

Armed Group Attacks Gambella Town Police Station

For Immediate Release: November 4, 2005

It is a sad day for Ethiopia. More killing has occurred in Gambella and it could have been prevented. The EPDRF government has not only failed in its primary job of defending its own people, but worse than that, they have become a predator that “munches on its own children.” In this case, it has been the Anuak people of the Gambella region who see themselves as being under attack by the Meles regime. Now, some of them have taken the law into their own hands and unfortunately, more killing has resulted.

On October 30, sixteen people were killed in an incident involving armed Anuak, along with some Nuer and Ethiopian highlanders, who called themselves “Popular Defenders of an Ethnic Enclave”. They took over the Gambella police station, where they released 63 inmates, and attempted to takeover Gambella prison, where they were unsuccessful in releasing thousands being detained without charges. Among the dead were twelve Anuak, mostly police officers who reportedly refused to give up their guns or who shot at the gunmen. One of these was the Anuak state commissioner of police, Didumo Omonde. One of the armed men was also reported to have been killed.

The Anuak Justice Council, (AJC), based in North America, is a non-violent, non-political advocacy group whose goal is the restoration of peace, justice and the rule of law to the Gambella area. The AJC condemns the violence that took place, but is not surprised that some have lost their patience. For two years now, with the assistance of the international community, the AJC has sought a peaceful resolution with the government due to the deeply seeded resentments in Gambella following the massacre of over 400 Anuak by Ethiopian Defense troops and highlander militias in December of 2003.

The perpetrators of what Human Rights Watch (HRW) has called in their March 2005 report, “crimes against humanity,” have gone unpunished. Instead, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi responded to this highly respected human rights organization by calling their report “fiction.” Human rights abuses have continued since and the survival of this small ethnic group is endangered. As the two-year-anniversary of the December 13th massacre approaches, not one of the participants in these crimes, from the central government, the federal defense troops, the police or militia groups, has yet been brought to justice.

The AJC has been conducting an investigation into the recent incident that took place on October 30, 2005, contacting numerous sources from Gambella, including Ethiopian highlanders living in the area. Surprisingly, reports coming from eight different highlanders in the area attest to new sympathy for the Anuak amongst other highlanders and increased disillusionment with the government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. Some have even joined their ranks. The question is, what led to this change of heart?

In the early hours of October 30, a group of armed Anuak entered the town of Gambella, located in Gambella State in southwestern Ethiopia, going to the prison, the police station and the Ethiopian Defense compound located in the center of town. These are Anuak who have lost their fathers, brothers and friends in the massacre or other continuing killings. They may have close relatives and friends detained in Gambella prison, many there for over two years, without charges or court action, many of them victims of beatings and torture. Some have mothers, sisters and daughters who have been raped.

About 500 yards from the police station, the armed group went to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in order to tell Ethiopian highlanders who lived inside the compound to not be afraid or run away. A highlander present at the time, but not wanting to be identified for fear of reprisals, told the AJC that three of the armed Anuak came to the gate of the Orthodox Church and told them, ““Do not run away! We are not here to hurt you. We have nothing against civilians, only with the EPDRF who is stirring up an ideology of ethnic hatred.””

The armed men then went to the local police station and found fourteen police officers present, nine were Anuak, three were highlanders, one was Nuer and the other was Komo. The AJC interviewed one of the police officers who had given up his gun during the incident, but was later arrested by the Ethiopian Defense forces. He remains in custody in the military compound.

He testified that at about 1:15 AM, they had heard a knock at the main gate of the police station and one of the police officers went to the gate and asked who was there. A man answered, ““It is me, open the gate.”” So the officer opened the gate and as soon as he did, he was told not to say anything and to put his gun down--- that they were not going to hurt him. At that time, another twelve armed men entered the gate, pointing their guns, telling them not to move or shoot; that they were not there to harm anyone. He went on, ““Within two minutes, we were outnumbered and surrounded by these men. They kept telling us to put down our guns. Most of us did so and raised our hands onto our heads.”” One of the police loaded his gun and shot at one of the Anuak. One of the gunmen then shot him. Then the two other police holding guns were also shot. All three were killed. The remaining police officers hands were then tied and they were told to sit by the side of the fence.

At the same time, he reported, the key to the cells was taken and about seven gunmen went from cell to cell, telling the inmates to not run or move, to stay seated and that they were not going to harm them. He then saw prisoners coming out of their cells, one by one. He remembers the Anuak saying, ““You can come with us or remain here. If you want to go home and it is safe, go. If you want to wait until the sun comes up, wait. If you feel that the government will arrest you again, you should think about going somewhere else.”” He then heard a muffler from a vehicle, followed by lots of gunshots. Those gunmen with them started talking louder, telling them to stay put and not to run. At this time, more armed men entered the police station and told their colleagues it was time to go.

Sixty-three persons were being detained in the police station prison and were subsequently released. Eighteen were Ethiopian highlanders and the others were from indigenous ethnic groups. One of these highlanders gave the AJC further testimony as to what happened. He is now in hiding and does not want his name revealed for fear of reprisals. This man reported that he first heard the gunmen ordering the police to put down their guns just before an Anuak man entered the cells with a flashlight, checking each cell and telling them not to move and that they were not there to hurt anyone, no matter what ethnic group they belonged to. They were told in Amharic to come out one by one and were directed where to sit. They then saw the police who had given up their guns, tied up and sitting down nearby. From a distance, about 100 feet away, he saw the police who had been killed. He heard the Anuak man continue to repeat that they would hurt anyone if they cooperated with them and that they would be released. Some of the highlanders were crying believing that they would be killed in revenge for the December 13th massacre. This same Anuak man told them to please not cry, that they were not going to hurt anyone.

Our source recalled him saying, ““We are not going to kill you just because you are a highlander. Our problem is not with the highlander civilians, but with the EPDRF government, the EPDRF Defense Forces, the Police Force and with those who participated in the massacre. As long as you are not one of these people, we will not harm you and we mean it. You can sleep without fear in your homes. You can continue to live here with us, living in harmony like we did in the past.”” He made it clear that one’s ethnicity was not the issue; instead it was with those who were guilty of the crimes, even if they were Anuak.

The Anuak then told them if anyone wanted to join ranks with them, they could do so, but if they wanted to leave, they could also do that. Some Anuak and a few Nuer and highlanders chose to join them. Our source chose not to do so. However, he said he was very surprised how these men talked to them, not in anger, but with respect. During the incident, one of the highlanders was crying very heavily. An Anuak gunman noticed and smiled at the man. He then told him, “Dry your tears, brother. You will be okay.”

Our source stated this that this kind of warm attitude was a surprise to him, something he had not seen since the Dergue when the Anuak and highlanders used to get along peaceably. Since the genocide of the Anuak, the highlanders had been expecting the Anuak to seek revenge for the killings by retaliating against highlander civilians. He reported that the EPDRF government repeatedly depicted the Anuak as dangerous, warning them to be highly suspicious of them.

Some of the gunmen went to Gambella prison and in an attempt to release the prisoners; they were involved in a shoot-out resulting in the death of the guard at the gate. At this time, they saw the lights from a vehicle approaching and started shooting at the vehicle, allegedly, thinking it was filled with federal defense troops. However, it was later learned that the occupants included the state police commissioner, his four bodyguards and his driver. Reports were received from one of the wounded.

He reported that they had just returned from Addis Ababa and had heard the gunshots in the direction of the police station. The commissioner had said he wanted to check it out. As they had approached the station, the commissioner told the bodyguards to roll down the windows and to get their guns ready to shoot. About 200 feet from the police station gate, they saw a flash of light, followed by others and then felt the shaking of their vehicle before actually hearing the thunder of the gunshots. The shots were coming from both sides and continued for about two minutes. The bodyguards could not respond because it had happened so fast. The police commissioner and two of his bodyguards were killed almost immediately. The others were wounded. One of the wounded was screaming that he was dying and a gunman came to the car and asked him if he were an Anuak. He responded by saying he was and that he was injured, as were others. The gunman ripped the wounded man's shirt and tied each of his legs so he would not bleed to death. After the gunmen left this man, he heard more gunshots from the direction of the main military compound that was approximately one kilometer from the police station.

It was later learned that some from the armed group had gone to the military compound and killed two troops at the guard station. Gunshots were easily heard throughout the whole town, but despite hearing the gunshots even at the entrance of their own compound, none of the Ethiopian defense troops came out of their barracks to see what had happened to their men guarding their gate. Neither did anyone respond from the military camp located only seven kilometers from town.

The next morning people witnessed defense troops removing the dead guards from the front gate while others went into town asking civilians whether they knew the assailants, whether they were hiding in the houses and if they had left for the bush, which direction had they gone? One of the highlanders we interviewed indicated that the defense troops were asked, “Where were you last night when the shooting was going on all over the town for at least forty minutes? Does this mean you did not check this out until now?” Reportedly, one of the defense troops looked at him, shook his head and passed him off as being crazy and told the others to leave.

The defense troops then went on a rampage, arresting Anuak men who they suspected were not sympathetic to the government. When the defense troops learned that some of the police officers had given up their weapons, they arrested them in their homes and asked them why they did not die like the others. They arrested twelve Anuak police, some who were not even on duty that night.

Later in the afternoon, they rounded up five Anuak young men. As they were being taken to the military compound, another Anuak man, coming from the other direction, saw them with their hands tied up and asked why. They allegedly told him that these men were being arrested for what happened the previous night. This Anuak man then responded, ““In my lifetime, I have never seen a dog that barked at a stranger or an unknown intruder with his head facing the house and his tail to the hostile intruder.”” They then arrested him as well. As of November 4, twenty-eight Anuak were arrested, most of them police who were accused of collaborating with the assailants.

On November 2, government officials called a meeting regarding the incident of October 30. During that meeting, an Ethiopian highlander man stood up to ask a question. He stated, “This is not fair. My question is, why are the only ones arrested, Anuak? When the federal troops searched houses for weapons, why did they only search Anuak houses? Most of the people killed by the gunmen were Anuak. When the government issued a curfew from 7 PM until 7 AM, why did they say it was especially for Anuak? My question is, if the Anuak are the ones creating the problem, are those people who are creating the problem in Addis also Anuak?”” The man leading the meeting immediately ordered the defense forces to arrest him. The man stood up willingly, and said. “I knew this would happen, but I have never done anything wrong!””

The armed men had left a note. In it they said they were not an organized rebel movement, but were people who did not want to sit around any longer while Meles’ regime continued to torture, detain, rape and kill their people like chickens! They stated, ““Meles may have a mighty, powerful army, but we are not afraid. That is why we targeted the police station, the symbol of EPDRF authority. That is why we went to the military compound and they were too scared to even come out. For the last two years, the families of those of us who have had our loved ones taken away have never slept or known what it was to be happy. Every time we try to forget, we are shaken by another killing or arrest. It is very painful for us!””

One highlander source, who wanted to remain anonymous, explained in a telephone interview on November 3rd that the true colors of this government are being seen by what they are doing to innocent protesters in Addis Ababa. The source stated, “We now know that what the EPDRF has been doing in Gambella to the Anuak has finally reached to Addis. The defense forces have been killing innocent Anuak men without sympathy or regret and then when asked about it, blame it on the Anuak. It is the same as shooting protesters in the head in Addis and blaming it on the CUD!””

The AJC regrets that more have lost their lives. This government could have prevented this and further bloodshed, yet it seems less and less likely. Unfortunately, even those in the international community seem to be losing hope that the current government is willing to take the steps necessary to resolve the serious crisis now spreading throughout Ethiopia like a wild fire. The violence and brutality of this regime has undone itself. However, there is a higher authority who judges the actions of men and calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves. May He revive Ethiopia!

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

###

For Immediate Release: November 4, 2005

For additional information, please contact:
The Director of International Advocacy:
Phone (306) 933-4346
E-mail: gda3@sasktel.net or advocacy@anuakjustice.org