

On Bloody Saturday, Ethiopia Chose Genocide

By Doug McGill

On Saturday, December 13, in a single bloody burst of targeted mass murder, Ethiopia became the world's latest sovereign to use genocide as a way to solve its problems with a troublesome minority.

As it did in Rwanda in 1994, the U.S. is looking the other way as an African genocide unfolds directly under its gaze. The killings continue to this day.

The U.S., which gave Ethiopia \$32 million in foreign aid last year, has not challenged the Ethiopian government's denial of the murder by its soldiers of more than 400 members of the Anuak tribe on December 13. It was by far the worst single-day killing in a decade-long ethnic cleansing of Ethiopia's indigenous Anuak tribe, which has caused more than 2,000 Anuak to flee to the U.S. as refugees.

The morning of December 13 began like any other in Gambella town, the capital of Gambella province in remote western Ethiopia. The sky slowly brightened, animals stirred, and women made their morning trips to the wells. Shops and street stalls opened, children came out, and a few cars bumped through town.

By the end of the day, the town had become a living hell.

At first a single gunshot was heard. Then came warning shouts, then the rat-a-tat of AK-47 rifles, then desperate screams. Straw-roofed homes called tukus, hundreds of them, went up like torches spewing black smoke as the terrified occupants ran for their lives, only to be shot in the back. As the sun set, dozens of Anuak corpses lay in the streets; many of the wounded called for help during the night but to no avail; and the nearby Openo River was clogged with bloated bodies like so many logs.

"They Killed My Boy"

According to eyewitnesses, the massacre was led by uniformed Ethiopian soldiers and joined by dozens of members of the Amara, Oromo, and Tigray tribes of highland Ethiopia. Groups of "highlanders" were seen chopping and stabbing Anuak with machetes as the soldiers stood passively by.

Omod, an Anuak survivor, described what happened to me in a telephone interview: "About 300 uniformed soldiers marched into the town. They knocked on doors or pushed them down and pulled out all the men and the boys. Then they beat them on the street and told them to run. When they ran, they shot them. They killed my boy. He was a driver

and they shot him in his car. I hid in the bush and I saw them beating people, shooting people, and burning houses. We collected 403 bodies. They are in a mass grave.”

This testimony corroborates that given by more than two dozen Anuak refugees I have interviewed in southern Minnesota, where some 1,200 Anuak refugees live. All of them had spoken to relatives – usually mothers and sisters as male survivors were rare -- within days of the massacre.

The Anuak have lived for centuries in a verdant western region of Ethiopia, near the border with Sudan. There are active gold pits and proven oil reserves on the Anuak’s ancestral land, resources the government of Ethiopia covets. Over the past decade the Anuak have pressed Addis Ababa for a share in the projected development of these resources and have been answered in political subjugation, physical beatings, and now the government-led December 13 pogrom. It is a genocide in progress.

Nuer v. Anuak

It is thus far a small genocide compared to that of Armenians by Turks in WWI; of the Jews by Germans in WWII; of Cambodians by Khmer Rouge in the 1970s; of Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda in 1994; and of Muslims and Kosovar Albanians by Bosnian Serbs in the 1990s.

Yet in kind, the killing of the Anuak minority by sovereign Ethiopia has all the markings of genocide as defined by the UN’s Genocide Convention and by popular usage of the term: a state-sponsored attempt to extinguish an entire race.

Over the past decade, some 20,000 Anuak have fled into refugee camps in northern Kenya (primarily the Ifo camp) and southern Sudan. More than half of the 2,000 Anuak refugees in the U.S. live in southern Minnesota.

Until December 13, most of the killings of Anuak were by their ancient tribal enemies, the Nuer, many of whom have resettled on Anuak land as civil war refugees from Sudan. The United Nations runs three refugee camps in Gambella for these refugees, most of whom are Nuer.

Anthropologists and missionaries say the Anuak and the Nuer in previous decades had evolved ritualistic peaceful ways to solve the inevitable disputes that arose between their tribes. The displacement of more than 100,000 Sudan civil war refugees onto Anuak land in Gambella upset those traditional ways. When a flood of small arms poured into Gambella via the Nuer refugee camps, the unarmed Anuak became sitting ducks.

Angry Crowd

The Anuak for years have claimed that the Ethiopian government was using the Anuak-Nuer rivalry as its main tool for Anuak extermination, arming Nuers and de-arming Anuak and then standing by passively as the inevitable happened.

On December 13, for the first time, hundreds of uniformed Ethiopian soldiers were seen marching through the main streets of Gambella; killing Anuak; and cordoning off the town to prevent Anuaks from escaping.

I interviewed more than two dozen Anuak refugees who live in southern Minnesota and who have spoken on the telephone to surviving relatives in Gambella, mostly mothers and sisters, who were eyewitnesses to the December 13 slaughter. I also spoke on the telephone to an English-speaking Anuak man in Gambella who survived but lost a son.

According to these witnesses and to United Nation's accounts, on the morning of Saturday, December 13, a van containing eight UN and Ethiopian government refugee camp officials was ambushed by unidentified assailants on a road connecting the towns of Itang and Gambella. All eight occupants of the van were killed.

At 1 p.m. that afternoon, Ethiopian soldiers brought the van and the corpses to Gambella, attracting crowds of angry onlookers. Here are three Anuak eyewitness accounts I gathered of what happened next ("highlanders" refer to Ethiopians of the Amhara, Oromo, and Tigray tribes, thousands of whom have been resettled by the Ethiopian government to live in Gambella):

Obang: "The crowd of highlanders was angry about the killings [of the people in the van]. They asked 'Who killed these people? Who killed these highlanders?' All these people followed the van to the hospital. They are all angry. One soldier fired his gun in the air, and all the highlanders scattered and ran home. In a few minutes they came back carrying anything they could get from their homes – knives, guns, machetes, spears."

Romego: "They burned down my Mom's house and my sister's house. My Mom said about 400 Anuak were killed and they are still finding bodies in the bush and in the river. My other sister ran with her family into the bush, we haven't heard from her. We don't know if she and her kids are alive. WE are just praying. My Mom was crying on the telephone. I am going crazy now."

Okun: "The soldiers knew who they were looking for. They went only to the houses of the Anuak, and then mainly for the educated ones, the students, the leaders. I talked to a cousin on my Mom's side. He hid under his bed to survive. He saw a soldier kill a boy in the street. They told the boy to run and then they shot him. He saw another boy who was shot in the leg but wasn't killed, he was just lying in the street, calling for help. No one could go to him. The soldiers burned down houses and stole TVs, refrigerators, and cash. All the houses with grass roofs, they burned."

A spokesman at the Ethiopian embassy in Washington said the eyewitness accounts of uniformed Ethiopian soldiers killing Anuak were "completely false and unfounded. The defense forces are doing their level best to look for those people who were involved in this sad event." When asked why 2,000 Anuak had fled Ethiopia as refugees, the spokesman said they had not fled ethnic cleansing. Rather, "they are enjoying the right of movement to live anywhere they like and to enjoy their own pursuit of life."

A spokesman for the U.S. State Department, which has advised Americans not to travel to Gambella, said it had confirmed 113 dead and has sent a security team to the area to investigate the massacre.

Meanwhile, the Anuak tribe's leadership in exile meets Saturday afternoons at an Ethiopian restaurant in St. Paul, Minnesota, to plan relief efforts and a lobbying campaign to catch the attention of U.S. Senators from Minnesota, Mark Dayton and Norm Coleman. The Anuak held such a rally a week after the December 13 massacre on the steps of the state capital in St. Paul. More than 100 Anuak men and women marched in a circle in freezing weather with signs asking "Mr. Bush, Terrorism? Now Genocide?" and "Where is the International Body?"

An Anuak leader in St. Paul sent a New Year's e-mail to a dozen Anuak friends in the U.S., Australia, and Canada. The e-mail had photographs of smiling Anuak boys and girls, and another of their dazzling homeland, rows of emerald green corn crops, and mango trees, and a deep blue sky.

"May we learn from the bitter experiences of life and look into the future with hope," the e-mail said. "This hope is our unity.

"No one is going to stand up for us, so we must stand up for ourselves. We all need to come together and tell the whole world, and our enemies too, that the Anuak people have a right to live in this, God's world. It is our birth place, just like the rest of the human species."

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