

Anuak in Minnesota fear for homeland

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Widespread ethnic killings in Darfur, Sudan, have been in the news lately, but another human crisis is taking place next door, in Ethiopia. A group of Minnesota immigrants is struggling to alert the world to what they call an Ethiopian genocide. This is in east Africa -- and involves the Anuak ethnic group, which numbers about 100,000 people.

Many Anuak have immigrated to southern Minnesota. They insist their Anuak parents, siblings, cousins and friends still in Ethiopia are being systematically killed by the Ethiopian army, and by other ethnic groups incited to violence by the army. The Anuak say they believe the government is trying to exterminate their small community to get hold of their homeland, and to send a message to separatist groups active in Ethiopia.

By Doug McGill

Rochester, Minn. — Telephones in Rochester, Burnsville and other towns where Anuak immigrants have settled in Minnesota started ringing urgently Dec. 13, 2003.

Many Anuak had moved here from Ethiopia over the last decade, to escape persecution by the Ethiopian army and other ethnic groups in the region. But just before Christmas, the calls from their home region, Gambella state in western Ethiopia, brought new fear.

Ethiopian government soldiers reportedly were going door to door, calling out Anuak men by name and shooting them in the street, said Obang Jobi, an Anuak immigrant living in Burnsville, who heard the news in a telephone call from a friend.

"She's so scared because ... people are being killed on the street and she don't want to talk on the phone," Jobi said. "And I said, 'Just stay on the phone. Just keep talking, just keep talking to me and tell me what's going on.' She was crying, and she was nervous, and she couldn't talk. She couldn't talk. She is saying that nobody is going to survive."

Jobi rushed to call a friend of his, Omot Bowar from Austin, Minnesota, who was visiting relatives in Gambella. "While we are talking I heard the noise that the military, they are coming to get Omot. They came to the door, and Omot told me that, 'Obang! Obang! They are coming to get me! They are coming to get me! They are coming to get me!'" Jobi recalled.

"I said, 'Keep talking to me! Keep talking to me! Just don't hang up the phone! Don't hang up the phone!' And he kept talking to me, and they came and just took the phone and threw it down. And we were silent for almost 30 minutes in the house, without talking to my wife. I thought that Omot has been killed," Jobi said.

More than 425 Anuak were slaughtered from Dec. 13-16, according to lists compiled by Anuak survivors. Bowar survived by showing his U.S. passport to the soldiers, and was later rescued by a team of U.S. embassy officials who drove to Gambella on Dec. 17.

Since the killings, 8,500 Anuak fled their homes in Gambella and walked for days through the malaria-infested scrubland to Pochalla, a village across the border in Sudan.

Survivors tell of massacre

At Pochalla, the Anuak live in a camp, a slum of lean-tos made of sticks and white plastic sheeting, which is ripped from United Nations food packages dropped by planes. The air drops, every six weeks or so, are not enough to feed the thousands of Anuak who have gathered in the camp. There are very few older people at the camp. Many died en route.

Obang Ojok worked as an office messenger in Gambella until the Dec. 13 massacre. He stood on crutches in a dirt-stained Lakers T-shirt, the stump of a missing leg resting on the crossbar of one crutch.

"I lost my leg during the massacre in Gambella last December," Ojok says through a translator. "And not only my leg, but that day I lost my children, my wife, and many other relatives."

Ojok explained that while he was running away, he was shot from behind in the arm and leg. His left arm has a small round hole on the back, and a jagged three-inch wound on the front where the bullet exited. He says he was saved by local missionaries who found him, persuaded the soldiers not to kill him, and later amputated his leg.

"I don't have hope. I don't think I will live much longer," Ojok said. "Even if the government doesn't come here to this camp to kill me, I don't have any food to eat. I survived the massacre but now starvation may kill me. Other people go to the bush to get leaves to eat. But I have only one leg now. I can't go out to get food."

Under a giant tree filled with birds that provides rare shade in the camp, Obang Opara, in a tan cap and a loosely buttoned dress shirt, limped over to a white plastic chair. He arrived in Pochalla from his trek in the bush in mid-April. He says both of his legs were broken during the Dec. 13 massacre.

Opara had to heal in hiding for four months, before making the long walk to the camp. He says groups of ethnic Ethiopians known as highlanders, who have lighter colored skin than the Anuak, attacked him.

"They came carrying knives and spears and clubs, and the government forces themselves carrying guns, rifles," Opara said.

Like all the Anuak refugees here, Opara says the highlanders worked together with armed Ethiopian troops in twos and threes.

"If you try to run away, just, they will shoot you," said Opara.

A thin and striking young man named Oboge danced around the Pochalla camp in his underwear, singing. He recited bits of poetry and struck poses of people shooting guns, and then of people writhing and falling.

Oboge was a soccer star in Ethiopia. But he lost his family on Dec. 13, and now some refugees say, he has lost his mind.

"Other people dance with me, but they think I lost my mind," Oboge said through a translator. "But I haven't lost my mind. When I sing a song I feel really happy."

His song questioned why the massacre happened: "You people, you people, you people, Tell me what did we do wrong?"

Some Anuak say they know why the Ethiopian government is driving their tiny tribe from its homeland. The government wants their rich farmland for economic development, and as a place to resettle Ethiopians from larger tribes who were driven out of their own homelands by famine, the Anuak say.

The Anuak home in Gambella also has active gold mines and potential oil reserves. And, recently, the Anuak have pushed for more autonomy over the region.

The Ethiopian government may have a deeper, political reason for pursuing the Anuak. The government is struggling to bind together a country composed of many ethnically distinct regions. It faces armed separatist movements.

Anuak leaders in Minnesota say the Ethiopian government may be using ethnic cleansing on their relatively small tribe as a warning to the larger separatist groups that the government will use violence, if necessary, to keep the country unified.

Government denies involvement

Ethiopian officials like Barnabas Gebre-ab vigorously deny any involvement in the Dec. 13 massacre, or the subsequent devastation of about a dozen Anuak villages. Gebre-ab is the minister of federal affairs for Gambella, and he insists the Ethiopian army is not killing its civilians.

"It is not an army that changes to heinous thugs all of a sudden when it reaches to Gambella. I just don't buy that."

Gebre-ab is the civilian chief of the country's military in Gambella. Anuak were killed on Dec. 13, Gabre-Ab acknowledged, but he blamed the problem on ethnic tension, not his soldiers.

The morning of Dec. 13, unknown attackers sprayed an official state vehicle carrying eight highlanders with bullets, killing all the occupants. Later that morning, the victims' bodies were put on display in Gambella town, and Anuak separatists were blamed for the killings. A mob mainly composed of highlanders started attacking Anuak neighbors in revenge, Gebre-Ab said.

"They assumed the Anuak were the ones who killed these guys on the road," Gabre-Ab said. "So when you see it on face value, this is a gut reaction. But it's also something that's related to animosity. It's hatred, you know. Why couldn't they control themselves? Why did they go into this emotional outburst and start to kill? Because they are social scums."

Asked why the Anuak and the government versions of the massacre differ, Gebre-Ab said, "This is something we have to probe."

Gebre-Ab denied the Anuak claim that up to a dozen of their villages have been razed by Ethiopian troops. But the army is seeking out armed Anuak rebels who hide in Anuak villages and who occasionally kill Ethiopian troops and civilians, he said.

"There is an Anuak group that claims to have formed a liberation front," Gebre-Ab said. "They kill health workers. They kill teachers. If they are highlanders, they kill them. Deliberately. So what do we do with these people? We have to hunt them down."

The Anuak respond

In the Anuak refugee camp in Pochalla, several men admitted to being members of the liberation force. One of them, a recent recruit who studied at South Central Technical College in Mankato, Minnesota, said that after Dec. 13 he moved to Pochalla to help the Gambella People's Liberation Force.

"The Ethiopian government is in the pursuit of killing our people, so we are defending our interest," said the man, who requested anonymity. After 20 years of persecution, only now have the Anuak raised a militia, he said.

"There is a time, even in the Bible -- I've heard the Bible, been going to the Bible college -- there is a time for everything," he said. "A time for war, a time for peace. A time for life and a time to die."

But armed resistance is the last thing on most refugees' minds. They are obsessed with simple survival. And for many of them, survival is synonymous with Minnesota. They either want to contact relatives in Minnesota who can send them money, food and clothes, or they want to immigrate to the safety of the state.

Anuak immigrants already in Minnesota are trying to help. They have been meeting in cramped apartments, trying to figure out how to focus the world's attention on their tribe's crisis. They organized a protest rally at the state Capitol in December. They convinced U.S. Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., to write to the U.S. ambassador in Ethiopia and urge her to pressure Ethiopia to stop the killings.

Most Anuak are churchgoing Christians, the result of missionary work in Africa, and they are trying to mobilize their ministers and congregations throughout the state. Some churches have organized fundraising campaigns and sent relief funds to Anuak victims.

"Our goal is actually to try to educate people here so they can stand with us together," said Omot Ochan, executive director of the Anuak Community Association of North America. Based in St. Paul, the association represents the roughly 1,500 Anuak who live in the state.

"If you speak out and explain the situation clearly to the people here, people really will come to your aid, and be able to stand up with you together," Ochan said.

So far, the Anuak appeals have not been heard. The United States and the United Nations are more involved with a larger ethnic cleansing occurring in Sudan, where 1.3 million refugees in Darfur have been driven from their homes, and 30,000 killed by Sudanese soldiers and Arab militias.

Several human rights organizations, such as Genocide Watch and the World Organization Against Torture, have researched the Anuak stories and declared that the Ethiopian government is using ethnic cleansing against the Anuak. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, the two largest

human rights groups, say they are aware of the Anuak crisis, but their attention has been largely diverted to Darfur.

The U.S. embassy in Ethiopia said it deplores the killings, and called on Ethiopia's government to investigate the claims against its military. An inquiry commission appointed by the Ethiopian Parliament on July 6 absolved the army of wrongdoing, the official Ethiopian News Agency reported. The commission also found that 65 people were killed in Gambella, contrary to Western reports that put the number of dead at more than 400.

Meanwhile, roughly \$300 million in U.S. foreign aid continues to flow each year to the Ethiopian government. And the Anuak immigrants in Minnesota continue to send money to their relatives in refugee camps, to write letters to U.S. officials, and to worry that their small culture may be wiped out while the world's attention is on other matters.