

April 18, 2012



Press Release:

TPLF/EPRDF Defense Forces Brazenly Murdering Innocent People in Gambella in Broad Daylight

Today, in Gambella, there is little to no accountability for TPLF/EPRDF Defense Forces who are committing rising numbers of human rights crimes against the people of the region. *It used to be that murders, beatings and torture were carried out secretly in the bush or in the rural areas, but now there is no security even in the middle of Gambella town for any but those carrying the guns. As these criminal acts against the unarmed civilians in Gambella are being so easily dismissed by authorities, it is increasingly clear they are actually being condoned or promoted by higher ranking officers and government officials—all the way up to Meles.*

As of Saturday, April 7, 2012, Mr. Tedo Kul Oman, an eighteen-year-old 12th grader from Gambella High School, was shot and killed by an Ethiopian Defense troop, accompanied by six other soldiers. Reportedly, a business owner from town had notified military authorities that this young Anuak boy might be “a rebel from the bush” because he looked “suspicious.” According to local sources, the reporter’s only evidence was his opinion that the boy had “a bad attitude.”

In response, an attachment of seven soldiers went to a gathering where the boy’s family and friends were holding a traditional Anuak baby-naming celebration. The TPLF/EPRDF Defense Forces called him away from the others to question him, asking for his identification. He refused, saying he had done nothing wrong, lived in Gambella and was in 12th grade at the local high school. He turned and started to walk back to the party when one of the soldiers shot him—execution style—in the back of the head and through his back. The young man died there in front of everyone.

Perhaps he should have given them his ID, but as we have reported previously, the anger and resentment over the land grabs and increasing harassment, arrests, threats and intimidation of local civilians by the TPLF/EPRDF troops runs high. This is especially true in the case of some of these young men who are often the chief targets of the troops.

Following his death, defense forces along with the local police, arrested his father Mr. Kul Oman, over fears he would retaliate when he heard of his son’s murder. His father is the head of the police commission in the Dimma district. What kind of country arrests the father of such a victim of injustice? Only after he was in jail did they tell him about the death of his son.

Mr. Tedo Kul Oman was going to graduate soon; but now, his hopes, dreams and plans for his future were buried forever, along with his young body. Instead of having the joy of celebrating his graduation; his family, friends and community are now grieving for him.



His death has hit the local people hard. This brazen murder at the hands of TPLF/EPRDF Defense troops, in broad daylight, tells the whole story of how lawless the Gambella region has again become.

Ever since the March 4th ambush of the passenger bus, where 19 out of 30 people were killed, thousands of troops have been deployed to this area. ***The TPLF/EPRDF defense forces have been known as one of the worst violators of gross human rights in Africa; however, we know that not all of them are criminals like the killer of this young man. In this case, one soldier out of six committed a horrendous crime and should be held accountable; however, the others may have been horrified by the crime.*** Some of these defense troops are our Ethiopian sons, who were forcibly conscripted, and may feel like prisoners in an evil system. It may be that their only allegiance to the TPLF/EPRDF is based on fear. Under the right circumstances, they may turn and become part of the solution.

Right now, the Meles regime and the military authorities are hoping their foreign supporters, who have provided military training, financial aid, guns and other kinds of support, will overlook their endless human rights violations; including war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity, much of which is backed up with substantial evidence; however, their guilt is undeniable and backed up with a shameful history. Meles and the TPLF took power by the barrel of the gun and prior to that, as communist rebels, they were classified as terrorists. Their nature and tactics have never changed.

When that is combined with the simmering anger on the part of the locals over the land grabs as well as the many incidents of torture, abuse, beatings, disappearances and extra-judicial killings in the region, it may fully account for any "bad attitude" he might have had towards those perceived to be supporting this regime. A teenager's refusal to hand over an ID, because he feels he has done no wrong and that they have no right to ask, has ended in his cold-blooded murder. His resistance may also result from the fact that Anuak men, especially the young, are being shot as potential rebels, simply for looking "suspicious." The Anuak Men are being forced to go into the bush to search for rebels, but instead what they find are dead or beaten Anuak on the road or in bush. Schools have been closed because of fear and there is no freedom of movement because the government has clamped down due to fear that the rebels will come.

We in the SMNE have been gathering information and are gathering the names of 27 people who have been killed, 59 tortured or 16 who have disappeared since the March 4th ambush as well as the details surrounding these incidents. Much of the abuse is taking place in the rural areas of Abobo and Goge districts where the regime claims the rebels are hiding; however, as a result, the local people are being punished collectively and indiscriminately. Now, what is taking place in the hidden rural areas is coming to Gambella town.

No one knows what has happened to the killer who just walked away from the crime like what he had done was nothing more than shooting an animal. It is proof of how barbaric some—but not all – of these troops are and how the military leaders have encouraged such human rights crimes by creating a culture of impunity. If this soldier could do this in front of everyone, with no fear of consequences, imagine what is happening to people alone in the rural areas where no one can see it even though the information from the ground usually does get out.

For example, in the late afternoon of March 28, 2012 in Itang town, a 27 year-old elementary school teacher Mr. Lol Tot, of Nuer ethnicity was asked by three defense forces to give his ID. When he refused, he was shot and killed. In response to the killing of the Nuer teacher, the authorities told the Nuer that they had arrested the man responsible for the killing and were holding him at the army base. The Nuer did not believe them and wanted to see him; demanding that the defense forces "hand over the killer," but their request was denied. The Nuer then threatened to go to the army base to get the perpetrator themselves, warning authorities that they would otherwise take revenge for his death on anyone. Fearing what would happen, the government has now tried to work towards calming down the Nuer; however, the tensions are increasing. After more questions and pressure, the defense forces claimed they had killed the guilty man for his crime so the Nuer should just drop their complaint.

The same lack of action is occurring in the case of the young man. After the murdered boy's father was released from jail, he went to the office of the governor of the region, Omot Obang Olom, to state his complaint and to demand justice. Mr. Olom told him that they could not proceed with the case because they did not know who committed the crime. This is absurd since there were so many witnesses to the killing. Mr. Olom said that someone else might have been posing in the uniforms of the TPLF/EPRDF Defense Forces and gave no indication that the case would be investigated.

On March 31, 2012, in Pinudo, three young teens between the ages of 14 and 18 were returning from the river. Defense troops told them to stop but instead they were afraid and ran. The troops ran after them and captured them. The military troops then brutally beat these young people with the barrels of their guns so severely that two of them had to be hospitalized in the clinic.

On April 2, 2012, in Abobo, defense troops went to the home of a man suspected of being a rebel. When they did not find him home, they questioned his wife regarding his whereabouts. When she said she did not know where he was, they removed a log from the fire and used the intensely burning red end of the log to torture her on her back. According to her testimony, as the TPLF/EPRDF Defense troops were torturing her, they made it clear they were there for the benefit of the investors. She reported the following threats: "We would rather let you disappear from here because the government has much more to lose if the investors leave.... If these rebels in the bush are going to cause problems for the investors to come or for them to do their job, we would rather eliminate them... if your husband is part of the rebels and it is his intention is to make it difficult for these investors, we will do whatever we can to make sure that they go, rather than the investors."

The woman remains in the inadequately equipped Abobo Clinic. This is a family who had been displaced because of the Meles government's land grab of the valuable agricultural land where she and her husband used to live and farm. In fact, the entire village where they had lived has been cleared and is now being leased to Saudi Star for their rice plantation.

These are only a few examples of what the so-called Ethiopian government is doing to their own civilians. All of it makes us wonder if the Meles regime, as many are now saying, were really the ones behind the ambush of the passenger bus and the brutal killing of the 19 passengers, to use it as a means to justify bringing in these troops to suppress the people. This would not be the first time this regime has posed as others as they committed incredibly horrible acts against innocent civilians in order to justify a clampdown that would advance their power and conquest of resources.

It appears that military authorities have given the criminal elements among these defense troops free reign. Any of the local people can be tortured or killed at the whim of the regime and have no hope of justice. We call on donor countries not to continue to pour money, aid and legitimacy to a regime committing these kinds of crimes.

In Gambella right now, everyone is afraid because in reality, everyone is unsafe. There is not enough security to carry out daily activities of life. This TPLF regime has lost its legitimacy. They are doing the same in Benishangul-Gumuz, the Afar region, the Ogaden region and Oromiyaa. *They are displacing innocent Amharic in the South; forcing them to leave homes and property. They are destroying Ethiopian religious sites in the Amhara region to make way for development. The people are not wanted; only the resources.*

All of this demonstrates the endemic lawlessness of this country; especially because the government, who is supposed to protect the people, has become the chief executor of injustice and murder. *Now the regime is said to be bringing five more tanks from the highlands to Gambella to deal not only with those rebels in the bush, but with the local people. People should not be surprised with what could happen under these volatile conditions. We are very concerned about the potential for bloodshed.*

Already, some of the Anuak young people have taken the law into their own hands by burning down the shop of the business owner who had singled out the young man to the authorities as a "troublemaker," despite the fact he did not even know the boy. The police have now ended up arresting the business owner, perhaps out of fear of retribution, and are now making this man the scapegoat. This is an example of how these people prey on smaller fish.

In the past, the TPLF/EPRDF regime's troops have only targeted the Anuak in the region, but now they are also perpetrating human rights abuses on the Nuer as well. Unlike the Anuak, who were disarmed prior to the genocide, the Nuer still have their guns and are calling for revenge as they see the reluctance of the local authorities to respond to their demands for justice. As a result, the government is now giving the Anuak and the Nuer strong reason to unify; something this regime has been actively working against for many years.

This new solidarity among the Anuak and Nuer was demonstrated during the funeral of Tedo Kul Oman, one of the largest in history, when thousands of indigenous people of both ethnicities showed up. This regime now appears to be inciting tensions between highlanders and lowlanders; much of it in response to the ambush of the bus when 19 people were murdered. As previously mentioned, evidence from the eyewitness survivors does not substantiate the government's spin that dark-skinned people were responsible; yet, to their advantage, it led to thousands of new troops.

During the funeral service, Anuak elders strongly cautioned the young people to not seek revenge, even though there is no "rule of law" in the land. They also encouraged the young people to not run away to refugee camps saying: *"We should not have to go anywhere but should stay. This is our land! Even if we die, let us die here rather than in a foreign land. If we are not wanted in our land, we can still rest beneath it like our ancestors who came before us and like this brother Tedo who just left us today."*

However, 300 young people have already left and more are going. Murders, beatings, arrests and intimidation are all another way the Meles regime has used to force the deportation of our people, not just from the region but from the country. If you make things bad enough, most people will try to escape.

Another elder at the service acknowledged the intense pain and grief of the young people but that it should not lead to hurting another person. He said: *"Our land has been suffering, grieving and crying for so very long; but even though the pain is so unbearable right now, do not go out and hurt another person. Even though for some, the tears waiting to be shed are still being held back, we can see the pain and know your hearts are bleeding. If your tears from that pain were allowed to freely flow from your eyes, they would flood our fertile land that is so wanted by others and foreigners who do not want us."*

Noticeably absent from this emotional farewell to this young Anuak man, whose life was prematurely taken away, was the indigenous Anuak governor, Omot Obang Olom, who claims to be the leader of the region. He did not even have the courage to go to the family of this boy—although, as previously mentioned, his father remained locked up in jail until several days later—but stayed away from the funeral. Is he really a leader of the people or the leader of the TPLF defense force? Most Gambellans will know the answer to this.

The question now is, how long before the local indigenous police, who still have guns, start defending their people? The regime knows this and now wants to disarm the local indigenous police force, but the police themselves say it will only happen, "...over their dead bodies," so the potentiality of a conflict heating up is escalating with every incident. These violent attacks on citizens simply recruit more people to go to the bush as rebels.

It is a dangerous situation and we are highly concerned that it is only a matter of time before things get out of control; not only in Gambella, but in various regions of the country where the same is happening. Those who care about the stability of Gambella and all of Ethiopia should take this situation very seriously. For donors or those who are supporting the TPLF/EPRDF regime for their own national interests, these same national interests may be in greater jeopardy in the long run if they ignore the warnings of imminent implosion.

For those who continue to support Meles and his TPLF regime because they do not see a viable alternative should think twice for Meles will never allow a viable opposition to emerge. **Any reforms can only be cosmetic for they know that genuine democratic reforms would only lead to their downfall and a call for justice and accountability for their countless human rights crimes.** Because of these limits on opposition activity within Ethiopia, solutions must focus on building alternatives outside of Ethiopia which could be merged when possible with an Ethiopian-based movement.

Which democracy-building donors and institutions are now willing to invest in supporting a genuine democratic movement that would be prepared for the inevitable downfall of Meles? As the TPLF/EPRDF targets innocent civilians in Gambella is there any question that Meles would call out all his forces to brutally suppress any uprising of the people?

This is a very precarious time. Historically, hunger, rising food costs and the inability to feed one's family have triggered unrest in many places, one of them being Ethiopia under the Derg. **The combination of these factors again exist in the country as Ethiopia: 1) is ranked the fourth hungriest country in the world,ⁱ 2) has the second highest level of inflation in the world and with it, rising food prices,[#] 3) has forcibly displaced subsistence farmers from their land and then leased it to foreign investors who export most of the produce, and 4) is committing increasing and widespread human rights violations against those who protest; all becoming a recipe for national disaster as people's hunger and desperation incite them to mobilize against the oppression as they believe they have nothing to lose anymore.**

Do those who care about peace and security in the region see what is happening? If this all blows up, it will be a grave threat to the security of the entire Horn. Under these conditions, can concerned onlookers and stakeholders afford to wait for promised reforms that will never happen? Would it not be better to deal with it before it is too late? For the sake of the people, we hope so.

May God help Ethiopians to realize the humanity of one another and that it is not an ethnicity but the TPLF regime that should be held accountable for what is going on. May we people care about the death, pain and suffering of all our people and may it unify us in bringing about the healthy transformation of our society into a New Ethiopia.

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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

ⁱ <http://www.ifpri.org/publication/global-hunger-index-2011-severity>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2092.html>