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Survivor's Rights International & Genocide Watch Call for Immediate Steps to Stop Massacres in Southwestern Ethiopia

February 18, 2004 – Survivor's Rights International and Genocide Watch are calling on the Ethiopian Government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, the United Nations Security Council, and the African Union to take immediate steps to halt escalating violence in the Gambella region of southwestern Ethiopia. Interviews conducted January 16-23, 2004 with Ethiopian refugees in nearby Pochalla, Sudan confirmed that Ethiopian government troops massacred over 400 members of the Anuak ethnic group in Gambella December 13 – 16, 2003, and that rapes and murders are continuing.

On January 29, 2004, members of the indigenous Anuak minority responded with violence to the torture and execution of an Anuak gold miner in Dimma. Exemplifying the climate of gross impunity, soldiers bragged about the murder to members of the Anuak community. Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Defense Forces (EPRDF) attempted to disarm other Anuak gold miners, who counter-attacked. EPRDF forces were defeated, with scores of soldiers believed killed. The Anuak gold miners also killed highlander civilians in Dimma town. On January 30, 2004, a convoy of EPRDF reinforcements was attacked on route to Dimma, with more soldiers killed.

After the January 29 - 30 battles, non-combatant Anuak women and children fled Dimma in fear of further military retaliation and atrocities by EPRDF soldiers. As of January 26, some 5,297 refugees had fled southwestern Ethiopia to Pochalla, Sudan from the Gambella region, including the districts of Gambella, Abobo, Gok and Itang.

On February 3, 2004, EPRDF reinforcements in Dimma massacred 17 Anuaks, including Dimma District government officials. EPRDF troops also massacred non-combatant Dinka and Nuer Sudanese refugees from a nearby camp and wounded other Sudanese refugees.

Mass rape continues in the region, perpetrated by both EPRDF soldiers and "highlander" militias. These same groups were responsible for the December massacres. On January 28, for example, EPRDF soldiers summarily executed an Anuak father for persevering in his attempt to bring to justice the men who that day had gang-raped his 10 year-old daughter. In the absence of Anuak men—who have been either executed or driven from southwestern Ethiopia—Anuak women and girls have been subject to sexual atrocities from which there is neither protection nor recourse.

SRI and Genocide Watch have received reports that the Anuak Gambella People's Liberation Force (GPLF) is planning armed responses to the ongoing repression, rape and murder of Anuak people, and to the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators. Additional reports indicate that the federal government of Ethiopia may have dispatched intelligence operatives to neighboring countries to assassinate exiled Anuak leaders, including Mr. Okello Akuai, the President of Gambella, and Mr. Abulla Obang Agwa, the founder of the Gambella People's Democratic Congress. The violence is thus already a threat to international peace and security in the region.

According to Genocide Watch sources, the massacres on 13 -16 December 2003 were ordered by the commander of the Ethiopian army in Gambella, Nagu Beyene, with the authorization of Dr. Gebrhab Barnabas, an official of the Ethiopian government. The accusation has also been made that lists of targeted individuals were drawn up with the assistance of Omot Obang Olom, who is himself Anuak, but holds an official position.

On 8 January 2004 Genocide Watch faxed Prime Minister Meles Zenawi a letter calling for the arrest of these officials, as well as other perpetrators of the December massacres. He has not replied. None of the perpetrators of the massacres have been arrested. Instead, the Ethiopian government has portrayed the December massacres as ethnic conflict between Nuer and Anuak, which they were not. It has also tried to minimize the number killed. Genocide Watch and SRI have eyewitness testimony that Ethiopian soldiers have dug up mass graves and burned the bodies.

The government portrays conflict at the Dimma gold mines as instigated by the Anuak, though the fighting began with an EPRDF atrocity against a miner, and an attempt to disarm the miners, for whom their weapons are their only self-defense. The Ethiopian government has moved over 20,000 EPRDF troops into the Gambella region, ostensibly to "calm down" the area, when actually EPRDF troops continue to commit murders and rapes.

Genocide Watch and Survivor's Rights International call upon the Ethiopian government to remove EPRDF troops from the Gambella region, leaving regular police. We also call upon the Secretary General of the United Nations to place this explosive situation on the agenda of the United Nations Security Council.

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For more information on the crisis in southwestern Ethiopia, please visit the website of the International Campaign to End Genocide (ICEG) at <<http://www.genocidewatch.org>>. The field report based on research and interviews of refugees in Pochalla, Sudan, is available on that website, and on SRI's website at <www.survivorsrightsinternational.org>

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