

ETHIOPIA: Parliament votes for independent probe into violence in Gambella

By UN Integrated Regional Information Networks

ADDIS ABABA, 30 Mar 2004 (IRIN) - The Ethiopian parliament has decided that an independent body be set up to investigate reports of violence between different ethnic groups in the western Gambella region, in which hundreds of people are believed to have been killed.

The parliament, in a meeting on Thursday, resolved that the independent body would be charged with establishing the real causes of the violence and what role the government was playing to quell it.

In a separate statement issued from Brussels the same day, the EU expressed concern over "sporadic but persistent" fighting in western Ethiopia. "While noting the actions taken by the government of Ethiopia to stabilise the area, the European Union emphasises the need for government security forces and the military to act in an impartial and lawful manner if tensions between the various ethnic groups in the region are to be reduced," it said.

"The European Union calls for a public and independent inquiry into suggestions of involvement by members of the Ethiopian military in violence directed against innocent civilians," the statement added.

Earlier this month, the government apologised to local tribes for its inadequate response to prevent a massacre in early December that led to the eruption of the violence. The troubles were sparked by the murders of eight government refugee workers when their vehicle was attacked in the area.

The bodies of the men, which were badly mutilated, were paraded around Gambella town, provoking reprisal attacks on Anyuaks, a local ethnic group who were blamed for the killings.

The federal authorities have started examining evidence related to the killings with the aim of ensuring that suspected instigators can be tried. Some 37 people have been identified. Forty others, suspected of involvement in clashes at a gold mine in Dima in the Gambella region on 30 January, in which up to 200 people were killed, have also been seized.

The government is now training some 300 indigenous police officers to help it stabilise the situation and prevent further outbreaks of violence. The authorities are also looking to traditional elders for help in restoring calm.

Gambella is ethnically diverse, being home to members of the Nuer, Anyuak, Majenger, Opou and Komo ethnic groups. It is also inhabited by groups belonging to other Ethiopian tribes, such as the Amhara, Oromo and Tigray, who are locally known as

highlanders.

The EU expressed support for calls on the government to work with traditional leaders, NGOs and local church groups to "heal" ethnic rifts so as to "establish trust and stability" in the region.

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