



THE ONLY WAY TO END ESCALATING ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN GAMBELLA IS THROUGH GENUINE RECONCILIATION AND THE RESTORATION OF JUSTICE TO ALL

WILL THE GOVERNMENT OF ETHIOPIA HELP OR HINDER THE PROCESS?

Press Release

For Immediate Release:

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Washington, DC--Over the last week, deadly violence between the Nuer and the Anuak of Gambella has broken out, resulting in the senseless loss of lives. It started as an argument between an Anuak and an Nuer, but it triggered ethnic tensions, which have now exploded into revenge killings, destruction and insecurity.

Now, many are suffering as it has caused great distress, pain and sorrow to both the Anuak and the Nuer who have lost loved ones. We give our deepest sympathy for the loss of these precious lives to those families, friends and communities who are grieving their deaths. We also express concern for those who have been wounded and for countless others, both Nuer and Anuak, who are now living under great stress and hardship as they have fled their homes to find safety from the violence and conflict. We condemn all violence and call on all parties involved to immediately stop the killing and destruction so that peace might return to the people of Gambella.

It is critically important to seek lasting solutions before the tensions and violence escalate further; something that will cause more deaths, injuries, loss of livelihoods, greater destruction, the destabilization of the region or even the violence to spread to other parts of the country. We are not seeking the status quo in Gambella, nor in Ethiopia; but instead, the reconciliation and corrective actions necessary to bring about meaningful and sustainable solutions to the pervasive injustice, human rights violations, corruption and lack of freedom throughout the country.

Background:

Many details surrounding the tragic ethnic clashes in Gambella have been fairly well established; however, additional information is emerging daily, if not hourly, as the situation is further clarified and as new reports emerge. Some of these reports may also vary to some degree, pointing to the very real need to corroborate the narratives and to integrate those proving to be reliable. Eventually, a more thorough investigation of the incidents and its root causes will be required.

The first reported incident of violence resulted from a dispute over land between a Nuer man who is the Deputy Dean of the Teachers Training Institute (TTI)—now called Gambella University—and an Anuak man who is the driver for the Deputy (Vice) President of the region, second in command under the Governor of the regional state of Gambella, Gatluak Tut, a Nuer.

Reportedly, the Anuak man, who was the Deputy President's driver, had legally leased the land a few months ago, with plans to eventually build a home on it. The borders of the land had been demarcated and he held clear title to it; given to him by the government authorities. Recently, the Nuer man from Gambella University, decided he wanted that same land. The Anuak man told him you cannot take the land because he had the legal rights to it. Allegedly, the other man said he would like to see the boundaries of the land so they both agreed to meet there. After showing him the boundaries, the Nuer man told the other man he wanted the land, starting an argument that escalated into anger. The Anuak man told the other to get off the land. The Nuer man pulled out a pistol which he was carrying and shot the Anuak man in the arm. He then got into his car and left. People in the vicinity took the man to the hospital where he recovered. Allegedly, after some pressure, the Nuer man turned himself over to the authorities and was put in jail in Gambella town.

News of the incident quickly spread, including to the college, where Anuak students started to argue about it; asking, how could the Vice President of the college shoot someone for this? As they talked, anger increased, leading to an argument between the Nuer and Anuak college students. It resulted in a physical fight between them. A number of the students were injured, both Anuak and Nuer; however, one of the Nuer students was seriously injured. He was taken to the hospital where he later died.

Several days after the burial of the Nuer student, another incident of vengeance took place at the college. While students were taking an exam, the brother of the deceased Nuer student entered the classroom and threw a hand grenade at the students, seriously injuring at least four of them. One of them lost his arm, another his eye and the other two were injured by the exploding shrapnel. Others in the classroom had more minor shrapnel injuries.

In retaliation, the Anuak students started throwing rocks at the Nuer students; again triggering more ethnic-based fighting. Fortunately, the local school security quickly contained the violence and the school was shut down. However, later on in the afternoon, this news spread to other Nuer— who were not students, but adults— who responded with more violence. When they heard of what had happened, they organized themselves and attacked two Anuak neighborhoods where they burned down homes and shot at the people as they ran from their homes. Five Anuak were killed; a number of others were wounded. The regional government authorities did not intervene to stop it; despite the fact it could have helped contain the violence that continued to escalate.

This incident begs the question as to why a group of people would organize to destroy the homes of innocent persons and randomly shoot at them, targeting them only for their ethnicity, as they fled their homes? Why did they have guns in a region where the Anuak had been disarmed years ago?

The news of the Anuak killings and burning of homes swept through the region, causing the Anuak to take revenge against innocent Nuer; who again, had not done anything wrong except for the fact they were Nuer. In this case, three Nuer were killed in a rural area. One of these incidents occurred when a Nuer man, the second in command of the work of the Road Authority was stopped by Anuak who forced him out of the car and killed him. The highlander, who was the driver, was not harmed.

After this incident, the federal government decided to disarm the Nuer and the Anuak security officials, who had been appointed to help the local police force. Most of the local police were also disarmed. Guards at the Gambella jail were exempted from this. Additionally, despite the disarmament of many, some of the Nuer continued to have access to guns due to the numbers of weapons brought to Ethiopia from South Sudan by those in the refugee camps.

In an attempt to stop the spiraling violence in Gambella town, the federal government placed restrictions on the movement of the people, ordering that each stay in their own areas, the Nuer on one side and the Anuak on the other. However, on Sunday, January 31, 2016, some Nuer with guns, with the assistance of the guards, stormed Gambella jail, releasing the Nuer Vice Deputy of the College who was being held there and proceeded to kill seven of the Anuak prisoners as well as two highlanders, with help from the guards. Most every Nuer being held in the jail was also released. This is the main jail in the Gambella region.

Where else could such a crime be carried out except in a place where there is no rule of law? Apparently, after they stormed the prison and killed the prisoners, they replaced the Ethiopian flag outside the jail with a Southern Sudanese flag, but some others within their ranks, took it down right away, probably realizing how dangerously provocative it could become. Yet, because it was witnessed by others in the vicinity, the story has spread.

We have heard reports, not yet corroborated, that some innocent Nuer were murdered by Anuak in retaliation for other deaths; however, we do not know the details surrounding these incidents, but are seeking more information. We hope those who know more will provide that information as we must seek to protect the lives of all people, regardless of ethnicity or other differences. This is God's universal law, which is higher than any other and should help us to seek the truth and to do right— even in the absence of the rule of law.

The federal government finally realized they needed to bring in more national defense forces as the situation was getting increasingly out of control, especially in the rural areas. There is talk that a good number of Nuer are being killed in Anuak areas and of Anuak being killed in Nuer areas.

One incident involved three Anuak who were waiting for the bus in village of Nyniang to go to Gambella town when they were killed by Nuer. Two of them were civilians and the other was a security official who had been disarmed. The Nuer have other incidents to add. It has become obvious that there is a risk to all. In Gambella town, the Anuak cannot safely go to the Nuer area and Nuer cannot go safely to the Anuak area; dividing the town. Tensions are extremely high.

Those perpetrating these crimes should be held accountable, but a large share of the blame is also on the shoulders of the ruling one-party, ethnic-based Government of Ethiopia (GoE). There are a number of reasons for this:

1. The lack of an effective rule of law or at the least, the failure to intervene earlier, when the conflict first broke out, could have stopped the violence from escalating, saving many lives and preventing the destruction that is now recycling and is at a stage that is much more difficult to contain
2. The GoE's policies of fomenting ethnic division as a means to prevent unity among Ethiopians— a unity that could threaten the authoritarian government of the TPLF/EPRDF— has created the seeds of ethnic hostility that can easily erupt under certain conditions; not only in Gambella, but in many other places across the country.
3. The GoE has failed to disarm the incoming South Sudanese refugees, coming from a war zone across an open border. Refugees can be seen walking freely in the region, carrying heavy-duty weapons like M-16 or AK-47 guns; yet, the GoE has failed to exert controls on this incoming flow of weapons to the region.
4. The GoE disarmed the Anuak prior to the massacre of Anuak in December of 2003, making them highly vulnerable and dependent on the GoE for protection, which has not been given.

5. The GoE has failed to give local representation in the regional government to the Anuak. In some cases, the local Nuer have also been excluded from access to the same; instead, some of the refugees have now taken government positions within the regional government. This is the case despite the lack of citizenship and their inability to speak Amharic. Some go to their offices wearing a South Sudanese pin attached to the lapels of their jackets.
6. The GoE has allowed the UN to use the region to house over 541,437 refugees, exceeding the population of Gambella, but they have never consulted with the people of Gambella regarding the local impact, seeming not to care. Although refugees are not supposed to carry guns; the UN is doing nothing to stop this, becoming part of the problem.

Recommendations:

The Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) is prepared to take a role in this effort, strongly believing the problem must be addressed before it worsens. We in the SMNE strongly condemn the killing of all the people, whether Anuak, Nuer, highlanders or others. The SMNE will do our best to draw attention to this volatile and fragile situation in southwestern Ethiopia, utilizing our experience, knowledge and network to help restore peace and calm.

- We call on the Nuer and Anuak elders in these communities, their religious leaders and other leaders among them to find a peaceful solution.
- We call on the GoE to bring those who committed the crimes to justice and to provide protection from harm to all the people, based on their humanity. We also call on them to improve security by disarming the refugees and establishing checkpoints of entry to better ensure that guns will not flow into the region.
- We call on the all the people of Ethiopia to not allow the people of South Sudan to import the conflict of ethnic violence to Ethiopia to the best of their ability. Instead, where there are other issues and grievances, civil discourse to find solutions should be pursued rather than the use of violence. Solutions for land and other conflicts in South Sudan should be justly resolved so that the people of South Sudan can live peacefully together. The Nuer of South Sudan should understand that Gambella is in another sovereign country and the erection of the flag of South Sudan within the boundaries of Ethiopia could be considered a violation of the sovereignty of Ethiopia.
- We call on donor countries to use their leverage to exert pressure on the Ethiopian government to: 1) protect their citizens, 2) call for the UN to play a positive role in ensuring the conflict in South Sudan is confronted more effectively among the refugees so the region is not at destabilized with ethnic-based violence, the overflow of guns and the expansion of the problems in South Sudan to Gambella and beyond.
- We call on the regional and federal government to act impartially; not representing the interests of one ethnicity, but with equal protection, justice and fairness towards all of the people of the region. The refugees should not be allowed to destabilize the area, even if it requires placing restrictions on their movement outside the camps— at least until peace is restored.

- We call on SPLM-IO leader, Riek Machar, to control and contain any of his supporters and soldiers who may have contributed in any way to this ethnic-based conflict so that the deadly conflict of South Sudan does not cross the border into Gambella. The basis of this recommendation is from alleged reports that soldiers responsible for killing Anuak and destroying their homes in Itang, when captured by Ethiopian National Defense forces, allegedly were wearing South Sudanese uniforms, with some claiming allegiance to the SPLM-IO.
- We call on the UN and members of the international community to move the refugee camps to a different inland part of Ethiopia that does not border on South Sudan **if the UN and GoE fail in their efforts to provide more effective border security and to control the influx of guns**. The current open border creates an ongoing risk of violence and instability to the region due to the ease of going back and forth between countries, a situation that allows for the free flow of both guns and conflict if not addressed immediately.
- We call on SPLM leader, President Salva Kiir, and SPLM-IO leader, Riek Machar, and those who support them, to genuinely seek the implementation of the peace agreement so peace, justice and reconciliation can come to precious people of South Sudan; and so the fruit of such peace overflows across its borders to contribute to peace and prosperity of all in the Horn of Africa. May others do the same for them.

Conclusions:

What started as a dispute among two people has now exploded into revenge killings due to a failure to see the humanity of others. Instead of holding the perpetrators responsible for the crimes— because there is no rule of law— people have taken the law into their own hands. In the case of Gambella, revenge is being taken against innocent parties— another family member or someone of the same ethnicity. This is a tragedy that causes evil to prosper and mutual destruction. It has caused much blood to be shed, the destruction of homes, and a surge in ethnic-based hostility after years of peace between the people of Gambella.

The people should not forget the good times. During the massacre of the Anuak in 2003; many Nuer gave safe refuge to Anuak in their homes. Religious leaders have been involved in the past years in efforts to bring reconciliation and peace among the people. Nuer and Anuak have intermarried, worked together, developed friendships and lived in peace. The future could be wonderfully promising together, but it will be lost if people give in to evil, hate and retaliation.

If there are some wanting to use ethnicity to divide the people for their own agenda; others should not give in to it. The Anuak and the Nuer should work together to bring genuine reconciliation among them and others in the region so healing can take place and they can once again live in harmony, thriving together.

This is now an opportunity for the regional and federal Government of Ethiopia to do their job to stop the violence, to deal with issues of insecurity and the heavy influx of guns, to protect the people and to bring the perpetrators to justice. Initially, federal security forces simply looked on without intervening; allowing this violence to be committed and to spread by lack of intervention; however, without more effective governance, the violence could spread beyond the region.

A meaningful implementation of the peace agreement in South Sudan could resolve much of this crisis. The vast majority of the refugees living in the camps simply want a peaceful life where there is safety, security, peace, justice and equal rights, just like what is wanted in Ethiopia. Let us work together for lasting peace.

May God help those recovering, those who are grieving for lost loved ones and for the softening of the hearts of those who carry anger, wounds and the desire for revenge.

Let God raise up leaders who can bring peace, justice, reconciliation and prosperity to Gambella, Ethiopia and beyond.

Let us put humanity before ethnicity or any other distinctions.

Let us care for the wellbeing and justice of others as we care for our own or for our own groups.

Let us share freedom with others for no one is free until all are free.

May God work through our souls to heal the pain that we have been going through until we are free indeed!

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