

The Ethiopian Government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi Continues Opportunistic and Multidimensional Attacks on the Anuak of the Gambella Region of Ethiopia

One year after the massacre of Anuaks and other horrendous crimes against the Anuak people of the Gambella region of Ethiopia began, extra-judicial killing, rape, false imprisonment, torture, disappearances, destruction of homes, crops, granaries and the means for self-subsistence and other actions continue to be perpetrated by Ethiopian government defense troops. Thousands of troops continue to be deployed to the area in an attempt to control the Anuak with an atmosphere of terror and intimidation as they continue their oil operation on Anuak lands, threatening anyone who would claim any ownership of the land with death or imprisonment.

The reputation of the government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has plummeted during the last year as the international community has become aware of the gross crimes being perpetrated by the government against its own people. In addition to the Anuak, human rights violations against other groups are rampant throughout Ethiopia, demonstrating a generalized policy of horror, terror and brutal governance by a dictator, shrouded in the deceptive clothes of a “democratic leader.

The international community has poured millions of dollars into a “black hole”, as Ethiopia remains, despite all the help, the third poorest country in the world. Where is the development resulting from all these “dollars”? Where are the people who have benefited? Instead, how much has it cost this government to imprison more prisoners of dissent than most any other country in Africa? How much has it cost this government to send thousands of troops to Gambella, essentially establishing military rule in the area? Little by little, the illusion of Ethiopia being a “model of democracy in Africa” is being shattered as the light of truth reveals the government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to be one of the most corrupt, oppressive and self-serving regimes of our time.

Thousands of New Troops Arriving in the Gambella Region

As the attention of the world has been directed towards the victims of the Asian Tsunami, the Ethiopian government has quietly seized the opportunity to make new threats against the Anuak, similar to those prior to December 13, 2003, believing that the international community will not pay attention. Thousands of additional troops have been arriving daily in Gambella, during the first days of January. It is estimated that 3000 troops surround the city every night and are guarding all the roads into town. With them are coming more weapons and heavy artillery, strategically placed in open view and pointed towards homes, churches and main streets in town to further intimidate local people. The local people, most of whom witnessed the massacre last year, are already emotionally traumatized from what they experienced; however, as they again see a similar buildup, they are living with fear that it may happen again. Now, some want to run to Pochalla, Sudan. Sources report that federal soldiers are again making threats, telling people, ‘If you think you are going to resist, we will wipe you out and finish you.’

This past week, a 21-year-old Anuak man, who recently came to Gambella from Addis Ababa, was interrogated and beaten in front of a crowd of bystanders by a new commander of the federal forces. Accounts indicate that he was told, ‘Your people were whining and complaining to the international community, making a bad image of our government. But what you don’t know is that you are not under the international community government, you are under the Ethiopian government. Where are they (the international community) now?’ He was then arrested and detained for being “a suspicious person”.

Rumors from some sources within the defense forces reveal that the government fears thirty Anuak, who are allegedly armed and want to retaliate against the military for the deaths of family members. People do not know if this is actually the case; however, if true, it is not surprising considering their losses and to the fact that their options have been reduced to living under the bleak conditions in a refugee camp in Sudan or returning to their homes either to be killed or arrested. Yet, it is surprising that so many thousands of troops have been deployed. Of course it is now the dry season, making travel possible again. In addition to the thousands of troops in Gambella town and on every road leading there, three to four thousand more have been seen crossing the Gilo River, between Pinudo and Tedo, close to the Sudanese border and to the refugee camp in Pochalla, Sudan. A thousand more troops are reported to be near Jor, looking for "armed Anuaks". There is great concern that the troops will actually cross the border into Sudan.

One source just arrived in Gambella from Dimma and reported that more troops have inundated that area, blocking anyone from coming into town that might want food or other support. Older farmers have been threatened that they will be arrested should they provide any help. On January 5, 2005 defense forces accused Anuak farmers of providing food to armed Anuaks in Pukung, a small town about 70 K east of Gambella, close to the Oromo area. Most of the residents are from the Komo tribe, but a small number of Anuak also live there. The federal troops burned down only Anuak homes, crops and granaries. Not a single Komo home or property was destroyed. Approximately two hundred people have now come to Gambella seeking food and other basic necessities.

On December 23, 2004 the government had called a meeting, requiring the remaining Anuak government workers and other educated Anuak to attend. They were then forced to return to the rural areas where they were from to talk to their elders and warn them that they should immediately report the presence of any Anuak insurgents or anti-government persons to the government. They were to inform them that should any federal troops be attacked, that the elders and farmers in the closest villages would be found accountable and punished. Over seventy-eight men were forced to participate in this. However, the response of the elders was to tell the defense forces to stop killing the people first. The group of men just recently returned.

Incidents of Rape of Anuak Women and Girls by Federal Troops Continue

At about 9:00 PM on December 31, 2004 two young girls, ages nineteen and twenty-two, were returning home from school when one was attacked by three men from federal defense force. This occurred on a major street in Gambella town. One of the soldiers grabbed the girl's hand, putting it behind her back and covered her mouth, as she cried out. Her friend, instead of running away in fear, started screaming and punching the man. As one of the men tried to forcibly take the victim from the area, her friend continued to scream for help before she was stabbed with knife by one of them and fell to the ground bleeding. When neighbors heard them, a federal police officer intervened, pointing a gun at the soldiers. He then handcuffed and arrested them.

A superior commander of the federal defense troops has now come to where these men were being held and had them transferred to a military site. Now, most believe that nothing will happen to them. This incident occurred in the middle of the town, an area thought to be one of the safest. Many other incidents of rape are going on in the rural areas, but the Anuak have been alarmed that the federal troops involved in these rapes are becoming more brazen. It may be noted that it has only been Anuak women who have been raped, similar to Anuak men being targeted for other crimes against their person.

Nearly 1000 Anuaks Remain in Federal Custody in Gambella

Local sources, including some from within the regional local police force, not wanting to be identified for security reasons, stated on November 25, 2004 that nearly 1000 Anuaks continue to be detained in Gambella Regional Prison, without charges, and without any access to the legal process as laid out in the Ethiopian constitution. Their physical and mental status continues to deteriorate as many of them have now been imprisoned for over a year. Reports indicate that medical care has been denied and that harsh conditions, including inadequate food and sleeping conditions, further endanger the health and survival of those imprisoned. Many are being tortured.

Obang Media, was the advisor to the former governor, Okello Akway Ochalla, who fled the country in January 2004 and is in asylum in Norway. After he left, Obang Media was arrested and has been detained since. He is a diabetic. Prison officials will not allow him regular medication, but wait until he is seriously ill before providing it. He has lost a significant amount of weight and could barely eat. His condition was so poor that he had to be hospitalized. After limited recovery, his request for medication has again been denied.

Oremy Waranga used to be a driver for the regional government. Reports indicate that he is likely to die within the next few weeks unless he is treated. It is believed he may have tuberculosis. Last week, his condition was so serious, he could not eat or talk. Other prisoners were so concerned they sought help from a prison official but were refused. They then had relatives ask the local Red Cross to intervene. The Red Cross requested medical help for him, but was told the official had no authority to okay the request. So four women, elders in the community, went to Omot Obang Olam, an Anuak government collaborator, on Monday and he was hospitalized the next day. However, after only two to three days of care, he was taken back to the prison after only minimal improvement.

One eleven-year-old boy has been in prison since he was only nine years old. His father, Oluch Achawo, was imprisoned in August 2002 after his son, Obang Oluch, was accused by the government of robbing highlanders in the town of Pinudo in the Gambella region. When he could not be found, his father was arrested and detained without charges in the federal prison in Addis Ababa, serving as a substitute for him. After only two months, Oluch Achawo died. The federal defense forces then went to Pinudo and forcibly took his nine-year-old son to now replace his father in prison. However, the head of the prison in Addis Ababa refused him, stating he was too young, forcing them to release him. Two weeks later, defense forces again went back and put him in the regional prison in Gambella instead where he has remained since November of 2002.

On December 12, just prior to the anniversary of the massacre, government authorities warned the Anuak not to participate in any public or private commemorative events or to even mention it. Anuak churches were told not to hold any special services. They also prohibited Anuak from gathering in groups of more than three persons. Yet, eighty-six young Anuak men were rounded up and imprisoned, even though they had not assembled.

One man, Omot Ojullu Abella, had been detained for the past year in Gambella Regional Prison without charges. As three federal police with iron bars and rifle butts beat him, they spoke of retaliating against him due to being related to organizers of a memorial service for the Anuak in the United States, which commemorated the one-year anniversary of this tragic event, which has now possibly taken thousands of Anuak lives. From the beating, Omot Ojullu Abella was critically injured and then denied medical care. However, after his case was brought into public view through the action of Amnesty International and through the action of the US State Department and the United States Embassy, the Ethiopian government sent their highest official, within the department of the federal police, to Gambella Regional Prison, to apologize in person to Omot Ojullu Abella for the actions of the "barbarians" who, allegedly, did not represent their government.

Government Controlled Nominations for Regional Governor

Omot Ojullu Abella was finally provided medical care for his injuries. He is recovering, yet remains in prison. It is well accepted that once arrested, none of the Anuaks are now ever charged, tried, convicted or released from prison. However, there are rumors that Omot Ojullu Abella may be the exception and end up being released. This may be due to public exposure, but those same sources indicated that it would only occur after nominations for the governor of Gambella are closed. Omot Ojullu Abella is a well respected and courageous man, who may well be the “people’s choice” for governor if not carefully controlled. The government now has made it public that the nominating period will end in an unprecedented three weeks. It is rumored that once nominations can no longer be made, that Omot Ojullu Abella may be released. At that time, due to their new policy, shortening the nomination period, he will no longer pose a threat to the government and their plans for who should have the job.

Currently, the “government’s choice” is Omot Obang Olam, an Anuak man who is listed as one of the perpetrators of human rights’ crimes against the Anuak by human rights field investigators due to his collaboration with the EPRDF government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. It is widely accepted that it was he that provided the list of Anuak leaders who were targeted for killing. He has been heavily involved in the arrests and torture of Anuaks. In fact, just before a federal police officer ordered the three other federal police to beat Omot Ojullu Abella, he had come out of a meeting with Omot Obang Olam.

This man continues to enjoy the “special treatment” awarded to such key collaborators who serve as the “right hand” of the Ethiopian government. His nomination is no surprise. Instead of releasing the intellectual prisoners who may be the best candidates for elected office, the government has imprisoned any who might challenge them and have substituted a criminal. The blatant attitude of this government, where they assume they can proceed with impunity, is astonishing, but clearly visible by these actions.

Detention, Torture and Killings in Military Camps

While information is known about those being detained in Gambella Regional Prison, much less is known about those persons who have “disappeared”. It is generally believed that many of those unaccounted for, have been either killed or are being secretly detained in military camps in the rural areas where federal troops are based. Thousands of these were young men who had sought safety in Pochalla, Sudan a year ago when federal troops started their rampage of killing or imprisoning Anuaks; however, due to the bleak conditions in the refugee camp, many have attempted to seek relief by returning to Gambella, only to be killed “for suspicious behavior” or detained in military camps on their way back to their homes.

In an area where communication is so difficult, public awareness of their plight has only come to light when some of the bodies of these men and boys were returned to their families for burial. Most had not known that their loved one was in route back to the Gambella. As families recover these bodies, they have seen bruises, cuts and other injuries covering their heads, limbs and torsos, evidence of gross maltreatment. No investigations of the cause of their death follow. Instead, when family members have asked about the injuries, they have ended up being arrested and detained. According to sources, since December 2003, there is record of 173 Anuaks dying while in the custody of federal defense forces. This does not include numerous others who have died in Gambella Regional Prison or in the Addis Ababa Federal Prison. Many others remain in detention in inaccessible military camps under unknown conditions, just how many is difficult to determine, but it is believed to be a significant number.

Federal defense soldiers and police have reportedly arrested some who are judged to be “suspicious” simply because they have old wounds, scars and other injuries on their bodies from gunshots or machetes related to the December 2003 attacks against them. They are arrested and detained as “terrorists”, their injuries serving as “proof.” One seventeen-year-old, Germa Ojo, is an example. He was a victim of December 13, 2003 and had scars from three bullet wounds, one in his hand, and another in his back and one on his upper thigh. He had fled to Pochalla for safety and returned in August with others, only to be arrested due to these scars on his body. Approximately one hundred sixty others were arrested for similar reasons.

Anuak Leaders Remain in the Federal Prison, Addis Ababa

In 2002, the democratically elected regional governor, Okello Niglo, and four district governors, the mayor of Gambella town, and thirty-eight other elected government officials were arrested in Gambella and transferred to the federal prison in Addis Ababa where they remain even though the Ethiopian constitution that states that any citizen arrested, should be charged with a crime within forty-eight hours, or be released.

Information was received on January 3, 2005 indicating that the governor, Okello Niglo, the mayor, and the former Dimma district governor, are all ill and in need of medical care. Family members have obtained medication and have tried to provide it to the prison authorities, but their attempts were denied.

Government Fails to Accept Any Responsibility or Look for Any Lasting Solutions

Since the massacre of December 13, 2003, the Ethiopian government has failed to accept any responsibility for the widespread human rights abuses against the Anuak ethnic group in the Gambella region of Ethiopia. Despite documentation from multiple sources and eyewitnesses, they even fail to acknowledge the basic facts. They have even failed to arrest perpetrators, even those identified in their own report, completed by the Independent Investigative Commission they appointed. They continue to hide the facts from the donor countries and human rights organizations instead of finding a meaningful solution that could resolve serious peace and security issues in the region.

Ethiopia Receives Debt Forgiveness to Improve the Lives of Ordinary Citizens

On December 30, 2004, the US rewarded Ethiopia with huge amounts of debt relief (\$100.6 million in the next two years) that essentially amounts to 100% debt relief so as to enable Ethiopia to improve the lives of ordinary citizens by strategically reducing poverty through education, health services and other means.

It is ironic that after destroying the homes, crops, and properties of the Anuak, after killing the educated leaders and family wage-earners leaving countless widows and orphans, after displacing thousands of Anuak from their homes, after expropriating schools for the use by federal defense forces, after raping the women and destroying the basic fabric of the Anuak culture, that the Ethiopian government is now going to change its direction and instead build up an infrastructure that would reduce poverty and improve the well-being of the Anuak. Another question is, what has it cost to send and maintain the thousands of federal troops in the Gambella region, the same troops who were responsible for executing the crimes against these defenseless citizens? The international community has a right to ask these questions as the truth about this government becomes well known. The Ethiopian government should be prepared to give the real answer this time.

Anuak Justice Council

The Anuak now have an organization, the Anuak Justice Council, but the Ethiopian government is not coming forward to offer any solution.

