



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL
Justice, Peace and Freedom

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Ethiopian National Defense Forces Killed 6 Civilians, including US citizen in the Gambella region of Ethiopia.

Press Release (Vancouver BC Canada)— **On March 2, 2013, seventeen Anuak men were ambushed by Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), as they were sitting under a tree near Gilo river in a rural area in the Gambella region of southwestern Ethiopia. Six men were killed. Among those killed was a 33-year old American citizen, Omot Ojulu Odol, [B.D. 2/2/1978] who came to the U.S. as a teenager more than fifteen years ago. Mr. Odol had been visiting his homeland.**

The Ethiopian government claims Mr. Odol was killed for acts of terrorism in the region; however, eyewitnesses and others on-the-ground in Gambella share a different story, as learned by the Anuak Justice Council (AJC), a human rights organization that has been investigating the incident since it occurred. The AJC has many contacts on the ground, some of whom were eyewitnesses, family members of the deceased, friends and community members. **As the Government of Ethiopia responds from afar to questions regarding what happened, those present during the incident provide a different scenario to the attack and its aftermath. The reality is, not only is the federal government in Addis Ababa disconnected from the region, they have repeatedly committed egregious human rights crimes in the region, fabricated propaganda and twisted information so as to advance their own deeply entrenched economic interests in the area.**

Background: For those who do not know, the AJC was formed following the massacre of the Anuak by the same Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) in December 2003. At this time, 424 Anuak leaders were targeted and brutally slaughtered within three days. Most of their bodies were buried in mass graves and have never been recovered. This all has been documented by respected human rights organizations such as Genocide Watch in their two reports and by Human Rights Watch in their report entitled: *“Targeting the Anuak: Human Rights Violations and Crimes against Humanity in Ethiopia’s Gambella Region* [<http://www.hrw.org/news/2005/03/23/ethiopia-crimes-against-humanity-gambella-region>]. Thousands more were killed over the next three years when the military presence was very heavy surrounding an attempt to drill for oil on indigenous Anuak land, which eventually failed. Since then, the region has never recovered. The Anuak, in particular, have never found safety and security and many have left for neighboring countries.

The tensions in the region have only been exacerbated by the large-scale land acquisitions by foreign and local investors that have displaced 70,000 local people from land the Anuak and others have depended upon for their livelihoods for centuries. [For more information on the displacements, please see the investigation by Human Rights Watch entitled: *“Waiting Here for Death” Forced Displacement and “Villagization” in Ethiopia’s Gambella Region.* <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2012/01/16/waiting-here-death>] Between now and 2015, another 150,000 indigenous Gambellans are to be moved to resettlement villages in a villagization program that has left the displaced homeless, with inferior land, with poorer access to water, with fewer or non-existing services and in hunger. In this milieu, anyone who attempts to defend their constitutional rights to their indigenous land can be called a terrorist and subject to human rights crimes.

Incident: From eyewitnesses and testimony from other local people, the AJC has learned that the incident began when someone reported to the local security in Gambella that an Anuak farmer had purchased a gun from the highlands in Ethiopia and had brought it back to this lowland area. Prior to the Anuak massacre in 2003, the Anuak had been disarmed of their guns despite using them for hunting and protection from the wild animals in the region that would prey on their livestock. Notably, the disarmament was ethnic-based and did not include those from other local ethnic groups. In fact, as of today, the Anuak remain the only disarmed people in the Gambella region while others still maintain the right to possess guns.

After receiving the report of this gun purchase, authorities had gone to the farmer's house on February 28, 2013. He was not at home; however, there were some other young men in the home, some of his relatives and others his neighbors. **One of his relatives, Mark Omot, who is 26 years old and whose father was killed in the Gambella massacre of December 2003, was interrogated and tortured. He was beaten by the barrels of the guns and he sustained many serious injuries to his head, neck and chest before finally telling the authorities that during the dry season, the majority of men go to the riverbanks to fish and hunt.** [If you want to eat during the dry season, it greatly helps to have a gun to hunt.]

A local Anuak security official, along with the ENDF, took this man and forced him to help them find the farmer. After a search lasting several days, on the morning of March 2, the farmer was located about 40 kilometers away on the bank of the Gilo River near the village of Abelean and Apoo. Mr. Odol and sixteen others namely 1 Gogo Ochalla, 2 Cham Ochall, 3 Okeach Achaew, 4 Akway Omot, 5 Omot Obang, 6 Agaba Akway, 7 Omot Ojulu Ogota, 8 Abacha Ojulu, 9 Thole Olok, 10 Ochwal Obang, 11 Owar Cham, 12 Nymolo Agola, 13 Aberach Nymolo, 14 Akonya Omot, 15 Agwa Cham, 16 Owar Nygiwo Agake and Omot Odol, including a number of children as young as ten years of age, were found sitting under the shade of a tree. Without warning, the ENDF began shooting at them, killing six persons, including an eleven-year-old. The others escaped, including the farmer. No one shot back.

After the six men died, the troops searched through the bodies and their belongings and found only one gun. During their search of the bodies, they found Omot Ojulu Odol's American passport and Washington D.C. driver's license on him. This is when the entire situation changed. Instead of focusing on the farmer, the others they had killed or those who had escaped, they focused only on Mr. Odol and justified killing an American citizen by calling him a terrorist. They separated his body from the others and videotaped his body, propping the gun up beside him along with his American passport and U.S. driver's license.

The security forces left the other bodies behind, without burying them, but took Mr. Odol's body with them to the town of Pinyudo, the capital of the district of Gok. When in Pinyudo, they placed his lifeless body in the back of their army truck, flagrantly displaying him as they drove through the town, boasting that they had killed the man who did not want investment or development in the region. They claimed that there would now be peace and development in the region because this man, who was "anti-development", "anti-foreign investment" and "anti-villagization", was now finally killed. The location where Mr. Odol was killed was near to the place where land had been leased to a Turkish land investor. They were among those who had been forcibly displaced from the area, ending up at the location 40 kilometers away where the farmer and they most of them were now living.

Following this, the ENDF forces brought Mr. Odol's body to the regional capital of Gambella Town, publically announcing their intent to display his body the following day, Sunday, March 3; however, the next day the people were told that his body would instead be displayed at the stadium and that the people should come and see the remains of a man who was "anti-development" and "anti-foreign investment."

They claimed that he had been responsible for the attack on employees at the Saudi Star agricultural farm in May 2012 and for the deadly bus ambush in April 2012, which had occurred when he was in Washington DC not in Ethiopia according to reports from his family. Please see the link below for the SMNE press release on Saudi Star attacked entitled: *Saudi Star Pakistani Foreign Workers and Ethiopians Killed in Raid on Saudi Farm Compound—Believed Related to Land grabs*: <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/downloads/120430-Pakistani-and-Ethiopians-Killed-in-Gambella.pdf>

However, the anticipated showing of his body in the stadium never took place. Allegedly, the central government in Addis Ababa stopped their plans, warning local officials that there could be a backlash because Omot Ojulu Omod had been an American citizen. This information was also confirmed by Gatluak Tut, Gambella Regional Vice President, when he was interviewed by the government-run newspaper, “Reporter,” on Wednesday, March 6.

On Monday, March 4, some ENDF went back to the village in Gok Depach where the farmer had lived and killed another farmer, Okwier Ojulu, who lived in the same vicinity. They saw him walking from his home and they ordered him to stop but he did not listen to them; knowing what had happened to the others and that if he stopped, he would be interrogated and possibly tortured. The soldiers then shot him in the back and killed him. His whole family witnessed his death. The soldiers left him dead on the road. Soldiers then arrested another farmer, Omot Abella, and his two teenage sons as well as one other Anuak farmer. People suspected that the defense forces feared retaliation from the villagers because of the people killed on the riverbank along with Omot Ojulu Odol. Those arrested, as well as Mark Omot, remain in custody in Pinyudo in the military’s detention center.

Additionally, two others were also arrested. One was Mr. Oman Agwa, the chief of police of the Gambella region who had condemned the killing of Omot and the others, saying that these were innocent people and that there was no proof of them committing any crimes. Out of guilt or shame, the Anuak governor of the Gambella region, Omot Obang Olom, who was complicit in the massacre in 2003 of his own people, along with ENDF commanders, arrested this man in order to silence him. However, when Governor Olom was asked during an interview on Voice of America on March 5th about the arrest of the chief of police, he claimed that the man had been arrested because authorities had found a T-shirt in the man’s house that called for the secession of Gambella from Ethiopia. No one else had ever seen such a T-shirt, but obviously free speech does not exist in one of the most repressive countries in the world-- Ethiopia. He remains in detention in Gambella.

The second man arrested is Paul Agwa, a security guard at the Mekane Yesus Church in Gambella. He was accused of being related to the farmer who had bought the gun and authorities believed he had been aware of the purchase of the gun and had not reported it. There are reports that he was tortured during his arrest. He remains in custody in Gambella. These are the facts from the people on the ground.

The Anuak, including family members, reported the incident to the U.S. State Department. The U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa later confirmed the man’s death to the State Department.

In reports the AJC received from U.S. government sources, they indicate the following:

Ethiopian officials have informed the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa that a U.S. citizen was killed on March 2, 2013, as part of an Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) operation against a rebel group that operates in the Gambella region of Ethiopia.

The U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa has not been able to confirm the details of this reported incident, and is seeking additional information.

On March 7, Ethiopian television reported that security forces had killed Omot Ojulu Odol in Gambella because he was a terrorist. They never mentioned the other five persons who had been killed, including the eleven-year-old, perhaps because it would diminish their argument that they were fighting a “rebel group” operating in the region.

Conclusion: What began as a report of one gun being purchased by a farmer for hunting—a crime only for the Anuak—ended in the ambush and cold-blooded killing of six Anuak people who had committed no crime. Unknowingly, one of these victims they had killed had been an American citizen, which totally changed the rationale and focus of their actions, but yet it gives an accurate picture of the kind of insecurity the Anuak continue to face on a daily basis.

The AJC, as an organization that speaks for the well being of the Anuak, wherever they are found, finds it necessary to respond to the one-sided propaganda given in this case by the Ethiopian government. **Most Anuak consider the TPLF/EPRDF regime, which has been in power for over 21 years, a terrorist regime that has a record of killing innocent people, not only in Gambella, but throughout the country. If they were genuine, they should have reported on the deaths and arrests of the others, but they did not. Sadly, this kind of biased and untruthful reporting by ETV and Tesfa- alem Tekle is not unusual, especially when the reporter, as in this case of Tesfa- alem a hard-core TPLF supporter who based in Mekelle, northern Ethiopia.**

From what we know, Omot Odol was not a terrorist. This was someone who was a responsible U.S. citizen who had had a job and reportedly, had never committed a crime in America, not even a driving violation; however, he had always spoken out against the human rights abuses committed by the current TPLF/EPRDF government. His own brother was killed by government-controlled military forces in 2008 and a few months later, his mother met the same fate. Maybe this was why he felt compelled to go back home to do what he could to speak out for justice. We are unaware of any crimes he has ever committed, and according to reliable sources, he was not even in Ethiopia at the time of either the Saudi Star attack or the ambush of the bus for which he is being accused.

On the other hand, since 2003, the Anuak, simply for being of that ethnicity, have been targeted for repeated egregious human rights violations in their own land. No one has yet to be held responsible for these crimes, including for the December 2003 massacre and aftermath. Over the last several years, as the land grabs are continuing to displace the Anuak, those who speak out against the injustice can be called terrorists and are at great risk. Those Anuak who return to their homeland for visits from other countries are regularly targeted as suspicious persons by the authorities.

We have documented more than twenty-one cases over the last two years where Anuak coming from the US, Canada, Europe or Australia have been detained and interrogated. Just to name a few: Mr. Ojulu War-Adwogi U.S. citizen detained, interrogated and beaten in 2011, Dr. Magn Nyang U.S. citizen detained and interrogated in 2011, Miss Adie Opada U.S. citizen detained, interrogated and beaten in 2011, Mr. Okwa Omot U.S. citizen detained and interrogated in 2010, Mr. Okello Obang U.S. citizen detained and interrogated in 2013, Mr. Ajalla Ogula Canadian citizen detained and interrogated in 2013 and Mr. Omot Nyigwo Australian citizen detained and interrogated in 2013.

Some have even been victims of torture and abuse by the TPLF/EPRDF. In certain cases, Ethiopian military and other security forces have even crossed international boundaries to harass and intimidate Anuak in the Republic of South Sudan and in Kenya.

The killing of Omot Ojulu Odol is not unique to Gambella. What makes it different is the fact that Mr. Odol was an American citizen and that he was killed without any due process. The Government of Ethiopia now wants to avoid accountability to the U.S. Government by taking the easy way out, which is to label him as a terrorist and to accuse him of crimes that reportedly occurred when he was not even in the country.

In a statement made by Gambella Regional governor, Omot Olom on ESAT [Ethiopian Satellite TV] on Friday, March 8, 2013, he said, *“Anyone who broke the law in Ethiopia could be killed whether an Ethiopian or an American!”*

Last month Governor Omot detained an Australian Anuak in Gambella, accusing him of aiding the rebels even though he lived in Australia. Allegedly security officials told him that they could kill him regardless of the fact he was an Australian citizen. In other words, educated Anuak from abroad are a real threat to them and they are obviously willing to break international laws in response to them.

We in the AJC are working to pressure the American government authorities to do their maximum in investigating this incident. To start, we have called on them to conduct an on-the-ground investigation in Gambella, beginning with exhuming the body in order to conduct forensic DNA tests to determine whether the remains are Omot Ojulu Odol’s, beyond a doubt. If it matches, we call on U.S. officials to claim his remains so that they might be given to his family for a proper burial.

As of now, the ENDF are the only ones who know where the body is buried. We also call on U.S. authorities to investigate who ordered the killing and who actually killed him so that they will be held accountable. Even if he was guilty of some crime, they should have arrested him and brought him to justice because of his American citizenship. This issue has already been taken up by some in the U.S. Congress and U.S. Senate.

The AJC and the Anuak as a whole, see Mr. Odol’s death and those of the other five Anuak killed alongside of him, as more names on the list of the thousands of Anuak who have already been killed by the TPLF/EPRDF since they came to power. The Anuak will not rest until justice has been served for all of them. It may not be done now, but surely there will be a day of accountability. Until then, the AJC will continue to gather the information and the names of those implicated in the crimes. When this government changes, the guilty will be found wherever they are and charged. This demand for accountability is not only for the Anuak, but for the rest of Ethiopians who have lost their lives throughout the country.

May God comfort and strengthen the families of those who have lost these loved ones. Ethiopia has become like a weeping mother, crying for her precious children who have come to a premature end. May their deaths not be in vain but be building blocks towards a more peaceful, life-affirming Ethiopia. May God strengthen the living to reach out to each other to bring an end to this regime and their crimes against our Ethiopian people.

May Ethiopia stretch out her hands to God who will not abandon us if we call him in humility and faith.

=====ENDS=====

Please do not hesitate to e-mail your questions or comments to Mr. Ochala Abulla, Chairman of the Anuak Justice Council (AJC): E-mail: Ochala@anuakjustice.org