



SMNE Press Release:

TPLF/EPRDF Retaliates Against Civilians for Killings at Saudi Star

Today, May 2, 2012, in Pokedi Village, in the Gambella region, TPLF/EPRDF Defense troops opened fire on a group of terrified Anuak civilians, killing two students, namely Zewudu Ochorjoo and Opiew Ojulu; a teacher, Mr. Obang Ochang and two local Anuak police officers names Owar Oman and Okung Oman.

This is exactly what we predicted would happen in our press release of April 30, 2012—“*Saudi Star Pakistani Foreign Workers and Ethiopians Killed in Raid on Saudi Farm Compound—Believed Related to Land.*” The incident occurred only sixteen miles from last week’s killing of ten workers at Saudi Star Agricultural Development PLC, a 10,000 hectare rice plantation owned by Saudi-Ethiopian businessman, Mohammed Al Amoudi, a staunch government-supporter. *We in the SMNE issued a public warning regarding the high likelihood that TPLF/EPRDF defense forces would in turn target innocent Anuak civilians, supposedly of the same ethnicity as the suspected assailants, as a means to collectively punish all Anuak. It has now begun.*

We condemn the killing of any innocent civilians; however, what legitimate government then retaliates by indiscriminately targeting innocent persons by tribal identity rather than by guilt? *Unfortunately, this is the trademark of the current TPLF/EPRDF regime. Since its rebel beginnings in the bush, they were identified as a terroristic organization by the U. S. State Department. They have not changed. Now in power for over twenty years, the terroristic nature of the regime is played out on the ground by the military forces they control who have committed massive human rights violations against their own people with government approval and legal impunity. Some of these troops, but not all, who wear the Ethiopian uniform, are as brutal on their own people as they would be against a hostile enemy invader.*

According to eyewitnesses, defense troops went to Pokedi village in the Abobo District to look for rebels. When they saw a man carrying a gun, they shot and killed him without ever questioning the man. The victim, Oman Obang, was a member of the village police force who had been officially working in that capacity. Mr. Obang had no known ties to the rebels in the bush but was commissioned by the government to protect the community in which he lived.

After hearing the shots, others from the village’s police militia came running with their guns; however, without hesitation, the defense troops then began shooting at them as well as in every direction, wounding two of them. When some children and their teachers ran out from their school, these defense troops shot and killed two primary school students, as well a teacher and two local Anuak police officers.

People in the village, fearing for their lives, ran away to the bush. According to eyewitnesses, it was the defense troops who did all the killing; murdering these innocent people for nothing. After the shooting ended and the troops left, the people went to collect the bodies, bringing two of the bodies to the largest town in the district, Abobo, and the two others to the smaller villages from which they came.

On May 1, 2012, a middle-aged man was killed in the village of Perongo and in another incident; a student was killed without reason as he was walking on the road outside of the town. The killing in Pokedi happened in the middle of town in broad daylight; however, the people are even more afraid to go anywhere outside the village, feeling they will be accused and shot without even being asked a question. This is exactly what happened yesterday when this man and young student were killed in separate incidents. In another similar case, a man was shot and wounded by troops, but did not die. The vulnerability of the people makes normal activities of life nearly impossible.

On April 30, 2012, in the small village of Batgilo, in the Gog district, an entire family—father, Mr. Owar Othimanywaa, his wife and their four children—was killed. The neighbors who were there at the time reported that the TPLF/EPRDF troops had accused the man of feeding the rebels, but neighbors reported that he had nothing to do with any of the rebels. We are also investigating cases of other civilians who reportedly have been murdered by defense forces since the attack on Saudi Star last week. One of those was a nineteen-year old name Amenya who was arrested and brought to the army headquarters. Tonight we have received word that he has died. He was tortured so badly, much by the barrel of a gun that he could not recover.

These savage human rights abuses are perpetrated by Meles' troops without any fear of accountability. It is barbaric. Even foreign soldiers from another land would not treat the people this way, but these troops are fellow Ethiopians, from the same country. Not all members of the TPLF/EPRDF are guilty of these crimes. This is very important to remember.

It does makes one wonder how the leadership of these troops, whose mission is to uphold the rule of law, to protect innocent citizens and to ensure Ethiopia's national security, have become the biggest threat to all. No one should be punished for the crimes committed by a family member, loved one or community; but instead, only the person who is responsible. The collective Anuak population of Gambella is now at risk of being targeted for something done by a few. These actions appear to be intended to so intimidate the people that they are pushed to leave the region for their safety.

Before the killing that took place today in Pokedi, the regional and federal government called a meeting in Gambella town where all the Anuak leaders, including community leaders and religious leaders, as well as the people, were supposed to attend. Most who attended the meeting were extremely upset with the government's demands to participate in a rally on May 3, 2012 to condemn the killing of the Saudi Star workers without acknowledging any of the other problems related to it like the land grabs and human rights abuses to the people. They were also to accuse the rebels of being anti-peace and anti-development. Officials demanded that the Anuak lead the rally and the Anuak were told that if they did not do it, they were supporting the rebels. They warned them, *"Tomorrow we will see who is here and not supporting the rebels or who is not here and is supporting the rebels."*

Government workers were pressured even more, telling them that if they did not show up, they would lose their salary. The government gave the reason. They said that the recent killing was creating a hostile environment for investors and that was why the Anuak had to come out to condemn the killings and to publically express their support of peace and development.

The official's inflammatory and threatening language was all very upsetting to the Anuak. They made some of the following threats or taunts:

"Why are you Anuak opposing this land development because this land does not even belong to the Anuak but it belongs to the government."

"If you want to take power away from Omot Obang Olom [the pro-government Anuak governor of the region] you should get rid of him, but our government will continue regardless."

"If there was no law, what happened on December 13th could still happen again [meaning the massacre of 424 Anuak leaders in Gambella town by the TPLF/EPRDF national defense force from December 13-15, 2003]. The only thing stopping it is the law," [which did not stop it before].

"If the Anuak are trying to separate Gambella from Ethiopia, you should be man enough to go to the bush and fight and see if you can take it. You will not succeed."

One Anuak said in response:

“Those of you in the government should think carefully before you say this kind of thing because it is so upsetting that it will incite more Anuak to go to the bush. You should think about it because the Anuak never used to be like this. You should be rational because what you are saying did not happen overnight but because of abuses. Those in the bush are doing this because you are pushing them to the edge so if you truly want peace; the language you are speaking is not the way to win the people. You are making the people more hostile because you should realize what made the people do these things in the first place. We did not get here without a problem and that is what you should be addressing right now and you should do it in a good way.”

The tension is extreme in the region and it appears that the TPLF/EPRDF is only fueling what is already there. ***Our fear is that this will get out of control very soon and very easily with dangerous consequences to all parties. The TPLF defense forces do not trust anyone, making every Anuak a potential rebel and target. They especially are suspicious of the Anuak regional and district police who have guns as part of the job they have had with the same government that now is a threat to them.*** Yet, here is some background on two victims. Mr. Owar Oman, the Pokedi police officer who was killed today by TPLF/EPRDF defense troops was the only brother of an Anuak man, who ironically, is also a member of the TPLF/EPRDF defense troops. In a personal interview he told SMNE’s Executive Director, Obang Metho, **“The same government I am fighting for has now killed my only brother.”**

April 7, 2012, the SMNE reported on the murder of Tedo Kul Oman, a young 18-year-old student who was shot in the back and head by a TPLF/ERPDEF soldier in the Gambella town. Tedo’s father Mr. Kul Oman was the Head Police Commissioner of the Dimma District [in Gambella]. This boy attended Gambella High School and was known in the town. He was not a rebel in the bush. These are the kinds of people that are being targeted.

As the TPLF/EPRDF government tries to force the Anuak to come out to promote the appearance of peace in the region in order to pacify the investors, rallies for other reasons would be outlawed. For example, it would be against the TPLF/EPRDF law for the Anuak, other indigenous people in Gambella or Ethiopians in general to rally against the land grabs and in support of indigenous land rights. The TPLF/ERPDEF would never tolerate a rally that condemned TPLF/ERPDEF-sponsored human rights violations and called them to account for their crimes.

Neither would they allow a public demonstration in opposition to the villagization schemes where many Anuak and other Ethiopians have been forced off their land into resettlement camps without services or adequate land and water. The demonstrations of Muslims this past week ended up with the TPLF/EPRDF shooting into the crowd and killing five people, including a six-year-old. The TPLF/ERPDEF wants the Anuak to condemn the killing of the workers but to be silent on the killing of Anuak or anyone else.

Are these all signs of desperation on the part of the TPLF/EPRDF as they try to crackdown more harshly on the people who are being pushed to their limit? Are they losing their grip on the people as people begin to feel they cannot take it anymore? It is not only in Gambella, but we are seeing similar protests in the North, with the Muslims demanding religious freedom for all in the South, in Afar where the people are experiencing much the same of what is going on in Gambella, in Benishangul-Gumuz and in the Ogaden. We are very concerned and are watching the situation very closely.

We in the SMNE strongly urge human rights organizations and especially donor countries, who are keeping this regime in power with aid money—hoping to prevent the disintegration of a country by doing so—to now act. It is the time to personally call on Meles to tell him to stop killing the innocent people of Ethiopia. We doubt he will listen closely until the people of Ethiopia make sure he has no option! May the God of justice defend the people and the precious land of Ethiopia as Ethiopians stretch out their hands to Him!

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