INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

Over the last few months, the peaceful coexistence of people living in Gedeo and West Guji has been disturbed. The Gedeo–Guji tension has resulted in thousands of people being displaced from their homes by violence. Nongovernmental organizations, such as Catholic Relief Services and World Vision, are collaborating with the Government of Ethiopia to address people’s immediate needs through holistic responses for internally displaced people (IDPs)—addressing health, nutrition, sanitation and shelter needs.

The Ethiopian Catholic Church (ECC), local government and CRS wanted to address the root causes of the tensions in Gedeo and West Guji. To this end, the ECC, in collaboration with CRS and World Vision, held a daylong high-level consultative peace forum entitled “Collaborative Action for Sustainable Peace.” The forum brought together religious leaders; regional and district government representatives; and traditional, youth and women’s leaders, to provide a platform to reflect on the Gedeo–Guji tension. The forum also created an opportunity for people to come together to identify ways to collaborate to ensure peace between the two communities. Religious leaders included Catholic, Muslim, Lutheran and Protestant representatives, and others, who delivered solidarity messages and expressed their support for peace. The conference was chaired by Cardinal Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphiel, accompanied by Bishop Roberto Bergamaschi of Hawassa, and Bishop Abraham Desta of Meki.
This peacebuilding forum was planned to:

1. Support existing peace efforts between Gedeo and West Guji and involve high-level stakeholders, providing an opportunity for expressions of solidarity and establishing a way forward to act on the commitments to reestablish peace and harmony.
2. Support local government leaders in their efforts to find effective responses to problems between the two communities.
3. Listen to the representatives of the two communities and identify ways they can be better supported in their commitment to bringing back peace and harmony between their people.
4. Secure the commitment of the two communities, through their leaders and representatives, to support peacebuilding efforts and contribute to the solutions by identifying clear next steps.

OPENING ADDRESS

Cardinal Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphiel opened by saying: “We are disheartened by the Guji–Gedeo tension, which has resulted in displacement, casualties and the destruction of communities.” But he said the Ethiopian Catholic Church and its partners were supporting the victims and had started restoration and peacebuilding that will continue in the future. “Conflict is inevitable, but the way we deal with it is the important thing,” he said.

He praised Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s efforts to promote unity within the country, across religions and ethnicities, as well as between neighboring countries. In the same spirit of unity, he urged everyone to work together to contribute to this peacebuilding process. “The government has an irreplaceable role in the peacebuilding process, and relocating those displaced, therefore I send my call to the government to play its role,” he said.

After Cardinal Berhaneyesus’ opening speech and prayers, a representative of the Ethiopian Muslim community, government officials and Aba Gedas (traditional leaders) gave their speeches and prayers.
We give our assurance that we will be in solidarity with the Catholic Church and those who facilitate the peacebuilding process. We have to investigate why these things are happening to us; until now, we didn’t differentiate ourselves by ethnicity and religion. What has happened to us now? We have to ask ourselves and restore the peace we had.

**Abdurezak Temam**
Representative of Ethiopian Muslims

We will be with the Ethiopian Catholic Church in the peacebuilding process of Gedeo and Guji community.

**Abera Afro**
Representative of Ethiopian Kalehiwot Church

Peace is a call from God that should be responded to by everyone. It is God’s will for us to live in solidarity. Though conflict is inevitable, we can work [to avoid] violence. The council’s mission is to prevent conflict before it happens. Conflict between the Guji and Gedeo communities has happened because we didn’t prevent it. Yet, there is a lot to do, so that the conflict is not exacerbated. [We must] reconcile the two communities and work on sustainable peacebuilding. The council has established a platform that works on stability. Overall, ethnic-based violence needs a national response. Therefore, the government must do what it has to do. The council will be successful if the government bears its responsibilities. We believe that we have to identify and focus on the interests where the conflict originates from.

**Mamo Wejega**
Representative of Ethiopian Religious Council

Peace issues are not something we compromise on, and the Bible has commanded us to [resolve them]. The Bible mentions peace about 335 times. We give our assurance that we will be in solidarity with the Catholic Church in this initiative. Let’s contribute what is expected from each of us. Let’s discuss what specific role we can play on this occasion.

**Reverend Terfe Gesese**
Representative of Evangelical Church of Mekaneyesus

We appreciate and thank the Ethiopian Catholic Church, CRS and World Vision for the peacebuilding and reconciliation initiative they have started. Guji and Gedeo are brother communities; conflict is natural, but we need to resolve it in a modern way through discussion. We can’t live without each other. A similar conflict happened 10 years ago; why has it happened again? Why are innocent people dying? Let’s identify [the causes].

**Yimenu Daka**
Gedeo Zone Administrative head

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**Yimenu Daka**
Gedeo Zone Administrative head
Oromia Regional Government has been doing a lot to stabilize and restore the displaced people. We recognize what the Catholic Church and its partners are doing in the restoration and starting this initiative. I ask other religions to also take a lesson from the Ethiopian Catholic church.

**Wegderes Beza**  
Oromia Region Security Bureau

We have to demonstrate what we are talking about through our actions. Every one of us is responsible for peace, despite age, religion or ethnic differences.

**Sr. Teressa**  
Galcha Parish, Gedeo

What we have heard is heart-touching. We are all asking, “Why all this suffering?” We are criticizing ourselves. We need to think about sustainable peace, apart from the temporary aid. We have to act on this suffering as one nation, regardless of our religious and ethnic differences. I call for an action of sustainable peacebuilding and reconciliation. We as one Diocese are ready to contribute whatever we can for this reconciliation and sustainable peacebuilding.

**Bishop Abraham**  
Meki Diocese

We are with you in all our prayers and support needed as a good neighbor. I have a belief that the Aba Gedas will put their promise into action and keep up the work they started.

**Msgr Angelo Antolini**  
Apostolic Vicariate of Robe

We were eating together, drinking coffee, marrying and embracing each other. No one intervened between us for all those years. We have to rebuild our bridges. The solution is in our hands. We ask the government and aid organizations to support us to reinstate the displaced people and continue the peacebuilding initiative for sustainable development. We need to transform our zones from conflict to peace. The government can take a lesson from this effort and support its continuity.

**Abera Buno**  
West Guji Zone Administrative Head

Abera Buno and Shek Mohamed Gobena sit together during the Peace Forum. Photo by Terhas Clark/CRS
We have a great reconciliation culture called “Gondoro.” Peace ensues after any conflict and fighting, [through the] Gondoro procedure. There is no grudge, revenge and death after Gondoro. For centuries, Gedeo have lived together with Guji in solidarity. We have been working and growing together, sharing and exchanging resources in markets where we both make transactions peacefully, fulfilling one another’s [needs]. Our social bond is very, very strong so that no one can break it easily. We received this strong bond from our great-grandfathers and we have to transfer it to our coming generation. Following the recent deadly conflict, we, the traditional leaders, have undertaken the Gondoro procedure twice, but we were unsuccessful. Now, people from other areas and people who are foreigners are concerned about this issue; we understand that we need to work more together with government. Truly speaking, the land issue shouldn’t make us kill each other; because we cannot carry and bring the land to somewhere else. The Aba Gedas of both communities are considered like kings or leaders; we have promised to create stability, but haven’t put into action that promise. Now, to bring a sustainable solution to this problem, we have to stand with government and give strong support.

Wako Wachu
Gedeo Aba Geda

In our community, we have lived peacefully for a century by embracing people who came from other regions and ethnic groups, such us Amhara, Somali, Gedeo and others. Our children attend school together, we have married one another, we practice our traditions of living together during times of happiness and sorrow without major conflict, just peace. Through such peaceful lives, we have seen different government regimes. Recently, due to the application of ethnic boundaries for government administration, we have faced violent conflict that is the result of boundaries. As our prime minister said, we need to leave the idea of boundaries and keep our former tradition of existing together with people from another ethnicity. Our focus should be on [the fact that] we are all one human family. After creating all that violence on human beings, what do we answer in front of God after we pass away? Currently, we the traditional leaders, are trying to bring stability. We are trying to create reconciliation among our youths. I want to give an assignment to religious leaders to bring reconciliation and consensus as we are observing some conflict and accusations between different religions.

Tuke Wako
Guji Aba Geda
After religious and traditional leaders and government representatives spoke, participants gathered in three groups to reflect on the way forward. The questions below were used to help facilitate the group discussions.

- What are the strengths of the Gedeo and Guji communities?
- How can we regain the common values of the two communities, rebuild trust and become close to each other again?
- To restore the strong values within the communities, what is expected of government and nongovernmental organizations?

FINDINGS
Participants gathered in groups to identify solutions for grassroots peacebuilding strategies

**Group 1: Role of the Gedeo–Guji communities**

Group 1 focused on the role of the Gedeo–Guji communities, specifically on the strengths and weaknesses of each community and what can be done to address the sources of tension at the grassroots level. This group first identified the primary strengths and weaknesses of each community. It was highlighted that Gedeo and Guji share a strong culture of supporting one another. It was also observed that a weakness these communities shared was that they had a large youth population and high unemployment rates. The youth in both communities often participated in mass violence without understanding the consequences. There was also minimal enforcement of the rule of law when the youth instigated violence.

It was suggested that elders and traditional leaders continue to transfer the tradition of peaceful coexistence to the youth. Participants also mentioned that traditional, religious and government structures of both communities needed to take this reconciliation discussion to the village level, particularly in the villages and districts where tension persists.
Recommendations

- The government should work to ensure the rule of law so that people live peacefully and can be productive.
- Resettle those affected and provide them with tools so they can work to stabilize the situation by rehabilitating and reconstructing demolished structures, such as churches, schools and other institutions.
- The government should protect the people from the few anti-peace entities and stand with development partners in the peacebuilding process.
- Religious leaders and government representatives should work together to mobilize the community to be engaged in the peacebuilding process.
- Elders need to transfer their knowledge and share their wisdom in order to instill the long tradition of coexistence between Guji and Gedeo.

Group 2: Role of government

Group 2 focused on the role of the government to advance the peacebuilding objective in the Gedeo–Guji communities. Some of the perceived shortcomings of the government included lack of employment opportunities, lack of rule of law and lack of impartiality when it came to law enforcement. Government should:

- Resettle people who are displaced from their homes.
- Recognize and support Aba Gedas in the peacebuilding process.
- Strengthen social and economic institutions to create an enabling environment for collective action so people can collectively organize and openly discuss and address their grievances.
- Create employment opportunities for youth. Specifically, high levels of unemployment among youth is one of the contributing factors for the high number of youth involved in mass conflict.
- Enable and encourage the participation of youth and women at the grassroots level, to restore common positive values.

If NGOs participate in peacebuilding, it will be an additional strength. We need to work on the youth’s attitudes: we are observing selfishness of the leadership.

Group 3: Role of nongovernmental organizations

Some religious institutions could strive to more fairly serve all those in need. Their credibility and integrity would increase if they continued to “walk the talk” of their holy teachings.

Recommendations

- Interrogate, learn and continue to ask why the tension returned after so many years, and examine whether or not NGOs are really reconcilers.
- Strengthen interreligious networks.
- Focus on employment for youth.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Aba Gedas of Guji and Gedeo, Guji and Gedeo communities, government offices, religious institutions and development partners expressed their sadness over the violence that had emerged in the Gedeo and Guji communities. The participants praised the reconciliation efforts of the Aba Gedas, elders and religious leaders. Gratitude was also extended to the Ethiopian Catholic Church—along with its partners, particularly Catholic Relief Services and World Vision—for the humanitarian assistance and the reconciliation efforts that they are making. The Catholic Church stated that it had begun a peacebuilding initiative, so that trust could be rebuilt between the communities, and solidarity and unity strengthened.

The Aba Gedas said: “Since peace is based on togetherness, respect, truth, justice and forgiveness, we, the Aba Gedas and traditional leaders, have an irreplaceable role. Hence, we, the Aba Gedas and traditional leaders, promise to work strongly to build sustainable peace between Guji and Gedeo.

1. We promise to be instruments of peace, to provide solutions through negotiation of the problems between Guji and Gedeo youth.
2. We request government bodies at different levels to serve impartially so that the social network is strengthened for sustainable peace.

NEXT STEPS

3. Ongoing dialogue (consultations or conversations) between the two communities using the people-to-people approach or our 3Bs (Binding-Bonding-Bridging) or 4Ds (Discover-Dream-Design-Deliver) approaches.
4. Capacity building for local peace actors. This includes training community leaders (elders, youth, woman and government administrators).
5. Advocacy campaigns to positively influence government representatives and the communities to take part and actively engage in the peacebuilding process, through facilitated dialogue between government representatives and community leaders (youth, women, elders, religious leaders, etc.)
6. Documenting best practices: The project could commission research monitoring emerging lessons from the community efforts to resolve conflict.
7. Peace fund: Young people from both communities could be brought together to work on joint community projects to enhance collaboration and unity, and build relationships.