The African Union Human Rights Memorial: 
Remembering Victims of Mass Atrocities in Africa  

Photo: Ted Mebrahtu

In Memory of Alem Bekagn: ‘Farewell to the World’
Acknowledgements

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The African Union Human Rights Memorial Project

The African Union Human Rights Memorial (AUHRM) project aims to preserve the memory of gross human rights abuses, in recognition of past suffering and to prevent such occurrences in future, in the interest of future peace and security. The African Union (AU) in its Constitutive Act made a commitment to ensure continental cooperation on the basis of human rights principles, constitutionalism, and the responsibility to intervene in the case of crimes against humanity or genocide.

The plan for an AU human rights memorial originated from a resolution taken on 7 April 2004, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda, adopted by the Committee of Permanent Representatives to the AU and sponsored by Rwanda. This resolution made the commemoration of the genocide in Rwanda on 7 April an annual event in the AU calendar. The resolution also committed the Commission to the remembrance of the abuses of the Red Terror, and the recognition of the fact that the site of the new AU Conference and Office Complex was the historical location of the former Addis Ababa prison, Alem Bekagn, the site of atrocities prior to, and during Dergue rule, in Ethiopia. The resolution also listed slavery and Apartheid as among the ‘unprecedented’ tragedies in the history of Africa.

The original intention was to preserve the octagonal building of Alem Bekagn as a human rights memorial museum, dedicated in the first instance to the victims of the Red Terror and the Rwanda Genocide.

The Year of Peace and Security (YoPS) in Africa programme that was launched in 2010 provided ample opportunity to revive the idea of a memorial. It was in this context that the Chairperson of the Commission, Dr Jean Ping, in his speech to the 14th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the Union, held in Addis Ababa from 31st January to 2nd February 2010, indicated that the Commission would ‘initiate steps to build a permanent memorial to the victims of human rights violations, including genocide, within the African Union headquarters’

As follow up to this commitment, two expert seminars were convened by the Peace and Security Department, in collaboration with the Political Affairs Department, to brainstorm and advise on the scope, purposes and forms the memorial should assume.

The AUHRM, it was recommended, will be designed to manifest the duty to remember, providing recognition of the victims. It will serve as a place for healing and public education, and will comprise other aspects of the AU’s heritage such as slavery, colonialism, the Rwanda genocide (1994), and apartheid in South Africa. It is also envisaged that the memorial will include a temporary rotating exhibit, drawing on the strengths of African groups and institutions with an established record of commemorating atrocities to establish a dynamic and inclusive memorial institution. It will incorporate the input of survivors of genocide and conflict and give attention to concerns about gender equity. It will contribute to the development and promotion of human rights norms and peacebuilding.

Consultations on the AUHRM went through a number of stages.
First Consultative Meeting of 15-16 November 2010

Based on the 2004 resolution, a seminar was convened in November 2010 to discuss and recommend on the development of the AUHRM. The seminar brought together AU officials, members of the Permanent Representatives to the AU, members of survivor groups, international partners, specialists on the genocide in Rwanda, the Ethiopian Red Terror, memorialisation and human rights, in order to exchange ideas on the objectives, function and design of the Memorial and its relationship to the theme of peace. It was agreed that those present at the meeting would constitute a Technical Working Group.

The group recommended that AUHRM should manifest both the duty to remember, provide a place of recognition as well as mourning, and the duty to overcome denial, silence and disregard. They also resolved that the memorial should have an educative function. The AU agreed to work on the plan to establish a mechanism for follow-up on the following recommendations:

a. The identification of an external space dedicated to the memory of the victims of Alem Bekagn central prison;
b. The construction of a permanent memorials that will be dedicated to the victims of the Rwanda Genocide, Apartheid and slavery; and the organisation of an inaugural event to commemorate those who perished during the Red Terror campaign and victims of other human rights violations elsewhere in Africa;
c. The establishment of temporary exhibits to memorialise human rights violations across the continent.

Second Consultative Meeting of 4-5 November 2011

The Second Consultative Meeting was held on 4-5 November 2011 to discuss and agree on modalities for building a permanent memorial for the victims of human rights violations in Africa within the AU Headquarters. The participants were tasked with developing concrete proposals to implement the existing recommendations for the memorial.

They drew up an action plan, making recommendations on:

a. Funding and management
b. Public education, including publications and a website
c. An AUHRM network of memorial museums, human rights and survivors associations
d. Designs and forms of memorialisation, and processes for decision-making on these.
e. Commemorative events

The meeting set up an interim board to oversee the progress of the AUHRM project and to realise the decisions that were made during the meeting.

**Alem Bekagn: A sad History**

The African Union’s new Conference and Office Complex is built upon the site of Ethiopia’s former central prison, known locally as *Alem Bekagn* ‘farewell to the world’. There are different stories on how *Alem Bekagn* earned its name, but all agree that it was the citadel of oppression for successive Ethiopian dictatorships: Fascist-colonial, Imperial and Communist.

Alem Bekagn was a squat octagonal building with two tiers of cells opening onto a courtyard. It was the first prison in the country to be constructed along modern lines. Some accounts suggest it was built as early as 1923, under the rule of Empress Zewditu, but it was in 1937 under Italian occupation, that it became notorious. The Fascist Governor of Ethiopia, General Rodolfo Graziani, detained and executed the cream of the country’s intelligentsia at Alem Bekagn, a massacre which spread across the country eventually killing an estimated 30,000 people.

After the restoration of Emperor Haile Selassie during World War II, it was in *Alem Bekagn* that political dissidents and revolutionaries were detained. Within its walls, students who led the Eritrean nationalist movement, the Tigrayan rebellion, and the Ethiopian Revolution itself, all conducted debates and seminars inside the notorious *Alem Bekagn*. It was here that Haile Selassie’s students dreamed of a new Ethiopia. It was in *Alem Bekagn* some grew in determination to make their nationalist and revolutionary dreams real.

In 1974, Haile Selassie was overthrown, but the Provisional Military Administrative Committee, known as the Dergue, displayed its orgy of violence just two months later, summarily executing sixty (60) Ministers from the previous Imperial Government at *Alem Bekagn* and buried them on the prison grounds.

As if this was not enough, the Red Terror of 1977-78 soon followed, and *Alem Bekagn* became the epicenter for the destruction of a generation of young Ethiopians by execution, torture and imprisonment. In Addis Ababa alone,
more than ten thousand (10,000) Ethiopians were murdered. Thousands passed through the prison gates: student radicals were incarcerated along with imprisoned Royals and Feudal Lords, Eritrean nationalists, Somali and Oromo separatists, and anyone else suspected of being an enemy of the Dergue. Later they were joined by some who had initially backed the military regime, including the architects or promoters of universal literacy, land reform, and religious freedom.

Under the Dergue, the number of prisoners rose to 1300, and the overcrowding made harsh conditions worse. This was a maximum security prison as prisoners were under close surveillance, including by two machine guns lodged on the cells. Due to its design, prisoners could see nothing but the sky from the courtyard. Former prisoners and their family members recall being allowed one visit each week, when the prisoners, were led out to the fence outside the building gate, but within the compound, where their wives and children were lined up behind another fence, about four feet away. Messages had to be shouted over the din, and food could be passed across; those whose relatives could not visit suffered most from a lack of provisions. Life was especially precarious during the rainy season: prisoners in cells lay on cold ground, some without mattresses, and the rain soaked their blankets. Others slept on the veranda or in the open, covered only with a plastic sheet.

Over the years, hundreds, possibly thousands, were executed in Alem Bekagn or died of illness or the wounds of torture. Other prisoners were released, often after spending months and years without charge. One prisoner escaped and fled across the alleyway to the OAU compound seeking refuge, from where he was handed back. Members of the royal family, including Princess Tenagnewerk, spent fifteen (15) years inside Alem Bekagn, until they were released following an international campaign. Another released detainee was a child of thirteen, born and brought up inside the prison walls.

When the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) swept into Addis Ababa on 28 May 1991, the prison guards abandoned their posts and left the gates unguarded. Hundreds of prisoners ran home to their families; others with nowhere to go stumbled bewildered into the streets and then returned to sleep in the only place they knew, free but unable to make use of their freedom. Soon afterwards, the bodies of the sixty ministers were exhumed from their anonymous graves in the prison compound and returned to their families and Alem Bekagn was returned to its ordinary use as a prison.

For 45 years, and the entire lifetime of the OAU and the first half decade of the AU, the institution was situated adjacent to and overlooking Alem Bekagn. Staff and visitors were aware of the killings and abuses there but they, like the rest of the world, helplessly remained silent. In 2004, a new central prison was built. The AU was given the land on which Alem Bekagn stood, and in 2007, the prison was
demolished in preparation for the new AU Conference and Office complex. While all traces of the prison have been eradicated, the AU has abandoned its history of indifference. The AU has recognized the atrocities at Alem Bekagn and is committed to preserving that memory of the infamous legacy, and to say ‘never again’.

The AU Human Rights Memorial Project: Interim Board

In collaboration with the AU, a technical group of experts, representatives of the AU Commission, permanent members to the AU (Ethiopia, Rwanda and South Africa), academics, members of survivor groups, museums, memorial centres, civil society and donor organisations met in Addis Ababa on 4-5 November 2011 and decided that an Interim Board be established with authority to coordinate the Memorial Project and related events.

Members of the Interim Board include:

1. Professor Andreas Eshete (Chair);
2. Three representatives from the AU Commission, including Office of the Chairperson, Department of Political Affairs and Department of Peace and Security;
3. Permanent Representatives to the African Union of Ethiopia, Rwanda and South Africa;
4. Survivors group: Ethiopian Red Terror survivors and Rwanda survivors;
5. Memorial museums (to be decided through consultation), to include Aegis Trust (Rwanda) and Maison des Esclaves (Senegal) and Sites of Conscience;
6. Civil Society: Justice Africa, InterAfrica Group and Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation and Research Centre;
7. AU Partners represented by the Government of Japan.

The Interim Board is led by Chairperson Professor Andreas Eshete, former President of Addis Ababa University. Professor Eshete, graduate of Yale University, is a Law and Philosophy professor. He is currently chair for the African Institute for Democratic Deliberation and Action; UNESCO Chair for Human Rights, Peace and Democracy at Addis Ababa University and the advisor to the Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

Professor Eshete expressed his expectations and future plans for the Interim Board as follows:

‘I expect the interim board to shepherd the execution of the AU Human Rights Memorial with special attention for certain concerns, among them: to make sure sites of grave violations on the new AU grounds are demarcated and preserved; to secure free public access to the memorial; to see that this is not merely a memorial of man’s inhumanity to man but one with a particular focus...’
on African citizens victimised by belligerent states; if possible, it would be good to set aside days when the memorial is reserved for visits by schoolchildren, a step that would also serve to introduce the AU to youth.

The responsibility that the AU and Professor Eshete, together with his team, have assumed is extensive and very critical. The Interim Board is conscious that the creation of the Memorial is to provide visitors with an opportunity to reflect upon the impact gross violations of human rights, slavery, the 1994 Rwandan genocide, apartheid in South Africa, and colonialism had in shaping the demography, history, culture, and overall development in Africa.

**Linking the AUHRM to the rest of Africa’s Memorials**

Africans are creating a rich memorial landscape. Across the continent there are monuments, museums and memory processes remembering mass atrocities, from slavery and colonialism, to postcolonial conflicts, apartheid and genocide. Memory is increasingly associated with reconciliation, healing, justice and conflict-prevention.

The African Union Human Rights Memorial will build on and strengthen national memorialisation in the aftermath of conflict. It will foster connections between African institutions and groups with a commitment to remembering in the interests of human rights and peace. It aims to share memories, to acknowledge diverse experiences of suffering and various forms of remembrance, and to learn from the continent’s tragic past.

The AUHRM will draw from, and/or link to, the following memorials in the continent:

**Red Terror Memorial in Ethiopia**

Due to its location in Addis Ababa, the AU has a particular duty to keep the memory of the massacres and other abuses committed by the Dergue regime in Ethiopia, especially the Red Terror of 1977-1978. The new AU building is constructed upon the site of the former prison, Alem Bekagn, where abuses were perpetrated by Ethiopia’s fascist and imperial regimes, as well as the communist Dergue regime.

**Memorial for the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda**

The OAU investigated and acknowledged its failure to intervene in the genocide of a million Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda as a moment of great shame in its history. Its review of this failure shaped the direction of the African Union (AU), encouraging the abandonment of the old principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of its members. The AU is committed to preserving the memory of this immeasurable atrocity and to preventing its recurrence.

**The Apartheid Memorial**

Apartheid was a crime against humanity whose devastating effects continue to afflict ordinary South Africans. The OAU stood firm against the Apartheid regime and supported the struggle for democracy and freedom in South Africa. The principled stand against colonial and racist rule was the core of the original human rights agenda of the OAU. The ending of Apartheid marked a major shift, contributing to the formation of the AU and a broadening of its commitment to human rights. This important inheritance of resistance against injustice must be preserved.
**Slavery Memorials in Senegal and Ghana**

While post-colonial atrocities were generally perpetrated by states within nations, Slavery affected peoples across the continent of Africa, in diverse and enduring ways. In the loss of lives and dehumanisation it entailed it profoundly undermined resistance to colonization and the prospects for development. It negatively affected relations between Africans, and laid the foundation for abuse and inequalities experienced by Africans internationally. The AU has a responsibility to remember this atrocity committed against, and sometimes also by, Africans. The institution also inherits from the OAU the pan-Africanist sentiments founded in part upon the memory of slavery and the bonds between Africans and the diaspora.

**Ethiopia**

Red Terror Martyr’s Memorial Museum, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, honours the victims of the 1977-1978 killings. It was established in 2010, an initiative of the surviving family and friends of the victims; the museum’s motto is ‘Never Ever Again.’

**Kenya**

Lari Memorial Peace Museum, Kenya was established in 2001 as a commitment to healing enduring divisions in the community, following the 1953 massacres; it documents both the killing of loyalists by Mau Mau nationalists and then the retaliation by the colonial regime against the nationalists.
Senegal

Maison des Esclaves, the House of Slaves, Goree Island, Senegal is a museum and a memorial to the Atlantic slave trade. Built in 1776, the house came to be known as the final exit point from where Africans were shipped across the Atlantic into slavery.

Sierra Leone

The Sierra Leone Peace Museum will open in 2012 in Freetown to make sure the lessons of the decade long conflict which ended in 2002 are not forgotten. It will include a memorial to honour the suffering of the war’s victims, an exhibition to tell the story of the war and the peace process to future generations, and an archive of documents relating to the conflict.
Nyarubuye Genocide Memorial, Kirehe, Rwanda is one of the hundreds of genocide memorials created to preserve the memory of the 1994 genocide, to mourn its victims; and to contribute to education and genocide prevention.

The District Six Museum Foundation, Cape Town, South Africa, came into being as a vehicle for advocating social justice; it is now also a space for reflection and an institution for challenging past distortions of history. It is one of several memorials created by South Africans to record the crimes of apartheid, and to restore dignity to its victims.
Survivors' Memories of the Red Terror
Part I

“I lost many family members and friends to the Red Terror campaign. I am still traumatized by the fear and insecurity that one feels when friends are summoned and led to their death or severely tortured.”

I was only 20 years old in August 1978 when the Ethiopian security agents of the Derg regime accused me of engaging in subversive activities and sent me to prison. I was one of the lucky few political prisoners who came out of the Alem Bekagn prison alive after seven relentless years of incarceration. I am a man of 54 years of age now and those memories of my confinement still haunt me to date.

In Alem Bekagn, I was tortured and beaten, especially on the soles of my feet. I underwent numerous interrogations and was made to confess to crimes I never committed. Before I was moved to Alem Bekagn I was kept in Keftegna 25 which was filled with hundreds of prisoners. Some were so badly beaten and tortured they were rendered immobile for a long period of time. One story that stands out is that of an individual with broken backbones who, consequently, could not control his limbs anymore. Looking back, I consider myself lucky for not suffering such injuries; and perhaps that was due to the intervention of a family friend who happened to be a high official in the government. We used to be locked in a crowded cell filled with stench. We were only allowed out for half an hour including brief morning and evening visits to the toilet in groups of ten under the watchful eyes of the guards.

The overall condition at Alem Bekagn was simply appalling and our basic rights as human beings were abused on a daily basis. Although women and men had separate quarters, the most disturbing memories were the conditions of the mentally ill prisoners. They were totally neglected. The other disturbing memory I have is to do with roll call – guards used to mistakenly call out names of those who had already been executed. That showed me that the prison administration did not have a good record or knowledge of the people that were being slaughtered.

During my detention the most atrocious incident I remember was the case of Shimelis, a friend of mine, who was brutally tortured for three consecutive days after his capture by the notorious butcher of Addis Ababa, Kelbessa Negewo who is currently serving a life sentence. Shimelis was put in front of firing squad but miraculously survived three bullet wounds. His bullet-riddled body was discarded in the streets of Addis. One bullet broke his nose between his eyes which blinded one eye, another bullet broke his spinal cord and the last bullet penetrated his ribs. He was discovered by a passerby and luckily was taken to a hospital. After his condition slightly stabilized he was brought back to prison. His face was so disfigured I simply could not recognize him. He was later released but I never saw him again. Afterwards I heard he was taken in and out of prison and died in the process.

I lost many family members and friends to the Red Terror campaign. I am still traumatized by the fear and insecurity that one feels when friends are summoned and led to their death or severely tortured. Most of my closest friends now are the survivors of that awful era. We support
each other to heal the scars Alem Bekagn left in us.

I think commemorative events are so important that all of us should be reminded that such history does not repeat itself. I wish to see events like this need to be broader to encompass all actors of past atrocities. I know records of the atrocities are not properly kept and should be made available to the general public.

Name of survivor is deliberately withheld

Source: A former prisoner of Alem Bekagn interviewed by the Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation and Research Center.

Part II

“I still remember those facial expressions of bravery, confusion and disbelief as prisoners were being led out of our cell to be executed.”

I am a survivor of the Red Terror, now aged 55. In 1978, at the age of 21, I was imprisoned for five years. I had been accused of being an Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) member and was arrested after my friend and comrade betrayed me, which was typical of politics at that time.

First, I was sent to Keftegna 25 local prison, later I was transferred to the Central Prison at Alem Bekagn. Torture of every kind was daily experience for all prisoners. I also saw fellow prisoners with rotten wounds; some even lost their toes. I have a vivid memory of a young boy who died of excessive torture. My worst memory of those awful days was the mass killings I witnessed. People were taken from our midst and never returned. I still remember their facial expressions of bravery, confusion and disbelief. I was tortured, but in the face of the heavy torture that my friends and other inmates went through, I consider mine insignificant.

I was moved to Alem Bekagn as the mass slaughter began to subside, but the fear and the shock were still lingering as no prisoner was sure to see the next day’s sunrise. We were over 300 prisoners at the time, but the number fluctuated. We were given hardly edible loaves of bread and a cup of tea for breakfast and dinner. Lunch was more bread with a cup of watery wot (sauce), plain beans or peas without oil, spices or other ingredients. When there were mass round-ups all the cells used to be very crowded, increasing illnesses. The queue for our daily ration and toilets would be very long. I remember an outbreak of typhus during which many inmates lost their lives.

The prison staff gave no value to human life; they even forgot the people they killed. They used to call out a list of prisoners for release and sometimes they mistakenly called out the names of people they had already killed – a few prisoners escaped by pretending to be the deceased.

I have mixed memories of Alem Bekagn. Most are gloomy, but some deserve to be cherished. The survivors get together and we offer some support to each other now. Some have even established associations to help those who are in need.

Alem Bekagn was a testament and a representation of an untold atrocity perpetrated on the doorstep of the OAU. It is imperative to establish a museum at the site as a way to send a message of “never again” to the present leaders of Africa.

Source: Story compiled from an interview with a former prisoner of Alem Bekagn - interviewed by the Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation and Research Center.
The new African Union built on the site of the city’s former central prison, known to Ethiopians as Alem Bekagn.