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Anuak Displacement and Ethiopian Resettlement

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The Anuak are a tribal minority living as agriculturalists in the fertile Gambella region of southwest Ethiopia. In the Abyssinian Empire, many Anuak were made slaves and were taken to Addis Ababa and other towns where they worked as domestic servants and carriers. When the area came under British rule in the early twentieth century, slavery was abolished, but was restored when Gambella was ceded to Ethiopia after World War II. Even during the "free" period, however, many Anuak were still kept as slaves or born as slaves in other parts of Ethiopia. Although slavery is illegal in Ethiopia today, many Anuak claim that they are still treated as inferiors and that their condition has deteriorated over the past few years.

The rich lands of the Anuak were for the Ethiopian government's large-scale agricultural project. Plans to develop the region were first outlined under the direction of the United States, but the final proposal was submitted to the European Economic Commission, which signed an agreement in 1978. At the end of 1980, following a formal protest to the EEC by the Anti-Slavery Society, the EEC suddenly announced that it had been requested by the Ethiopian government to transfer the funds allocated to the Baro scheme to another project.

The project calls for clearing land, constructing dams and fences (to bar elephants and other animals from agricultural lands) and, most significantly, for the displacement of the Anuak people from their lands and the resettlement of the area by the Ethiopian government.

Importing settlers - mainly from the Wollo, Shoa (Central Ethiopia) and Tigray (northeast Ethiopia) provinces - into Gambella constitutes part of the government's plan to move a quarter of a million settlers into southern Ethiopia (Gambella).

**The Eviction of the Anuak**

After clearing their lands at the end of the harvest, many Anuak had their lands seized by the government and their animals appropriated for food for the army. Landless and destitute, many Anuak fled to the bush, trying to make their way to Sudan. Having driven the Anuak from their lands, the Ethiopian government is not willing to permit them easy access to Sudan. Their movement within Ethiopia is obstructed by the government's internal permit system, which prohibits movement from one village to another. Many Anuak have been killed in their attempts to reach Sudan; others have been bombed by Ethiopian planes as they seek shelter in the bush.

As an example, on 7 July 1979, Ethiopian helicopter gunships killed 10 refugees as they attempted to cross the border. Another group, caught on the bridge spanning the Baro River, was pushed into the water; only a handful escaped drowning, and Sudanese police confirmed that three more were shot just as they reached Sudanese soil. Later the same day, a pitched battle took place between Anuak fleeing to Sudan and the police near the Ethiopian village of Qodgur, leaving 27 Anuak and three Ethiopians dead.

In addition to government efforts to evict the Anuak from their lands, there have been attempts to draft the Anuak into the Ethiopian army. Raids for "recruits" usually take place at night: armed Kebele guards and security police search the peasants' huts for male occupants and herd them away. Anuak recruits do not receive medical treatment, compensation or pensions. The Anuak now resist conscription with whatever weapons they have at their disposal. They say they will not fight unknown enemies who have done them no personal harm.

The Anuak want political autonomy and the right to decide their affairs. These sentiments have led to further repression by the Ethiopian government. The government suspects the loyalty of most of the populations living near the Sudanese border, especially groups traditionally residing in both countries. The government is therefore determined to replace these groups with loyal Amhara, the ruling-class group in Ethiopia. Thus, what is happening to the Anuak could happen to other border groups.

Anuak cannot survive out of their lands, and the government has no plans to resettle them elsewhere in the country. The total Anuak population today is half of what it was a generation ago.

### Ethiopia's Policy of Genocide

In October 1985, the Ethiopian government reported that 17,553 heads of families from Tigray and been resettled to unoccupied, "virgin," fertile lands in the Gambella region of Illubabor Province, in the extreme southwest of Ethiopia. The fact that these lands are the traditional homelands of the Gambella people was not mentioned in the government announcement, nor has it been a major source of contention in the debate currently being waged in the media and among relief agencies over the use of resettlement as a form of famine rehabilitation in Ethiopia.

The Nilotic Anuak people, who numbered 30,000-40,000 in 1958, have seen their population rapidly dwindle under the present Ethiopian government. Today, with an influx of tens of thousands of highland Ethiopians into Gambella, the Anuak are a minority in their own lands. Since Cultural Survival first reported on the seizure of Anuak lands for settlement in 1981, this process has accelerated. Gambella people consider the resettlement program part of a deliberate campaign by the Ethiopian government to exterminate the Anuak people.

Unlike other Ethiopian indigenous groups, the Anuak have little constituency abroad. Thus, not surprisingly, the alleged decimation of the Anuak people has received almost

no public attention. However, in light of Col. Mengistu's recent public promise to resume and step up resettlement operations in Ethiopia, the current status of the Anuak people in Ethiopia and of Anuak refugees in Sudan must be examined. Certainly, the Anuak in Sudan are in no position to protest or publicize the expropriation of their homelands and destruction of their way of life in Gambella.

In 1984 Cultural Survival declared that the Anuak of Gambella were an endangered people. As warfare intensifies and the resettlement program accelerates, the rate of death, displacement and expulsion of Anuak people will increase. The Ethiopian government's present actions toward the Anuak, as these refugees reported, is consistent with journalist Peter Niggli's belief that the Dergue, the ruling Ethiopian military junta, is attempting to break the autonomy and self-allegiance of tribal minorities in Ethiopia in order to create a collectivized and homogenized peasant sector that is dependent for survival on a mono-ethnic central government, and, therefore, controllable. Such dependence facilitates military conscription and the extraction of taxes and agricultural surpluses, which are exchanged for military hardware to further these ends.

Genocide is conducted against the Anuak people in Ethiopia by several means: (1) by dispossessing them of their lands through the resettlement program; (2) by undermining their resource base through destroying their agricultural fields, prohibiting hunting and, possibly, by ecologically degrading the Gambella area; (3) through attempts to interbreed them with northern Ethiopians in integrated settlements; (4) by destroying their traditional way of life through confiscating domestic animals and such accouterments as marriage beads; and (5) by using them as cannon fodder in the various civil wars.

#### Resettlements Destroy Anuak Lands

The Gambella region in Illubabor Province probably contains the largest remaining intact forest in Ethiopia. Annually, it receives over 1,200 mm of precipitation. The region is watered by the Gilo, Baro and Akobo rivers, tributaries of the White Nile. It is along these rivers that the Anuak people live, farm and fish.

Gambella soils are touted for their great fertility, providing the Dergue with the ecological excuse it needs to help persuade Western relief agencies that massive relocation of highland farmers is a reasonable idea—at least in principle. Most Anuak farmers can harvest two bountiful crops of maize and sorghum each year, using the rich alluvium deposited after the floods.

However, it is doubtful that such fertile land exists within the non-alluvial soils underlying the surrounding forests, which have become the site for the new settlement farms. The soils of lowland tropical forests are, as a rule, rarely good for cereal cropping.

#### Death, Disappearance and Interbreeding

The Ethiopian government forces Anuak off their lands and out of their houses as well. In 1984, Anuak residents were ordered to evacuate two neighborhoods in Gambella called

Betourhe and Ajumara. The government then bulldozed at least 200 huts in order to build new houses for Soviet specialists sent to work on a dam and irrigation scheme, a project that the Anuak residents considered of no benefit to them. Gambella people are also being forced to give up or build living quarters for the influx of resettlers to their lands.

In 1985, schools in Gambella were closed so that students and teachers could cut grass and wood and erect huts in the camp. This decree especially angered the Anuak, who place a high value on education and still bitterly resent the expulsion of their US missionary teachers and what they see as the systematic exclusion of Anuak graduates from higher education opportunities. They believe that corrupt practices in the evaluation of national qualifying exams have barred Anuak and many other tribal minorities from entrance to university study in Addis Ababa and abroad.

Following expulsion from their lands or homes, Anuak must either move to unoccupied land and try to farm or flee as refugees to Sudan. Since the Anuak population spans both sides of the Ethiopian-Sudanese border (about 25 percent live in Sudan), it is impossible to estimate the rate of flight from Gambella. In addition, Anuak refugees from Ethiopia are scattered throughout the Sudanese areas of Damazine, Gedref, Khartoum and Malakal - many passing themselves off as Sudanese. However, the ongoing influx of tens of thousands of resettlers into the Gambella region and the resultant massive clearing of forested land has undoubtedly made internal movement more difficult.

As even more settlers move into the Gambella region, the resource base will be further diminished. Of particular concern are the populations of the many species of fish in the rivers, a major protein source for the Anuak. As the surrounding forests are indiscriminately felled to make way for vast agricultural projects, the entire hydrologic cycle of the region may be altered; certainly the silt load these rivers carry will increase.

The Ethiopian government has also devised various policies that deny the Anuak access to their remaining resources. Hunting, another major source of food, has either been outlawed or made more difficult by the confiscation of weapons. Domesticated animals, such as zebras, have been seized from Anuak farmers who are told they needed for zoos in Addis Ababa.

The flight of the Anuak into Sudan transforms skilled, productive people into destitute, unemployed refugees in a nation already burdened with the same. In addition, their disappearance has devastating social and psychological impacts on the members of the Anuak community who remain in Gambella.

Agricultural work along the riverbanks is labor intensive: plowing, planting and cultivation, which are done manually, require cooperative work. Anuak villages are thus divided into elaborately organized social groups, called Wimach, which function similar to an extended family and to which each farmer belongs. Personal disputes and decisions of all kinds are resolved democratically within Wimachs. Thus, the very fabric of Anuak life is torn apart as its members flee.

In a 1985 report, Cultural Survival documented the ways in which the Dergue has outlawed Anuak customs and attempted to impoverish the people through taxation and Peasant Association abuses. Since then, integrated settlements have become another means by which the Dergue achieves these ends. According to the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission of the Ethiopian government, the idea behind this scheme is to insert settlers into preexisting communities whose peasant associations lack the necessary labor force. However, the indigenous people as well as the settlers are uprooted forcibly in the creation of these societies.

In 1984, evictions took place at Ukuna Kejung in the Abobo district in an attempt to move these Anuak into the integrated settlements in the southern half of Illubabor. When the Anuak refused to leave and continued to sow their crops in the traditional way, the government brought in tractors and plowed the riverbank crops under in an attempt to starve out the Anuak. These same tactics are used to induce Anuaks to move to the state farms. In both cases, the Anuak fled the area.

One of the real reasons for these integrated settlements is to intermarry the Nilotic Anuak people with the lighter-skinned highlanders ("those brown Abash people"), thus breeding the Anuak out of existence. They rightly consider this a form of genocide.

#### Conscription Continues at a High Rate

Conscription of Gambella men into the Ethiopian army continues at a high rate. Daughters, too, are sometimes taken from their homes for mandatory service in military bands. The removal of young, vigorous members of the community is often permanent. War casualties are high and those men who do return are often maimed or crippled and unable to farm.

Conscription is probably the major cause of refugee flight among young Anuak men. "Recruitment," as described earlier, often takes place in the middle of the night or while students are attending classes at the secondary school in Gambella. Refusal to join the army results in a two-year prison sentence.

In 1985, army officers came into a classroom in Gambella and registered the names of the biggest and strongest boys. The school director, an Amhara described as a "cruel man," cooperated with and facilitated this process. Those selected were taken to the hospital for medical checkups and ordered not to leave town. The following morning they were to be taken to a military camp. Remembering brothers and friends who had been forcibly conscripted into the army and had never returned from battles in Eritrea and Tigray, some chose to refuse conscription and fled to Sudan. Others fled because they sympathized with the Gambella People's Liberation Movement (GPLM) and other revolutionary movements opposed to the Dergue. Those who decide to head for Sudan often simply disappear into the forest; they do not inform their families of their plans for fear their parents will suffer retribution at the hands of the Dergue authorities.

The miserable conditions under which Anuak refugees live in the Sudan have prevented them from speaking out about events in their homeland. Thus, the false assertion that Ethiopia's highland farmers are being resettled onto fertile, unoccupied land continues unchallenged. Meanwhile, the impoverishment, dispossession and gradual elimination of people continues unabated.

### Current Situation in Sudan

Anuak refugees who journey through the dense jungles between Gambella and Sudan, enduring hunger and thirst and attacks by wild animals, walk into a war zone on the other side of the border. The greatest danger they face on their way to Sudan is of being suspected by the Sudanese military of collaborating with the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Association (SPLA), whose fighters are members of other Nilotic tribal groups. Since Anuak are black skinned like the southern Sudanese, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Commissioner of Refugees in Sudan (COR) and humanitarian organizations consider them to be Sudanese, not refugees.

In 1979, Anuak who had migrated to Sudan were settled in the upper Nile region of southern Sudan. These refugees were living together in poor neighborhoods in Galacial. Since they were not recognized by the UNHCR and other agencies, they did not receive medical care, sufficient food, shelter or clothing. Reluctant to reveal the extent of their poverty, many still acknowledge that they are often hungry. These people are now suffering from disease and none have sufficient clothing, bedding or shelter in the refugee resettlement area called Suki.

### An Endangered People

The future of the Anuak is in serious doubt. Those who have been forced to leave their villages near the rivers are eking out marginal existences in the forests and inaccessible areas. There is a shortage of men as a result of the killings, recruitment to the militia and the flight of many either to the GPLM or to Sudan as refugees.

The Anuak are, however, a tenacious people who have kept their language and customs alive in the face of extreme hardship and pressure over the years. This tenacity, coupled with their ability to hunt, fish and live off the land, may help them survive. The Anuak in Ethiopia must, however, be regarded as an endangered people.

Further investigation into the case of the Anuak, protection of Anuak refugees and direct assistance to the Anuak people in Sudan is needed if their tragic situation is to be checked and reversed. If nothing else, the direct testimony of Anuak refugees fleeing from Gambella represents one of their only sources of information about what is happening in resettlement camp areas that are off limits to foreign nationals, where, according to Sandra Steingraber, the "fate of hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian people is being played out in a human experiment of enormous proportions."

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