

World Organization Against Torture and Genocide Watch respond to Ethiopian Prime Minister's denial of massacres of Anuaks in interview with Reuters

Geneva - Washington, 5 May 2004

The International Secretariat of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and Genocide Watch reiterate the need for an independent and impartial investigation into reports of massacres of members of the Anuak community, mass rapes, forced disappearances, torture and burning of homes and crops in the Gambella region in Ethiopia.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, in an interview with Reuters on 29 April 2004, dismissed reports that the Ethiopian army targeted and killed Anuaks as 'fiction' and said that at the most 200 people had been killed in clashes in the region. He stated that the "only people who had been killed by the military in the area were armed Anuak insurgents who had staged cross-border raids from Sudan."

Genocide Watch, Survivors' Rights International (SRI), and OMCT have previously drawn the attention of the international community to reports that Ethiopian government troops and 'highlander' militias massacred 424 Anuak civilians, including women and children and the elderly, in December 2003. Genocide Watch and SRI interviewed eyewitnesses and documented the massacres in the Gambella region in a 23-page joint report released in February 2004, titled '*Today is the Day of Killing Anuaks*'. A list detailing the names, gender and ages of the 424 people who were killed has also been compiled. Genocide Watch sent a letter to Mr. Zenawi on 8 January 2004 urging him to prevent the massacres from becoming full-scale genocide. The letter also called on Mr. Zenawi to order the arrest of the perpetrators of the massacres, and named three Ethiopian government officials responsible for the killings. Genocide Watch has received no reply to its letter to Mr. Zenawi. The named officials have been promoted to positions of more authority, rather than arrested.

Following its own fact-finding in Gambella, the U.S. government called for "transparent, independent" inquiries into the violence in which hundreds were killed. In a statement from Washington on 20 February 2004, the U.S. said the Ethiopian government must investigate allegations that its troops were involved in the killings. On 25 March 2004, the European Union Council of Ministers called for "a full and independent enquiry into suggestions of involvement by members of the Ethiopian military in violence directed against innocent civilians" in the Gambella region of Ethiopia.

"We have interviewed numerous victims and eyewitnesses from the minority Anuak ethnic group who fled south-western Ethiopia in the wake of massive and unprovoked violence against unarmed men, women and children," said Genocide Watch/SRI researcher Keith Harmon Snow. "We have collected detailed testimony suggesting that acts of genocide and crimes against humanity were committed against unarmed civilians by Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Defense Forces (EPRDF) and 'highlander' militias."

"There is irrefutable evidence of atrocities against thousands of civilians, and we continue to receive reports of killings and mass rape," Mr. Snow said. "We are very concerned about rural areas where communications and access to civilians are prevented by isolation and a heavy military presence. On April 27, for example, we received reports of four girls and three farmers allegedly shot dead by EPRDF soldiers in Pinyudo and Abobo districts, but assessment of the scale of the violence in rural areas remains difficult because the government has prohibited access by independent investigators."

Recent reports received by OMCT and Genocide Watch allege that killings and other acts of ethnic cleansing are continuing. On 8 April 2004, The United Nations Commission on Human Rights heard testimony estimating that between 13 December 2003 and 31 March 2004, the total number of persons killed had reached 1,137. (See <http://www.genocidewatch.org/ethiopiastatementobang.htm>.) These reports need to be investigated carefully, considering the massacres and other violations documented in December, accounts of ongoing violence from families of victims and other local sources, as well as

information collected from the thousands of refugees who continue to flee to Pochalla in Sudan. Although the total numbers of victims are estimates, OMCT and Genocide Watch believe that the Government cannot dismiss the consistent accounts of scores of eyewitnesses as fabrications.

Mr. Zenawi has stated that, "Without the intervention of the army, the killings would have continued indefinitely." This statement is in stark contrast to reports from victims and eyewitnesses to Genocide Watch and SRI and to documentation by a member of the OMCT network that uniformed Ethiopian troops incited highlanders to commit violence and led attacks on Anuak civilians in Gambella and the surrounding areas. The killings were allegedly ordered by Tsegaye Beyene, commander of the Ethiopian Army in Gambella, with the authorization of Dr. Gebrehab Barnabas, an official of the Ethiopian government. According to reports, the Ethiopian army continues to commit atrocities against Anuak civilians daily. The situation is reported to be so severe that OMCT, Genocide Watch and SRI have called for the withdrawal of Ethiopian government troops from the region.

The Ethiopian Parliament has mandated the establishment of an independent commission to investigate the reports of violence. While OMCT and Genocide Watch view this as a positive development, and a recognition by the Parliament of the seriousness of the situation, we have raised profound concerns about the independence, composition and mandate of the commission that has been set up. One of the alleged planners of the attacks has even been named Chairman of the commission. The commission appointed seems to have been designed to "whitewash" the crimes committed. These concerns have not been addressed by Mr. Zenawi.

Genocide Watch and OMCT repeat the urgent requests that we have made to the Ethiopian government, urging an immediate halt to all military operations against Anuaks, and independent and impartial investigations to bring the perpetrators of massacres, mass rapes, torture, and other grave human rights violations to justice. We also strongly urge the government to invite independent UN human rights experts to visit the Gambella region, in order for them to carry out unrestricted investigations into these atrocities. Immediate access to the region by international monitoring groups and humanitarian assistance must also be guaranteed.

Finally, Genocide Watch and OMCT also urge the international community to react with all speed to provide the refugees and other affected Anuaks with adequate food, shelter and medication, both within the Gambella region and the Pochalla refugee camp, in order to avert a humanitarian catastrophe and to provide international protection for civilians.

Copies of previous press releases as well as the Reuters interview with Mr. Zenawi are attached.

Please note that this press release is also supported by the Anuak Survival Organization.

To view the Genocide Watch and Survivors' Rights International joint report please visit:

<http://www.genocidewatch.org/Today%20is%20the%20Day%20of%20Killing%20Anuaks.htm>

To view the list of names of 424 people killed in December 2003, please see:

www.genocidewatch.org/EthiopiaANUAKSMASSACREDGAMBELLAREGIONDEC13-15.htm

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