justice.

### **Background**

Earlier this year in March [reports](#) came out that clashes broke out in Mota town, in East Gojjam Zone of the Amhara regional state, leaving unknown numbers injured following the arrest by government security forces of the leader of the local Fano. Back then, Mota City Administration released a statement saying four security forces were killed by “unidentified armed forces.” It alleged that the armed groups were operating in the guise of Fano and mobilized from other woredas to launch the attacks on the town.

In November of this year, the Security Council Command Post of Bahir Dar city called on the members of Fano to get registered and organized under the structure of government security forces, promising that it would provide necessary logistical support. On similar counts, it was noted that the Amhara State Government Communication Bureau Head, Gizatchew Muluneh, [told the Ethiopian Press Agency](#) at the time that the government “will organize” and “not disarm” *Fano* members who have paid sacrifices for the survival of the country and people’s freedom. He said that in the history of the Amhara people, the Fano protect the Amhara “from the enemy and humiliations” as well as paid sacrifices for the Amhara people to benefit from development and political areas. Therefore, the government “will further organize” the Fano and “will not disarm them.”

The organizational structure of Fano has been a widely controversial issue since last year. The *Fano*, is an armed group of thousands of young men and women in the Amhara regional state who are not a part of the regular structure in both the federal and state security apparatus but have been on the side of the federal and regional forces in the ongoing armed conflict with Tigrayan forces. **AS**