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U.S. Anuak Refugees Fear 400 Dead in Ethiopian Massacre

By Doug McGill
[The McGill Report](#)

Rochester, MN -- There will be no last names given in this article. The reason is that if the last names are published, those people or their relatives could be shot and killed.

Let me explain. I am talking about the relatives of some 1,200 Minnesotans.

At 1 p.m. on the afternoon of Dec. 13, more than 200 uniformed soldiers of the Ethiopian army marched into the town of Gambella in remote western Ethiopia, near the border with Sudan.

The soldiers spread out through the town and knocked on the doors of the houses and huts made from corrugated steel and straw matting. Some of the soldiers had pieces of paper with addresses and names. If no one answered their knocks, the soldiers broke down the doors and grabbed all the men and boys inside the house, looking under beds for anyone hiding.

Once the frightened prisoners were in the street, the soldiers beat them with their guns and then told them to run. When they did, the prisoners were shot in their backs. Meanwhile, civilians in town from a different ethnic group than the victims appeared wielding spears and machetes.

"I am going crazy right now," said Romeago, a Minneapolis resident whose sister's home was burned down. "My sister and her kids ran for their lives into the bush. We have no idea if they are safe. We are just praying."

Eyewitness Report

Sometimes the spear-wielding civilians, watched by the passive Ethiopian government soldiers, ran the prisoners through with their spears or simply hacked them down like small trees. They crumpled and died in the street.

Eyewitnesses to the massacre, including one man named Omot who lives in Gambella, and with whom I spoke on the telephone Monday, say that more than 400 bodies have been recovered, many of them from a mass grave.

The United Nations, which runs three refugee camps in the region, has confirmed the massacre and said all of the dead are members of the Anuak tribe, an

indigenous people of Western Ethiopia who have been the target of ethnic cleansing for more than a decade.

About 2,000 Anuak refugees came to the United States in the 1990s, with more than half of them settling in southern Minnesota. About 200 Anuak rallied on Saturday at the state Capitol, marching and making speeches to grab the attention of Minnesota citizens, legislators and the press. It was a freezing cold day, however, and I was the only reporter present.

"The problem is hunger," said Obang, a Minneapolis citizen whose brother is missing and feared dead. "There is nothing to eat. Even if you have money, you have no place to go to get food. You are afraid of being killed."

Ethnic Cleansing

The Anuak live in a verdant but remote area that has active gold pits and is also known to have oil deposits. Over the past two decades, more than 100,000 refugees from the Sudanese civil war, many of them members of the Nuer tribe, have been settled in the region. Tens of thousands of Ethiopians from poorer parts of the country have also been resettled to the Anuak land.

On Dec. 13, according to the testimony of Anuak survivors, the government and "highlander" Ethiopians collaborated in the massacre.

Omot, the man I interviewed by phone, lost a son in the attack.

"He was a driver and they shot him in his car," Omot said. "I survived by hiding in the bush. I saw a uniformed soldier kill one boy, a student."

Omot also saw a young man who had been shot in the leg and could not walk, and was crying out for help in the street. Omot couldn't help the boy for fear of being shot himself.

The thought of that boy haunts me.

Is he still alive, I wonder? Or was he shot like a crippled dog by the soldiers?

What would it be like to be shot and wounded and left abandoned to die slowly, on the side of a street in the middle of one's own town?

That question kept me awake last night. That and whether Minnesotans will rally to help the suffering relatives of their fellow citizens, the Minnesota Anuak.

If you want to be in touch with Anuak leaders in Minnesota who are organizing a relief effort, drop me an e-mail and I'll put you in touch: doug@mcgillreport.org.

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