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How an African Genocide First Came to Light in Minnesota

By Doug McGill
[The McGill Report](#)

Rochester, MN -- The response to my column three weeks ago, in which I reported on a genocide occurring in Ethiopia, has been so extraordinary I'd like to share it.

I got 55 e-mails and more than a dozen phone calls from such places as The Hague, New Dehli, Cape Town, Melbourne, Geneva, and Washington, D.C., as well as from southern Minnesota, Wisconsin and South Dakota.

The Post-Bulletin was the first newspaper anywhere to report on a new genocide occurring on the other side of the planet. I wrote the column because more Anuak refugees live in Minnesota than any other state, and they have been thrown into a panic about family and friends back home.

My account of the massacre was based on interviews with two dozen Anuak in St. Paul and Minneapolis who had spoken by telephone with eyewitnesses in Ethiopia on the day of the massacre and in the days immediately after.

" You were the first to report on this and we're very grateful," wrote Greg Stanton, president of Genocide Watch in The Hague, in an e-mail. On Jan. 8, after having done its own research in Ethiopia to corroborate the Post-Bulletin report, Genocide Watch put the Anuak killings on its genocide alert list and published an article filled with damning new evidence.

Someone Listened

By breaking local news, we broke global news. Anuak refugees all over the world, desperate for news of friends and relatives from home, sent the Post-Bulletin column zipping around the Internet.

Most meaningful of all to me were two dozen e-mails from Anuak refugees around the world who wrote to say -- often in these very words -- "God bless you and thank you." These letters were filled with a heavy grief but also with a great dignity and a profoundly touching gratitude.

The fact that someone had listened to them had moved many Anuak deeply.

" Sir, I would like to thank you for being a real friend of this small and defenseless tribe," wrote Ujulu Goch, from Washington, D.C. "God has always worked

through someone to help needy people like the Anuak. But Sir, this is not the end of the tragedy. It's the beginning of the extinction of my tribe from the face of the Earth."

Obang Metho, from Saskatchewan, Canada, sent me six attachments in his e-mail -- letters he had written to U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, and other diplomats and aid groups.

Why Rebel?

He also sent a poem called "Why Do I Rebel?" that captured a note of inspired defiance:

I rebel because honor
And justice are the work of duty and destiny.
I fight because honor and justice
Are the fixed demands of duty and beauty.
I speak up because love of liberty
And the well-being of every human
Are the splendid ornament of the moral life.

Here in Rochester, we can be an early warning system for crimes and atrocities committed all over the world, which would never receive the cleansing light of international attention if not for us. We are free; most of the world is not; therefore, it's our opportunity and our responsibility.

We can do this simply by being open to what our immigrant neighbors have to say.

The Rev. LeRoy Christoffels, pastor of the Worthington Christian Reformed Church, which has many Anuak refugees as parishioners, said his church is raising money for an Anuak relief effort.

Ripples of Grief

John Frankhauser of Spokane e-mailed to say he had brought an Anuak pastor, the Rev. Okwier Othello, to their church last summer to meet with Anuak members. "He spoke of the danger he faced when he returned to Gambella," Frankhauser wrote. "We were impressed with his gentle spirit and the way the other Anuaks respect him as their pastor."

The Rev. Othello is the first name on the list I have of the dead. Frankhauser received eyewitness accounts of Othello's murder and gave details of his death too grisly to recount here.

It was Martin Luther King Jr. Day when I wrote this column, so I went to his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" to find some lines that seemed relevant.

There are parallels between the way King encircled Birmingham and Atlanta within a single moral sphere, and the way the ripples of grief and outrage from the Anuak massacre had so quickly spread around the world.

" I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham," King wrote in his jail cell. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

Splendid.

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