

Ethiopia: Crimes Against Humanity in Gambella Region

Army Impunity and Official Inaction Fuel Abuses

(Nairobi, March 24, 2005) — The Ethiopian military has committed widespread murder, rape and torture against the Anuak population in the remote southwestern region of Gambella since December 2003, Human Rights Watch said in a 64-page report released today entitled “[Targeting the Anuak: Human Rights Violations and Crimes against Humanity in Ethiopia’s Gambella Region](#).” Human Rights Watch said that the abuses detailed in the report could amount to crimes against humanity.

Following the December 2003 massacre of some 400 Anuak civilians in a Gambella town by mobs and soldiers, the military launched a series of attacks on Anuak villages that destroyed well over 1000 homes and left several dozen villagers dead. In numerous smaller incidents, soldiers have severely beaten and sometimes killed Anuak men they encounter along roads or in sweeps of Anuak villages. These abuses have forced several thousand Anuak civilians to flee their homes for camps across the Sudanese border, while others have sought refuge with friends or family in the relative safety of Gambella’s larger towns.

“The Ethiopian government must address its responsibility for the horrific crimes that the army has committed against Anuak civilians in Gambella,” said Peter Takirambudde, executive director of Human Rights Watch’s Africa Division. “While serious abuses have continued, the government has focused only on prosecuting a handful of soldiers involved in the December massacre.”

The army’s operations in Gambella began as an attempt to root out armed Anuak groups that are believed to be responsible for a number of brutal attacks on the region’s large population of onetime migrants from other parts of Ethiopia. Human Rights Watch said that the military’s response has been to treat Gambella’s entire Anuak population as a legitimate target for attack.

Human Rights Watch researchers who traveled to towns in Gambella documented military raids on Anuak neighborhoods and villages throughout the region since the December 2003 massacre. Eyewitnesses told how government soldiers killed more than one hundred Anuak civilians in these attacks. Many of the victims were shot down from behind as they tried to flee attacks on their villages. Others were killed in chance encounters with military patrols in the countryside.

Soldiers from military garrisons near Anuak communities have attacked and raped women on their way to fetch water or gather firewood, and have invaded homes and raped the women living there. Military patrols traveling along the region’s roads have also been implicated in rape.

Beatings and torture of Anuak civilians by soldiers have become such common occurrences in much of the region that many of the victims interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that they consider it to be a normal part of their existence. “We don’t even bother to take [the victims’] names,” said one Anuak villager. “If all they do is beat you, you are lucky.”

In the first four months of 2004, soldiers burned several villages to the ground, and an attack in December 2003 destroyed more than 1000 Anuak homes in the town of Pinyudo. Soldiers have also looted homes as well as cattle and other livestock when they pass through Anuak villages. As one farmer whose home was stripped bare by soldiers from a passing patrol put it, “because everything is in their hands, they take whatever they want.”

“The Ethiopian government claims that the military is trying to bring stability to Gambella’s countryside,” Takirambudde said. “But in fact it’s the army that is terrorizing the rural population with impunity.”

Human Rights Watch said that the Ethiopian government’s response to the ongoing abuses has been wholly inadequate. The government launched a public inquiry into the December 2003 massacre, but its report ignored overwhelming evidence of the army’s participation in the massacre and absolved the military of any wrongdoing. The government has not taken any steps to investigate allegations of ongoing abuse in other parts of Gambella. Hundreds of civilians have been killed and raped, and numerous villages have been burned to the ground, yet the government has only recently said it would put six soldiers on trial for their alleged involvement in the December 2003 massacre.

Several Anuak villagers who have reported abuses to regional authorities told Human Rights Watch that officials said there was nothing they could do to control the military, and urged them to keep quiet for their own safety. Others complained to the military authorities about rapes committed by soldiers garrisoned near their communities, only to be advised that the best way to prevent such abuses was to tell women not to walk the roads alone. In some cases, military officers have responded to complaints of abuse by accusing villagers of supporting armed Anuak groups and threatening them with further violence.

The military’s continuing depredations have left many Anuak farmers afraid to travel to their fields, which often lie in isolated areas far from the villages they live in. The total area under cultivation in Gambella dropped by 25 percent in 2004, and relief agencies attribute this alarming development mainly to insecurity in the region.

Under international law, offenses committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population are crimes against humanity. Human Rights Watch believes the numerous acts of murder, rape and torture committed by the Ethiopian army against Anuak civilians since late 2003 should be investigated as crimes against humanity. Human Rights Watch urged donor governments to publicly call on the Ethiopian government to conduct a thorough, public and independent investigation into military abuses in Gambella.

Testimonies from the Human Rights Watch report “Targeting the Anuak: Human Rights Violations and Crimes against Humanity in Ethiopia’s Gambella Region”

One [man], the soldiers tied his hands to his legs and put him on the road and then ran him over with a military truck. This person had been running. The soldiers caught him, between five and ten of them. They tied his hands and legs and were saying, “Why do you want to shoot him? We can kill

him in another way instead.” There were some highlander children there and they were crying, saying, “Don’t kill him, don’t kill him!” They [the soldiers] put him on the road, and they yelled, “Go over him, go over him!” and then the truck ran him over once. Then the soldiers and highlanders clapped and cheered together.

— Anuak man describing massacre in Gambella town, December 13, 2003

I was on my way to a nearby village and . . . I was caught by soldiers. They beat me and raped me at that time. There were twelve soldiers and all twelve of them raped me. They kept me for three hours. [After this] I became very exhausted and I was bleeding. From Gok Jinjor to Gok Dipatch usually takes two hours, but after I faced this problem, it took six hours. I received no treatment. I reported to my relatives, not to outsiders, because when they see a woman bleeding they may think she has made an abortion. When I was caught by the troops, my child ran away. I reached Gok Jinjor without knowing where my child was. After I arrived, I received information that the child joined another group of people and I sent my relatives from group to group. . . . I have suffered long term harm. It is still difficult for me to walk. The same thing has happened to other women.

— Anuak woman describing an attack near Gok Dipatch, early 2004

It was late in the afternoon and we ran into the military by accident. They just shot him [Ojulu Ochala] without asking any questions. . . . After he was shot, he fell down and then we ran. . . . They ordered the old men to throw him away without burying him. So they did this, they threw him in the bush somewhat far from the village . . . but then after the solders left they buried him.

— Anuak man describing an attack near Okuna Pino, October 2004

All quotes are from interviews done in Gambella, Ethiopia, or Ruiru, Kenya, late 2004.

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