Moyale-The Answer Ethiopia Refuses to Hear

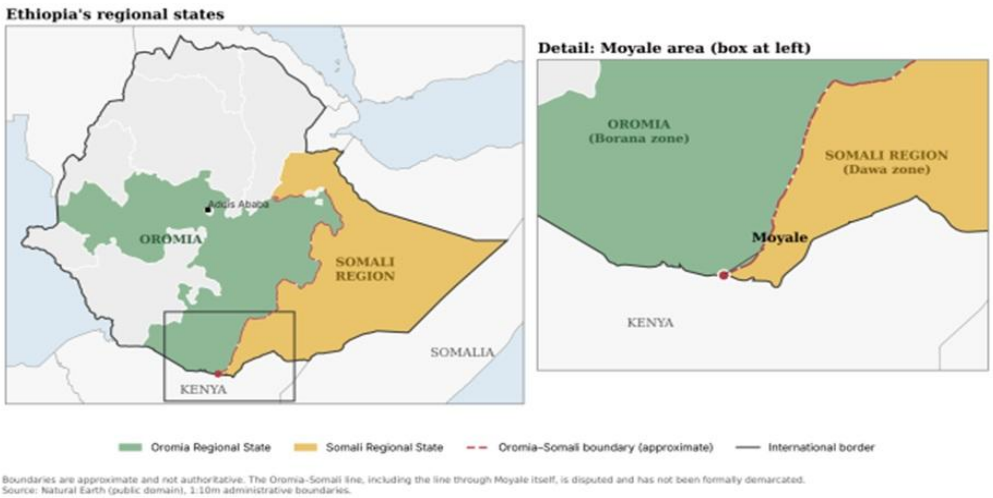
By Sa'ad Awale & Ahmed Roble

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Understanding the root causes of conflict and the quest for peace in Moyale

On 18 October 2026, officials from Ethiopia's Somali Regional State opened an office in the Somali-administered part of Moyale and raised their regional flag over it. Within a few days, the town was at war.[1] Regional forces and allied militias fired machine guns and mortars down residential streets,[2] and one of the first people reported killed was a 13-year-old girl.[3] A month later, the fighting has reached neighbouring Hudet, and the federal government still has not stopped it.

It is tempting to see this as just another round of ethnic clashes. It is not. A flag did not start this war. A question left unanswered for more than twenty years did: *whose town is Moyale?* Ethiopia's government has the legal means to answer it and has chosen not to.



Moyale sits where Oromia, the Somali Region and Kenya meet. The regional line through the town has never been formally demarcated.

[1]Capital Ethiopia. "Deadly Moyale Border Clashes Displace Over 14,000 in Southern Ethiopia." 27 October 2026. Reports on the 18 October outbreak of violence and the initial death toll.

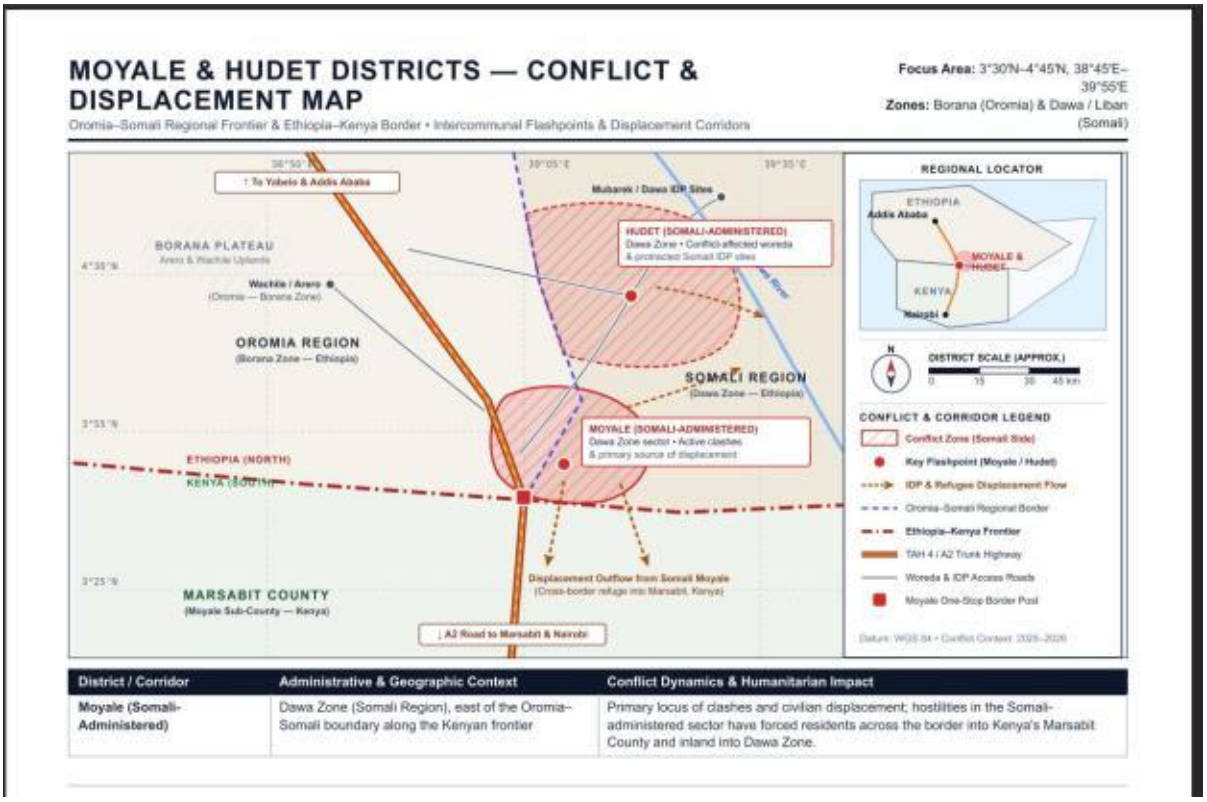
[2]The Rio Times. "Somali and Oromia Forces Fight in Moyale." October 2026. Reports on the regional forces, heavy weapons, the new regional office and the competing claims over Moyale's administration. https://www.riotimesonline.com/ethiopia-moyale-somali-oromia-fighting-2026/

[3]Latin Times. "Ethiopia Moyale Clashes: Displacement into Kenya." October 2026. Reports on the killing of a 13-year-old girl, displacement into Kenya and UNHCR figures. https://www.latintimes.com/ethiopia-moyale-clashes-displacement-kenya-600630

1. A Crisis That Crosses Borders

Nobody yet knows how many people have died. Community leaders we spoke to say around 40 kebeles in Moyale and Hudet districts have been hit.[4] The UN refugee agency and its partners have asked for $8.9 million to help up to 50,000 people who have crossed into Kenya,[5] and Kenyan officials say arrivals have already passed that figure.[6]

The violence is also moving. On 14 November, eight Somali civilians, among them women and children, were killed at Malkamari on the Dawa River, about 350 km east of Moyale, where Ethiopia's Somali Region meets Kenya's Mandera County.[7] Many now fear the conflict will spread along the frontier and into Kenya.[8]



Moyale and Hudet districts: flashpoints and displacement corridors along the Oromia–Somali and Ethiopia–Kenya borders.

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[4]Interview with community leaders in Moyale and Hudet districts, Dawa Zone, Somali Regional State, 15 November 2026; and the authors' communications with community leaders and residents, October and November 2026.

[5]UNHCR. "UNHCR Warns of Growing Humanitarian Needs as Thousands Flee Ethiopia to Kenya." News comment by the UNHCR Representative in Kenya, 28 October 2026. https://www.unhcr.org/node/31848

[6]Daily Nation (Kenya). "Refugees in Moyale Hit 50,000 Mark as Chaos Rocks Ethiopia." November 2026. https://nation.africa/kenya/counties/marsabit/refugees-in-moyale-hit-50-000-mark-chaos-rocks-ethiopia--5651324

[7]Anadolu Agency. "8 Killed in Militia Attack Near Kenya-Ethiopia Border." 14 November 2026. Reports on the killing of eight civilians in the Malkamari area. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/8-killed-in-militia-attack-near-kenya-ethiopia-border/4125217

[8]Wardheer News. "Violence Erupts Around Moyale: Clan Revenge Killings Compound Oromo-Somali Conflict." 15 November 2026. https://wardheernews.com/violence-erupts-around-moyale-clan-revenge-killings-compound-oromo-somali-conflict/

2. A Town Divided Twice

Moyale is cut in two by the Kenyan border, and the Ethiopian half is cut again by the line between Oromia and the Somali Region. Oromia says the new Somali office stands on its side of that line.[9] But nobody knows exactly where that line runs. It has never been marked.

For generations the Garre Somali and the Boran Oromo have shared the town's wells, grazing land and markets. When Ethiopia redrew itself into ethnic regions in the early 1990s, both regional governments laid claim to Moyale. Today the two regions and the federal government share, uneasily, in running it.

Ethiopia's own statistics tell us who lives there. In the 1994 census, the Somali-administered Moyale woreda was 99.9 percent Somali.[10] The Oromia-administered woreda was more mixed, at 52.9 percent Oromo and 37.3 percent Somali.[11] Official projections for 2026 put about 69 percent of greater Moyale's 96,000 people on the Somali-administered side.[12]

The history supports the numbers. Scholars from I. M. Lewis to Lee Cassanelli place Garre communities on this frontier well before Emperor Menelik II's armies came south in the 1890s.[13] Yes, many Garre speak Afaan Oromo. But on a pastoral frontier, people learn their neighbours' language to trade and survive; it is not a title deed. The anthropologists Günther Schlee and Fekadu Adugna have shown how identities here shifted through alliances and marriage.[14] Borana oral tradition itself says the ancient Tula wells were dug by the Warday, a Somali Dir community,[15] and inherited by the Boran after the Oromo migrations of the sixteenth century.[16]

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[9]The Rio Times. "Somali and Oromia Forces Fight in Moyale." See note 2.

[10]Central Statistical Authority of Ethiopia. The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia: Results for Somali Region, Volume I, p. 71.

[11]Wikipedia, "Moyale (Oromia woreda)," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moyale,_Oromia_(woreda); Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia, 2007 Population and Housing Census, population and ethnic composition tables for Moyale (Oromia).

[12]Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia. Population projections for 2026, Moyale (Somali) and Moyale (Oromia) woredas. July 2025.

[13]Lewis, I. M. Peoples of the Horn of Africa: Somali, Afar and Saho. 1955; and A Pastoral Democracy. 1961. Cassanelli, Lee V. The Shaping of Somali Society. 1982.

[14]Schlee, Günther. Identities on the Move: Clanship and Pastoralism in Northern Kenya. 1989. Fekadu Adugna. "Overlapping Nationalist Projects and Contested Spaces: The Oromo–Somali Borderlands in Southern Ethiopia." Journal of Eastern African Studies 5, no. 4 (2011): 773–787. https://library.au.int/node/321441

[15]Historical and ethnographic studies on the Tula wells and Borana–Somali historical interactions: Helland (1980); Tiki (2010); Culis, Ali and Irwin (2019); and Ochungo et al. (2022).

[16]On the sixteenth-century Oromo population movements and their consequences: Mohammed Hassen, The Oromo and the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia, 1300–1700 (2015); Daniel Ayana, "From Geographic Skirt to Geographic Drift: The Oromo Population Movement of the Sixteenth Century," The Journal of Oromo Studies (2011); Hiroki Ishikawa, "Migration to the Christian Kingdom of Northern Ethiopia and Its Consequences," African Study Monographs (2008); Bethwell Allan Ogot, ed., Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century, UNESCO General History of Africa, Vol. V (1992); and Abba Bahrey, The History of the Galla, traditionally dated to 1593, the earliest surviving account of these movements.

3. An Unfinished History of Repression

These grievances are old. The Garre Sultanate stood up to both British and Abyssinian rule. The British arrested Sultan Gabaaba Mahad in 1923, and his son and grandson were later killed under Haile Selassie. In the 1960s, Kenya and Ethiopia, with British help, fought the so-called Shifta war against Somali movements in Kenya's Northern Frontier District and southern Ethiopia,[17] and in 1963 they signed a defence pact to do it.[18] For Somali families in Moyale, today's fighting brings that history back.

4. The Rule Ethiopia Wrote, Then Shelved

Ethiopia's 1995 constitution has a rule for exactly this. Under Article 48, if two regions cannot agree on a boundary, the House of Federation has two years to settle it "based on settlement patterns and the wishes of the peoples concerned".[19] By that measure, Moyale's case is clear.

In October 2004 a federal referendum asked people in disputed kebeles along the Oromia–Somali boundary, 463 of them by the national election board's count, which region they wanted to join.[20] Roughly 80 percent of the contested areas went to Oromia, and there were many complaints of irregularities.[21] Somali officials say they were never consulted or shown the results. In Moyale's nine disputed kebeles, the vote was put off and has never been held.

Why was Moyale left out? Abadula Gemeda, who was Oromia's president from 2005 to 2010 and later Ethiopia's defence minister, is quoted as admitting that the ruling coalition "did not want the referendum to take place in Moyale, because the majority of the town's population was Somali."[22] His predecessor, Junedin Sado, reportedly described Moyale as a "make-or-break issue".[23] The decision came from the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, in which the Oromo People's Democratic Organization was a leading member.[24]

Neither man disputes who lives in Moyale. What worried them was losing a profitable border crossing on the Addis Ababa–Nairobi Road. But Oromia is a region, not a country. It does not need its own international gateway, and federalism does not hand a town to whichever region values it most.

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[17]UK Parliament, House of Lords. "Northern Frontier District of Kenya." Hansard, 3 April 1963. https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/1963-04-03/debates/43c1b02a-97fa-463a-a0ea-35c7881a57b6/NorthernFrontierDistrictOfKenya

[18]In July 1963, Ethiopia and Kenya signed a mutual defence pact. Its primary objective, among other provisions, was to silence the Somali communities living under the two states, who were demanding their fundamental rights in accordance with the principles of the United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity, most notably the right to self-determination.

[19]Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Proclamation No. 1/1995, Article 48 (State Border Changes). Available via Refworld: https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/1995/en/18206

[20]Al Jazeera. "Ethiopia Moyale Clashes Disrupt Livelihoods as Territorial Dispute Deepens." 17 November 2026, citing Ethiopia's National Election Board. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/11/17/ethiopia-moyale-clashes-disrupt-livelihoods-as-territorial-dispute-deepens

[21]Wikipedia, "Moyale (Somali woreda)," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moyale,_Somali_(woreda); Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), reporting on the disputed Oromia–Somali boundary and the 2004 referendum.

[22]Moyale News. "Abadula Gemeda Interview: 2004 Referendum in Moyale." 27 October 2026. Video: https://www.facebook.com/darweshma/videos/1637794751060985/

[23]Eastern Nation Report. "Junedin Sado Remark on Moyale as a 'Make-or-Break Issue'." 2 November 2026.

[24]Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), member organisations: https://eprdf.org.et/EPRDFE/faces/ssi/member.jsp?type=OPDO. The EPRDF comprised four ethno-political parties: the TPLF, the OPDO, the ANDM and the SEPDM.

5. Why the Stakes Are Rising

With the vote shelved, armed regional forces stepped in, each betting that whoever holds the ground will keep it. A 2025 Rift Valley Institute study found that the boundaries left unclear in 2004 are still largely unresolved.[25] Every clash in Moyale since then grows from that same failure.

This round is more dangerous than the last. Oromo politicians now dominate federal institutions and the security services, and Somalis, like Afar, Amhara and Tigrayan communities caught in their own boundary disputes, worry that hardliners see a chance to settle contested towns by force while they can. Addis Ababa's slow response has made that worse. Elders tell us wounded people have been stopped from travelling to the capital for treatment.[26]

One thing should be clear. The Boran have deep roots in Moyale, and the Burji, Amhara, Gurage and others have made their homes there too. Recognizing that most of the town is Somali does not mean pushing anyone out. It means applying Ethiopia's own rules fairly, instead of letting the side with the heavier weapons decide.

6. Seven Steps to Peace

This is a political conflict, and it needs a political answer. We urge Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government to act now:

Stop the killing. Pull both regions' forces and militias out of Moyale and Hudet, send in neutral federal police, and set up an independent commission that publishes what it finds.
Open the doors. Let aid agencies work freely across Dawa Zone and make sure the sick and wounded can reach hospitals safely.
Deliver justice. Try those who carried out attacks, and those who ordered or armed them, before impartial courts, and compensate victims. When killers go unpunished, killing becomes a tactic.
Bring people home. Ethiopia, Kenya and UNHCR should plan safe, voluntary return with displaced families, and make sure it is not used to change the town's population before a vote.
Finish what 2004 left undone. The House of Federation should hold the referendum in Moyale's nine kebeles, with an updated voter roll and observers from the African Union and IGAD and publish the full 2004 records. The constitution allows two years to settle a dispute. Moyale has waited twenty-two.
Protect minorities in law. Whichever region governs Moyale must guarantee minorities' rights to land, language and local representation.
Keep the world watching. Kenya, which is hosting the displaced,[27] and Ethiopia's partners should say plainly that a ceasefire is not a settlement, and tie their support to accountability, return and a public timetable.

[25]Rift Valley Institute. "Minor Demarcations, Micro-Dams — Major Drama?" 2025.

[26]Interview with community leaders in Moyale and Hudet districts, Dawa Zone, Somali Regional State, 20 November 2026.

[27]Daily Nation (Kenya). Report on leaders' warnings of a humanitarian and insecurity crisis on the Kenya–Ethiopia border. November 2026. https://nation.africa/kenya/news/leaders-humanitarian-crisis-insecurity-kenya-ethiopia-border-5645530

The Answer Ethiopia Already Has

Ethiopia does not need to invent anything to end this conflict. Its constitution already sets the test. Its statistics office has already counted the people. The House of Federation already has the power to decide. What has been missing is the will to let those rules produce an answer some powerful people may not like, and a government neutral enough to be trusted with it. Peace also needs justice and a safe way home. Without them, any deal will rest on graves and empty houses.

In 2004, Ethiopia asked the people of Moyale where they belonged and then refused to hear their answer. It should ask them again, and this time it should listen.

About the Authors:

Dr Sa'ad Awale is a physician and healthcare services administrator with an interest in governance, community development and state-building in the Horn of Africa. He writes on state-building, social development and service delivery, with particular attention to the challenges of building inclusive and accountable institutions.

Ahmed Roble is a humanitarian and development specialist focusing on state-building, accountability, peacebuilding and minority rights in conflict settings. His work examines the social, political and institutional dynamics affecting ethnic minority communities in conflict-affected areas of Ethiopia and South Sudan, with particular attention to conflict resolution, protection and inclusive governance.

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