North Horr MP Bonaya Godana was furious when he accused the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) of "misleading" some Kenyans that they would secede. Last year, several Kenyan police officers were killed by land mines believed to have been set by Oromo rebels or Ethiopian intelligence pursuing the rebels.

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His statement was the first public allusion to a little talked about conflict in southern Ethiopia that occasionally, and in recent times, frequently, spills into Kenya.

How the recent massacre in Marsabit [in northeastern Kenya] is linked to the big story of the Oromo Liberation has been a running theme of the Ethiopian conflict, known to Kenyan security apparatus and the residents of Moyale and Marsabit districts alike. At times it looks like ordinary cattle rustling; or pasture and water wars - but these explanations often obfuscate the bigger picture.

Some 13 years ago, on July 3 1992, Jatani Ali, a leading Oromo leader and former provincial governor in Ethiopia, was gunned down in Nairobi by people believed to be Ethiopian intelligence operatives. The men later escaped a police dragnet. One man, whom police named as Haile Kidu Gemechu, was arrested and accused of the murder, but he was later set free.

The Marsabit massacre has uncannily occurred only a few days after the commemoration of his death. The Oromo Liberation Front, established in 1974 by Oromo nationalists, had only one aim - to lead the national liberation struggle of the Oromo people, among whom the Kenyan Borana are counted as part of the Oromos, in the dispersion. Some Kenyan Borans are sold on the idea of belonging to an Oromo nation, but the majority remain confused.

The OLF agenda - and it is not a hidden agenda - is that if the Oromo people cannot forge a voluntary union with others based on equality, respect for individual and collective rights, and promotion of mutual interest, then the people shall exercise their inalienable right to form their own independent state to promote peace and prosperity," the Front says in a recent Internet posting.

With a population of over 25 million people, the Ethiopian Oromos take the Kenyan Borans as part of the larger Oromo diaspora and expect to be treated as brothers when they make excursions into Kenya. It is then no wonder that when Ethiopian soldiers raid some Kenyan border posts in search of OLF soldiers, the first culprits are the Kenyan Borana.

So why raid the hapless Gabras, whose language is close to that of the Borana? Researchers believe the carnage in the north is basically a search for and desire to control an enlarged Oromo territory. Gabras are seen to consider their future better secured in Kenya than with Oromo nation.

Additionally, the Borana are angered at the continued killings of their number by Ethiopian agents - some say in collusion with some Kenyan security forces - when they pursue Oromo rebels into Kenya. They are often without protection from the Kenyan security forces, who are themselves victims of the attacks. Last year, several Kenyan police officers were killed by land mines believed to have been set by Oromo rebels or Ethiopian intelligence pursuing the rebels.

Northern Kenya has been a playing field for insurgents and the Ethiopian governments. The border is too long, the terrain treacherous and the roads impassable. Policing the area is considered next to impossible - hence the decision to arm local residents who serve as police reservists.

The perception that the Borana have been abandoned to their fate by the Kenyan security apparatus could be fuelling the hatred at a higher political level.

It is not unlikely that some local leaders might have entered into pacts with the OLF for security. [Passage omitted]

Although Ethiopian soldiers have denied involvement in many of the reported raids in Kenya, the local residents and politicians have always pointed fingers at them.

OLF supporters in Western capitals also say the recent deaths in Marsabit might have been purposely planned and executed by assassins from Ethiopia to cause tension between the Borana and the Gabra. It had been calculated that the moment the two communities were pitted against each other, there would be no access for the OLF fighters to Hurri Hills, Dukana, Galqalch and El Yibo. But there is the tie to the current politics in Ethiopia.

This month, some five Oromo political parties formed an Oromo umbrella organization: the Front for the Forces of Oromo Struggle (FFOS), which is to translate into action “the principle of self-determination” provided by the Ethiopian constitution.

“The burning issue and desire of our people is the application of the principle of self-determination,” the Front says in a recent Internet posting.

“People are demanding from their leadership, in various ways, that Oromo political organizations now in existence unite to take the Oromo people forward in their quest for true federalism and self-determination,” the statement said.

The five organizations agreed to lead the Oromo struggle for self-determination and economic and social development. They agreed on the principal points and called on all Oromo political parties to join them in achieving the political goals and objectives of the Oromo people.

Whether this was connected to the Marsabit massacres could soon be known.

But the leaders of the movement called on “all Oromo nationals, within and outside of Ethiopia, to heed our call for unity and common purpose; the members of our new organization commit themselves to mutual supportive tactics and strategies and tolerate each other.”