



World Organisation Against Torture
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PRESS RELEASE

Ethiopia: concerns about a Commission of Investigation attempting to cover up State involvement in acts of genocide

For the attention of the Press
Geneva, April 27th, 2004

Following its press release on April 13th, 2004, the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) again wishes to highlight the ongoing crimes against humanity and acts of genocide being perpetrated by the Ethiopian Armed Forces and “highlander” militias against the Anuak (or Anywaa) indigenous ethnic group in rural areas of Gambella, Ethiopia. It has been estimated that during the period spanning December 13th, 2003 to March 31st, 2004, the total number of persons killed had reached 1’137, and the killings have reportedly continued since then. The massive targeting of a specific ethnic group, with the clear intent of destroying a part or the entirety of the group, bears all the hallmarks of acts of genocide and crimes against humanity.

Although OMCT welcomes the steps that have been taken in order to form a Commission of Investigation - which was established following a ruling by the Ethiopian Parliament on April 12th, 2004 - serious doubts as to its impartiality and effectiveness have been raised by local and international NGOs.

It is believed that both the selection of the Commissioners, and the restricted scope of the investigation that they are tasked with carrying out, will ensure that this Commission of Investigation is ineffective and that impunity will reign. The neutrality of its Chairperson, Ato Kemal Bediri, who is the Minister of Justice and the Chairman of the National Election Board, has been seriously questioned by local NGOs, as he is accountable for many of the violations that have been taking place, according to our sources. They claim that the chairperson will attempt to cover up the involvement of the Ethiopian Armed Forces in the ongoing atrocities that are being perpetrated against the Anuak people.

The scope of the investigation is allegedly going to be limited so as not to cover the period during which the Ethiopian Armed Forces intervened in the Gambella region. During this period, which lasted from mid-December to some time in late January, according to our sources, the worst atrocities were committed, including massacres of hundreds of civilians, the bombardment and destruction of villages, leading to thousands of refugees fleeing to the Pochalla refugee camp in Southern Sudan. The investigation will also reportedly not involve the refugees in Pochalla or those in the Ifo refugee camp in Kenya. In addition, the few Anuak persons who remain in Gambella town are allegedly being threatened in order to ensure that they do not implicate the Ethiopian military in the various acts of genocide in the region. There are therefore significant concerns that this Commission will not be impartial or effective, raising the obvious need for an independent international investigation into these acts of genocide and crimes against humanity.

The International Secretariat of OMCT condemns the widespread and targeted killing of civilians, mass rapes, burning of homes and crops and other acts being perpetrated against the Anuak people, and calls on the Ethiopian Government to take all measures necessary to ensure that these are halted immediately, and to invite a United Nations independent investigation team to the Gambella region, in order for them to carry out an unrestricted investigation into these atrocities. OMCT calls upon the United Nations to send a top-level investigation team to the region, as a matter of utmost urgency, as the nature of the situation requires immediate action.

It is essential that this international investigation is unrestricted in terms of its mandate, its timeframe, the geographical areas it is able to access, including the refugee camps in Pochalla and Ifo, and that it is allowed to investigate any and all allegations of acts of genocide and crimes against humanity.

OMCT issued a press release on April 13th, 2004 concerning the attempted elimination of the Anuak people, which provides further details on the situation and is attached, for your reference.

For more information contact OMCT at: omct@omct.org or + 41 22 809 49 39