



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL
Justice, Peace and Freedom

Remembering the Anuak Massacre of December 13, 2003
Do Not Rest Until Justice Comes to Ethiopia

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“I have posted Watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they will never be silent day or night. You who call on the LORD, give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem...” (Isaiah 62:6-7)

On December 13-15, 2009, it will be six years since the massacre of 424 Anuak in Gambella, Ethiopia followed by nearly two more years of widespread extrajudicial killings, rape, torture, imprisonment, disappearances and destruction. By the end of this time, another 1500 Anuak from this very tiny ethnic group, numbering less than 100,000 worldwide and less than .01% of the Ethiopian population, were killed.

In April of 2009, Genocide Watch president, Dr. Gregory Stanton, defined this ethnically-based targeting of the Anuak as genocide and crimes against humanity in his referral of the “case of Ethiopia” to the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights.

Wondering what thoughts were on the minds of the Anuak in Gambella at this anniversary of their darkest of days or what changes they might have seen during these years, we in the Anuak Justice Council contacted some of the Anuak to ask this question. One Anuak man said, ***“Thank you for asking me what has changed in the six years. The answer is not a lot. We still do not know where the bones of our people are, not one single killer has been brought to justice and we still are not free.”***

As some might remember, the genocide was linked to gaining access to oil on Anuak land. Drilling for that oil began almost simultaneously to the massacre. There was a prepared list of those to be targeted for death by Meles’ Ethiopian National Defense Forces. Those who were on that list were mostly those who had been the most outspoken opponents to the TPLF government control of every aspect and benefit of this effort, in violation of the Ethiopian constitution which provided regional involvement in such endeavors. International laws also protected the land rights of indigenous people.

The two wells that were drilled proved to be dry; however, the memory of the horror and the impact of the great loss of beloved family and community members continue to be felt throughout the Anuak community in Ethiopia and worldwide. Another Anuak man commented in his interview:

“To some who are outside Gambella, today [December 13th] is the day of remembering, but for those of us here, every day is a ‘remembering day;’ we remember by not seeing our neighbors, by seeing someone who lost her husband or her son, by seeing a child without a father or by seeing a demolished home, burned down six years ago, but still not rebuilt. The list could go on and on. That is the reason that to us, each day is a day of remembrance.”

For now, in Gambella, there will be no commemorative services, public recognition of the past, acknowledgement by the government of what they have done or new efforts to hold offenders accountable.

One Anuak woman explains a very different—and difficult—reality for Anuak:

“The horror of December 13th is part of our daily life—like a dark cloud hanging over us that has never left. What makes it worse is that the killers are still around us. For example, the chief of police who ordered the killing of the Anuak in 2003, Haile Selassie Tadesse, has been promoted to a higher position. He is now the information desk officer for the regional governor, Omot Obang Olam. (Governor Omot is the one who allegedly compiled the list of Anuak to be targeted for death. Last year, he was denied entrance into Canada based on his complicity in committing crimes against humanity.) How can we say there is a change with this kind of thing going on around us?”

Instead, life in Gambella is expected to go on as if nothing ever happened. The government, who authorized the targeting of the Anuak and continues to give both impunity and rewards to the perpetrators, is still in power and they “dislike” any “remembering.” It is “not good” for their public image. Instead they promote propaganda regarding progress in the country that the people of Gambella have yet to see.

One Anuak man commented on this:

“The government in Addis can preach with their rhetoric that there is peace, development, democracy, the rule of law, good government and justice, but the truth is opposite from what they are saying. As it is said in the Bible, the truth can set you free. It is a light that can never be hidden.”

The unhidden truth being revealed right now are the new government plans to again attempt to exploit the significant natural resources and related economic opportunity in the region. The Meles government has leased a large tract of some of the most fertile land in the region to Mohammed Al Amoudi, an Ethiopian/Saudi Arabian billionaire, who has, according to reports, already been “given” a choice parcel for next to nothing. He is negotiating for more land, saying he wants some 500,000 hectares in Gambella and in the neighboring Benishangul-Gumuz region and in the Amhara region. Al Amoudi has also procured the gold mining rights to extract gold from indigenous Anuak land, a source of income for the Anuak for many years. They will now be totally left out of any of the benefits.

Meles is also making more bargain land deals with India, Saudi Arabia, China and others from 35-year to up to 99-year leases. It is very clear that the TPLF-dominated government does not want the people, but only our resources. As indigenous agricultural land is confiscated, much of the food produced on these lands will be directed to other countries or the local people may end up buying food grown on their land, at inflated prices, from foreigners and made into slave laborers.

This is going on all over the country. In Gambella, it has raised an uproar of outrage among the Anuak. One Anuak man interviewed said:

“To make the matter worse, Meles is still planning more “indirect” killings that could result in even more lives being lost than were lost in 2003. Meles is now giving away our land to foreigners. This land is covered with virgin forests. The forests to us are our food, our shelter, our nails, our roof, our walls and our medication. The land is not just “nobody’s land” as Meles claims, it is our life! Without this forest, we could have never existed as a people. Meles is really going to the hard extreme and I do not think we will accept it without resisting.”

Another Anuak man stated:

“The central government has been bribed by foreign investors and now the regional governor, Omot Obang Olam, is being bribed to give away this land. The Anuak elders are warning him not to gamble with our lives; meaning that our land is our life. These dirty business deals, conducted without consulting the people, are very dangerous. This Anuak land was given to us not by us begging for it or bribing someone, but because God gave it to us. Without it, there is no us. I hope the Meles regime and Omot Obang Olam will listen.”

A young Anuak man added his comments:

“In the Abobo area of Gambell, Al Amoudi has already cleared the land of the forests and still plans to transport some 300 tractors, bulldozers, or other large equipment to the area for further clearing of the land. The Anuak people who live there are already being forced from their land. No one knows who will take responsibility for these displaced people or where they should go. There seems to be no plan for them and they may end up not having any land to farm. The Anuak land is being given away to the Chinese, the Indians, the Saudi Arabians and the “so-called Ethiopian” al Amoudi.”

“If they continue with the plan as is, and destroy the forests, even a billion dollars or one hundred years will not restore them. Knowing that, some of us would choose to be cleared away with our forests. The indigenous people will lose their livelihood. We are not against feeding the Ethiopian people or in investing in their future, but investing in outsiders and feeding outsiders with the food from our land when Ethiopian people are starving does not make sense. It would never be tolerated even in those countries now wanting our land. If it is unacceptable for Ethiopians to go to China or India or Saudi Arabia and clear their land without consulting the people, it is unacceptable here. We are human too and we care about the future of our children like everyone else. We would rather remain the way we are or the way our ancestors were instead of losing our livelihood for the greedy few. My message to the investors is, listen to the owners of the land or you will pay the consequences.”

The Anuak will not ignore this attempt to defraud them of their land because the land is who they are. This land-grabbing is in violation of international law and their right to it is protected. This is a very sensitive issue and the Anuak and other Ethiopians throughout the world, are watching, waiting and preparing for what will come next.

In the meantime, on this anniversary of our pain, the Anuak will remember in silence, quietly meeting together or visiting the graves of those who died; that is, if their loved one's body was ever recovered for many were buried in a mass grave; and some, simply disappeared. Many Anuak who ran to refugee camps in neighboring countries, will remember from there and Anuak in the Diaspora will hold commemorative services.

Since 2003, the Ethiopian government has only become more abusive, repressive and openly dictatorial as they continue to imprison, torture and kill people all across the country; as they close off any political space in anticipation of rigging the next election and as they deny Ethiopians every basic civil right. It is a morally bankrupt regime that will not willingly give up power unless the victims of their crimes, from every region of the country, rise up together to demand their freedom.

An Anuak woman eloquently spoke of her hope that Ethiopians would work together. She stated:

“What gives us hope and encouragement is when we hear that you in the Diaspora are working together with other Ethiopians. Let everybody work together to create that Ethiopia that will hold us together. As we remember this December 13th, let us remember December 13ths of other Ethiopians that have taken place all over Ethiopia.

As we remember the Anuak who have lost their family members or others who are locked up in prison, let us also remember all Ethiopians whose name or tribe we may not know, but who are part of us because we are all victims of this inhumane government. All of these prisoners are the warriors of justice, committed to bringing justice throughout Ethiopian land. I am confident that God will free these people from their cells so they will be able to rejoin their families. I am also confident that if we stand together, justice will pour over Ethiopia.”

Can we find justice for these and the many other precious lives lost at the hands of a government who has forgotten their role as protectors of the people? As one of the interviewees stated:

“This regime is one of the most hated regimes in Ethiopian history because they kill the people like they are nothing and with no remorse. As a result, even though the people may not talk about it, within themselves they are unified by the terror and horror inflicted on them and others by this government.”

The testimonies given here are just a few, but if we were to go throughout Ethiopia, we would find testimonies like these in every region and among every ethnic group. If these kinds of testimonies cannot unify us as one, what will?

In conclusion, at the time of their crisis six years ago, the Anuak were alone, but today, they are reaching out for the hands of others. This is the time to reach back and clasp hands together—mourning together under one tent covering all of Ethiopia.

May God remind us that whoever is being killed or tortured anywhere in Ethiopia is a cause for our mourning. May God help us see a bigger picture of our shared humanity rather than the ethnicity that Meles uses to incite us to destroy each other. May God open the eyes of Ethiopians to know that whenever the blood of an Ethiopian is spilled, it is the blood of our brother or our sister.

December 13th is a tragic day, but do not forget, God is able to make all things—even those that are horribly evil—work together for good, according to His purposes. He can use all of us who are genuinely determined and committed to work together for something greater beyond only ourselves.

Could the loss of these precious lives create the foundation for a better future for our children and grandchildren? Yes, but only if we are transformed as people who are willing to define our destiny.

Could God bring about the compassion in each of us towards every ethnic group that might lift the pain from the shoulders of those suffering all over the country? Yes, if we soften our hearts.

The final question for us today is if we the people of Ethiopia are willing to become those “watchmen” who call on the LORD day and night, never being silent until God helps us bring justice, freedom, integrity and goodness to Ethiopia?

As the Anuak, the people of Gambella and all other peace-loving Ethiopians remember this day, let us give God “no rest” until He establishes a “**New Ethiopia**” in our hearts, in our minds and in our land.

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