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MEMORANDUM

TO: Subcommittee on Africa/Committee on International Relations/House of Representatives, the United States of America.

FROM: Mr. Obang O. Metho, Executive Director, Gambella Development Agency

DATE: June 1, 2004

RE: Conflict in Gambella, Ethiopia - policy options for a US response

Background

Since the current Ethiopian government came to power in 1991, hundreds of Anuaks-an indigenous people of the South Eastern Gambella province numbering 150,000-have experienced intolerable suffering and abuses of their human rights. The region has been systematically purged of indigenous populations that the government considers racially inferior. Women, children, the elderly, politicians and religious scholars of Anuak descent have been killed; and if not killed, they have been “disappeared,” tortured, or kept in permanent isolated detention, without reason or hope of release.

In truth, the injustices and human rights abuses inflicted upon the Anuak people date back to the Ethiopian occupation of the Gambella region a century ago. Through numerous regimes, the Anuak have been subjected to dispossession of their lands, forcible conscription to the military, confiscation of their domestic animals, indiscriminant killings, and systematic destruction of their traditional way of life.

This treatment has only worsened under the ruling Ethiopian government. Outside of a policy of direct violence against the Anuak population, discrimination and segregation of Anuaks in education, health care, employment, and economic development are standard government practices. This is in spite of the current administration’s adoption of the Transnational Charter in 1991, which guarantees respect of human rights, democratic principles, and right to self-determination for all nations in the empire-state of Ethiopia.

The situation between the Anuaks and Ethiopian government is dire. On December 13, 2003, Ethiopian armed forces launched an attack on the indigenous population of the Gambella province. Educated male Anuak were targeted, hundreds were killed in cold blood, entire

villages were burnt to the ground, women were raped, and tens of thousands of young Anuak males—including the President of the region—fled across the border into war-torn Sudan. On this one day, over 424 Anuak were massacred in Gambella town by government troops and local militia.

The weeks and months since have seen hundreds more killings by groups of “Highlanders” (non-indigenous Ethiopians from outside of Gambella backed by the military), as well as reprisal killings by groups of Anuak armed through Southern Sudan. Six months after being forced from their homes by the Ethiopian military and its militias, 10,000 to 12,000 Anuak continue to languish in defense force-controlled villages in Gambella, Ethiopia. Government forced intimidation, violence, and disinformation make it impossible for refugees to freely and safely choose between repatriation to Gambella and resettlement in Sudan.

Despite the reports of various international human rights organizations and hundreds of eyewitness accounts, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) has repeatedly denied any allegations regarding this far flung part of Ethiopia. Government officials insist that the killing, raping, and pillaging of the Anuak is nothing but an ‘ethnic conflict,’ and that their policy of increasing the number of troops in Gambella is only ‘restore calm’ in the region. However, it is clear that the intimidation, terror, destruction of property, displacement and evacuation of ethnic Anuak people would not have been possible without the active involvement of the Ethiopian army.

There is no doubt that the human rights situation will continue to deteriorate dramatically in the Gambella region unless the US government and international community steps in to stop the colonial, inhuman policies of the Ethiopian government. The proliferation of arms in this part of the Horn of Africa is staggering; consequently, the potential for the situation to escalate into a major regional conflict is very real. Should this happen, the humanitarian catastrophe will only get worse. The need to act in a swift and decisive manner is paramount.

Regional Ramifications

Ethiopia

Since the take-over in 1991, Ethiopia has adopted a unique brand of federalism that divides along ethnic lines. The high level of autonomy given to ethnic groups as a result of this well-meaning political system has fuelled nationalist pride amongst many of the ethnic groups in Ethiopia. The consensus is that Ethiopia is on the brink of a major internal conflict. Conflicts between the Tigray dominated government and other ethnic groups have increased rapidly in recent years, and—as outlined by many independent human rights agencies—Ethiopia’s record in trying to quell the dissenters has involved force, arbitrary detentions and imprisonments.

The ethnic-majority Oromo (40% of the population), led by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) has engaged in alarming levels of violence, with the OLF level carrying out numerous bombings and other attacks aimed at destabilizing the government. The Oromo region sits in between the capital Addis Ababa and the region of Gambella; should the situation in Gambella escalate, there is a real fear that the overwhelmingly popular OLF would seize the opportunity to overthrow the federal government. If that occurs, Ethiopia would be plunged into civil war. In light of centuries old conflicts and scores to be settled, the humanitarian consequences of such a scenario are potentially catastrophic.

Eritrea

The situation between Ethiopia and Eritrea is still volatile. A UN effort to implement the recent peace accord is in danger of falling apart. Should the FDRE become increasingly unstable, it is quite feasible that Eritrea would attempt to acquire territory in Northern Ethiopia. It is in Eritrea's best interest to fuel any conflict in Ethiopia that has the potential to destabilize the federal government, and the conflict in the Gambella province is an excellent opportunity for them to do so. Recent documented discussions between Anuak dissident groups exiled in Sudan and the Eritrean armed forces regarding arms distribution evidence undesirable Eritrean intervention.

Sudan

Recent agreements between the Government of Sudan and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) have fuelled speculation that the long war in Sudan may be nearing an end. A pre-requisite to the successful implementation of peace in this war-torn country is stability in neighbouring countries. Reports of conflicts and tension between the Anuak refugees in Pochalla, Sudan, the SPLA and the Ethiopian armed forces are increasing. Should the situation in Gambella intensify, thousands more Anuak refugees will likely flee to Southern Sudan and inflame this already unstable region.

Strategic Importance of a Stable Ethiopia

One of the reasons for Ethiopian aggression is the large amount of proven petroleum reserves in the region (same geological basin as that in Southern Sudan). The increased likelihood of peace in Southern Sudan, the need for Ethiopia to look at other revenue sources given the dramatic fall in coffee prices, the pace of Ethiopian industrialization, the signing of recent subsurface development agreements with Petronas Petroleum and the tendency for Western nations to look for alternate sources of imported oil have all contributed to Ethiopia's aggressive actions in Gambella.

Additionally, the Horn of Africa is often seen as a potential breeding ground for extremists of all types. A government backed by the Oromo Liberation Front, surrounded by neighbors like Somalia and Sudan, will not help US counter terrorism efforts in the region. Frankly, these regimes and their violent tendencies will only make those efforts substantially more difficult.

Recommendations

The United States government annually gives \$32 million dollars in aid and \$12 million dollars in military assistance to Ethiopia. This aid does not come without responsibilities. Ethiopia relies heavily on US assistance, which puts the United States in a unique position to shape Gambella's future. To ensure stability in the often volatile Horn of Africa, stop human rights abuses, and further foreign policy goals, the United States of America must act, or withdraw its support from the inhumane Ethiopian regime.

In consultation with the Anuak community in Gambella and refugees camp in Pochalla, the Gambella Development Agency makes the following **eight recommendations**:

1. **The United States government must exert pressure on the FDRE to withdraw its troops from Gambella region.** As FDRE troops are believed to have fueled much of the violence in the region, withdrawal of federal troops will be a concrete first step by the FDRE in showing that they are serious about making reparations and rebuilding trust with the Anuak. The U.S. must maintain a complete ban on military training and support for military aid until Anuak refugees have returned safely home, and those responsible for crimes in Gambella have been tried in accordance with international standards.
2. **The United States should ensure that an independent inquiry is made into events from December 13 through the present.** This investigation should outline precisely

- what happened, who is responsible, and what actions can be taken to ensure such violations do not happen again in Ethiopia. An effective and truly transparent inquiry that brings those responsible to justice will help to rebuild the trust and to provide the Anuak with confidence and belief that they have a part to play in Gambella's future.
3. **The U.S. must actively work towards the formation of an international tribunal for crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in Gambella.** The U.S. and U.N. must ensure that those who perpetrated rape, murder, sexual slavery, and other widespread forms of violence against Anuak men women in Gambella since December 13, 2003 are held accountable. Justice is necessary for reconciliation and nation-building in Gambella, and for democracy and the rule of law in Ethiopia.
 4. **The United States is requested to act as a mediator between the FDRE and the Anuak of Gambella.** Serious reparations must be made to the Anuak, and the process to rebuild the trust will be a long and difficult one. The Ethiopian constitution guarantees a high degree of autonomy to indigenous groups. The US is an excellent candidate to mediate the discussion between the FDRE and a group of representative Anuak from the region. (Discussions have been held on the formation of such an Anuak Committee with Anuak ex-Gambellans presently living in East Africa, United States, Canada, UK, and various European countries).
 5. **The United States government should be involved in and urge Ethiopia to develop a regional police force, representative of the ethnic makeup of the region.** Such a police force existed in Gambella up until mid-2002, when it was disbanded and replaced with federal government troops from outside of the region. This police force shall be responsible for maintaining peace and security. Ideally, there should be a period where both the federal and the new regional police force are present and operational in the region.
 6. **The United States should provide Gambella with developmental assistance.** Historically, Gambella has been the least developed region one of the most underdeveloped countries in the world. The recent conflict has made the situation drastically worse. The United States government should commit to providing \$10 million in additional development aid to Gambella, to be implemented by international and Gambella based aid agencies and organizations to be focused on:
 - capacity building initiatives in the fields of education, good governance, and health care;
 - infrastructure improvements including clean water access, schools, health care facilities, roads; and,
 - counseling services for those persons affected by the conflict (an American NGO in Gambella estimates that 1/3 of Anuak school age children saw a family member murdered in the Dec 13-15, 2003 period alone).
 7. **The United States government should assist in an investigation of the refugee situation in Pochalla, Sudan.** As access to the region is difficult, accurate reports of the number and condition of the refugees who have fled Gambella does not exist. Following an assessment of the situation, appropriate action should be taken to support humanitarian aid efforts to Anuak communities within and without Ethiopian borders. Lastly, the United States should encourage the U.N.-in conjunction with UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration, and others-to provide transportation, resettlement, and other services required to settle or repatriate the Anuak.

8. **The United States should urge the release of prisoners detained without charge.** In late 2002, the FDRE arrested 44 of the top officials (including the democratically elected leader Mr. Okello Nigilo) of the Gambella regional government. Two years later, the prisoners have not been formally charged and are being detained illegally in federal prisons in Addis Ababa. The Ethiopian government must be instructed to immediately release or charge all political prisoners with recognized criminal offences, prosecute fair trials, and lastly, to provide regular access to family members and representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

In closing, it is important to note that the Anuak live in a constant state of uncertainty, poverty and terror-with no end in sight. International authorities must act now to secure peace in Gambella, before the Anuak way of life disappears forever. The suffering of these people has gone on long enough, and the assistance of the United States would provide an immeasurable help.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Obang Metho
Executive Director,
Gambella Development Agency Inc.