The Eid al-Adhaa Incident of November 2011 in Mega Town

In the past decades in Ethiopia, no one paid much heed to others’ religion and beliefs. Followers of the four Abrahamic religions and traditional beliefs used to respect each other. People buried their dead, helped each other on their farms, and enjoyed each other’s celebrations together. They even inter-married, although in many cases the bride followed the husband’s belief. These traditions went on undisturbed for decades. Nowadays, however, things have changed. Many families now refuse inter-religious marriages between Muslims and Christians, and new animosities have cropped up as the following description of a potentially violent event in late 2011 demonstrates.

The Protestant Conference Incident

A Protestant Conference was held at the Mega Mekane Yesus Church in early November, 2011. Although not an especially large congregation in this particular region, over 1500 Protestants from Moyale, Miyo, Yabello, Bule Hora, and Hawassa came to participate in the meeting held in the Church’s compound in Mega town.

Tsegaye Bekele

Tsegaye Bekele served as CEWARN field monitor for Moyale, Ethiopia. He continues to serve as CEWARN’s local peace building partner.
The following is a play-by-play account of what happened.

Nov. 5, 1 pm: I went to the town to have lunch when I observed small groups of Muslim youth gathering in several places. They were whispering. Although what they were discussing could not be heard, it was easy to see that they were worked up about something. I sensed something was going on. Then I remembered that the following day was the Muslim holiday, Eid Al Adhaa (the Festival of the Sacrifice). Whenever there had been a Muslim celebration in the recent past there had been small skirmishes between Muslims and Protestants. But the problem in 2011 had become considerably more sensitive, as the events were to prove.

Nov. 5, 2 pm: I dialled one of my informants who happened to be a Muslim. He explained that a number of his community’s youths were planning something, adding that there might be a confrontation between Muslims and Protestants the following day.

Nov. 5, 3 pm: I returned to the town and gathered more information that confirmed there was going to be a problem the following day. I immediately rang the local government administrator, who was also the chairman of the local CEWARN Peace Committee. The call did not go through. I tried to call the head of peace and security, also a member of the Woreda Peace Committee. This call did go through. I shared all the information I had gathered. He told me that he had also heard about it. Although he seemed reluctant to act on it initially, he nevertheless said he would check it out.

Nov. 5, 5pm: My informant called back and said some people were hatching a plan to attack the Protestant church after the Eid prayers; I immediately called the peace and security head to tell him what I heard. We met and went together to question the Muslim religious leaders about the matter. They told us they were not aware of any such plan. We instructed them to follow it up from their side; if there was any hint of the threat, they needed to tell us about it. At the same time, we advised them that they should caution against any such attack if there was a plan. “Your people should not be allowed to break the peace,” we told them.

The peace and security head and I headed to his office where he convened an urgent meeting of his staff and some members of the local Woreda Peace Committee. We tried to get a rough estimate of the number of Muslims who would be attending Eid prayers, and concluded that 80 per cent of Mega town and its suburbs residents would be present. The next step for us was to check out how many police and militia personnel we had at hand. There was only a
small contingent—not a good thing if the imminent attack was going to be carried out. Members present at the meeting were ordered to gather more information and to keep the religious leaders, the local Peace Committee members, and the Kebele (ward) elders informed. We examined every option available to us to prevent what was clearly going to be a violent situation.

Nov. 5, 8 pm: I received a call from the peace and security head who told me that the attack was definitely on, and he reported that he was going to ask the Yabello zone administration for extra riot police. I agreed, and at the same time dispatched some armed police and militias to keep the peace in the town.

Nov. 6, 7:30 am: Muslims, young and old, women and children, started flowing towards the place where prayers were to be held. Lorries and motorbikes ferried the faithful while even more arrived on foot.

Nov. 6, 8:30 am: Land Cruisers loaded with riot police in full gear and batons and shields arrived in Mega town from Yabello. They took up positions on the two streets in the town leading to the Protestant Church. A message was sent to the Church to close the gates and not to let anyone out. The arrangement was to post unarmed elders to stand at the first point as the youths left the prayers. The police and militias were stationed 50 meters from the elders. The plan was for the elders to try to talk the youths out of their plan; if that failed, then the police and militias would engage them.

Nov. 6, 9:30 am: After the prayers, the Muslim youth flowed into the town. They stopped near the Orthodox Church where they began to chant “Allahu Akbar,” and “there is no son of God”, and other slogans. They didn’t stay long at the Orthodox Church, but rushed off in the direction of the Protestant Church. They reached the point where the elders were standing. The elders talked and pleaded with them to calm down. But the elders failed to stop them. They reached the cordon formed by the police and militias, who halted their advance. The police talked to them and advised them against violence.

All this time, the commander of police from Yabello, the Mega peace and security head, and I were observing the situation from a position in the middle of the street behind the police and militias. I failed to notice that a man dressed in Islamic attire, an outsider to the best of my knowledge, had been standing beside us all along.

The crowd did not listen to the police and militia. They overwhelmed them and pushed forward. The commander ordered his men to shoot into the air when he realised the crowd was not going to be deterred. He said that if they still refused to disperse, legal action would be taken against them.
Nov. 6, 10:30 am: We took cover away from the road for safety. Then, suddenly, I noticed that the man who was standing next to us had vanished. I looked at the crowd and saw that the man was now with them, and that the provocative chanting stopped. The man appeared to be having a very serious talk with them, while looking in our direction and gesturing. The crowd seemed to disperse but in fact they were regrouping in an attempt to use an alternative route to the Protestant Church. Fortunately, the police and militia had also blocked the other street. At this point, they resumed their chanting and headed back to the mosque. Perhaps the man who had been standing beside us had also warned them that legal action would be taken against them. I later pointed this man out to the authorities who arrested him together with others suspected to have been behind the mobilisation. Things went quiet and the town appeared deserted after the Muslims returned to their homes to celebrate their holy day in the usual manner.

I can only imagine the catastrophic impact of the attack had it succeeded. Many of the Muslim youth were carrying stones and sticks and who knows how many of them were carrying concealed knives. Many people might have been injured or even killed if the mob managed to reach the Protestant Church. But I think that the majority of those in the crowd were not aware that the incident had been planned in advance.

After the incident, the government called all the town’s religious leaders together for a workshop. When the workshop was over the ringleaders were identified and the Muslim community’s leaders scolded those who planned the abort ed attack. They were let off with a stern warning not to engage in such disruptive actions again. The events of November 6 2011 taught me that many innocent community members are at risk of getting into serious trouble over matters that they really knew little about. The irony of the situation is that otherwise sincere people are easily incited to rash actions that end up with longtime neighbours and friends bearing the brunt of the trouble. I learnt we have to be wary of those who exploit religion only as a pretext for perpetuating violence. But most of all, I learnt that early information and early response is an essential tool for the prevention of conflict and violence.

A year later, Eid 2012 passed peacefully.