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A River Washes Away Ethiopia's Tensions, for a Moment

By MARC LACEY
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GAMBELLA, Ethiopia - Bath time here is a communal affair. Everyone grabs a bar of soap and heads down to the river.

As they stand naked in the water a few feet from one another, lathering and rinsing in unison, people from Gambella's various ethnic groups appear at ease. The Anuak, the Nuer and the highlanders all use the Baro River as their tub.

Appearances can be deceiving. Ethnic clashes over the last six months have killed hundreds in this remote region of western Ethiopia. Making matters worse, government soldiers have joined in the killing, siding with the highlanders. To escape the bloodshed, thousands of Anuak, targets of the latest rage, have sought refuge across the border in Sudan, about 50 miles away.

From the riverbank on a recent evening, a longtime resident gazed at the hundreds of bathers, explaining who was who.

The Anuak, farmers and fishermen, are indigenous. They have dark skin, and many have removed their bottom row of front teeth, an old tradition. "Those are Anuak," the man said, gesturing to a group of men knee-deep in water.

The Nuer, cattle herders, are tall and dark, and many of them, men and women alike, have ornamental scars on their faces. "The Nuer are over there," the man said.

The other ethnic groups here in Gambella are known collectively as highlanders. They have lighter skin and make up about a third of the population. They moved here in the mid-1980's when the junta that ruled Ethiopia forced them to relocate. Now they own most of Gambella's shops, another source of tensions. "See the highlanders there," said the man on the riverbank.

As they bathe together, everybody keeps an eye out for crocodiles, a real threat in these waters. Once they are dried off and clothed and heading back home, it is one another they eye warily.

The Anuak and the Nuer, traditional enemies, have clashed sporadically over the years. But the latest round of violence began in December when a group of armed Anuak killed some highlanders. The highlanders, working for Ethiopia's refugee agency, had been

scouting out sites for a new camp. Thousands of Sudanese are living in camps around Gambella, waiting out their country's war. The Anuak, who had been complaining that the refugees were taking precious land, were outraged that another camp was going up.

When the highlanders' bodies were brought into town for burial, the reaction was swift. Angry highlanders said they were fed up with Anuak insurgents wreaking havoc. The highlanders began searching out Anuak to attack. But what set off an outright massacre was the involvement of the army, dominated by highlanders. Some soldiers joined in the killing, many Anuak witnesses said, providing firepower for the highlanders.

What ensued was a house-by-house hunt for Anuak men. Scores were killed on Dec. 13 and in the days and weeks that followed.

The government, also dominated by highlanders, has since called in more soldiers and asked the president of the Supreme Court to investigate the killings. "Was the army involved or not? To what extent? How many people died? These are the questions," the top judge, Kemal Bedri Kelo, said in an interview.

But politicians in Addis Ababa, including Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, have already declared that they see no evidence that the army has done anything other than bring the killing to a halt. "Is this a tragedy? Yes," said Dr. Barnabas Gebre-Ab, a minister responsible for the Gambella region. "Is this something that's grave? Yes. But why is it necessary to inflate it?"

Doing his best to fight the hatred is a local pastor, the Rev. Omot Agwa Okwoy. He is Anuak, but undeterred by ethnic labels. He and his wife, also Anuak, adopted a highlander infant years ago. The boy, Daniel Mer Omot, now 17, lives in the netherworld between rival loyalties.

"If I could make myself black, I would make myself black," said Daniel, who is light-skinned but considers himself as Anuak as his father.

Soldiers stop Daniel when he walks around with Anuak boys, suspecting some mischief is afoot, harassment that angers his father. "When a light-colored boy is moving with the dark boys, it ought to be seen as a sign of peace," Mr. Omot said.

He is chairman of the local peace council, an interethnic group sponsored by Oxfam America that is trying to help unity triumph over strife. During the raids on Anuak homes, Mr. Omot almost lost his life. Another clergyman, the Rev. Okwier Oletho, did. Angry highlanders surrounded his house, set it on fire and killed him as he tried to escape.

Mr. Omot has redoubled his efforts to try to bring the communal feeling that seems to exist in the river to the rest of Gambella. The task is great.

The other day, a young boy bathing in the Baro was snatched by a crocodile and carried off into the murky water. Recounting what occurred, an Anuak man said dismissively, "It was just a highlander boy."

After initial panic, the people of Gambella were back in the river again soon after the attack, standing side by side and scrubbing themselves in what looked like unity.

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