



## **ETHIOPIA: THE GAMBELLA CONFLICT – STRUCTURES AND PROGNOSIS**

**AUGUST 2004**

(Update 16 August 2004 – addition at end of briefing)

### **A. BACKGROUND**

The Gambella region is a peripheral and largely neglected area of Ethiopia, which has only been part of the Ethiopian State since the 1930s, when the British government negotiated with the recently crowned Emperor Haile Selassie the transfer of power over it from the Anglo-Egyptian condominium to the Ethiopian empire. Illubabor, as the region was then called, is a lowland tropical zone, populated by African Nilotic tribes, who are culturally foreign to the highland Abyssinian populations. The area remained a political, economic and cultural backwater until the 1960s. At that time the Emperor decided to use the Anuak tribesmen as a conduit for weapons destined for the Sudanese Anya-Nya guerrillas in order to put pressure on the Sudanese government and punish it for helping the secessionist Eritrean guerrillas.

Together with the weapons came a modicum of interest from Addis Ababa in the affairs of the province. Nevertheless Illubabor remained quite peripheral to Ethiopia, as evidenced by its almost total lack of participation in the revolution which started in 1974. Political and ethnic problems began to develop in 1983, when the second Sudanese rebellion sent thousands of Nuer, and later members of other Sudanese African tribes, fleeing into the region. The present situation is a result of that transformation and of the later influx of transferred Abyssinian (Highlander) peasants, who were forcibly moved by the Mengistu regime during 1985-1986. These two phenomena, the Sudanese refugee influx and then shortly thereafter the arrival of thousands of deported Abyssinian peasants, upset the fragile and underdeveloped environment, which had remained practically unchanged for hundreds of years.

The current spate of violence started in late 2001 between the Anuak and the Majangir, another indigenous group. It subsided fairly soon but left a situation of armed stand-off. Then the Anuak felt threatened by increased arrival of Nuer refugees from Sudan, leading to clashes in early 2002. Soon thereafter, in April 2002, groups of OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) guerrillas were infiltrated into Western Ethiopia from the Sudan, moving on into the Highlands, where, however, they were defeated by the Ethiopian army. The survivors retreated through the Gambella area, and were – according to local Oromo settlers, though not

independently verified – betrayed by the Anuak, who also collaborated with government forces in the final destruction of the guerrillas. In November 2002 there was more violence against the Sudanese refugees, 20 of whom were killed by Anuak fighters. UNHCR eventually came to the conclusion that a large-scale attack against Fugnido refugee camp was only a question of time, and therefore began planning for the establishment of a new camp at Odir, which they felt would be less exposed. However, this turned out not to be the case, and the Anuak became incensed at the idea that not only Fugnido, but now also in addition a second site, was going to be filled with their “enemies”, under protection of both UNHCR and the Ethiopian army.

In November 2003 a road-building crew was attacked on the road between Abobo and Gok. Several workers, all Highlanders, were killed by local Anuak. In December the Anuak attacked a vehicle carrying the director of the planned Odir camp, as well as an engineer and five labourers: all were killed, as were the driver and their military escort. Ethiopian army soldiers brought the bodies back to Gambella town and displayed them to the public, showing the mutilations they had suffered. This inflamed feelings among the Highland settlers, and started a pogrom during which Highland settlers, at times supported by the police and the army, killed large numbers of Anuak. Tens of thousands of Anuak refugees fled across the border to the Pochala area of Sudan, which is under the control of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA).

By April/May 2004 the situation on the ground in Gambella had calmed down somewhat, and this has continued, partly due to heavy army intervention. However, tens of thousands of IDPs, both Anuak and Nuer, remain in camps, and it would be an exaggeration to claim that the situation has returned to normal, or that it is stable.

## **B. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

### ***1. Who are the main parties to the conflict?***

The principal, active, parties to the conflict are the armed segment of the Anuak tribe and the local police and military authorities, who are collaborating with the Highland settlers. The broader Anuak community is frightened both by the activism of some of its members and by the extreme violence of the government’s response.

However, the position of government bodies is itself fraught with contradictions. The Federal government would prefer caution, for fear that the situation will deteriorate and that its enemies will make use of it. But the local government authorities in Gambella are resolved to “bring things under control”, even if this involves using the most violent means. The army units stationed in Gambella (whose numbers have been substantially increased, possibly up to 20,000) prefer the attitude of the local administration.

In addition the Nuer community, while not directly involved so far, could be drawn into the conflict at any time. At present they could be described as biding their time in the hope that the political scales will tip their way.

### ***2. Who within the Anuak population group is behind this conflict? Is there an identifiable group which is carrying out violence?***

In order to understand the internal dynamics of violence among the Anuak themselves it is necessary to provide a brief examination of the political history of the region.

During the late imperial period the province, then called Ilubabor, was in practice a colony of the Abyssinian Central Highlands. The population was then Anuak by majority with a large Nuer minority and a smattering of smaller, politically irrelevant tribes. The natives of the

province had no political role and the administration was entirely in Highlander hands. During the first Sudanese civil war (1956-1972) Emperor Haile Selassie used the Anuak to support the anti-Khartoum southern rebellion, which meant that the tribe acquired a degree of military experience and strength.

Following the Ethiopian revolution in 1974, the new government therefore did not trust the Anuak, who were suspected of being “reactionary” and of supporting “the old feudal order”. Although these accusations were largely baseless they caused the communist Derg to try to empower the Nuer as a local counterweight to the Anuak. After the 1976 *zemecha*,<sup>1</sup> the regime created a completely artificial Nuer-led local administration, which it later used for purposes of its own such as anti-OLF counterinsurgency campaigns. But in exchange for Nuer support, the communist regime closed its eyes on its anti-Anuak favouritism. A number of young Anuak then started to look for outside support, going to Eritrea for that purpose. It was in Eritrea that the EPLF (Eritrean People’s Liberation Front) put them in touch with the TPLF (Tigray People’s Liberation Front). Thus later (1989-1990), when the TPLF created its multi-ethnic political cluster, the EPRDF (Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front), Anuak were the natural choice for the future Gambella administration.

In April-May 1991, when power changed hands, the old communist-supported Nuer administration fled and was replaced by young EPRDF-supported Anuak. They were relatively unknown within their own community but soon acquired significant political weight due to the support they enjoyed from the new government. These are the men who, ten years later, are behind the present insurgency.

***3. What is the source of income and funding of armed Anuaks, enabling them to perpetuate the conflict?***

The basic source of funding for the Anuak insurgency comes from Eritrea and, to a degree, from the participants themselves. But the importance of the Eritrean connection should not be exaggerated. This is a poor man’s war, which could easily be fought at a cost of US\$ 20,000 per month or even less.

***4. There is a tradition of conflicts between the two main population groups of the region, the Anuak and the Nuer. Is the present conflict a continuation of older conflicts? Or is it something else? Is it perhaps more between the Anuak and the regional government of Gambella or the federal government of Ethiopia? What are the causes of the current conflict? Is it about political control of the region? Or is it a resource conflict (land, oil)? As far as we know, there have been no public utterances of any grievances or aims.***

The dynamics of the present crisis date back to 2002. At that time the TPLF-dominated government in Addis-Ababa decided that the ethnic federalism system, upon which all its political action had been based since it had taken power in 1991, was perhaps obsolete and counterproductive. This system had been highly criticized from the beginning for a number of reasons: the danger of increasing ethnic tensions; the extreme complication of local administration; the spread of corruption as many small local political elites were created, all with their appetites and agendas; the extreme difficulty of coordinating multiple ethnic parties within the regional governments; and the poor progress towards democratization, since each ethnic party dealt mostly in parochial issues without any interest in national ones.

But the decision of the central government to do away with the ethnic federalism system was largely expressed in words only, not actions, and it has remained inconclusive. Local

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<sup>1</sup> Amharic for [military] “campaign”, the term used for the Derg’s rural Development Through Cooperation Campaign

administrations were told that the system which paid their salaries and underpinned their legitimacy was to go soon. But no clear timetable for change was given, no procedure for change was established, no elections were held and no new system was outlined or explained. The only indication of what was to come was a declaration that political parties would no longer be ethnic but regional and that within all regional parties, several ethnic groups could co-exist.<sup>2</sup>

In this legal and political void regions with long-standing simmering ethno-political quarrels came to a boil, since local administrations started to act immediately on these vague hints, without waiting for anything clearer to develop.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Gambella the mostly Anuak administration was told that its days were numbered, without any clear new course of action being defined by the government.

It was at that point that the Nuer factor became significant. There had been clashes between Nuer and Anuak in 2000-2001. They had quieted down. But the causes had not disappeared. Demographically the Nuer were quickly gaining the upper hand, because their tribe was constantly reinforced by refugees from the Sudan. Given the local demographic profile it was not possible for UNHCR to control movement of Nuer in and out of the refugee camps, and the refugee population spilled over into the local population. Since the Anuak considered themselves the “owners of the land” and the “real inhabitants” of Gambella they tended to react with violence. The Nuer, who had connections either with the SPLA or with the pro-Khartoum Nuer militias on the other side of the border, responded in kind.

In another dimension tensions grew between the Anuak and the local administration which, after being seen as an ally during the 1990s, was now perceived as hostile. This tension was partly articulated around the problem of the “settlers”. In 1984-1986 the communist government had transferred thousands of Highland peasants to various Lowland locations in the hope of fighting the famine.<sup>4</sup> Although famine victims themselves, these “settlers” were seen by the local Anuak population as “invaders”. In 1991 many were killed by the Anuak when the regime changed. But the new EPRDF government prevented the settlers from taking any form of revenge. Later the newcomers used their Highland connections to set up small businesses and go into gold-panning. They succeeded fairly well economically, thereby increasing the resentment of the local population against them.

It is against this background that the events of November-December 2003 have to be seen. The decision to open a new refugee camp for the Nuer was perceived by the Anuak as an act of spite and defiance on the part of all “authorities”, i.e. the local government (no longer under Anuak control), the Federal administration and UNHCR. Killing those in charge of mapping out and setting up the new refugee camp was an act of resistance and counter-defiance. But it immediately re-opened a mass of old, unresolved conflicts. When the mutilated bodies of the Highlanders were brought back to Gambella town, feelings ran so high (fuelled by the memories of the never avenged 1991 massacres) that the local authorities let settler vigilante groups form themselves and slaughter Anuak. Later the Anuak took

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<sup>2</sup> This had previously been strictly prohibited. Each political party was supposed to represent one ethnic group and one only. Since ethnicity is a compulsory mention on every person’s ID card, this was easy to check. But the new rules regarding the relationship between ethnicity, regionalism and political parties appeared confusing to the great majority

<sup>3</sup> There were other less serious ethnic clashes, e.g. in Northern Harrarghe (between Oromo and Somali) and in Southern Sidamo (between various Sidama clans as well as between Sidama and Borana Oromo)

<sup>4</sup> The present government has re-started the process, and has produced plans to displace 2.2 million people, including a number into the Gambella region. Preliminary studies indicate the probability of a failure at least as serious as that of the Mengistu regime.

revenge on the civilian settler population which the Ethiopian army was incapable of protecting. Killings and counter-killings became routine.

There are also underlying material interests influencing the conflict. They might not be at the core of it, but they have made it worse. One issue is land. In traditional Anuak terms there is no such thing as private property, since all land belongs collectively to the tribe. This clashes with the government's policy, according to which all land belongs to the State, which is free to use it for its own purposes or lease it to whom it wants.<sup>5</sup> This is, for example, at the heart of the Highland settlers/Anuak clashes, since the Anuak claim the settlers "stole" the land from them, while the settlers say they hold legal government leases.

Then there is the recent discovery of oil. The findings were made by a minor Canadian company which does not have the resources ever to exploit them, if indeed the oil exists in commercially viable quantities. But the major oil company Petronas (Malaysia) is interested in buying permit shares. Petronas has working permits on the other side of the border in Sudan and has the financial capacity to build a pipeline extension connecting the Gambella fields with its Sudanese Eastern Upper Nile fields. Petronas enjoys excellent relations with the Sudanese government. Since the EPRDF regime is very keen on good relations with Khartoum, mainly in order to preserve a common front against Eritrea, it tends to favour the Petronas interest.

These considerations in turn bring us back to the question of who will control the regional government. Both the Nuer and the Anuak know that whoever does so will benefit handsomely from the oil, if the discoveries are ever exploited. Therefore the issue of how the regional government will be restructured, when pure ethnic federalism is no longer the basis for it, is a highly significant and contentious one.

***5. Are there any links to the conflict in Sudan? Are other parties involved? Is the OLF taking this opportunity? Eritrea?***

While there are links between the Gambella conflict and that in the Sudan, such links are correlative rather than causative. The main links are between the Nuer and various factions and groupings in the Sudanese civil war. These were developing even before the beginning of the war, in 1981-1982, when various Nuer clans set up the Anya Nya 2 guerrilla group near Gambella, with Ethiopian communist support. These fighters later fell out with the SPLA, when this was created in 1983, and since the SPLA was largely a Dinka organization, the conflict turned into a Nuer-Dinka war on the border, with the Ethiopian government taking the Dinka/SPLA side. This left the Nuer leaders with three choices. They could fight alone, but those who did were all dead by early 1985. They could submit to Colonel Garang and join the SPLA. Those who did are still active today in the refugee camps and along the border. Or they could turn to Khartoum and start to fight on the government's side. There are many survivors among those, including Gordon Kong Chuol, the main Nuer warlord based in Nasir, who recently took Pibor, both situated in Sudanese provinces bordering Gambella.

Garang and the SPLA are in a delicate position. Since the SPLA has only limited trust in the "peace agreements" entered into with the Sudanese government since June 2002, it wants to keep its trump card in the form of a battle corps of several battalions based in Eritrea, under nominal NDA (National Democratic Alliance) supervision. President Issayas Afeworki, who has a very poor relationship with Khartoum, sees no objection to that. But he asks for some favours in return. And one of the favours has been to help him support any enemy the Ethiopian government might have in the region. In April 2002 the Eritreans flew a few

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<sup>5</sup> Ethiopia, Land Reform Proclamation, Addis Ababa, March 1975. This decree, which nationalized all land, has never been modified and is one of the most hotly contested political topics nation-wide today

hundred OLF fighters down from Eritrea to Pochala in light planes, landing them in SPLA-controlled territory, from where they moved into Welega province of Ethiopia, in an attempt to set up a guerrilla base on the plateau around Nekemte. However, this was a complete failure, and within six weeks all the OLF fighters had either been killed or surrendered. So when the trouble between the Anuak and the Ethiopian government developed, the Eritrean government was keen to exploit the new opportunity. Small training camps were set up near Pochala to accommodate the young men fleeing, or to entice them there.<sup>6</sup> The Nuer stayed clear of the new development. But Gordon Kong Chuol and his men could at any time be used to attack the Eritrean-organized camps on SPLA territory. Whether they do so or not will be determined by the relationship between the Sudanese government and the SPLA in Khartoum itself. If things go relatively well in Khartoum, the government will look the other way and let the SPLA render this small favour to the Eritrean government. But if things go wrong in Khartoum, then the issue would become one of the many pressure points between the former enemies now trying to work together.

**6. What are the prospects for ending the conflict? Are there particular grievances which can/should be addressed? Is there scope for outside mediation? Who could be such a mediator?**

The means for ending the conflict are almost entirely in the hands of the Ethiopian government, which is dominated by Highland Abyssinian interests, in spite of the EPRDF government's emphasis on "ethnic federalism". This means that policy is inevitably influenced by deep underlying cultural attitudes, which – the language of polite political discourse notwithstanding – tend to regard all Lowlanders, particularly the black African ones, as *shankalla* (derogatory term for "black people") or *barya* ("slaves"), and which affect both the development of the administrative process and that of any negotiations towards a return to peace and order.

At the administrative level it would be vital for the government to announce a clearly laid out policy and plan of action which would set out structures and conditions under which the various actors and interests are expected to function. At present no such plan is available and rumours, fears, contradictory statements and unauthorized declarations abound.

The second element of the process of developing a solution would be to begin negotiations among the real actors, i.e. the old Anuak administration, the civil leaders of the Anuak tribe, the Highland settlers, the present local *de facto* administration and the Nuer community. For such negotiations to have a chance of success it would be necessary for the central government to recognize the validity of these local forces and accept, *inter alia*, that traditional tribal leaders have a key role to play in the peace making process. This might be where the cultural difficulty comes in: the EPRDF government is used to telling local tribal groups what to do, not listening to them. But the Gambella problem is one in which genuine ethnic or "community" democracy is a must if any solution is to be reached.

The key reason for this is that there are no clear grievances over a clearly defined issue such as land or resources. The core problem is both simpler and more radical: it is about the respective political weights of several communities in a distant, marginal and economically neglected part of an already poor polity.

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<sup>6</sup> Most of the *bona fide* refugees were women, children and old people. Young men staid behind to ambush Ethiopian troops. But when they learned they could get military training on the Sudan side, then they came.

Outside mediation is almost impossible for a number of reasons. It would be difficult for any institutional outsiders (UN or diplomatic) to muster the degree of deep historical knowledge of these complex factors needed to be listened to by local actors.

It is also almost certain that the Ethiopian government would not take any outside arbitration seriously and would even be likely to consider it as an infringement of its national sovereignty. The EPRDF is already deeply enmeshed in a problem of national sovereignty symbolism over the Ethio-Eritrean border question and would be extremely unlikely to accept being put in a position, where it would appear to be bending to foreign threats or foreign interests.

The only “outside input” possibly of benefit might be that of an advisory group, made up of foreign individuals with significant experience in local ethno-politics, such as might have been built up over many years by NGO workers, priests and academics, none of them likely to be well-known or high profile. It would also be possible to identify the rare Highland Ethiopian who could serve usefully in such a group. It would be necessary for the members of the advisory group to be permanently in the field, to keep a very low profile, and not to seek publicity for their efforts.

***7. In an environment that is completely devoid of transparency and accountability, there would inevitably be massive human rights abuses and violations in this ongoing conflict. When such questions are not raised at the popular level, would the expert be able to shed light on these human right violations perpetrated by either party of the conflict? What would be the verifying mechanism? What is the Ethiopian government’s commitment to either peace processes or to tackling the root causes of the conflict?***

In theory expert verification of local human rights violations would not be particularly difficult, because what has happened, everywhere, is a matter of common knowledge and could easily be ascertained by independent inquiry.

In practice there are substantial difficulties, not least in the fact that there are no “guilty” and “innocent” parties: all sides have committed human rights crimes on a large scale. The Anuak, who have often been depicted as helpless victims, are neither as weak nor as meek as some outsiders make them out to be. Especially for campaigning and fund-raising Western human rights organizations there seems often to be a need to paint the picture of a conflict or other emergency situation in such a way that it appears the victims must be victims only, and not also act as perpetrators.

Another complicating factor is that the Ethiopian government is unlikely to wish to cooperate with any independent inquiry, and instead likely to try obstructing any such effort. Since the Ethiopian government is well-organized and can boast a disciplined administrative service, operating without its support would be an uphill battle. The reasons for this anticipated absence of government cooperation are several: traditional lack of trust in foreigners and extreme nationalistic sensitivity; the fear that any independent inquiry would bring to light crimes committed by government forces; and the suspicion that an independent inquiry would directly or indirectly place blame on the ethnic federalism system, which the government is at present slowly, painfully and so far unsuccessfully trying to overhaul.

***8. What would be the fallout of the conflict both in short term and long term in the region?***

Callous as this may sound, this conflict is not very likely to represent a major threat to the stability of the region either now or in the long term. It is extremely localized, and even outside actors such as the Nuer do not regard the situation as a key element of their political future. Developments in the Sudan are much more important for them.

The only factor that could significantly alter this forecast is oil. If commercially viable quantities of oil were to be found and a big company like Petronas were to acquire the exploitation licences, then the stakes would be raised for everybody and the temptation for the Ethiopian government to “bring back law and order” by extreme force would be significant. The same factor would amplify the interest in the region of outside actors such as the Eritrean government, the SPLA or pro-Khartoum Nuer militias. For that reason, keeping a close eye on oil developments is essential.

For reasons outlined above it is unrealistic to expect that the international community could solve this conflict; at best it could mitigate its effects on the various populations in Gambella. At the other extreme, however, the suggestion sometimes expressed that the Gambella conflict could escalate into a crisis of the dimensions of another Darfur is also quite improbable.

#### ***LATEST INFORMATION: 16 AUGUST 2004***

During late July and early August new fighting developed around Akobo (on the border between Sudan and Ethiopia). At first the Ethiopian government described the fighting as due to territorial encroachments into Ethiopia by members of the Sudanese Luo subsection of the Nuer tribe. It soon became obvious that this was much more serious than that. The former governor of Gambella during the Derg communist regime, Tuwat Pol, a Nuer by ethnic affiliation, who had left the region at the beginning of the crisis, has now returned to Southern Sudan from Eritrea, with support from the Eritrean government. This has enabled him to mobilize his own tribe for an invasion of Gambella, although he has only managed to attract a small number of “traditionally hostile” Anuak to his cause. Tuwat Pol has created a militia organization called the Ethiopian Patriotic United Front (EPUF), which, however, in spite of its name is purely a Nuer affair. EPUF is a member of the anti-Addis-Ababa coalition of dissident movements supported by the Eritrean government.

It is evident that this bout of fighting goes beyond “tribal conflict”. Rather it appears to be a full-fledged effort by the Eritrean government to take advantage of the Gambella crisis and turn it into a direct threat for the Ethiopian government. Combat has been fairly heavy, with light artillery and combat helicopters brought into the fighting. Precise casualty numbers are not known, but it seems certain that over one hundred have been killed. The Sudanese government, which has concerns of its own about Eritrean interference, has given its blessing to Ethiopian troops entering Sudanese territory.

However, these developments do not invalidate our earlier conclusion that there is only a limited risk of “local” extension of the conflict. On the contrary it is interesting to see that Tuwat Pol has found it very difficult to go beyond his own tribe in terms of mobilization. He has extended his military operations into Kaffa and the northern part of South Omo. But it seems that this territorial extension of his operations has been carried out by troops of various ethnic origins (Oromo, Amhara and even some Tigreans), which have been flown from Eritrea by light aircraft to the Akobo area from where they have deployed on foot. These militant guerrillas had to be brought from Eritrea as EPUF has not been successful in its attempts to find recruits from the largest body of locally available potential fighters, i.e. the Anuak refugees.

**Caveat:** Writenet papers are prepared mainly on the basis of publicly available information, analysis and comment. The papers are not, and do not purport to be, either exhaustive with regard to conditions in the country surveyed, or conclusive as to the merits of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. The views expressed in the paper are those of the author and are not necessarily those of Writenet or Practical Management.