



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL
Justice, Peace and Freedom

Local testimonies of bus ambush on June 11 near Gambella, Ethiopia

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The Anuak Justice Council has been researching the recent ambush of a bus near the Gambella region of Ethiopia. When we heard of this incident, we felt we needed to put out a press release, but felt it was highly important to carefully gather information to closely document what had happened before doing so. The following is information that we have been able to obtain on the incident that may be helpful in understanding the broader situation. Some questions remain and for now, you must come to your own conclusions.

On June 11, 2006 at about 4:30 PM, a group of armed men ambushed a bus carrying civilians from Addis Ababa to Gambella, Ethiopia. The attack occurred near the town of Bonga, about 35 Kilometers east of Gambella town. The armed group killed 21 passengers and wounded many others, four of whom later died. None of the assailants were captured, but initial reports whose sources are unknown, indicate that they might have been of Anuak ethnicity. Although the regional government called on the EPRDF defense forces for an investigation into the incident, none was done.

It is well-known that some of the Anuak have formed armed resistance groups since the December 2003 massacre of 424 educated Anuak leaders by Ethiopian Defense Troops and other pro-government perpetrators. This group has been involved in killing some Ethiopian Defense Troops and police over the last two years and has directed its efforts against the government. It has been reported to the AJC, by persons who do not want to be identified, that the Gambella Peoples' Liberation Front (GPLF) leadership have denied having any part in this killing of innocent civilians. Instead, the AJC was told that if Anuak really committed the acts, it may have been done by a small rogue gang of young angry Anuak who have lost close relatives at the hands of EPRDF troops. They are currently wanted by the government.

Members of this rogue group, who allegedly range in age from 13 to 24, have also reportedly targeted and killed seven Anuak who were allegedly working with the current government of the Ethiopian Peoples' Republic Democratic Front (EPRDF) in oppressing the Anuak and others in the area. However, it is somewhat out of character for them to turn on fellow Anuak who are not involved in "pro-government acts." This was the case with this incident as some of the dead were themselves, Anuak. With the possible exception of an Anuak policeman, there is no information that the others were in any way associated with the government, making one wonder if this group was actually responsible. However, if this group was responsible, it appears that their attacks, although totally unacceptable, are based on retaliating against other innocent victims due to the killing of innocent Anuak by EPRDF troops.

Another question is whether the attackers expected that the bus may have been transporting defense troops as this bus line had done in the past. However, if the bus had been stopped for this reason, it should have been quickly clear that those inside were civilians, although things might have gotten out of hand. Unfortunately, none of the witnesses are talking and the Defense Forces in charge of any investigation do not seem to be interested in asking questions.

The AJC strongly holds that any killing of innocent civilians is repugnant under any conditions and should incense any persons valuing human life as God-given. These innocent victims have families who are now grieving the loss of their loved ones like any other Ethiopians would do across the country and the AJC extends its sympathy and condolences to the families affected by this horrific act. The anger of the families may be stirred up against the assumed offenders. More division may occur between ethnic groups despite the fact that most Anuak in the Gambella region strongly abhor this kind of killing. Yet, this kind of barbarism has not emerged from nowhere.

Vicious acts against the Anuak, going on for almost three years, have birthed much seething anger in some, causing a few to become like those that have perpetrated against them. The danger is that violence begets more violence. Revenge begets more revenge. It only takes a few to perpetuate a cycle that will destroy the larger group. It is totally unacceptable and must stop. Yet, if the EPRDF troops continue to commit such brutal acts with impunity, there is likely to be some who will continue to identify with the inhumane methods of the government forces. Unfortunately, the current government has done little to harness these reckless perpetrators of evil, acting with what appears to be their tacit approval in the rural areas across the country and now even in the city.

As none are held accountable, even after almost three years of human rights atrocities, reports indicate that especially within the last several weeks, Federal Defense Forces are “going wild,” appearing to have no discipline or order as they harass, kill, rape and generally terrorize civilian Anuaks. Previously this mainly was going on in the rural areas, but now these defense force troops are blatantly committing these acts in the center of Gambella town. They excuse themselves from any responsibility by calling anyone who they kill, “suspicious,” and “an insurgent,” despite having no evidence, completing no investigation and usually not even knowing the name of the person.

There are a number of recent examples. Just about two weeks ago, on June 1, 2006, an Anuak man, Gur Didumo, who worked for the regional government was walking home from work in Gambella town at about five in the afternoon when three Ethiopian Defense Troops stopped him. Reports allege that after capturing him at gunpoint, they started taking him to their army base, located about six kilometers outside of Gambella town. As they proceeded, allegedly they called the commander of the defense forces to ask what they should do with the man. Information received from informants, not wanting to be identified for fear of retaliation, indicates that the commander told the troops to kill the man, which they then proceeded to do. His body was left on the side of the road until the next day when Anuak retrieved him.

When the regional government asked the commander of the Ethiopian Defense Forces to investigate the killing and to arrest the three soldiers involved, the commander reportedly simply apologized for the killing, saying they had thought the man was part of the rebel group. No further action was taken—no investigation and no charges. Another Anuak man, Akway Wangara, was also killed on June 1 when he was shot in front of the Teacher’s Training College in Gambella town by the EPRDF troops. The regional authorities asked the federal police for an investigation; however, again, no investigation was completed and no one was arrested in response to his murder.

On June 3, a 24 year old man, Omot Ojullu, was shot dead by defense troops as he was going home from work at about 7:30 PM. The incident happened in front of the stadium in Gambella town. Federal police heard the gunshots and rushed to the scene only to find defense troops leaving the area. When the federal police asked what had happened, the defense troops told them that the Anuak man was an insurgent, despite a lack of evidence to prove this. People who heard the gunshots and overheard the explanation allegedly passed the information on to the regional Anuak governor, Omot Obang Olom. Governor Olom called for an investigation from the federal police, but again, none was completed.

Killings and disappearances of the Anuak are occurring on almost a daily basis throughout the region, particularly in the rural areas where reports indicate that Anuak are being routinely shot if they are found alone. Reports indicate that the defense forces seem to have lost any sense of their own humanity, perpetrating senseless and countless savage acts against not only Anuak, but have started including highlanders as well.

On May 29, 2006, defense troops killed five highlanders at about 9:00 PM in Gambella town, for no apparent reason. EPRDF troops again blamed Anuak insurgents for the deaths, but it was later proven by the federal police that the defense troops had committed the killings after highlander witnesses attested to their complicity. Four defense troops were detained by the federal police, but later were released to the military compound where no further action is known to have been taken.

Two days later, three more civilian highlanders were also shot and killed by a federal defense troop in Gambella town. This occurred near the teacher's training college. Federal Police were in the area and were able to capture the man who immediately blamed Anuak insurgents for the killings. However, when the federal police felt the barrel of his gun, it was still hot and proceeded to arrest the man. Yet, the man was allegedly released after Defense Force authorities asked to take him back to their compound claiming he was under their jurisdiction. These secretive acts of killing of some highlanders by Ethiopian Defense Troops have made some wonder whether they could be involved in the ambush in an attempt to implicate Anuak.

Anuak in Gambella have told the AJC that the killing of the civilian bus passengers is widely condemned by the majority of Anuak. We have been told that even leaders in the Anuak armed resistance who have acted against government targets, consider killing innocent civilians a barbaric act. Yet, the Anuak cannot prove whether or not this gang of young angry Anuak actually attacked these people. Even though they believe it is possible, certain factors make some question the assumption of their guilt. Yet, the Anuak cannot prove whether or not a gang of young angry Anuak actually attacked these people. They believe it is possible, yet certain factors make some question the assumption of their guilt. Yet, regardless of their opposition to such acts and questions regarding who really did it, the Anuak are paying the price for it anyway. Life has become extremely difficult for them as they are all being lumped together as being guilty by association and therefore legitimate targets of violence from the EPRDF.

It is dangerous now for them to go anywhere, more severely interrupting the daily tasks of life. The Anuak are living in constant fear and terror. Their worst fears were confirmed on June 12. On this day, two truckloads of armed EPRDF troops approached Gambella town on a mission to revenge the killings of the passengers on the bus.

Before the trucks could cross the bridge, federal police heard about it and fortunately, intervened. It was feared that another massacre, the likes of the one that began on December 13, 2003, would be carried out in the town against any Anuak who they could find. Anuak had stayed home from work and off of the streets due to in fear of such retaliation against anyone from the ethnic group.

The federal police took a strong stand and threatened to shoot the troops should they cross the bridge into the town. Reportedly they told the troops that they did not want them to spoil the name of Ethiopia like they had done before on December 13, 2003. They had to fire their guns to back up their threats. The federal police told the troops that it was the police that would have to pay should another massacre occur in Gambella town. They asserted that they had been given control of the town and that the troops were under their authority. The troops finally left. Eye witnesses provided this information to the AJC.

Without the federal police, it is likely that the situation would have gotten out of control, possibly leading to another massacre of innocent Anuak. However, the federal police have no authority in the rural areas and reports have been received that the EPRDF troops have been seeking revenge outside the town. Since this time, many Anuak on their way to Gambella town have disappeared, never arriving in town. Gunshots have been heard outside of town leading most to believe that those who have disappeared have been killed by troops.

On June 13, 2006, the EPRDF defense forces brought the body of a dead Anuak into town and displayed it in front of the army barracks in the center of Gambella town so everyone could see it. The body was already bloated, possibly because the person was killed in a rural area and brought from a distance into town. The body was covered in a dark cloth and the head was partially covered with a bandana, but the face was grossly disfigured due to a gunshot to the forehead that had ripped apart the face. At first, people were not sure whether the body was of a man or a woman, but later believed it was a woman due to some seeing braiding of the person's hair.

The defense troops told people to come forward to identify the body, calling the victim an insurgent even though there was no evidence. If there were any relatives, they did not come forward, not surprising as most Anuak fear that family members of these victims are frequently shot or arrested. Some civilian highlanders and others came by, but few Anuak. Some hurled insults at the body as they came. The EPRDF defense troops openly threatened the Anuak by saying, "If you are an Anuak and wanting to resist the government, your body will be like this body." Many Anuak and others found it extremely degrading that a body of a human being was treated in this way and used to incite hate amongst other ethnic groups and to provoke fear and intimidation of the local Anuak people.

The Anuak regional governor, Omot Obang Olom, even though he has deeply betrayed his own people, providing the names of the educated Anuak to be targeted in the massacre of December 13, 2003, felt outraged enough to order the body to be taken down. Finally, after much objection from him and others, the body was removed by the police and brought to the police station for them to bury the body. The tension between the federal police and the EPRDF forces has been greatly increasing and obvious even to the local people as the federal police seem to not approve the brutal tactics of the government troops.

There remain many questions as to who really killed the civilians on the bus. It is certainly possible that this rogue gang of youths perpetrated this crime. However, apparently most do not care to confirm, whether they were involved or not. Immediately after the killing, Governor Olom called for an investigation and none occurred. Reports from the wounded are scarce. No effort has been exerted to find the culprits and the federal defense commander has instead attempted to accuse the Anuak despite the lack of any investigation. In addition, reminiscent of the massacre in 2003, he attempted to incite ethnic hatred by displaying the Anuak body in the center of town, calling the unfortunate woman "a rebel," seeming to associate her as an Anuak, with the killers.

People are frightened of going anywhere due to the threat from the troops. Unfortunately, the central government seems to not care what the military does and has allowed them to perpetrate endless acts of brutality with no consequences. On the other hand, the federal police appear to be controlled by a leader who upholds an admirable degree of moral integrity in his attempt to protect the citizens of Gambella town; however, regrettably, his authority does not reach beyond the bridge from town into the rural areas where chaos and inhumanity reign.

What is somewhat puzzling is why the EPRDF defense troops are unleashing such venomous attacks in broad daylight in the middle of town for all to see. It is almost as if they want to incite retaliation in order to strike back harder. Why have EPRDF troops been secretly killing highlanders and blaming it on Anuak, as was uncovered by the federal police?

The fear is that should the government feel pressure to conduct an investigation into the killing of the civilian bus passengers, it is believed that the government will find innocent Anuak to blame who have had no part, but who may be persons who oppose the operations of this government. After asking these questions, another possibility emerges as one reads about the EPRDF's secret 52-page paper on repressing leaders in the Diaspora that was recently made public.

One might wonder whether the government was hoping to discredit Anuak in Gambella in order to discredit the efforts of the Anuak in the Diaspora in their effort to advocate for unity, justice, freedom and democracy in Ethiopia and for the protection of the Anuak. Anything is possible when a government is desperately trying to survive, particularly in light of the recent formation of the Alliance for Freedom and Democracy (AFD) that has been successful in bringing key groups of people together, a real threat to the divisive policies of the EPRDF that keeps them in power.

Unity is truly a frightening development for the EPRDF, perhaps even worthy of duplicitous attacks against innocent victims and then blaming your opponents for it. In fact, this trick is one of the favorites of this regime—a regime that perpetrates genocide and then accuses non-violent opponents of the same acts they have themselves done like the CUD opposition party.

If this is another Machiavellian move on the part of this government to foment division, may their own evil plans backfire on themselves. However, if the EPRDF are not guilty of this, we then call on all Anuak and other Ethiopians to abhor inhuman acts against the innocent brothers and sisters of Ethiopia no matter who does them. We must not be our own enemies. We must stand together against such barbarity and cruelty! We must stand together against a regime based on hate and inhumanity! We must stand for principles that unite mankind as God's precious creation. May God heal Ethiopia.