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Oil Development In Ethiopia: A Threat to the Anuak of Gambela

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Anuak (Anywaa) are a Nilotic people indigenous to the fertile Gambela state in southwest Ethiopia, and to the Akobo, Pochalla, and Jokau areas in Sudan. For years they have been the victims of abuses by successive Ethiopian governments. They now face renewed human rights abuses and a development project with the potential to further marginalize them.

Anuak History

The Ethiopian authorities established a claim to Gambela in 1898 while escorting the French expedition mission to disputed land along the Nile in Sudan. Despite their claim on the land, Gambela remained isolated from Ethiopian interference. It came under British administration in 1902 and was used as a British outpost, then was ceded to Ethiopia in 1956 when the British military forces withdrew from Sudan. With the ouster of Haile Selassie in September 1974, a group of military officers seized power.

Unlike former regimes in Ethiopia whose purposes were economic and administrative intervention was minimal, the military regime was largely responsible for the past and present suffering of Anuak society. Under the regime, thousands of political opponents were purged and property confiscated.

The Cultural Survival Quarterly reported extensively on this disaster in the 1980s (see Clay, CSQ 9:4, 10:2; Steingraber, CSQ 10:3; Grilz, CSQ 11:4; and Gambellan Mutual Relief Association, CSQ 12:4), declaring the Anuak an endangered people in 1984. The Anuak were dispossessed of their lands through resettlement and villagization programs. Their resource base was undermined through the destruction of their agricultural fields, the prohibition of hunting, and the ecological degradation of the region. They were encouraged to intermarry with northern Ethiopians in an attempt at assimilation. The confiscation of their domestic animals and cultural property destroyed their traditional way of life. They were recruited into the army or militia groups to fight in ongoing and bloody civil wars. (Gambellan Mutual Relief Association, CSQ 12:4) In 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of rebel organizations, routed the Ethiopian army and set up an interim government. A constitution dividing the country into nine ethnically based administrative regions, each with the right of secession, was approved in 1994.

In Gambela, the military regime left behind an ugly legacy. Names of localities serve as reminders of the regime's brutality. The name of one area, Dozer Olemi, recalls the destruction caused by bulldozers and the people whose lives were torn apart by so-called development policies.

The indigenous Anuak welcomed the change of government in 1991 with hope for peace, security, and control over their ancestral territories under the leadership of the Gambela Peoples Liberation Movement (GPLM). It was this hope for stability that gave the GPLM widespread grassroots support. The change of government seemed to signify the return of freedom, renewed access to confiscated lands, and durable peace in Gambela and in the Anywaa Kingdom at large.

These high hopes were soon replaced with fear and uncertainty about Anuak survival as a distinct ethnic group. In the last year, the Anuak, in massive numbers, have fled their homeland in search of peace. Disagreement between the GPLM and the ruling EPRDF has resulted in a tense struggle over control of Gambela state. As pressure from both sides mounts, the Anuak are fleeing to neighboring countries at a rate even higher than under the military regime.

Human Rights Abuses

Only recently, with the government's direct involvement in their affairs, have the Anuak fought Ethiopian rule. This effort by the indigenous Anuak is resisted by the government, which fears losing control over Anuak territories with few historical or ethnic ties to Ethiopia. While the government claims to respect all fundamental human rights -- to be committed to the basic democratic principles of good governance, justice, equality, and the rule of law -- it demonstrates the contrary in practice.

Opposition political parties are barred from participation in public activities, their members and supporters intimidated and affected by numerous breaches of the law and by unconstitutional practices. The government restricts freedom of the press and continues to detain or imprison journalists; most are accused or convicted of inciting ethnic hatred, committing libel, or publishing false information in violation of the 1992 Press Law. Those who aren't arrested are often spared government censure only because they practice self-censure. Freedom of religion is generally respected, but local authorities infringe occasionally on this right. The government restricts freedom of movement. Violence and societal discrimination against women, and abuse of children -- often for economic and sexual purposes -- are endemic. Discrimination against disabled persons and religious and ethnic minorities continues. Forced labor, including forced child labor, as well as reports of trafficking in persons are also prevalent. Legislation passed in October, 1999 created a constitutionally mandated Human Rights Commission and an Office of the Ombudsman but neither entity was operational at year's end.

The suffering common to all Ethiopians -- irrespective of their ethnic origin, religious beliefs, geographic location, or socio-economic background -- has gained some attention in recent years. The focus of reports, however, is largely limited to the center, and to the

"more developed" Tigrai, Amhara, Oromo, and southern peoples' states. Details of human rights abuses against the indigenous peoples in the "less developed" peripheral states -- Gambela, Afar, Somali, and Benshingul-Gumuze, which have common agropastoral economic and social backgrounds -- have received far less attention.

In these areas, opposition political parties find their members regularly mistreated, imprisoned, tortured, dismissed from civil service posts, detained without trial, or even killed. Members of the only opposition party in Gambela -- the Gambela Peoples' Democratic Congress currently suffer in jails and detention centers. Today, as during the military regime, the Anuak are suffering at the hands of EPRDF soldiers. Political opponents are frequently picked up and detained in military garrisons, in the town center, or out of town, where they are severely beaten by the soldiers, sometimes leaving them with lasting injuries. Some have been issued death threats should they remain in the region. Many who have undergone such brutal treatment do not dare mention their experiences for fear of retaliation. Local state governments, largely controlled by the ruling EPRDF authorities in Addis Ababa, demonstrate a complete lack of interest in promoting a culture of democratic rule and good governance, or of freedom of expression.

In May 2000, the ruling Gambela Peoples Democratic Front (GPDF), the EPRDF's surrogate party in Gambela state, claimed an overwhelming victory in the general election. Claims by the opposition GPDC of widespread human rights abuses against its members and supporters were ignored by the government, as was the widely reported intimidation carried out by EPRDF soldiers against local people during the election campaign.

Though local elections were recently held in several areas of Ethiopia, it is widely believed that they will not take place in Gambela state until the next countrywide general election, five years from now. The municipal position for Gambela town should be filled though a democratic election. Instead, because the ruling GPDF had such difficulty winning a majority in the general election despite the corruption of the electoral system, the party is appointing a loyal party member to fill the post rather than risking even controlled elections.

A Method to the Madness?

These human rights abuses are calculated as a step toward the realization of a long-term objective of one of Africa's colonial authorities, the Ethiopian Empire. Ethiopian leaders have long aimed at assimilating this culturally, historically, politically, linguistically, and socially distinct people. Because of racism toward the country's indigenous populations (the Anuak in particular), integration of these populations involves the destruction of their traditional values and beliefs. Many Anuak refugees interviewed about villagization and resettlement in Ethiopia in the 1980s were convinced that the programs were tools to facilitate the assimilation of the Anuak through intermarriage and interbreeding. (Steingraber, CSQ 10:3) Villagization also enabled the ongoing militarization of the countryside and the seizure of Anuak lands.

Compared to the northern part of the country, which is dry and over-populated, the fertile and resource-rich Anuak territories cover an enormous area occupied by a small population. Militarization provides jobs here for the unemployed of other regions. And the territories have great tourism potential.

What's more, the government claims a historic right to Gambela state. This claim is baseless. Though Gambela fell under the Ethiopian administration system in 1956, it retained its autonomy, including its indigenous political and social systems.

Ethiopian Control

Attempts to control the Anuak and their land came late, but with vehemence. The assault on their traditional political institutions has made the Anuak weak in dealing with Ethiopian politics. But the Anuak weren't always weak; as Roberts O. Williams makes clear in Shadows in the Grasses, they were strong in their traditional system. Many history books mentioning Gambela refer to the Ethiopian authorities' failure to control the Anuak territories. The British Administration in the then Anglo-Egyptian Sudan was similarly unsuccessful. Ethiopia's successive governments have thus been suspicious of any move to strengthen Anuak institutions.

Only by resorting to a system of indirect rule -- entrusting administrative power to the chiefs -- was Ethiopia able to bring this land under check. Part of the strategy to control the Anuak involved confining their movement by engaging them in conflict with their traditional foes, the Nuer.

The government gave the Nuer access to grazing land along the Ethiopian-Sudan border, creating conflict between these culturally and linguistically interrelated traditional enemies. Recent reports indicate that more than 20,000 armed Nuer have crossed into Anuak territories they had never previously threatened, and have settled on the bank of the Gilo River. Many Anuak have lost their lands and now live as refugees following clashes. Hundreds from Jokau and Akobo districts are displaced every year without any government interference. The federal and regional governments show no sign of interest in what has become almost chronic ethnic violence.

Tension between the Majanger (Ojang) and settlers from different parts of the country in Godare district is also rising and actual conflict is now likely. The Majanger are being displaced from their homelands by large trading companies involved in the destruction of the only remaining forest in Gambela state. The Majanger are under threat from highly profitable business activities that ignore their suffering while destroying their environment and way of life.

Oil

The recent oil exploration deal signed between the Ethiopian government and the Gambela Petroleum Corporation (Pinewood Resources, Ltd. of Canada) has raised great

concern in Gambela state. Not surprisingly, the Anuak are worried about the potentially devastating effects of such a "development" project.

Gambela is home to a park endowed with a variety of wild animals and fish species. In the last few decades, with the arrival of the Ethiopian military forces and a great number of refugees from across the international border, the nation's wildlife has been migrating. Many remaining animals live in the petroleum deposit areas. So-called modern environmental management has not sustained the environment of the Anuak Kingdom.

The government's plan is expected to drive the remaining wildlife from the area. Fish species on which the Anuak are dependent would be threatened with extinction if the project is implemented. The specific areas targeted for exploration are Adhura and Jot, both of which contain major fishing rivers -- the Gilo and Adhura (Adura) -- much used by local people as primary sources of food. The project's environmental effects will be devastating to the Anuak community there, seriously reducing alternative food sources. Coupled with low agricultural productivity and food shortages, oil development may also reduce the Anuak population to perilous levels.

Nor is the oil deal the first government initiative affecting local peoples' way of life. Several such development projects have been instituted in hopes of "significant improvements." The Abwobo (Abobo) state farm and Alwero (Alworo) irrigation dam are still underutilized today. They deprived local people of large areas of fertile land and displaced them without compensation, denying them access to ancestral burial sites and forcing them to become refugees in their own territories. More than 60,000 people from the highlands were resettled on Anuak lands, forcibly displacing the Anuak and resulting in significant increases in rates of poverty, alcoholism, and suicide, among other psychological and emotional disorders. As early as the 1970s, attempts were made to clear Anuak lands along the Openo (Baro) River. Thanks to efforts by the international community, with the active participation of the European Commission (EC) and Anti-Slavery Society campaigns, these attempts were blocked. But the current Ethiopian government is attempting similar dangerous developments.

Today's secretive deal claims to benefit the indigenous peoples of Gambela state. It doesn't. Though they will be affected by the investment of this foreign company, the Anuak have not been consulted at any stage of planning and remain uninformed of the agreement's details. Ethiopians have begun management training for the project while the Anuak are ignored. Even senior local government officials, council members, and community elders know nothing about the government plan for their own lands. The government's action is, at every level, a clear contradiction of all basic constitutional principles and of the international instruments, treaties, and protocols Ethiopia has ratified and signed.

Ethiopia can hardly be unaware of international requirements in planning such major development on indigenous lands. The ILO convention and World Bank Operational Directives call for indigenous consent for development projects on their territories. The

Gambella Petroleum Corporation (GPC) -- of which Ian Nielson, a Canadian citizen, is president -- has no indigenous consultants.

Given negative past experiences with development projects, the Anuak will resist the oil deal. They are already highly suspicious of resource extraction, a development strategy that contributes nothing to social welfare and to the economic performance of Gambela state. Such projects, ignoring the importance of indigenous participation and representation, are all too liable to fail, bringing disaster to wildlife, the environment, and the Anuak themselves.

Human Rights

The implementation of such an ambitious and destructive project cannot be justified. The indigenous Anuak live on subsistence agriculture, hunting, gathering, and fishing. The government has made few attempts to involve them in any major economic activities. It is no surprise that the benefits of such environmentally and socially destructive projects are not intended for the indigenous peoples of the area. Yet the threats posed by such projects will fall on local inhabitants. Worse still, social and economic institutions in Gambela remain inadequate to cope with the fallout. The deal threatens the Anuak with destruction of their way of life, their culture, and their tradition.

The previous regime had little regard for the survival of Anuak political institutions and culture, and no concern for their survival as a people. Little has changed. The oil deal could finish what so many destructive policies attempted: the annihilation of this indigenous people.

For many Anuak, the time has come to seek international protection and save the next generation of Anuak from complete assimilation. The Anuak of Gambela seek recognition as constituted in the international conventions on indigenous peoples of the world.

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