



Emergency Alert: Civilians Under Attack as Human Rights Violations Soar in Gambella

We in the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)**¹ call on human rights organizations, civic groups, media groups and donor countries to focus their attention on the Gambella region as the number of human rights violations—assaults, arrests, torture and disappearances—in the region are soaring due to an intense crackdown on the local people by TPLF/EPRDF troops.

According to witnesses from Gambella, in the last few weeks, two to three thousand TPLF/EPRDF defense troops have been sent to the area following the ambush of a passenger bus on March 4, 2012 where 19 innocent people—mostly young students returning from school—were killed. Despite an absence of evidence, the Anuak rebels in the bush have been blamed and with them, the Anuak in general, especially men and older boys who all “look” suspicious in the eyes of this regime. It has resulted in a spiraling number of incidents of violence and arrests of Anuak by the military, creating an atmosphere reminiscent of the Anuak massacre of December 13-15, 2003 and the two or more years of human rights abuses that followed.

The TPLF/EPRDF regime is justifying this clampdown as necessary to protect the region—and the investors—from these “anti-peace” insurgents; however, *from our investigations, we in the SMNE have found no evidence of their involvement and instead, reason to suspect that the tragic murder of these 19 Ethiopians may be another Meles-conspired false flag operation, where disguised TPLF agents attacked the bus themselves in order to blame the local people, especially those who are opposed to the land grabs.*

In the last year, Wikileaks released a report that attributed responsibility for a car bomb that exploded in Addis Ababa following the 2005 national election to Meles’ own agents who had then used the incident to arrest members of the Oromo Liberation Front. On the morning of the genocidal massacre of Anuak of December 13-15, 2003, a UN vehicle was ambushed and all its occupants, including an Anuak driver, were brutally murdered and the bodies were strategically laid out in the center of Gambella town, inciting the residents. Anuak insurgents were blamed; however, the plans to eliminate Anuak resistance to the oil drilling, *Operation Sunny Mountain*, began in Meles’ offices in September 2003, according to documents retrieved from the office of Mr. Omot Obang Olom, the current Gambella regional governor who was Chief of Security during the massacre.

These are only some examples of the *long-standing pattern of widespread human rights violations by this one-ethnic dominated apartheid regime that makes it one of the worst human rights violators in Africa. The crimes in the Gambella region only declined because the TPLF/EPRDF troops were moved to commit the same or even worse crimes in the Ogaden and into Somalia. These violations include genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and other atrocities that they have perpetrated and continue to perpetrate with impunity; much of it documented by multiple human rights organizations.*

Eight years after the Anuak genocide, Gambella is again in the spotlight. This region has become the epicenter of land grabs on the African continent and with it, human rights violations in response to dissent; however, with the return of TPLF/EPRDF troops, the numbers and breadth of these incidents have multiplied. From the testimony from people in Gambella, the very heavy presence of troops has terrorized many, triggering post-traumatic memories of the past genocide.

Some of the schools in the Gambella districts of Abobo and Gok, where much of the land development is going on, have now been shut down and the children are no longer going to school. ***Men and older teens are being intimidated and harassed with reports of many arrests and torture. Troops have been rounding up the men and ordering them to go into the bush, barehanded, to search for unknown insurgents who are now accused of the killings despite a lack of evidence.***

Many local people are questioning the regime's assumption of guilt. Instead, many believe that the government was behind the ambush as a covert means to protect the investors with thousands of troops. There has been no peace or stability in the region since their arrival as they target the local farmers in these rural towns and villages. Now, anyone walking by themselves is labeled as a rebel; particularly any men, young and old.

On March 25th, defense troops went to the teacher's college to arrest three Anuak students and one Nuer student. These students claimed they had committed no crimes and had nothing to do with the ambush or other rebel activity. They resisted going with them and as they did, faculty members called the police. Many of the police force are local Anuak and should have been the ones to arrest them or otherwise to protect them.

As the incident created a public spectacle, the defense troops backed off and did nothing. When the police came, they arrested the students and jailed them; however, in the middle of the night, the military removed them from their cells and brought them to the army base for interrogation, all in violation of the law. The outcome of these students is still unknown. One of the students Mr. Opiew Obang allegedly was suspected because his father, a police officer, had been arrested in the Abobo area on March 17th for refusing to search for the insurgents saying he had no idea of their whereabouts. This is only further evidence that no justice exists in this country.

The federal government has now taken complete control of the Gambella region although the governor, Omot Obang Olom, remains as a figurehead. ***Why is the TPLF/EPRDF regime panicking so much? Was this ambush part of a plan to protect the investors? After the car was ambushed, the government-controlled news agency put out a press release regarding the bus ambush and the killing of the 19 students. This is quite unusual for them because they usually do not usually put out a press release. When one puts it all together, we believe it may be all a strategy to protect the regime's investments in the area as well as the investors with their work crews and professional staff who have been feeling fearful with some threatening to leave according to rumors from the ground.***

The motivation to use a high-profile and horrific killing of innocent students to justify bringing in so many troops to assure the investors to stay or even as a means to provide cheap labor (TPLF/EPRDF troops) for the investors if their crews leave is not far-fetched for a government such as the Meles regime who has a long history of pseudo-operations.

On March 21, federal representatives went to South Sudan to meet with the Anuak Commissioner of Pochalla where thousands of Anuak remain who had fled from Gambella during the massacre and its aftermath. They wanted the commissioner to hand over approximately twenty Anuak who they believed might be involved in the insurgency and hiding in the refugee camp in South Sudan. The Anuak there said they did not know the whereabouts of these people. Now, the TPLF/EPRDF regime is exerting pressure on South Sudan to return all of the Anuak refugees to Gambella, against international law.

In the last two weeks, an extensive campaign has been launched, especially in the three Anuak districts where the land development is going on. Mr. Omot Obang and federal officials went to meet with some of the Anuak elders and people in these districts to literally beg them not to join the resistance and instead to work with the government against the "anti-peace" elements in the bush. Great efforts were made to convince the Anuak that this land investment was good for the people and that the TPLF was the best government for them because it was a minority government that respected the rights of the minorities and marginalized, unlike the Derg under Mengistu.

Efforts to discourage the Anuak from joining or supporting the resistance are ongoing. On March 26th Mr. Aleka Tsgaye Bereh an official from the office of the Minister of Defense was in Gambella town and met with the teachers at the college. On March 27th they met with the students; both times with the message to not support the insurgents.

One of the government representatives at the Anuak village meetings with the elders was Mr. Shefarwa W/Mariam the man who replaced Barnabas Gebre-Ab, the former Minister of Federal Affairs for the State of Gambella, who had been an architect of the Anuak massacre. In response to their attempts to gain support of the government, the Anuak elders, at every location, told the officials that one of the problems in the region was Omot Obang and that until he was out of power, the problems would continue. When Mr. Omot was asked about this, he said that these elders had been “...brainwashed by the intellectual Anuak who are against me and those people are not only in Gambella, but also in the Diaspora.” He further said, “These are the people who are against the land deals and who also hold a grudge for December 13th.”

For this reason, in the afternoon of March 26, 2012, Omot Obang, the police commissioner, Mr. Tsgaye Bereh the defense commander and the Supreme Court Justice of the Gambella Region made a decision that the Anuak insurgents who are in the bush must have a link to the those Anuak in the West as well as to the intellectual Anuak in the region who do not want him—Omot Obang—to be in power. So on March 27th, instead of having an open meeting at the governor’s office as usual, a secret meeting was held at the Police Commissioner’s office which lasted for only ten minutes.

The decision was made to declare a war on intellectuals. What this meant was that they would identify guilty suspects by retrieving telephone records from the state-owned telecommunication office so as to reveal who had talked to people in the Diaspora. Once identified, those who had engaged in such calls would be arrested. From tomorrow forward, anyone under suspicion by Omot Obang or anyone he thought did not “like” him, he would target for arrest.

This is all a strong indication that things will get worse. *There will be many more arrests, disappearances, torture and killings, the way it was done before in Gambella and in the manner that is still going on in the Ogaden. We call on human rights groups to investigate and for pressure to be put on the Ethiopian government to go after those in the bush, if they can prove their guilt, rather than those in their homes. Even more importantly, they should stop the abuses of the innocent and hold their own troops accountable for human rights crimes already committed.* The SMNE is already collecting the names of the people who have disappeared or who have been arrested or tortured. We now have 27 names, with more names forthcoming. We will make this information public when we are ready.

In conclusion, *caution should be exercised by every Ethiopian citizen so as not to be entrapped by any TPLF/EPRDF deceit and efforts to divide people along ethnic lines, skin color or as highlanders or lowlanders as a ruse to maintain power, and with it, access to land and resources. We Ethiopians must see the humanity in each of us if we are ever to live in that New Ethiopia.* =====

Please do not hesitate to e-mail your comments to Mr. Obang Metho, Executive Director of the SMNE at: Obang@solidaritymovement.org. You can find more about us through our website at: www.solidaritymovement.org

¹The SMNE is based on the belief that the future well being of our global society rests in the hands of those among us who can put “humanity before ethnicity,” or any other distinctions that divide and dehumanize other human beings from ourselves; inspiring us to care about these “others;” not only because of the intrinsic God-given value of each life, but also because “none of us will be free until all are free.” These are the underlying principles of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE), of which I am the executive director. The SMNE is a non-violent, non-political, grassroots social justice movement of diverse Ethiopians; committed to bringing truth, justice, freedom, equality, reconciliation, accountability and respect for human and civil rights to the people of Ethiopia and beyond. The SMNE has branches in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden, Australia, Japan and chapters in various cities and countries throughout the world, including within Ethiopia. You can find us through our website at: www.solidaritymovement.org