

When Will the Human Tragedy of the African People End?

My story also encompasses the tragedies and triumphs of the larger African story, but the ending is still to be determined.
Letter to President Obama

July 26, 2015
President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Your visit to Ethiopia

Dear Mr. President,

Seven years ago you stood before the parliament in Ghana and said, "*I have the blood of Africa within me, and my family's own story encompasses both the tragedies and triumphs of the larger African story.*"

On July 28, you will be addressing the African Union in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. As you do, may I introduce you to another story, my own and that of the Anuak people of Ethiopia. I also have the blood of Africa within me; in fact, it is similar to your own. We Anuak are part of the larger family of Luo, Shilluk, Acholi, Pari and other people of the upper Nile. We are an ancient people, now mainly living in East African countries of Kenya, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Uganda, but some of our people are scattered all over Africa. Many of our names start with "O" like yours and mine.

My story also encompasses the tragedies and triumphs of the larger African story, but the ending is still to be determined. The reason I am telling it at this time is because it presents a microcosm of what threatens the lives and futures of Africans. It begins in the remote region of Gambella of southwestern Ethiopia, located on the border of South Sudan. It involves a rich culture, a marginalized people, valuable land and resources and its exploitation by those in power. Much of what you may hear about Ethiopia may be heavily processed, like food that undermines your health. Some thrive on it while others are not satisfied until they have it in the "organic" state. If you are the latter, keep reading; if not, please forgo the rest of the story.

The Anuak are a small indigenous ethnic group numbering no more than 100,000 worldwide. Due to the difficult, tropical climate of the swampy lowlands of the Upper Nile, the Anuak and other indigenous people of the area have been mostly ignored until more recently. Additionally, the Gambella people have not been considered *real Ethiopians* by some Ethiopians due to their dark-skin color as well as due to cultural, linguistic, and religious distinctions from the *habesh* culture of the light-skinned Ethiopians living in the highlands. As a result, the Gambella people were not only marginalized, but experienced significant discrimination. In 1984, Cultural Survival classified the Anuak as an endangered people due to their dwindling numbers, marginalization, and pressures from encroaching groups surrounding them. Since that time, the threat to the Anuak has only increased. The reason is the well-known curse of Africa—the location of rich and abundant resources on their ancestral land.

Anuak indigenous land is found on either side of the river dividing Ethiopia from South Sudan. Five rivers flow through the Gambella region, carrying rich nutrients to the soil as it floods much of the arable land during the rainy season. As a result, Gambella land is some of the most fertile land in the Horn of Africa, capable of producing up to three crops per year. Gambella town used to be a port, connecting interior Africa to the Nile. Gambella also has oil, gold, minerals, Shea forests, abundant wildlife and other untapped resources. Most Gambellan people are small-holder agriculturalists and cattle people. For the most part, we have raised our own food, surviving without humanitarian aid. In difficult times, we shared with others—it was engrained in our culture.

The name *Anuak* means people who share or people who eat and laugh together. We do this so others in our family, community and village would also have enough to eat. Greed was looked down upon. As a child, most of us would carry our spoons with us as we played. Where there was food, we were welcome. If we were still hungry when the food was gone, we would go to the next place.

When the civil war was going on in 1984 between the south and the north in Sudan, the Anuak would travel with water, food and clothing to minister to the needs of the hungry and fatigued Sudanese refugees flooding into Gambella. We saw the *human being* in the face of others.

We knew there was a God who created the world around us and that there was a right way to live even if we were not well-educated. Yet, we wanted an education and as a result, as a 17-year old, I immigrated to Canada. Life was a challenge, but the opportunities were there and after graduation from the university, I returned to Gambella and found out nothing had changed. Even Gambella town lacked clean water and health care. The only hospital had no running water and people routinely died from childbirth, illnesses and injuries that could have been easily handled elsewhere. In response, with the help of Canadian friends, professors, doctors and a partnership with the university's medical school, the Gambella Development Agency was founded and our work began in Gambella in 2000.

Three years later, in December 2003, I received a phone call that changed everything. Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), along with civilian militia groups armed with machetes, were going door to door; brutally attacking Anuak in front of their families. As they marched through Gambella town, they chanted, "*Today is the day for killing Anuak,*" and "*Today there will be no more Anuak land.*" If the Anuak ran, the ENDF would shoot them in the back. They used a prepared list to identify and target the most influential Anuak among them. Oil had been discovered in Gambella and those being killed were those who had spoken out against the drilling for oil. The victims had opposed the plan for three main reasons: 1) the failure to consult with the people as required by law, 2) the lack of any provision that would benefit the people, and 3) the lack of environmental impact studies in this ecologically sensitive region of the Upper Nile.

Within three days, 424 Anuak had been ethnically targeted and massacred. Countless women had been raped and nearly 10,000 had fled to neighboring Sudan [now South Sudan] for safety. Out of the 424 who lost their lives, I knew 317 of them; they were family members, friends, and classmates, but also included many of those with whom we had been partnering in the development work. The troops continued on a rampage of destruction and pillaging of schools, health clinics, wells, homes, and crops. The terrorization and widespread killing and rape of the Anuak continued for three years before the Chinese drilling company failed to find any oil and the Ethiopian government troops were moved to the Ogaden region of Ethiopia where they repeated similar destruction and human rights crimes.

The widespread human rights atrocities against the Anuak were well documented in multiple investigations completed by Genocide Watch, Human Rights Watch and others. Former US Ambassador Aurelia Brazeal went to the Gambella region following the massacre and talked to the survivors, hearing first-hand testimony from the local people. As a result, she later called the Gambella region "*the conscience of Ethiopia*" because of the risks the indigenous people faced due to its abundant resources and potential for becoming the "*bread basket of Ethiopia and possibly of the Horn of Africa.*"

The international community, including US policy makers, urged the Government of Ethiopia to launch an investigation of inquiry, which they later did. Even in their biased findings, they acknowledged the involvement of some members of the ENDF in the killings. Human rights investigations discovered the complicity of top members of the EPRDF with the attack. Regardless of that, justice was never done. As of today, many of those arrested remain in prisons in Gambella and Addis Ababa, others in refugee camps in Kenya and South Sudan. The Anuak in general have never recovered; yet, their plight continues. When a vulnerable people sit on abundant resources, a corrupt, greedy and strong-armed regime will continue to look for a way to gain what it wants—Anuak land.

In 2008, the race for arable land in Africa began and Gambella was at its apex. The Anuak were forced off their land to make way for foreign and domestic investors seeking to lease their land from the government for next to nothing. Some of those contracts were made available to the public. In them, the Ethiopian government assured the contract holders of their support against "impediments," referring to the people. Oakland Institute, Human Rights Watch and others have completed studies of these land investment schemes and the egregious violations of human rights that accompanied the effort to forcibly "resettle" Anuak.

This so-called “villagization program”, promoted as a means to provide more services to “scattered communities,” failed to deliver in most every aspect, leaving many of the displaced Anuak without shelter, arable land, accessible clean water, food and most other services. Those who protest have been intimidated, beaten, arrested, raped or even killed. As a result, countless more Anuak have ended up in refugee camps.

According to Oakland Institute’s study, since 2008, 60% of the Anuak people in Gambella have been forced off their land in these government orchestrated “land grabs.” Of the total land expropriated, 78% has been leased to domestic investors and the remaining 22% to foreign investors.

Promises that this development will bring in new investment money that will build the economy and benefit the people of Gambella have not materialized. Instead, the land has benefited only a few, and nearly none of them are Anuak but instead are those in power and their crony networks. Applications from Anuak Diaspora groups and individuals have been denied, even though these Anuak, allegedly, were attempting to lease their own indigenous land. Instead, national treasuries have been looted as easy-term loans were doled out to underwrite economic opportunities for these few. In a country where there is no privately-held land, these land usurpers have been allowed to use this “leased” Anuak land as collateral, something unattainable to the Anuak and other Ethiopians.

A recently leaked Ethiopian government document from the Ministry of Investment gives more details concerning the 155 domestic investors in Gambella land. The document has its official seal and is dated, signed, and stamped. It contains a list of the names of domestic investors who have now acquired land in Gambella. It also records the ethnicity of each investor, the amount of the loan the investor has received from the National Bank of Ethiopia and a description of the land in possession. Many of the loans are in the millions [USD].

Out of 155 names of domestic investors, all but three of those listed are of the same ethnicity as the ruling party, the Tigrayan Peoples’ Liberation Front (TPLF) that controls the coalition government of the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Not even one investor is Anuak or from one of the other ethnic groups indigenous to the region. These investors do not have to pay taxes on the land and have enjoyed preferential treatment in accessing these large loans from the National Bank of Ethiopia. The same favoritism is going on throughout the country. No wonder why floods of young Ethiopian refugees are flooding other nations, often dying along the way as they seek a better life elsewhere.

Dear Mr. President, at your speech at the July 2013 business forum on Africa you promised *“a new type of relationship between the United States and Africa—a partnership founded on equality and shared interests”* which you said begins with *“the empowerment of Africans for greater access to more economic opportunities.”*

As you can see, my story is not over yet. After receiving that call of the massacre of the Anuak in December 2003, our NGO, the Gambella Development Agency, had to decline a grant from the Canadian government for a health care initiative between our organization, the College of Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan, and the people of Gambella. Instead, the Anuak Justice Council was founded to respond to the human rights threats from the EPRDF. What a tragedy!

As Executive Director of the AJC, it became apparent that justice would never come only to the Anuak until it came to all the people of Ethiopia—that *no one would be free until all were free*. We became aware of the serial perpetration of human rights abuses all over the country, by a regime that sought to take control of every aspect of life in Ethiopia to their own advantage. Their system was based largely on a flawed model of ethnic federalism that was manipulated to give the elite of one ethnic group—comprising only 6% of Ethiopia’s population—all the power. That power gave them license to rob as they pleased. This was not an Anuak problem, but a systemic problem requiring systemic change. It also required seeing the God-given rights and dignity of every person, regardless of ethnicity, political viewpoint, religious belief, regional background or any other factor—putting *humanity before ethnicity*.

These principles required a national rather than ethnic-based approach to bring freedom, justice, equality and opportunity to all citizens. In 2008, we founded the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) a non-violent, social justice movement committed to advancing the rights of all the people of Ethiopia. The SMNE is also committed to bringing change through meaningful reforms, the restoration of justice and the reconciliation of the people.

Mr. President, what we have now in Ethiopia is an ethnic apartheid system that is built on favoring a few at the top. It is kept in place through forceful controls exerted over every institution, the media, the political process, economic opportunity, the courts, and the people. If dissent arises; harassment, imprisonment and/or brutality are all likely to result—all covered by a shroud of deception. The people of Ethiopia see diminishing options for their future as the TPLF/EPRDF cracks down harder on all freedom and opportunity for regime outsiders. Many fear a violent ethnic-based backlash that could bring conflict, chaos and potentially, instability to this Horn of Africa country. This is the kind of country that is hosting you and which is home to the African Union.

In 2005-2006, the Anuak Justice Council filed a case with the International Criminal Court regarding the human rights crimes committed by this regime against the Anuak people of Gambella. A similar case has been filed to the African Commission for Peoples' Rights. Multiple investigations and studies since that time have only added additional facts to the case. Other legal cases could be filed against members of the EPRDF for complicity in gross human rights crimes in the Ogaden region, in the Omo Valley, in Oromia, in the South, in the Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz and Afar regions and throughout Ethiopia. **Why support such a regime in Ethiopian with military and other aid when they are terrorizing their own people? If African strongmen claim more Africans have been accused by the ICC than others; do not forget to tell them to stop terrorizing their own people. As you say, black lives matter, even in Africa.**

Dear Mr. President, if you really believe as you said in Ghana, that "*good governance is crucial to development, prosperity, and stability in Africa,*" US aid should be conditional. Leaders should be held accountable for the huge amounts of US aid they receive. Such aid should empower the people, not corrupt and tyrannical governments. Following the three-day massacre of Anuak leaders in 2003, US bullets were found that had been used to kill exactly the kind of men and women Africa needs for its future.

Just like Gambella, Africa is being plundered by its own leaders, regime cronies and foreign partners, the latter who see these strongmen opening the door to unprecedented opportunities; however, this is risky business. There are always unspoken expectations of these crooked regimes on foreign business partners to "play by regime rules." Some of the foreign investors in Gambella have already learned the hard way that the "law" is always on the side of the regime.

Right now, these strongmen are the gatekeepers necessary for doing business in Africa; but, sooner or later, many of these regimes may go, but the people of Africa will remain. Eventually they will rise up to demand their place at the table. I urge you to stand in alliance with the people, not only because of long-term US interests, but more importantly, because it is the moral high road. Will you contribute to help end the human tragedy of the African people? This is the kind of legacy we, the people of Africa hope you will choose for Africa. Thank you!

May God bless Africa as its people and leaders stand up for what is right!

Sincerely yours,



Obang Metho; Executive Director of SMNE
910- 17th St. NW, Suite 419

Washington, DC 20006

Email: obang@solidaritymovement.org

Website: www.solidaritymovement.org