

## **Bench-Sheko Zone Conflict 2020-21, Yared Tsegaye**

In recent years, Bench-Sheko Zone has been one of the deadliest conflict hotspots in Ethiopia. Between the end of 2020 and early 2021, 50,000 people were [reportedly](#) displaced in the Bench-Sheko Zone because of communal violence.

The situation in Bench-Sheko is severely under-reported. There have been violent episodes in the zone dating back several decades. The main conflict areas are the Guraferda, Sheko, and Debub-Bench *weredas*.

The causes of communal violence are complex and multi-factorial.

### **Persistent attacks**

A killing spree that would last for months started in October 2020 when [31 people](#) were killed and at least 4,600 people were killed in two rounds of conflict across three kebeles in Guraferda *wereda*.

The killings, which took place on 18 and 21 October, were carried out by unidentified attackers who targeted Amhara farmers who moved to the area over twenty years ago. Witnesses said that district officials were complacent and didn't intervene. Ultimately, 54 suspects were [arrested](#) following the brutal incidents.

Similar attacks in Guraferda continued from mid-February to the end of March 2021. As Ristu Yirdaw, the president of Southern Nations, [explained](#) in a press briefing, this round of attacks began when six people were killed in one kebele on 13 February.

According to Ristu, seven Southern Nations security members, three police officers, and four militiamen who were part of a force sent to stabilize the area were “summarily executed” on 1 March, while seven others were wounded.

Ristu depicted the attackers as “bandits” who took the uniforms and weapons from the dead forces then came back later that month disguised as state security forces and killed another eight civilians. Witnesses [reported](#) that more than ten people died in these attacks, which took place in three Guraferda kebeles between 26 and 29 March.

Eyewitnesses [said](#) the killings were committed by “armed personnel wearing military uniforms and equipped with modern firearms.” After the incidents, the attackers retreated into forests at the border between Gambella region and neighboring South Sudan.

On 17 May, nine security personnel—three regular police officers and six Southern Nations special forces—were killed in two kebeles of Sheko *wereda*. The zonal peace and security head [depicted](#) the perpetrators as “anti-peace forces” who do not represent the public.

In two further incidents later than month, four civilians were [reportedly](#) killed on 22 May and another nine between 24 and 25 May in Guraferda *kebele*.

## **Reinforcements demanded**

After holding an urgent zonal council assembly on 24 May 2021, Bench-Sheko Zone released a [communiqué](#) in which it asked for the assistance of “concerned regional and federal bodies.”

The assembly argued that the conflicts started as a result of “[administrative/zonal] structural demands.” However, it accused “anti-peace forces that do not represent any ethnic group at all” of changing the context of those political demands to commit inhuman actions.

According to the communiqué, 151 civilians and 28 security personnel were killed, properties were damaged, and over 21,000 people were displaced from October to May 2021 as a result of conflicts in Bench-Sheko Zone.

The situation only worsened after this communiqué was released.

On 4 June 2021, six Southern Nations special force members were [reportedly](#) killed in Gurafera *wereda* while they were undertaking an operation. According to [local residents](#), this incident was accompanied by looting and burning of rural villages, leading more than 4,000 people to flee.

Guraferda’s head administrator described the attackers as forces that were “organized” about six or seven months before. The district police head admitted the situation was beyond the control of officials at the district and zonal levels. He asked for help from federal authorities, including the national army, to be deployed in the district.

The killings subsided from July 2021 onwards, but looting and burning of properties, including coffee plantations and agricultural farms, continued to be rampant.

In August 2021, residents of the Debub Bench area—one of the hotspots of conflict and part of the contested areas of the zone under the Ayinamba cluster—told *Ethiopia Insight* that there was a prevailing atmosphere of fear owing to farms being routinely burned.

Locals in Janchu kebele claimed that attackers often came suddenly asserting their demands over various kebeles and that civilians were burned alive during conflicts in late April 2021. Conflict in that area dates back at least to November 2020.

Witnesses, victims, and relatives reported that many of those targeted in Janchu kebele were from the Bench and Sheko ethnic groups rather than Amharas, as was the case in Guraferda. Thousands were in the streets of Mizan Aman town after being displaced from several *weredas*. Other victims, including ethnic Sidamas, went to Hawassa to plead for help.

## **Shifting blame?**

After the incident in June 2021, the Guraferda district peace and security head linked the killings with the civil war in northern Ethiopia and [said](#) the Guraferda attack was being waged by forces organized by the “junta”, meaning the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF).

The district security officials' claim was yet another example of the pervasive scapegoating discourse commonly employed by politicians at the national level. Such rhetoric was also nothing new in relation to violent conflicts in Guraferda specifically.

For example, in early November 2020, the Federal Supreme Court sentenced three brothers to either death or life imprisonment for seven counts of murder in relation to attacks in which 61 Amhara residents of Guraferda were killed, and for killing twelve federal police officers and four members of the national army.

The brothers were [charged](#) with engaging in organized crime in different episodes from 2014 to 2016 “in a mission given by TPLF’s destructive forces.” The Supreme Court’s ruling stated that the brothers, along with their accomplices who were not apprehended, incited violence by saying “Amharas invaded your land.”

### **Differing explanations**

Victims from the Amhara ethnic group and residents of the Bench-Sheko Zone have identified the Sheko and Me’eint as perpetrators in the aftermath of conflicts.

Elites representing the Sheko and Me-eint ethnic groups claim there has always been antagonism and blame directed towards their groups, including by zonal and district officials, when it comes to conflicts in Guraferda and the broader South West.

For instance, Al-Ain Amharic, a news outlet from the United Arab Emirates, [reported](#) that the October 2020 attacks in Guraferda began with the local people telling Amhara residents to “leave [their] area.” It quoted an Amhara witness who said the attacks started after “one Sheko man killed his fellow Sheko but then claimed the killing was committed by an ethnic Amhara.”

Similarly, in an April 2021 video [report](#) from Guraferda, Channel 4, a UK news station, reported on the plight of Amharas in the region. The report named “indigenous groups like Sheko” as perpetrators killing Amharas, whom they believe are “unfairly occupying the most fertile land.”

However, the Sheko and Me’ent also claim to be victims. For instance, several Sheko elites and officials are imprisoned, mainly in the Bench-Sheko and Sheka zones of South West.

### **Peace conferences**

Traditional leaders, elders, and religious figures of each competing ethnic group held a series of peace conferences in each district cluster throughout September and October 2021.

Such meetings held in Guraferda ended in [ceremonies](#) of reconciliation. The Bench-Sheko Zone communications office [claimed](#) that those in meetings included “peace ambassadors, religious and tribe leaders, members of the society who went into forests [to fight], and residents.”

According to the Guraferda's chief administrator, traditional leaders and government officials [held talks](#) with all groups in the district kebeles. "Victims and perpetrators have sat together for the peace conference" and the government believes it can bring about lasting peace, he said.

Residents were not convinced and aired their fear of further attacks as long as groups in the area were not disarmed. Promises of compensations were made to the victims, but were not fulfilled.

Some believe that despite the reconciliation efforts, peace will be elusive until the zonal demands and contestation to control the *wereda* between the Sheko and Me'eint ethnic groups are resolved.