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For Immediate Release May 4, 2004

Ethiopia: International Community Should Investigate Government Role in Ongoing Gambella Violence

Survivors' Rights International (SRI) reiterates its call to the Ethiopian authorities to halt immediately all operations against the Anuak and withdraw all defense forces from the region, and it urges the international community to address the urgent humanitarian and political crises and to provide international protection for civilians. The international community should immediately investigate ongoing violence targeting ethnic minorities in southwestern Ethiopia, SRI said today. SRI also called on the government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to launch an independent investigation that would lead to the dismissal and prosecution of all military and government officials involved in the commission of atrocities, to guarantee humanitarian assistance, and to grant international monitoring groups immediate access to the region.

"We have interviewed numerous victims and eyewitnesses from the minority Anuak ethnic group who fled southwestern Ethiopia in the wake of massive and unprovoked violence against unarmed men, women and children," said SRI researcher Keith Harmon Snow. "We have collected detailed testimony corroborating allegations of acts of genocide and crimes against humanity against unarmed civilians by Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Defense Forces (EPRDF) and 'highlander' militias."

"There is compelling evidence that atrocities have been committed against thousands of civilians, and we continue to receive reports of killings and mass rape," Mr. Snow said. "We are very concerned about remote areas where a heavy military presence prevents communication with and access to civilians. On April 27, for example, we received reports of four girls and three farmers allegedly shot dead by EPRDF soldiers in Pinyudo and Abobo districts, but assessments of the violence in these areas was otherwise impossible."

Both the US State Department and the UN IRIN condemned the ongoing violence in Gambella and called for "transparent, independent" inquiries into violence in Ethiopia's western region where hundreds have been killed. Each agency called for "[f]ully transparent and independent investigations by the government" that would "encourage restoration of peace in the troubled region," and called on the Ethiopian government to investigate allegations of EPRDF involvement in atrocities committed against Anuaks and other victims. See UN Integrated Regional Information Networks, Ethiopia: US Government Wants Gambella Violence Investigated (February 23, 2004), accessible at http://www.survivorsrightsinternational.org/sri_news/un_news_ethiopia.mv; US Department of State, Ethiopia: Violence in Gambella Region (February 20, 2004), at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2004/29647.htm>.

Reports have alleged EPRDF involvement in massacres of civilians, mass rapes, forced disappearances, torture, illegal arrests and detentions, widespread burning of homes and crops, and the forced displacement of between 5,000 and 9,000 people. According to reports, Anuak women and girls have been systematically raped; several hundred persons have been arbitrarily arrested, detained, and allegedly tortured; and government soldiers have destroyed evidence of mass graves.

Survivors' Rights International and Genocide Watch documented the violence in a 23-page joint report released in February 2004, "**Today is the Day of Killing Anuaks**," at www.survivorsrightsinternational.org. Names of 424 people killed in December can be viewed at www.genocidewatch.org. By March 31, 2004, the list of names of the dead had reached 1,137; sources now believe the death toll may exceed 1,400.