

Ethiopia's Genocide of the Anuak Tribe Broadens After December 13 Massacre

By **Doug McGill**
[The McGill Report](#)

(The following article appeared on May 6 in the *Rochester Post-Bulletin* of Rochester, MN.)

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia -- A genocide in western Ethiopia that began last December with a massacre of some 400 Anuak tribe members has broadened into widespread attacks by Ethiopian military troops against more than a dozen Anuak villages in the western Ethiopian province of Gambella, according to Anuak refugees and humanitarian aid groups.

Scorched-earth raids carried out from January through April have destroyed a dozen Anuak villages in Gambella, refugees said. The raids have driven more than 10,000 Anuak into refugee camps in neighboring Sudan and Kenya, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

While the December 13 massacre in Gambella town, the capital of Gambella province, was directed only at educated male Anuak, the new phase of the genocide has seen women and children killed, hundreds of Anuak homes and fields burned, and gang rapes of dozens of girls and women, according to Anuak refugees living in Pocalla, Sudan, and Nairobi, Kenya.

Fleeing earlier episodes of ethnic cleansing, more than 2,000 Anuak refugees have immigrated to Minnesota since the early 1990s. The present crisis, however, is by far the bloodiest phase of the continuing genocide of the Anuak in Ethiopia.

More than two dozen Anuak survivors interviewed in mid-April in south Sudan said that on Dec. 13, several hundred uniformed Ethiopian soldiers led the slaughter of more than 425 male leaders of the Anuak tribe in the town of Gambella. The troops used a list of names to identify educated Anuak men whom they dragged from their homes and shot with AK-47 assault rifles in the streets.

Ethiopian troops also incited hundreds of ethnic Ethiopian "highlanders" living in Gambella to go to their homes to fetch machetes, knives and spears, and to join them in the slaughter, eyewitnesses said. Survivors said the Ethiopian troops burned hundreds of Anuak "tukuls," traditional mud and straw homes, and gang-raped hundreds of Anuak girls.

The Ethiopian military broadened its attacks after Dec. 13 by dispatching troop trucks and, in one case, allegedly a helicopter gunship, against Anuak villages throughout Gambella state. The total casualties from these attacks is said to be more than 1,000.

Eyewitness Accounts

The eyewitness Anuak accounts have been corroborated by independent investigations made by humanitarian groups including Genocide Watch in Washington, DC., and the World Organization Against Torture, based in Geneva, Switzerland. Amnesty International and the governments of the U.S., the European Union, Canada have all called on the Ethiopian government to immediately investigate the reports.

“The Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Defense Front and highland Ethiopian civilians [have] initiated a campaign of massacres, repression, and mass rape deliberately targeting the indigenous Anuak minority,” Genocide Watch wrote in its February 2004 report, following a research team visit to Pochalla. “A severe escalation of violence [has] the potential to provoke a full-scale international military confrontation if not immediately checked.”

The Genocide Watch team documented numerous instances of attacks on Anuak as the Highlander attackers sang or chanted slogans like “Let’s kill them all!” and “Now is the day for killing Anuak!” Hand grenades thrown into huts was frequently reported, as was looting and, on February 1, the exhumation of a mass grave in the Jabjab region of Gambella by 11 Ethiopian soldiers, apparently to remove evidence of the massacre.

In Addis Ababa on April 22, Barnabas Gebre-Ab, the Ethiopian Federal Minister with statutory responsibility for Gambella state, insisted that all reports of an Anuak genocide were “fabrications.”

Gebre-Ab admitted the region had suffered “tragic” bouts of violence in recent months but said the killers were not the Ethiopian military but, rather, armed revolutionary cells of the Anuak people themselves.

"Social Scums"

“These are Anuak,” Gebre-Ab said. “It’s an Anuak group which claims to have formed a liberation front in Gambella, okay? So these are the ones who are killing. They kill engineers. They kill health workers. Teachers. If they are Highlanders, they kill them. Deliberately. And we are hunting them. We have to hunt them down.

“If you want to challenge the political order through violence, we won’t let you go. So we are doing our job. Because we are giving them a mortal blow, they are fabricating about this rape, and this and that, it’s all fabrication.”

According to Gebre-Ab, it was a mob of “vagabonds” and “social scums” including many Highlanders who precipitated the widespread killing of Anuak on December 13. “It’s related to animosity. It’s hatred, you know,” he said. “Why couldn’t they control themselves? Why did they go into this emotional outburst and start to kill? Because they are social scums.”

“In all societies there are backward elements,” Gebre-Ab said. “They are illiterate. They are backward. They are liable to commit crimes.”

On December 18, five days after the December 13 massacre, Gebre-Ab released a statement blaming the killings on the Oromo Liberation Front and the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front, two resistance forces fighting the Meles regime that are based in areas far remote from Gambella state. A few days later, the Ethiopian defense ministry announced on national radio that inter-tribal conflicts between the Anuak and the Nuer tribes.

Okello Akuai, the governor of Gambella state last December 13, strongly disputes Gebre-Ab's account of the massacre. An Anuak himself, Okello fled for his life on January 8 and today lives in exile in Europe.

"Stop the Killings"

"Gebre-Ab gave the order to the local military," Okello said in a telephone interview. "I know that because I was at the military camp when it happened. I was sitting next to the military commander in the region, Tsegaye Beyene, when he got the call from Gebre-Ab on December 13."

"From there they started killing people in the town," Okello said. On the second day of the killing, Okello said he pleaded with Tsegaye to stop the killing. "I quarreled with him, I told him to stop the killings," Okello said. "He said to me, 'All Anuak are the same, they are butchers.'"

On the early morning of December 13, before the killings began in Gambella, an unidentified group attacked a vehicle carrying eight Highlander government officials, killing them all. According to Okello and other Anuak eyewitnesses, the Ethiopian army displayed their corpses in downtown Gambella and incited local Highlanders to their murderous fury by saying that Anuak had killed the eight, and that the murders needed to be avenged by killing all grown Anuak men living in Gambella.

On December 14, the second day of the massacre, Okello said he called Gebre-Ab in Addis Ababa to report on the killings and to plead that they stop. Gebre-Ab's telephone line to his military commander was not working at the time, so Gebre-Ab told Okello to relay a message to Tsegaye.

"I told Gebre-Ab that the military was killing people," Okello said. "And Gebre-Ab told me, 'Tell Tsegaye to increase the military force.'"

Okello also said Gambella municipal employees had earlier reported to him that a list of educated Anuak men marked for execution had been drawn up. Okello said before he fled Gambella on January 8, eyewitness reports to the massacre by Anuak women who had lost husbands and brothers were destroyed en masse.

King Adongo

In an interview last week with the Reuters news agency, the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, called reports of the Anuak genocide a “fiction.” He said the Ethiopian military had intervened to stop killing by armed Anuak insurgents and that “without the intervention of the army, the killings would have continued.” No more than 200 people have died, he said.

The statement to Reuters was Meles’ first public mention of the violence in Gambella since it started on December 13. Neither Meles nor Gebre-Ab explained why a radical Anuak militia -- even if it conducted armed attacks on the Ethiopian military -- would also kill large numbers of Anuak farmers and herders, loot Anuak homes, and rape Anuak women.

The Anuak King, Adongo Agada Akway, whose permanent home is in the village of Otallo, southern Sudan, is presently living in Nairobi where he is meeting with foreign diplomats, journalists, United Nations officials, and other humanitarian workers to try to bring international pressure on the Ethiopian government to stop the genocide of the Anuak people.

“What is happening in the Anuak Kingdom is exactly what happened in Rwanda, and what happened in Darfur, western Sudan,” King Adongo said. “Innocent people are killed in all these cases. They don’t know why they are being killed. And in every case it is designed by the regimes in those countries. The Ethiopian government is the one that gave the orders.”

The King estimates that the ethnic cleansing of his tribe by the Ethiopian government has decreased the tribe's population by 10 percent since 1991, when the present government took power. There are about 150,000 Anuak living both in a small portion of eastern Sudan and, primarily, the Gambella state of Ethiopia.

The Breadbasket of Ethiopia

Historically, the lighter-skinned Ethiopian tribes have shunned the darker-skinned African tribes, and sometimes raided the tribes to acquire slaves.

The Anuak are one such dark-skinned African people indigenous to regions of the lower Nile, others including the Nuer, Dinka, and Shilluk. All these tribes are racially distinct from the olive-skinned Ethiopian tribes such as the Tigray, the Oromo, and the Amhara.

The Anuak’s ancestral homeland of Gambella is not only geographically remote from the capital of Addis Ababa – it is also agriculturally fertile, relatively sparsely populated, and blessed with gold and oil reserves. This has made their land much coveted by the central government for economic development and population resettlement.

“Gambella is potentially a very rich area,” said Gebre-Ab. “It could be the breadbasket of Ethiopia.”

Throughout the 20th century, the Anuak Kingdom has been studied by many Western anthropologists who have lived among the Anuak for long periods, including the famous British social anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard.

The Anuak have been admired in particular by anthropologists for their system of dispute resolution, in which all major arguments throughout the Kingdom are resolved by open discussion between all the disputants in front of the King and his cabinet which holds session every day in Otallo, Sudan.

King Adongo is now struggling to apply his culture's ancient system to one of the greatest crises the Anuak Kingdom has faced in its history.

“Before taking up arms we want to find a democratic way,” he said. “A way of reconciliation. We don't want to aggress anybody. We want to have peace talks with somebody who aggresses us. We want to have a meeting with the Ethiopian government with the intervention of the world community. There is no alternative unless people sit down.”

Copyright @ 2003 The McGill Report