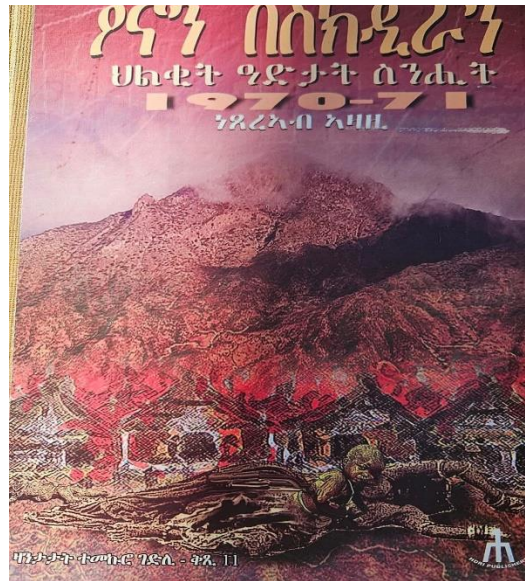


## Remembering the Unforgettable:

### Ona and Besikdira Massacre



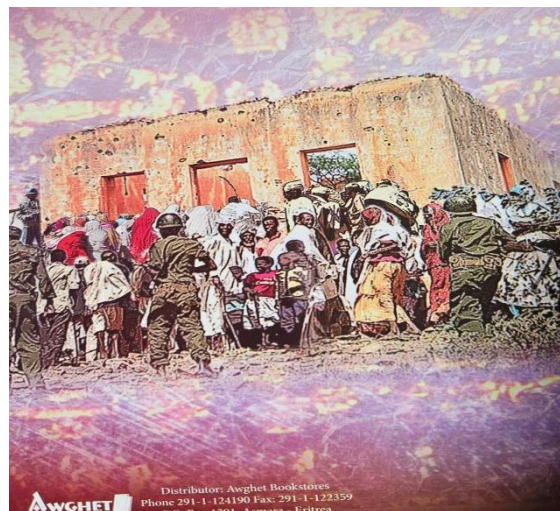
By Simon Weldemikael

When you ask Eritreans today what they remember about November 30 and December 1, 1970, July 10, 1974, Feb 2, 1975 and May 12, 1988 they would tell you the story as if it happened yesterday. These are days when the Ethiopian colonial army massacred innocent Eritreans in Besikdra, Ona, Omhajer, Wekiduba and Sheib respectively. These were just few instances of the merciless attacks on peaceful civilians. The list of dates atrocities were carried out is long and it is registered in the memory of the Eritrean public, young and old.

The massacre of 1970 in Ona and Besikdira, few kilometers away from Keren, was one of the worst instances of mass killing in Eritrean history. The tragic massacre was committed by the Ethiopian army in conformity with Machiavellian advice on holding the conquered: “there is no safe way to retain them otherwise than by ruining them.” Ethiopian soldiers killed entire families, burned houses to ashes, and hauled away anything of value from the houses. 54th anniversary of the Ona and Beskdira Massacre was held on Monday, 2 December in Keren in remembrance of the victims. **ዖናን በሰክዲራን: ህልቂት ዓድታት ሰንሒት** (Ona and Besikdiea-the Massacre of Senhit Villages from 1970-71), a book written by Netsereab Azazi, was inaugurated at the event organized to mark the solemn day in Keren. In writing the book, the author interviewed survivors of the massacre, eyewitnesses and a number of residents of the two villages and consulted secondary sources from the archives.

The book focuses on the sequence of events that started on November 21, 1970 when Major General Teshome Ergetu, commander of the Ethiopian army in Eritrea, was killed and ended on December 1, 1970. Apart from the massacres in Ona and Besikdira, the book covers the atrocities committed by the colonial army in Geleb, Debresina and Habrenqeqa. The author's exhaustive research to gather accurate information makes the book credible and his artistic presentation attractive and readable. The narrative evokes vivid images of the suffering of the innocent civilians.

On November 30, 1970 Ethiopian troops entered Besikdira, rounded up its inhabitants and crammed them into a mosque. The soldiers then pointed their guns at the doors and windows of the mosque and opened fire, indiscriminately killing innocent civilians, including women and children. The blood spilled in Besikdira did not seem to have satiated the blood thirsty Ethiopian soldiers' desire for innocent Eritreans' blood. On the following day, December 1, 1970, they went to Ona, set the huts on fire and gunned down people. Huts were burned and the soldiers fired at and killed those who escaped from the fire. One thousand civilians were killed.



The memorialization at the site where the atrocity was committed serves multiple purposes. It's a tribute to the fallen victims and some sort of reparation or justice for survivors. Speaking at the event held for the remembrance of victims of Ona and Besikdirs, Mr. Zemhret Yohannes, Head of the Research and Documentation Center of the PFDJ, said the purpose of the memorial service is to teach humanity a lesson so that such atrocities are never carried out again. He said by remembering the crimes committed they are not trying to incite hatred but rather remind people of Eritrea's history, learn from the past and strive for a better future.

Memorials are as much about the future as they are about the past. The purpose of memorialization, among other things, is to remember the suffering of victims and work for a better future.

Massacre sites and the memorial services for massacres have been transformed into places and events where people renew their commitment for peace.

Netsereab Azazi's *Ona and Besikdira-the massacre of Senhit Villages from 1970-1971* is a well-researched and presented book that refutes any sort of repudiation by historical evidence. It shows how one thousand people, including entire families, died on those fateful days. The perpetrators of the atrocities might have chosen to forget the massacre at Ona, Besikdira and other places, but Eritreans cannot.

The publication of Netsereab's book will have an important contribution in preserving history and promoting knowledge of Eritrea's experience during colonization. It is a must-read book for every Eritrean and it would be great if initiatives are taken to translate it into all Eritrean languages and international languages.

Netsereab's *Ona and Besikdira-the Massacre of Senhit Villages* is the third book on atrocities committed against the Eritrean people to be published by Hidri Publishers. The two books that had been published earlier are: (ህልቂት ወኪድባ) *Massacre at Wekidiba*, by Habtu Gebreab and (ግፍዒ) *Atrocity*, collected short stories edited by Solomon Berhe.

On Dec 18, 2024