
MEMORANDUM

From: Anuak Justice Council (AJC)

To: Human Rights Organizations and International Community.

DATE: March 20, 2005

RE: February/March Update, Human Rights violations against the Anuak people of the Gambella region of southwestern Ethiopia continue to occur on a regular basis.

Human Rights violations against the Anuak people of the Gambella region of southwestern Ethiopia continue to occur on a regular basis. However, during the past month, a major change has occurred in that the Ethiopian Defense troops have been pulled out of the Gambella region in small numbers and are instead being deployed near the Eritrea border of Ethiopia due to the tension there. Now, militia troops are coming to replace them and have proven to be equally, if not more aggressive towards the local Anuak.

A significant event occurred on January 28 when the US Ambassador, Aurelia Brazeal, held a special meeting in Gambella with some Anuak, Nuer and highlanders. The local Anuak were highly encouraged by the meeting and subsequent public statement by the Ambassador where she called on the Ethiopian government to bring the perpetrators of the crimes against the Anuak to justice, wherever they are found and called the resource rich area of Gambella, "**the conscience of Ethiopia**". The local government in Gambella called a meeting in response where some of the federal government officials were involved.

Prior to this meeting, the government had completed an assessment of government employees to ascertain if they were appropriate for their positions. This assessment, which is mandated by law to occur only every five years, had just been completed a year previously. Despite this, it was completed anyway. After the assessment, most Anuaks lost their jobs or were demoted. Many highlanders were to replace them and had been moved to the area prior to the assessment. Now the regional government was informed that the Anuak would get their jobs back because they blamed the previous Anuak governor, Mr. Okellow Akway Ochalla, who is now in asylum in Norway, for not keeping a record on this. The highlanders who had just moved to Gambella for the jobs, are now upset. The Anuaks found out about their jobs being restored to them via news on television.

On February 2, federal troops killed four more Anuaks in two different locations. One incident occurred at the oil company compound where oil extraction operations are being set up. The location is near the village of Maquyi, in the Jor district, but also close to the Jikaw district. Originally, no Anuak were hired for the many jobs available, but more recently, jobs have been opened up to some of the Anuak and Nuer. Most of those working for this oil company, the Zhongyuan Petroleum Exploration Bureau (ZPEB), are really poor and needed employment, but reportedly the Anuak and Nuer employees are not treated well.

The Zhongyuan Petroleum Exploration Bureau (ZPEB), a powerful subsidiary of the second largest national petroleum consortium in China, the China Petrochemical Corporation (SINOPEC), appears to be the principal petroleum exploration and development firm operating in Gambella at present, under subcontract to Malaysia's national oil company PETRONAS.

On January 31, one Anuak man, Puro Omot, age 28, from Keir village in the Itang district, was accused of not looking friendly and not working hard enough by his highlander supervisor. They became involved in a verbal argument after which the highlander supervisor went to get help from the federal soldiers. One of the soldiers came with a gun pointed forwards, asking, "Which one is it?" When Puro Omot was identified as the problem, the soldier hit him with the gun.

Puro Omot became very angry, but other Anuak and Nuer immediately took hold of him and advised him not to do anything as he would be killed. He then stated he wanted to leave and go to Gambella as soon as a car came through the area. However, on February 2, before any transportation became available, he was looking, with obvious anger and disdain, at his supervisor who then lashed out at him. When Puro spoke back, saying, "You don't have to treat us like animals," the man again called the soldier who immediately started beating him as everyone watched. As Puro Omot started hitting back, another Anuak man, John Cham Ojwato, age 34, from Poual village, in the Itang district, intervened in an attempt to restrain Puro Omot and stop the fight. However, before he could do it, they were both shot and killed by federal soldiers. These two Anuak men had only been working there for two weeks.

When the Chinese oil company officials realized that Puro Omot had died, they told the commander of the troops that the oil company should not be linked to this. All the Anuak men quit their jobs and by 12:00 PM had buried the two men. They left for Gambella town two hours later, walking about 85 kilometers. Before they left, the troop commander warned them that anyone who implicated the oil company in the killings and said anything damaging, would be killed like the two troublemakers. They stated that otherwise, those Anuaks who do not like the government and who are making reports to the international community, would say that the people who worked for the oil company were involved in the killing.

On February 2, at 4:40 PM two young Anuak women, Najan Namilu, age 18, and Cham Okwier, age 19 and one man were on the bank of the Gilo River when four to five soldiers spotted them and told them to stop. Instead, they threw down the bags they were carrying and ran. The two women were captured. They had just finished high school in Pinyudo and were on their way to the refugee camp in Pochalla, Sudan. One of the women had a brother in the US who wanted to bring her to the US via Pochalla and then Nairobi, Kenya. The other woman had relatives in Pochalla. The young man who escaped, was a relative who was trying to guide them to Pochalla. The girls were found dead the next morning. They had been raped.

On February 4, an Ethiopian Judge wrote a letter to the prison official in Addis Ababa where many Anuak men, the previous district governors in the Gambella region, had been held since 2002. He indicated that the prison officials should begin developing a plan to send these men back to their districts, especially those from Abobo, Itang and Gog, to the local police stations to be dealt with at a local level since he was not seeing any credible reason for them to be held in Addis Ababa. They were to be transferred the following week. There was no ruling regarding those from the Gambella district of the Gambella region which included the ex-governor of Gambella from 2002 and his ministers as well as the mayor of Gambella. However, as of March 17, no action has been taken. On March 18, one family member inquired of the prison official why these people had not been transferred yet, as ordered by the judge, and why those from the Gambella district had not been included?

The family member was told that there was no money to transport these people and no funds to pay for their food on the way. The person then asked if family members could provide the finances and transport their relatives themselves. The response was that this had never been done before, but would be explored. They were also told that the case of the Gambella prisoners would come up later. It is believed that the primary reason for the exclusion of those from the Gambella town district (the mayor of Gambella, the regional governor of Gambella from 2002 and the top regional government ministers) is that these are leaders who could be effective in challenging the government to bring peace and stability to the region.

On February 8, the Ethiopian government took a good number of well-trained troops and transported them to Addis Ababa in approximately twenty-four large trucks. It was believed that as the relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia are becoming more tense, they are being redeployed to the northern border area of Ethiopia. Between February 8 and 9, it was estimated that over thirty-six vehicles were seen taking soldiers to the highlands. In replacement of these troops, approximately fifty-seven more vehicles transported militia groups to the area, most of whom, not trained at all.

On February 21, sixteen more trucks arrived as twelve more vehicles left with federal troops. It is also believed that the government is recruiting more troops in the Gambella region for the deployment on the Eritrea/Ethiopian border.

On February 9, one of the soldiers in the defense forces, set fire to an Anuak home in the town of Dimma. The fire ignited almost the entire town, which is home to not only Anuak, but also highlanders and other indigenous groups. Because of the dryness, significant damage was done and ten lives were lost, six Anuak and four highlanders. No one knows why this was done, but apparently, one source indicates that gunshots had been heard near the outer limits of town prior to the fire. No investigation has taken place and some of the Anuak have now left for Pochalla.

On February 12, Omot Okuth Nigwo, an Anuak man in his mid thirties, was walking from the Jor area, heading towards Pinyudo. Somewhere between Pinyudo and Thata village, he passed some local people who were going in the opposite direction. A short while later, six Ethiopian troops with guns met up with them. They were stopped and asked where they were going and they indicated Jor. They were told to walk straight ahead and to not report anything. When they reached Jor, they reported the incident to others. The man never arrived to his destination and two days later, was found dead, 15 K from Pinyudo, with two gunshots in the head and his right hand cut off.

On February 13, in the small town of Elaia, in the Itang district, the federal troop replacements are now living in the same compound as previously occupied by the federal defense forces. Local people indicate that the incidences of rape of Anuak women have increased since they have come. On the above date, at about 12:00 noon, an 18 year old Anuak woman who wants her name withheld, was raped. Between the 14th and 16th of February, six different women were raped by multiple men from this compound.

On February 18, as six men gang raped a young mother of two children, her screams were heard. Anuak men went there and yelled at them to stop. The rapists shot at four times into the air to intimidate them. No one was injured, but they did let the girl go. On February 19, as three women were collecting firewood, three were raped by these reservists. Two made it home, but the third woman could not be found. She was later found dead with her hands tied and her mouth covered with a t-shirt.

On February 15, nine Anuak men were arrested in Pochalla-Oluri. They were accused of possibly coming from the Pochalla, Sudan refugee camp to spy on the defense forces or oil operations as part of Anuak or Human Rights groups in Pochalla, Sudan. They had been on their way to Pinyudo from Jor. They were told by the commander that was responsible for the torture, that he wanted information as he had been told that there were human rights organizations in Sudan. These men were tortured and kept in secret detention before being transferred to the prison in Gambella.

Another incident occurred on February 15 in the Itang district. An Anuak man, Okune Ojullu, age 21, was on the road, close to where the oil development was going on. He was trying to find a ride to Gambella. People last saw him about 3:00 PM. Only one army vehicle had gone by. He was later found propped up, under a tree and dead from a bullet wound in his back.

Water availability in Gog district, continues to remain a critical problem. On February 17, a woman was tortured and beaten as she tried to get water during the day instead of the night, the only time allowed for local people. This person was beaten, tortured and left unconscious. She is still in critical condition.

On February 20, two Anuak women were beaten by three soldiers because they had also “broken the law” by going to get water during the early evening. They were whipped on the back with an iron rod and sustained severe cuts on their bodies. One of them was helped to find a way to the hospital in Gambella town. She has bandages all over her back.

On February 22, in Pinmoyo town in the Itang district, an Anuak man, Okuch Okwir, and two Anuak girls were walking on the road to Gambella town when four soldiers in a vehicle, stopped them and asked where they were going. When they said Gambella town, they were told that they had room for one of them and that they would take the man. When he refused, he was forced to go. The girls walked to the next town and inquired about the vehicle. They were told that the soldiers and vehicle had come through the main street of town, but that there had been no Anuak with them. The local people then searched and found tracks from the car going off the road. Where the tracks stopped, the man’s body was found, lying on his back, covered with dried grass. He had been shot once in the back of the head.

On March 1, in the village of Bonga, 76 Kilometers from Gambella town, two Anuak men, Odang Obach and Ochalla Ojullu, were walking. This is in an area close to where the newly arrived militia troops are living after many of them arrived on February 27. As these two men were walking, they were stopped by ten of the militiamen. Odang Obach questioned why they had to be stopped, as they had done nothing wrong. They were then told to stop or they would be shot. Again, Odang Obach asked why, when they had not done anything. When they were told to shut up and be quiet, Odang Obach challenged them again after which one of the men proceeded to hit him on the side of his head with the butt of his gun causing Odang Obach to fall down. Four out of the ten militiamen started beating him with their guns until he was unconscious.

Ochalla Ojullu was also beaten, but not as severely. As this occurred in a public area, many people started to congregate and finally the beating stopped. Odang Obach was carried to the home of an Anuak where he died as they were trying to find a vehicle to transport him to the hospital in Gambella. Ochalla Ojullu survived. It is believed that he would have also been killed if there had not been so many witnesses at the scene.

On March 12, in Dimma district, near the area of the goldmines, an incident occurred between a local indigenous tribe, the Surmas, and the civilian highlanders who had taken over the gold mining operation, something that had been previously operated by the Anuak. Apparently a conflict arose between the two and the Surma left, but came back later with guns. The civilian highlanders ran to Dimma town, arriving about 10:00 AM, and told the leaders of the defense forces that the Surma had guns and wanted to kill them.

Apparently, some believed that the Surma and the Anuak were working together and thus, the level of fear was noticed to be increasing throughout the day as people thought the Surma and Anuak might attack the town. By 6:00 PM, the federal defense commander in charge of the defense forces in the area went to the chief of police of Dimma, a Nuer man. He told him to disarm all the other police. He refused. This Nuer man had been in Gambella before and believed that if they were disarmed, the same thing could happen there. Pressure was put on this man to disarm the other police by force. Instead, the Chief of Police told the local indigenous police officers to get their arms ready as the commander would most likely be returning with troops and they may be killed. When the soldiers arrived about twenty minutes later, the bodyguard of the commander shot the Chief of Police was the first one shot and killed.

Fighting broke out between the defense forces and the locals, by 8:00 PM, one other local police officer, an Anuak man, was killed and five were critically wounded and are in the Gambella hospital. One federal soldier was killed and three wounded. It has now reached to the point it has become an ethnic issue with the Nuer and Anuak uniting. The tension has spread to Gambella as the Nuer see themselves as being united due to their shared vulnerability. Since this time, ten buses, each holding fifty to sixty-five people, have brought back defense troops to the Gambella region who were immediately deployed to the rural areas. It may be noted that there is no known collusion between the Surma and Anuak yet the Surma have heard of the government's atrocities against the Anuak and see them sympathetically.

On March 13, Omot Bang, an Anuak bulldozer driver, was found dead in his bulldozer. He had been working on the road between Bonga and Mezan. Omot Bang had been a bulldozer worker since 1983. An Anuak man, driving along the road with some highlanders, on their way to Dimma for business reasons, came upon some Ethiopian troops who were burying the man next to the bulldozer. They reported finding his dead body in his bulldozer. He had a bullet wound in his head and chest. There was no investigation and even though the man had identification, his body was not returned to his family for burial. The other Anuak man notified his family.

On March 13, another incident occurred in the Abobo area where the new militia groups had gone to find Anuak, suspected of being unsympathetic to the government. Ojo Obowya, one of the suspects, was not home the three times that the militia had gone to his home. On the third unsuccessful attempt to find him, one of the men ignited his hut on fire. It ignited others causing the deaths of two people, a six-month old baby boy whose mother could not reach him in time, and a blind woman who could not quickly find her way out. In all, seventeen huts were burned down.

No one investigated this incident so after the burial of these two victims, their families went to the regional government to request an investigation and the arrest of the man who did it. The response from the commander of the militiamen was that the man who did it had completed his term the very night of the incident and had been transferred the next day to another part of the country. The infant's father is in Pochalla. The mother and child had just recently returned from there.

On March 16, a delegation of highlanders from Gambella town, went to Pinyudo to meet with the Gog district governor, Mr. Okello Omot, and other local officials regarding doing further investigation on the incident occurring in December where three highlander teachers were killed by young Anuak teenagers in retaliation for the killing of three Anuak men.¹ They pressed District Governor Mr. Omot for information, believing he knew more about it. He indicated that he only knew what was public knowledge, but believed that the Anuak were responsible. He was asked why he did not go to their families and he stated he did not know the perpetrators, thus he did not know their families. However, he indicated he would hand them over to the authorities, as he believed they should be held accountable, but did not believe the families should be punished.

He was told that it had been he who had given the go ahead for the school to reopen and the teachers to return three weeks before the incident. They publicly stated in this meeting, that he must have been aware of the plan and that he could no longer be trusted. They also told him that his attitude towards the federal government was not right, as well as his attitude towards the highlanders in his community (who were also present at the meeting). Mr. Omot had previously refused to disarm all the Anuak police in the district. As a result, these highlanders official from Gambella town fired him, saying it was his last day. They appointed another Anuak man by the name Acouni in his place. No one gave them the authority to fire him, but there is fear that any one who speaks up may be arrested.

The head of infrastructure, Obowy Cham, works with school and district government capacity building programs. He was also accused of knowledge regarding the killing, as were the nine Anuak teachers who taught at the school. Mr. Obowy Cham and the nine teachers were all arrested during the meeting and taken to Gambella Regional Prison. One of them was in Gambella at the time, building a house for his mother. The authorities picked him up and without even going to the police station, took him to prison to join the others. It is believed that it is just a matter of time before the district governor Mr. Okello Omot is arrested.

It may be noted that many of the Anuak were not in favor of the murder of the teachers as they were innocent people; however, they are upset since the defense troops, acting on behalf of the highlanders, have already taken revenge on the Anuak by killing three young men and one girl.² They are questioning as to whether there are additional reasons for the actions taken as this pattern continues to be an unending story in this conflict between this tiny tribe of indigenous Ethiopians and the powerful government of the EPRDF.

Regardless, it is unfortunate that while the Anuak and others in Ethiopia are suffering under a regime privately known for its gross human rights violations and kleptomaniac policies, that Prime Minister Meles Zenawi is publicly launching a policy, as a member of Tony Blair's Africa Commission, to solve the problems of poverty, conflict and disease in Africa by working together in an "increasingly interconnected world".

¹Some Anuak have recently retaliated. On or about December 13, information was received that several young Anuak men indiscriminately killed three innocent teachers, all who were highlanders, in retaliation for what they believed was the indiscriminate killing of three Anuak teens, ages 12, 13 and 17, by defense troops. The victims were on a road when they met up with federal troops who told them to stop. They did not and instead ran. They were all shot and killed. After their burial, four or five teenagers went to an elementary school in Pinyudo and killed three highlander teachers and left a woman, the cook, alive. They told her to give a message to the federal defense troops that every time they indiscriminately kill innocent Anuak that they will indiscriminately kill the same number of highlanders.

Perhaps it is time for this interconnected world to be made aware of what the Anuak, the Nuer, the Surma, the Oromo, the Somali, the Afar and even some Tigrayans know, that the EPDRF government's divisive ethnic policies and oppressive tactics, used for years to gain land, resources and control, are starting to backfire. As the government is unsuccessfully trying to hide its foundational role in perpetuating poverty, conflict and the lack of access to health services and education, the people of Ethiopia are starting to unite in ways that may never have been possible before. As the veil of deceit falls, one may see a new unity in Ethiopia, a unity that is sure to rock this government on its already wobbly foundation, something that it has feared from its inception.

² In another rural area near the village of Pochalla-Olwori, (not to be mistaken with Pochalla, Sudan) in the Gog district of Gambella State, federal troops, based close by, rounded up four young men, ages twenty-one to thirty, and a nineteen-year-old girl. It started on January 13, when federal soldiers accused the young people of being new to the area. Despite insistence by the local people that they were from Olwo, another village nearby, and that they were on their way to Pinyudo, the soldiers radioed ahead so that when they left the town, other federal soldiers also detained and immediately taken to the local police station in Pinyudo. They learned from the local prison official there that the young people had never arrived at the Pinyudo police station. Instead, they had heard, the five had left the town at about 6:00 PM on January 16 and had been transported to Gambella Regional Prison, accompanied by ten military troops. However, the young people never made it to Gambella.

On January 17 and 18, their families started asking what had happened to them when they did not arrive. Information was received from some Nuer (another local ethnic group) who live in the refugee camp nearby, that during the evening of January 16, they had heard a car muffler and then silence before hearing five to ten gunshots. The Nuer reported being frightened that the Anuak who had killed three highlander teachers in December, 2004 in retaliation for the federal defense soldiers killing three young Anuak men, were now going to retaliate against Nuer; however, when nothing happened, they had come forward with this information.

The mothers of these young people have traveled to Gambella town to speak with the regional government representative, Omot Obang Olam, asking for help in finding their sons and daughter. They also were told that "outsiders" were coming for a meeting and that they were to leave and come back another time. The mothers said they did not want to leave until they found out where their children were. However, they were told that they would be arrested and go to prison if they did not leave.

After the mothers returned on Friday to Pinyudo, a group of Anuak men started searching for any evidence of what might have happened. They found all five bodies. Three of the corpses, Lero Ojulu, age 30, Athow Okoth, age 27 and the young woman, Ajulu Omot, age 19, were in close proximity to each other. Their clothes had been removed from them except for a shirt remaining on Ajulu Omot. The men's faces were unrecognizable due to being beaten and mutilated. Lero Ojulu's neck was deeply slashed. Athow Okoth had a gunshot through his head. Ajulu Omot had died from two gunshots to the head. A half-kilometer away, the body of Gilo Cham, age 23, was found. He also had been shot once in the head and another time in the chest. Another 500 meters away, Kero Okway, age 21, had been shot twice in the head. These two also had their clothes removed and their faces smashed. The charred remnants of their clothing were nearby where a fire had not completely destroyed them.