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Ethiopia's Policy of Genocide Against the Anuak of Gambella

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In October 1985, the Ethiopian government reported that 17,553 heads of families from Tigray had been resettled to unoccupied "virgin, fertile" lands in the Gambella region of Illubabor Province in the extreme southwest of Ethiopia. The fact that these lands are the traditional homelands of the Anuak people is not mentioned in the government's announcement, nor has this point been a major source of contention in the debate currently being waged in the media and among relief agencies over the use of resettlement as a form of famine rehabilitation in Ethiopia.

The Nilotic Anuak people, who numbered 30,000 to 40,000 in 1958, have seen their population rapidly dwindle under the present Ethiopian government in recent years. Today, with an influx of tens of thousands of highland Ethiopians into Gambella, they are a minority in their own homelands. Since Cultural Survival first reported on the seizure of Anuak lands for colonial settlements in 1981, this process has accelerated. During interviews in Sudan, in March and April 1986, Anuak refugees said they consider the resettlement program part of a deliberate campaign by the Ethiopian government to exterminate the Anuak people.

Unlike other Ethiopian nationalities, the Anuak have little constituency abroad. Of the 11 known to be in the US, for example, most are students resettled as refugees from Sudan. Thus, it is not surprising that the alleged decimation of the Anuak people has received almost no public attention.⁽¹⁾ However, in light of President Colonel Mengistu's recent public promise to resume and step up resettlement operations in Ethiopia, the current status of the Anuak people needs to be examined. Attention also needs to be paid to the current situation of Anuak refugees in Sudan, many of whom the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) has not recognized as refugees and whom are living under miserable conditions.

I spoke extensively with two Anuak refugees who had recently fled Gambella as well as many earlier arriving refugees who had migrated to Khartoum. Some of these refugees are attempting to organize themselves into an Anuak support committee. The staff of the Oromo Relief Association (ORA) in Khartoum, with whom the Anuak committee meets weekly, are encouraging them in their efforts to organize. However, according to ORA representatives there, the destitute conditions under which the refugees live in Khartoum have prevented the Anuak support committee from offering their later-arriving comrades any sort of assistance other than a sense of solidarity which comes from suffering together in abject poverty. Certainly, the Anuaks in Sudan are in no position to protest or

publicize the expropriation of their homelands and destruction of their way of life in Gambella.

Resettlements Destroy the Ecology of Anuak Lands

The Gambella region in Illubabor Province probably contains the largest remaining intact forest in the entire Ethiopian empire. Annually, it receives over 1,200 mm of precipitation distributed throughout the year. The region is watered by the Gilo, Baro and Akobo rivers, tributaries of the White Nile. It is along these rivers that the Anuak people live, farm and fish.

Gambella soils are touted for their great fertility, providing the Dergue, the ruling military party, with the ecological excuse it needed to help persuade Western relief agencies that massive relocations of highland farmers into this habitat is a reasonable idea - in principle at least.

Indeed, soil surveys have pronounced these river banks "most favorable for crop production". According to Anuak refugees interviewed, most Anuak farmers can harvest two bountiful crops of maize and sorghum each year in their plots along the banks of the rivers, using the rich alluvium deposited after the floods. However, it is doubtful that such fertility is contained within the non-alluvial soils underlying the surrounding forests, which become the new settlement farms; the soils of lowland tropical forests are, as a rule, almost never good for cereal cropping.

In fact, of 37 Tigrayan farmers who said they had tried to grow crops in Gambella resettlement camps in 1985, before fleeing to Sudan as refugees, none had succeeded. In random interviews conducted in February and March 1986, resettlement escapees reported that they were organized in work brigades and ordered to clear-cut the surrounding forests and plant traditional cereal and root crops. In both collective fields and individual gardens, these crops were devoured by insects, rotted as seedlings, had pale sickly leaves or never produced fruit. One Tigrayan farmer, when asked to describe the fertility of Gambella soil, replied, "Oh, it is very fertile - it produces many worms, but no corn."

When informed of the almost complete lack of harvest reported by Tigrayan farmers resettled on their lands in Gambella, Anuak refugees in Sudan were not surprised. They noted that their fathers used this land for hunting - not for agriculture. One pointed out that the name of one of the resettlement camps, Ora, is an Anuak word that refers to a low wet area where wild animals come to drink. This detail perhaps illustrates why the indigenous people had allowed these forests to remain "virgin".

Death, Disappearance and Interbreeding in Gambella

The Ethiopian government forces Anuaks off their lands and out of their houses as well. Two years ago in 1984, Anuak residents were ordered to evacuate two neighborhoods in Gambella, called Betourhe and Ajumara. At least 200 huts were bulldozed in order to

build new houses for Soviet specialists sent to work on a dam and irrigation scheme, which the Anuak residents considered of no benefit to them.

Anuak people are also being forced to provide living quarters for the influx of resettlers to their lands. The forced labor of indigenous peoples in provisioning incoming colonists has been reported repeatedly by the Oromo of Wollega Province and by the Oromo Liberation Front. However, unlike the Oromo of the Asosa region, who must also relinquish food supplies and household goods to the colonists from Wollo and Tigray, preparations by the Anuaks seem to be restricted to hut construction.

In 1985, schools in Gambella were closed so that students and teachers could cut grass and wood and erect huts in the camp. This decree especially angered the Anuaks who place a high value on education and still bitterly resent the expulsion of their American missionary teachers and what they see as the systematic exclusion of Anuak graduates from higher education opportunities. They believe that corrupt practices in the evaluation of national qualifying exams have barred Anuaks - and many other tribal minorities - from entrance to university study in Addis Ababa and abroad.

One Anuak refugee in Khartoum, who had been a grade school teacher in Gambella, was ordered to send his students into the forests to cut grass and wood for resettlement huts when his school was closed. Concerned about the welfare of his young pupils, he feared that they might become lost or injure themselves with the machetes. He requested that his smallest students be allowed to stay behind. When his request was denied, he led his students into the forest and managed the best he could, helping the littlest ones carry their bundles of grass and sticks. In spite of his help, he said his young students suffered a great deal under these labors.(2)

Following expulsion from their lands or homes, Anuaks will either move to unoccupied land and try to farm or flee as refugees to Sudan. Since the Anuak people span both sides of the Ethiopian-Sudanese border (about 25 percent live in Sudan), it is impossible to estimate the rate of flight from Gambella. In addition, Anuak refugees from Ethiopia are scattered throughout the Sudan - Damazin, Gedaref, Khartoum, Malekel - and many pass themselves off as Sudanese. However, the ongoing influx of tens of thousands of resettlers into the Gambella region, and the massive clearing of forested land required by this scheme, has undoubtedly made internal movement more difficult.

As even more settlers are moved into the region during the upcoming year, the resource base will be further diminished. Of particular concern are the populations of the many species of fish in the rivers which are a major protein source for the Anuak. As the surrounding forests are indiscriminately felled to make way for vast agricultural projects, the entire hydrologic cycle of the region may be altered; certainly the silt load these rivers carry will increase.

The Ethiopian government has also devised various policies which deny the Anuaks access to their remaining resources. Hunting, another major source of food for the Anuaks, has been outlawed or made difficult by the confiscation of weapons.

Domesticated animals, such as zebras, have been seized from Anuak farmers who were told they were needed for zoos in Addis Ababa. One refugee said that the Anuaks in his village once slaughtered all of their zebras - which they raise from infancy by hand - to prevent their seizure by Ethiopian authorities. Such practices serve to strip the Anuak people of self-sufficiency and autonomy. As these practices continue, we should expect more dispossessed Anuaks to cross the Sudanese border.

The flight of the Anuaks into Sudan transforms skilled and productive people into destitute, unemployed refugees in a nation already burdened with millions of destitute, unemployed refugees. In addition, their disappearance has a devastating social and psychological impact on the members of the Anuak community who remain in Gambella. Agricultural work along the river banks is labor intensive; plowing, planting and cultivation are done manually and require cooperative work.

Anuak villages are divided into elaborately organized social groups called burmachs which function like an extended family and to which each farmer belongs. Personal disputes and decisions of all kinds are resolved democratically within the burmachs. Thus, the very fabric of Anuak life is being torn apart by the flight of its members. "Disappearance," the Anuak people say, "is Death's little brother."

In their 1985 report, Cultural Survival documented the ways in which the Dergue has outlawed Anuak customs and attempted to impoverish the Anuak people through taxation and peasant association abuses. Since then, integrated settlements have become another means by which the Dergue achieves these ends. According to the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission of the Ethiopian government, the idea behind this scheme is to insert settlers into pre-existing communities whose peasant associations lack the necessary manpower. However, those interviewed in Sudan contend that the indigenous people as well as the settlers are uprooted forcibly in the creation of these societies.

An Anuak who left Gambella in November 1985 said evictions took place last year at Kuakejung in the Obobo district in an attempt to move these Anuaks into the integrated settlements in the southern half of Illubabor. When the Anuaks refused to leave and continued to sow their own crops in the traditional way, the government brought in tractors and plowed the riverbank crops under in an attempt to starve out the Anuaks. These same tactics are used, he said, to induce Anuaks to move to the state farms. In both cases, the Anuaks fled the area and are now squatting elsewhere.

The Anuak refugees I spoke with believe one of the real reasons for these integrated settlements is to intermarry the Nilotic Anuak people with the lighter-skinned highlanders ("those brown Abish people") and thus breed the Anuaks out of existence. They rightly consider this a form of genocide. Earlier reports from Cultural Survival indicate that the Dergue has attempted to squelch Anuak procreation by confiscating the sacred "marriage beads" which are used as dowries. My interview partners confirmed these reports but indicated that it made little difference - cows are exchanged as easily as beads.

A refugee Tigrayan priest in Sudan said that party cadres tried to force him to marry an Anuak woman when he arrived in the resettlement camp without his wife in 1985. The "bride" was presented to him bare-breasted and he refused. She was presented a second time - fully clothed - and he refused again on the grounds that polygamy was against his religion.

Conscription of Gambella men into the Ethiopian army continues at a high rate. Daughters are sometimes taken from their homes for mandatory service in military bands. The removal of young vigorous members of the community is often permanent: war casualties are high and those men who do return are often maimed or crippled and unable to farm. Members of the Anuak community in Khartoum had heard recently that some Anuak recruits were being "given to" the SPLA (Sudanese People's Liberation Army), financed and harbored by the Ethiopian government. However, I could not confirm this directly.

Conscription is probably the major cause of refugee flight among young men. "Recruitment" often takes place in the middle of the night or while students are attending classes at the secondary school in Gambella. Refusal brings a two-year prison sentence.

Two Anuak students who left Gambella in November 1985 said army officers came into the classroom and registered the names of the biggest and strongest boys. The school director, an Amhara, described as a "cruel man," cooperated with and facilitated this process. Those selected were taken to the hospital for medical checkups and ordered not to leave town. The following morning they were to be taken to a military camp. These two boys said that they and two other students chose to flee into Sudan because they remembered brothers and friends who had been forcibly conscripted into the army and had never returned from battles in Eritrea and Tigray. In addition, they said they sympathized with the Gambella People's Liberation Front (GPLF) and other revolutionary movements the Dergue armies fight.(3) Two of the four made it to Sudan; the whereabouts of the other two are unknown.

Those who decide to head for Sudan often simply disappear into the forest and do not inform their families of their plans for fear their parents will suffer retribution at the hands of the authorities. One man who fled said he later heard his house had been burned down.

The Current Situation in Sudan

An Anuak refugee who escapes through the dense jungles between Gambella and Sudan, enduring hunger and thirst and attacks by wild animals, walks into a war zone on the other side of the border.

Anuak refugees said the greatest problem they faced on their flight was being suspected by the Sudanese authorities of collaborating with the SPLA, which is active in the border areas near Gambella. Such misidentifications are understandable because SPLA fighters are members of other Nilotic tribes, such as Nuer and Dinka. Unfortunately, their

physical resemblance to the black-skinned peoples of southern Sudan has made it difficult for Anuaks to achieve refugee status and protection.

Forty or fifty Anuaks who have migrated to Khartoum live together in poor neighborhoods south of the city. They are reluctant to reveal the extent of their poverty, but acknowledged that they are often hungry. They also said they could not find steady employment. None have sufficient clothing, bedding or shelter and most do not have refugee ID cards.

Efforts and Needs of the Anuak Community in Khartoum

While in Khartoum, I attended one of the Anuaks' weekly mass meetings. The newly formed support committee, made up of half a dozen younger men, reported to the rest the recommendations of the Oromo Relief Association, with whom they meet weekly. News from Gambella was shared; problems and complaints were aired democratically. Mostly, the need to organize was emphasized.

Members of the support committee also try to gather information about the well-being of other Anuaks in Sudan. Two committee members visited the refugee camp in Damazin after receiving a message from two Anuak students who had fled conscription. The only Anuaks in a camp of 1,100 Ethiopians, they were overjoyed at the visit. Sadly enough, however, the visitors had to advise them to remain in the camp, saying that living conditions and food supplies were better there than in the Anuak neighborhood in Khartoum.

The two have since made the trip to Khartoum to live among their own people and have reported that living conditions are indeed very poor. They would like to continue their education and finish secondary school but do not know where to seek assistance.

In 1984, Cultural Survival indicated that the Anuaks of Gambella were an endangered people. As warfare intensifies and the resettlement program is accelerated, the rate of death, displacement and expulsion of Anuak people will increase. The Ethiopian government's present actions toward the Anuak, as these refugees reported, is consistent with journalist Peter Niggli's belief that the Dergue is attempting to break the autonomy and self-allegiance of tribal minorities in Ethiopia in order to create a collectivized and homogenized peasant sector that is dependent on a mono-ethnic central government for survival and, therefore, controllable. Such dependence facilitates military conscription and the extraction of taxes and agricultural surpluses which are exchanged for military hardware to further these ends. Genocide is conducted against the Anuak people in Ethiopia by several means: by dispossessing them of their lands through the resettlement program; by undermining their resource base through the destruction of their agricultural fields, the prohibition of hunting and possibly by the ecological degradation of the Gambella area; through attempts to interbreed them with northern colonists in integrated settlements; by destroying their traditional way of life through the confiscation of domestic animals and accoutrements such as marriage beads; and by using them as cannon fodder in the various civil wars.

The miserable conditions under which Anuak refugees live in the Sudan have not allowed them to speak out about what is happening in their homeland. Thus, the false assertion that Ethiopia's highland farmers are being resettled onto fertile unoccupied land is allowed to continue unchallenged. Meanwhile, the impoverishment, dispossession and gradual elimination of a people continues unabated.

Further investigation into the case of the Anuak, protection of Anuak refugees and direct assistance to the Anuak people in Sudan is needed if the Anuak's tragic situation is to be checked and reversed. If nothing else, the direct testimony of Anuak refugees fleeing from Gambella represents one of our only sources of information about what is happening in resettlement camp areas off-limits to foreign nationals where the fate of hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian people is being played out in a human experiment of enormous proportions.

Notes:

(1) See, however, "The Anuak - a Threatened Culture," 1984, *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 8(2):75-76: and Clay and Holcomb, 1985. "The Anuak," *Politics and the Ethiopian Famine 1984-85*, pp. 232-234.

(2) A few days later, a colleague informed him that his request for exemption of some of his students had raised the suspicion of an official: he learned that he had been labeled a "counter-revolutionary" and that papers were being written up about him. Fearing imprisonment, he fled to Sudan.

(3) The GPLF, according to those interviewed, was founded in 1980 by one of the rare "educated Anuak" who was later killed in battle. Created to liberate the Gambella area from Dergue control, the GPLF has floundered in recent years for lack of leadership and direction.

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