



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL
Justice, Peace and Freedom

Press Release from the Anuak Justice Council Regarding HRW's Report:

"The People of Gambella Have Been Heard"

(Vancouver, January 18, 2012) – The Anuak Justice Council (AJC) commends Human Rights Watch for their in-depth investigation of the Government of Ethiopia's (GOE) massive resettlement program in Gambella State and its impact on indigenous populations, among which are the Anuak who have lived in the region for centuries.

The AJC, whose leadership maintains extremely close contact with residents of the region, confirms the accuracy of the facts and findings as reported in the newly released Human Rights Watch Report, *"Waiting Here for Death': Forced Displacement and 'Villagization' in Ethiopia's Gambella Region."* As a representative organization of the Anuak, committed to protecting their human rights and well being, the AJC has been regularly receiving similar reports from the region ever since the top members of the regime began marketing indigenous land for investment without involvement, benefit, consultation or compensation of the local people.

In fact, the AJC contends that this crony-based regime of the TPLF/EPRDF wants the land and resources found in Gambella, but not them, the people of Gambella. Review of TPLF/EPRDF-investor contracts involving these highly secretive deals, will reveal that the regime is obligated to remove "all impediments" from the land and to provide security to investors. In reality, this has meant the forcible removal of the indigenous people from their land, accompanied by the provision of security forces to ensure cooperation and to suppress any resistance that might rise up.

This is not new. The AJC was formed following the genocide and subsequent brutal repression of the Anuak that began in 2003 as a Chinese oil company attempted unsuccessfully to drill for oil in Gambella. Again, the people, especially those who were leaders, were seen as "impediments" to the plan and on December 13-15, 2003, 424 of these Anuak leaders were brutally massacred by Ethiopian defense troops and armed militia groups. This horrific act was followed by over two more years of TPLF/EPRDF-sponsored human rights crimes; including extra-judicial killings of any indigenous persons seen in the vicinity of the oil drilling. Genocide Watch and Human Rights Watch each conducted two separate investigations.

Now, the regime has started to remove the indigenous Gambellan people from their highly fertile land in region where there is also easy access to water for irrigation. The current HRW report gives detailed information regarding the impact of the resettlement of 70,000 local people following the first year of the regime's villagization program. Within the next two years, another 155,000 people are to be moved. This is nearly three-quarters of the total population of Gambella.

The regime asserts that all resettlement is voluntary; explaining that the people are willing to move because they will have increased access to services in these new areas; however, those in the AJC personally know many who have been moved or will be moved—they are not just numbers but are people with names like Okello, Ojulu, Abang and Ariet. They are teachers, brothers, uncles and friends and their experience defies the TPLF/EPRDF's baseless claims. In fact, the AJC finds it absurd for the Ethiopian regime to continue to deny what is becoming progressively easier to contradict on the ground.

The regime has relied on intimidation, loss of jobs, assault or imprisonment to force the people into silence; however, despite their efforts, evidence is leaking out. Eyewitness testimonies, photos, video coverage, satellite coverage and comprehensive investigations such as the current one from HRW, all bring to light what the regime has attempted to repress. Surprisingly, many are willing to risk providing information pertinent to these investigations because of the intolerable conditions under which they live.

Another significant investigation which adds to HRW's was released in June of 2010. At that time, the think tank, Oakland Institute, in collaboration with the social justice organization, Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE), released another comprehensive report, *"Understanding Land Investment Deals in Africa" (Ethiopia section)* which revealed the details and extent of the "land grabs" in some key areas of the country where it was most prevalent. Gambella was one of those areas studied.

HRW's report does include a response to their findings from the Ethiopian government as well as from the largest investor, Karuturi Global, an India-based multi-national agricultural company which has acquired 100,000 hectares of land in Gambella and promised 200,000 more.

In both responses, the parties deny that indigenous people were being forced off the land into "locations" where no services exist. In reality, we in the AJC know from our personal contacts that people have died due to the unlivable conditions they faced after dislocation. Some died from hunger after leaving homes and crops behind, right before harvest and finding no sources of food in these new locations. As the people suffer under these circumstances, their sense of frustration and despair has deepened with these continual denials by Meles and his regime.

Karuturi continues to promise jobs and services but little has materialized. A few have taken jobs with Karuturi, but workers end up working for wages and under conditions that could only be deemed as "slave labor." Their work force is also made up of young children who have left primary school to help work to help their families survive. This is denying the children, their families and Ethiopia of an educated populace for the future while also robbing the people of their land, resources, livelihoods and no one is supposed to talk about it.

This TPLF/EPRDF regime does not care about the indigenous people. If they really were genuine in wanting to provide access to improved services: agricultural resources, clean water, education, health care and economic opportunity, they would come to the region to see for themselves and to talk with the people, just like the U. S. Ambassador and his staff did when they visited Gambella last week to observe the conditions under which the displaced people were living. Conversely, Meles Zenawi, who has been in power for twenty years, has never set foot in Gambella, yet, he is doing his best give the land away to foreigners.

On top of all of this, the level of corruption in the region is unimaginable and has only increased in the last few years as the details of these investments are conducted behind closed doors. One former regional government official described a [domestic] investor indirectly paying for villagization: *[I]n Gog, 1 million Birr [US\$59,000] was brought to the district chairman to help this process. "What is this money for?" the woreda officials enquired. The investor told them "I was told to bring this by [Mr. Omot Obang Olom, president of Gambella region]." So woreda officials went to the [senior regional official] who told them: "Do you want to do the villagization work or not? Take the money and go do some work."*

Despite the corruption, HRW indicates in their report that the villagization scheme has been made significantly more possible from the misuse of funding from the donor countries who make up the Developmental Assistance Group (DAG).

The AJC strongly endorses HRW's recommendations to DAG as defined in the report and calls on members of DAG to live up to their obligations to make sure that their funding does not promote human rights crimes, further the oppression of indigenous people, undermine their well being or increase their poverty and hunger.

As the people of Gambella continue the struggle for their God-given rights in their ancestral land—land not given to them by Meles or his TPLF/EPRDF, but by God—the AJC and the people of Gambella should not seek to take advantage of the present vulnerability of the indigenous people under this repressive regime. Once this regime collapses, no one should assume that any of these agreements that violate the rights of the indigenous people will be binding. They have not been signed with the consent of the people.

Ironically, some of the poorest people of all people, in terms of material possessions, are now providing the financial equity—of land, resources and slave labor—for these potentially lucrative investment deals. Who benefits? It will not be the people of Gambella; but instead, Meles, Meles' family, regime cronies, corrupt facilitators, crony investors, foreign investors and all involved along the way.

As long as this regime, its investors, DAG or others overtly deny or subvertly refuse to acknowledge the truth, the people will suffer physical, emotional and financial harm. However, as groups like Human Rights Watch invest their human and financial resources into protecting the people through exposing the truth; this human struggle for freedom, dignity and justice will move forward—for the people of Gambella have been heard!

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