Ethiopia Protests - Hachalu Hundessa, an Oromo icon

Why in news?

Over 80 people have been killed in clashes with security forces in Ethiopia following the murder of popular singer Hachalu Hundessa.

What happened?

- The musician was shot by unidentified assailants in the Galan Condominium area of capital city Addis Ababa.
- The motive for the murder remains unclear.
- The local police has arrested some individuals in connection with the case.
- A Human Rights Watch report stated the government cut internet services across the country, in response.
- This made it difficult to access information on those who were killed and injured in the protests.

What was the recent controversy?

- Just before his death, on June 22, 2020, Hundessa gave an interview to the Oromia Media Network (OMN).
- This had sparked outrage on social media.
- During the interview, he criticised the government.
- He spoke out against the marginalisation faced by his community, the Oromos.
- Following his death, OMN was raided by the police and several journalists were detained.
- Jawar Mohammed, who owns the network, was also taken into custody.

Who are the Oromos?

- The Oromo community is the largest ethno-linguistic group of Ethiopia.
- It makes up more than 50% of the country's population.
- They speak a language of the Cushitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic family.
- There are thousands of Oromo people living in diaspora, largely residing in the U.S., Australia, Canada, Norway, England and Sweden.

Who is Hachalu Hundessa?

- Hundessa, 34, was a musician and activist.
- Born into the Oromo community, he sang about their struggle for freedom.
- Hundessa started writing songs when he was imprisoned for political activities between 2003 and 2008.
- There are not many artists in East Africa who get to witness their own stellar achievement in their lifetime. But Hachalu Hundessa did.

How significant was Hundessa?

- Hundessa was the undisputed king of contemporary Oromo music of resistance (also known as Geerarsa).
- He used his artistic tools to engage in the most profound reflections on issues of identity, dispossession, precarity, marginalisation and love.
- His songs encapsulate some of the most complex, subtle and painful narrations about the reality of the Oromo experience.
- These include the political repression, the cultural subordination, and the economic deprivation the Oromo have been suffering for decades.
- Many within his Oromo community saw him as indispensable to their struggle for political emancipation.
- He gave voice to the anti-government protests that emerged in 2014.
- This culminated in the resignation of prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn in 2018.
- Desalegn was succeeded by Abiy Ahmed to become the first prime minister from the Oromo community.
- Ahmed won the Nobel peace prize in 2019 for his efforts towards resolving the border dispute with neighbouring Eritrea.

When did tensions begin?

- The protests began in 2014 after the government announced a plan to expand the boundaries of the capital into the Oromia region.
- The community was concerned that the expansion would displace farmers living in the outskirts.
- The plan, called the “Addis Ababa Master Plan”, was eventually dropped.
- However, the protests continued.
- This signalled the growing frustration of the ethnic group facing marginalisation.
- Separately, anti-government protests also emerged in the Amhara region.
- This is home to another ethnic community called the Amharas.
- Tensions in Oromia and Amhara escalated after October 2, 2016.
- That was when, during the Oromo thanksgiving holiday, over 55 people were killed in a stampede.
- After fresh protests broke out following the incident, the government

declared a state of emergency.

- It established a special unit to “rehabilitate” those who had been arrested for participating in violence or unrest in the past year.
- According to Amnesty International, following the events of October 2016, the government security forces arrested tens of thousands of people.
- These include arrests in Amhara and Oromia among other regions.
- Those arrested included political activists, protesters, journalists and members of the Human Rights Council among others.

What are the recent human rights violations?

- Various reforms led to the release of thousands of detainees following Ahmed’s prime ministership.
- However, a recent Amnesty report claims that Ethiopian security forces have committed “grave” violations between December 2018 and December 2019.
- Since March 2019, security officers have forcefully evicted over 60 families from Oromia’s East and West Guji zones.
- The report adds that in order to mobilise support ahead of the now postponed elections, politicians have been trying to stir up ethnic and religious animosities.
- They have sparked inter-communal violence and armed attacks in five of the country’s nine regional states.
- Amidst this, Hundessa's tragic death is an incalculable loss as he inspired a whole generation of Oromos to fight for their rights.

Source: Indian Express

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