



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL
Justice, Peace and Freedom

Anuaks Suffer as Ethiopian Defense Forces Approach Refugee Camp in Sudan

April 14, 2006. Over the last several days, Ethiopian Defense Forces have again killed more Anuak and burned down their huts in remote towns near the Ethio-Sudanese border. Allegedly, they planned on surrounding the refugee camp in Pochalla, Sudan where they believed eighteen Anuak resistance leaders were staying with other Anuak refugees who had fled the genocide of December 2003. Reportedly, troops were supposed to capture the eighteen Anuak, even if it meant using violence against the refugee population. They were then to force the refugees to return to Ethiopia.

Two weeks ago Ethiopian Ambassador to the US, Ambassador Fesseha A. Tessema, gave testimony before the US House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations and denied any government participation in human rights abuses and that any Ethiopians were being held as political prisoners. Many Ethiopians knew differently, that the current regime of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was actively involved in gross human rights abuses against countless of its citizens throughout Ethiopia and that its jails, prisons and detention centers were overflowing with prisoners of conscience and human rights activists.

At the hearing the Anuak Justice Council's Director of Advocacy, Mr. Obang Metho, testified to the planned massacre of Anuak leaders starting on December 13, 2003. He told of the crimes against humanity towards the Anuak and of the destruction of Anuak property, perpetrated by Ethiopian Defense Forces and others.

In his testimony the Ambassador never mentioned the case of the Anuak or assumed any responsibility for the actions of the military who are under the control of the government of the EPDRF. Nearly three years later, they are still attempting to violate human rights and have failed to bring any of the perpetrators, named by victims and witnesses, to justice.

It is hard to break out of old habits, but for some reason, the recent aggression of the last week is still surprising in that the international community is no longer hoodwinked about the persecution of Ethiopians by their own government. They may see this as just the evidence they need to take stronger action as the government of the EPDRF continues their brutal tactics in the rural areas, believing they can do so with the impunity empowered by supposed invisibility.

Yet, the new weapons of defense may not be the gun, but technology. No longer is "the bush of the bush" totally inaccessible to modern day tools of self-protection. One can now call "from the bush" with "from the ground coverage" of what is going on. If you have the right numbers of those in the international community, of those who object to the killing of innocent people and the burning down of their homes, you may never have to pick up your gun, spear, machete or club. You even may be able to film it.

According to information we have received from a reporter, not wanting to be identified, a meeting took place in Gambella, Ethiopia about three weeks ago, just prior to the hearing on "Ethiopia's Troubled Internal Situation". Allegedly, at this meeting a two-part plan was devised to send defense troops from where they were stationed in Gambella and Dimma, to take into custody eighteen Anuak who they believed were leaders of the armed resistance and the second part of the plan was to force the Anuak refugees who were still living in a refugee camp in Pochalla, Sudan after fleeing the genocide of December 13, 2003, to return to Ethiopia. During the last several days, Ethiopian Defense Forces have been moved to the border of Ethiopia and Sudan from Gambella and Dimma.

The eighteen Anuak were supposedly from an armed resistance group. After the horrible atrocities against the Anuak over the last several years, it is understandable that a group might choose to arm themselves to fight back. We also have information from within the regional government of Gambella, that eight of these men were on the list to be killed on December 13, 2003.

It is also believed that some of these men are aware of the government plan that led to the massacre. Apparently, the government is afraid that they may be capable witnesses against them in future legal action. Therefore, it is also understandable why they are the targets of the government search. What is truly most outrageous is the alleged intention for the defense forces to take armed action against the refugees in order “to find the eighteen” and to then force these refugees, men, women and children, to return to a country where they are still being persecuted. Why is this second goal so important to the EPDRF?

It may be “bad press” for Ethiopia to have refugees seeking safety in other countries when they want to present the image of good government. It may also be noted that the office of the UNHCR has never awarded these refugees, actual refugee status. Refugee status would have enabled them to receive the level of humanitarian assistance typically given to refugees experiencing crimes against humanity directed towards them by their own government. It is unknown whether this decision by the UNHCR has been a politically influenced decision, under pressure from Ethiopian government officials or for some other unknown reason, but it has created great hardship for the Anuak. These refugees believe the UN and the international community have forgotten them.

Now, this plan would further jeopardize the survival of the Anuak and would be in violation of international law and Ethiopian law. Allegedly, troops were to attack the Anuak from the east (Dimma) and from the north (Gambella). However, Anuak saw the troops leave two weeks ago from Pinyudo (on the road from Gambella to Pochalla) at night and from Dimma during the day. To get to their destinations, they had to go through a number of small Anuak villages.

On April 4, defense troops went through the village of Teado on their way from Pinyudo. When residents saw them, they ran away, but not before four people, two men and two women, were shot and killed. The soldiers burned down five huts in this small village. Some of those who escaped ran to Pochalla to warn the refugees, putting them on high alert. Troops then went to Neum, about 24 km from the Alari Refugee Camp in Pochalla, Sudan. Only a small, narrow river, the Akobo, divided them from being in Sudan. The people of Neum had already fled. The troops then blocked the only road to Pochalla from the Pinyudo area.

Information became known that the troops coming from the Dimma area had beaten some Anuak elders, arrested others and killed seven people as they passed through the four small Anuak villages of Awaiya, Pineteen, Odek and Okwaweny on their way to Pochalla. They burned down huts in the villages. They captured one of the elder Anuak chiefs in Pinteen, after killing his wife, and no one knows what has happened to him. Three or four Anuak had guns and fought with the troops. Many fled for Pochalla, arriving on Saturday, April 8.

An Anuak leader from the SPLA in Pochalla, called the governor of the Jungoli state to ask for help from the Southern Sudanese government. This Anuak man informed the governor that the Ethiopian government was on its way to look for the Anuak leaders and to force the refugees to return to Ethiopia. He assumed the government of Southern Sudan would come forward to protect the refugees, but instead, reportedly, the governor told him that they (the new government of Southern Sudan) had been trying to tell the Anuak leaders in Pochalla County to hand over those eighteen Anuak. Because they had refused to give them over to the Ethiopian authorities, the Anuak would have to deal with the Ethiopian Defense Forces by themselves. The Anuak leader then turned to the Anuak and said that they were all alone, despite fighting next to the SPLA for all these years, they would have to face the Ethiopian Defense Forces on their own.

He also reported to the AJC that people within the SPLA had told him that Prime Minister Meles Zenawi had contacted Mr. Al-Bashir, President of Sudan, to convince him to put pressure on the government of Southern Sudan to exert their pressure on the Anuak to hand over the eighteen Anuak to their custody. When the Anuak refused to do this, the SPLA threatened to use force against the Anuak. The Anuak still would not hand over the eighteen, saying they did not know their location. This occurred during the second weekend in March. At this time, the Anuak leader said they would fight back if attacked by the SPLA. The tension increased to the point of both sides preparing for armed conflict.

It was at this juncture that an intervention involving the Anuak leader and others in the SPLA, the Anuak king, Adonga Akway; Riek Machar, the Vice-President of Southern Sudan; the Anuak Justice Council (AJC) and others were able to begin steps to resolve this stand off through dialogue and compromise. Another point of contention was that the Southern Sudanese government had chosen the new commissioner for Pochalla without taking into consideration the choices of the local people.

King Adonga convinced Riek Machar to fly to the area the next day in an attempt to settle the conflict through negotiation. He did so. Together, they were able to avert a crisis and the Riek Machar agreed to take the local choice for the Commissioner of Pochalla back to Juba along with the government's choice, saying the new president of Southern Sudan, Salva Kiir, would make the final decision.

Just last week, the local choice for the commissioner's position was approved; however, tensions remained. The recent refusal by the government of Southern Sudan to defend the refugees caused many to question why they would not protect their own citizens from another government. Some believe that even though the Anuak of Sudan fought hand and hand with the SPLA, now that there was a peace accord, they were not represented in the new government. Some Anuak had met with the President, Salva Kiir, the previous week and he had seemed to take their concerns seriously. However, the Southern Sudanese government was not responding to this crisis. Some believe that Prime Minister Meles Zenawi may be behind it.

King Adonga, the recognized traditional leader of the Anuak of Sudan, a Canadian citizen, stated to the AJC that if Pochalla was attacked, it would be bloody, devastating to all and could mark the extinction of the Anuak. He told us, "Pochalla has been the only safe haven of the Anuak since the Ethiopian government killed us like dogs in the streets of Gambella." However, he stated, "If the Ethiopian government crosses the border, we (the Anuak of Pochalla) will fight to protect them (the refugees) with whatever it takes, even spears."

He continued, "The EPRDF Defense Forces are thirsting for the blood of the Anuak, but the blood of the Anuak will be united and that blood of the Anuak will fight back to protect that blood. We are not afraid of bloodshed, but we have never done anything wrong. This is our land that was given to us by God, where our ancestors lived, where we were born and our umbilical cords are buried. This is the land that has given us our identity. We have nowhere else to run."

A renowned historian on the Southern Sudan talked to the AJC about this crisis. He warned, "If the Ethiopian government is not careful, what happened to the British when they tried to take over this particular area might happen to the Ethiopian government and it could be very embarrassing for them." He was referring to a battle in the early part of the 1900's when the Anuak held back the Brits from gaining control of the Anuak territory that they wanted to come under the control of the British administration in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.

The technology that helped the Anuak back then was the gun; today, the technology is communication. As the Anuak leader in Pochalla assessed the threat of the troops located only 24 km away, he started calling the Anuak in the Diaspora on his satellite phone. The AJC provided him with the phone numbers of the key people throughout the international community who would want verification of the incident. Within one hour, six people responded to his calls.

He spoke with well-respected representatives from human rights organizations, with a BBC reporter and with some government officials in the United States and the European Union, along with others. As other Anuak surveyed the position of the troops, he was able to report the troop activity to concerned listeners thousands of miles away. He also told them that all the women and children in the refugee camp had been moved to a safe place and the remaining men were prepared to defend themselves.

Contact was made by officials within the US with the government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. These EPRDF officials denied any intent of going over the border, claiming they were there to clear the ground for resettlement. What resettlement?

Word was then received from the Anuak that the Ethiopian Defense Forces pulled back, the group from Pinyudo retreating to the village of Teado, about 40 km away from Pochalla, where they remain. No one seems to know what their next move might be. They might be waiting for more troops after finding out that the Anuak had gathered more men to fight than they had expected. Another possibility for the retreat of the EPRDF troops may be because the information got out to the international community.

The same might be the case of the approximately 300 Ethiopian Defense troops originally coming from Dimma who returned to that town. The AJC learned after calling someone in Dimma, that the district government officials in Dimma had questioned the Defense Forces as to what had happened to the chief of the village of Pinteen who they had captured. The response they received was, "That old man ran away..." but the locals believe he has been killed.

The next question to be asked is if the government of Southern Sudan did actually refuse to provide any protection to this refugee community despite this threat to them from another government?

In an attempt to probe further, the AJC made contact with an official within the government of Southern Sudan who wants to remain anonymous. The AJC was told that the inaction of the government was linked to pressure coming from Meles Zenawi. Allegedly, the internal incentive for Sudan was believed to be that this aggression could at the same time, deal with their own identified trouble makers, the Anuak, who refused to give up the eighteen Ethiopian Anuak. If accurate, this kind of "passive aggression" can be accomplished by simply standing by, while others do your "dirty work." Later on, one can appear innocent to a most "unfortunate incident."

A human rights investigator who has been working on the Gambella massacre since 2004, analyzed the possibility that this tactic was being utilized and contacted the government of Southern Sudan on April 12 to alert them to the consequences of such inaction, telling them that they could be held accountable for their complicity, even as those Ethiopian Defense Troops and their superiors could be held accountable for War Crimes under international law should they proceed to attack the refugees or force them to return.

Collusion of this kind between governments must stop. Sacrificing your own people to another aggressor so as to accomplish your own goals has engulfed the politics in the Horn of Africa, perpetuating constant pockets of intense suffering and instability throughout the region.

Where else might this have happened? Could it be between Ethiopia and Sudan, between Ethiopia and Eritrea, between Ethiopia and Somalia, between Ethiopia and Kenya, between Sudan and Uganda, between Sudan and Chad (Darfur) and so on? Who are the victims of such complicity and perverse alliances? Is it not the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed who have been told to be silent---who may have resources others want---who live in remote areas where previously, the new technology did not reach? Times are different now.

Because of technology, what has happened in the last week has made many Ethiopians aware of what is happening to the Anuak of Gambella. What is happening to others in the remote and silenced parts of Ethiopia may still not be heard, but just like with the Anuak, new ways have become available. The AJC encourages the persecuted and oppressed to use these new ways to be heard and to speak the truth, carefully and responsibly, getting the facts and evidence correct.

Do not take the new technology for granted. For those still suffering, use it to the full extent. Satellite, cell and landline phones along with the Internet, have opened the world up in remarkable ways. These tools can be more powerful than machine guns and bullets. We hope that your awareness and action might stop a tragedy before it occurs.

Perhaps with this increased communication amongst victims and their defenders in the global community, the world will now know what is happening in the most remote places of our planet. But do not forget, this new technology will not do it all; we still need honest dialogue, negotiation and compromise. We still need to push for systems that respect human life, freedom and the rule of law. We still need people of courage to become engaged.

If the Horn of Africa is ever going to be stable and safe for all, it will not only be about the new technology. New thinking about these ancient principles might need to be resurrected. After all, some universal truths never change. We might as well use them!

###

For additional information about the Anuak Justice Council (AJC), please visit <http://www.anuakjustice.org/>.

For additional information, please contact:
The Director of International Advocacy:

Phone (306) 933-4346

E-mail: advocacy@anuakjustice.org