

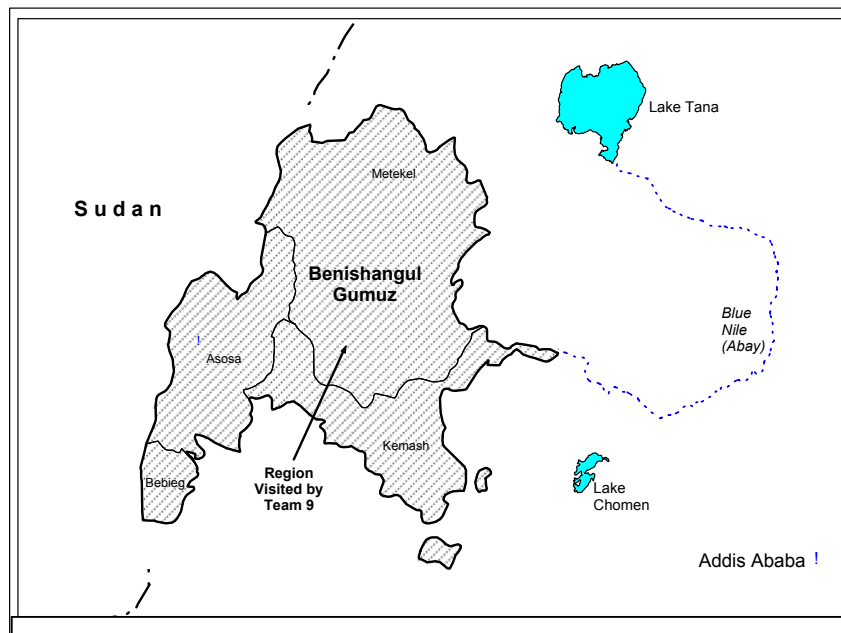
Benishangul - Gumuz Situation Report: 21 - 25 October 1996

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1. Introduction and Objective

The 1996 *Meher* Season Pre-Harvest Crop Assessment was launched by the central Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC) in mid-October. While in previous years the assessment teams were mainly composed of members from line ministries and regional authorities, this year the participation of NGOs and donor representatives was encouraged. Being part of a series of inter-agency activities, this year's joint assessment was carried out to "improve the accuracy of food needs estimation in Ethiopia", and to make a provisional estimate of food assistance requirements for the 1997 calendar year.

Starting from 12 October, the DPPC sent a total of 10 teams to the regions of the country. Team 9 was assigned to cover the two regions of Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz. Having limited resources in field personnel to join in for the full assessment period of one month and having been recently to Gambella (see: "Gambella Report - Gambella People's Regional State: Flood Assessment, 22 - 27 September 1996") the UNDP Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia (EUE) decided to join this team as a temporary observer in Asosa, capital of Benishangul-Gumuz Region.



The objective of EUE in joining this mission was two-fold: to support the DPPC field team in its efforts to gather information in the framework of the pre-harvest crop assessment and,

secondly, to get a quick overall impression on the current situation in Benishangul-Gumuz, a peripheral border region at the western edge of the country which is seldom visited by international agencies. Moreover, no international agencies or NGOs are permanently present in Asosa according to local information, while in Metekel, an area in the Northern (Gumuz) part of the region, the Italian International Committee for the Development of People (CISP - Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli) and German Agro Action are active. However, CISP is planning to open a small office in Asosa in the near future in connection with a community based water project.

2. Population and Economy

Approaching Bambesi, the first major Benishangul-Gumuz town on the Gimbi-Asosa road, one does not get the impression of being in one of Ethiopia's remote border regions: Amhara people driving their cattle alongside the dusty gravel remind one of Welo. And indeed, as local authorities confirm later on, the area has a significant amount of settlers from Wollo. A similar picture is given in Asosa, the regional capital, where people from Amhara and Oromia regions predominate (by 67%, according to the 1994 census). The indigenous nilotic people such as Gumuz, Berta, Komo, Mao and Shinasha settle mainly in the rural areas and a number of them are still pursuing a nomadic lifestyle, which makes it difficult to assess the absolute population figures.

The 1994 Census gives a total population figure of 460,459 people (urban and rural) for the entire region, with a breakdown of 233,013 males and 227,466 females. The predominantly rural character of the region is reflected in another breakdown giving the total urban population as 36,027 while more than 90% are categorised as rural. Regional officials doubt these official census figures and estimate the region's total population at 3.5 million.

The region is divided into three Zones: Asosa Zone (7 weredas) in the central part of the region, Kamashi Zone (5 weredas; zonal capital Kamashi) in the Southeast and Metekel Zone (7 weredas; zonal capital Pawe) in the North. Updated maps showing the current boundaries of the region are not yet available. According to the 1994 Census the major ethnic groups in the region include:

<i>Group</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Jablawi	26.7%
Gumuz	23.4%
Amhara	22.2%
Oromo	12.8%
Shinasha	6.9%
Other ethnic groups	8.0% combined

The religious composition of the population is:

Muslim	44.1%
Orthodox Christians	34.8%
Traditional religions	13.1%
Protestants	5.9%

No information was available in the census data on the remaining 2.1 percent.

Among those aged 10 years and above literacy reaches 18% only while urban literacy was found to be 61% and rural literacy 14%.

Average life expectancy for the whole population is given to be 46.8 years, infant mortality 139 deaths per 1000 births, while 3.4 is given as the total fertility rate for the entire region. To conclude the excerpts of the census data are some figures illustrating the regions level of

development: Out of the total number of residential housing units about 20% have toilets, and in the entire region 11.6% of the population have radio sets while out of the urban households 0.9% have television sets and 1.6% have a telephone.

The economic activities in the region are predominantly agricultural with livestock being of limited importance. While maize and sorghum are the main crops, some teff is grown in higher areas, with sesame, haricot beans, noog (oil seed plant) being among other important crops. At the time of the mission's visit, the DPPC *meher* season pre-harvest crop assessment team had started to gather some production information at the zonal level. According to that information Asosa Zone expects this year a higher yield as compared to last year's production. Rainfall patterns were satisfying and no major pests except for stalkborer and termites were reported. However, the overall regional assessment is not yet concluded and results can be expected after finalisation and publication by the DPPC. Interesting to note in this context might be some information provided by the Ethiopian News Agency (ENA), published in the "Ethiopian Herald" 29 October 1996: Quoting the regional agricultural bureau the article states, that there is "a high crop wastage" in the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State. This was mainly due to "lack of control to curb crop infestation" and furthermore to "failure to properly stock" the grain. According to that information apparently 15 to 20% of crops get damaged "as peasants lack the tradition of spraying pesticides", while 30% of crops stored in mud silos got damaged by mice and insects.

Besides agriculture other means of livelihood, although to a minor extent, are trade and traditional gold-washing in some rivers. The operational status of a large gold mine in the region was unclear at the time of the mission's visit. Equally, no major economic activities of industrial scale were reported during the visit in Asosa, although the newspaper "Monitor" carried in its 26-27 October edition a story indicating, that two private companies had started work on major scale gum production in Benishangul-Gumuz (in Asosa and Metekel zones).

3. Access and Related Issues

Movements in Asosa zone are somewhat restricted at present. Affected at present are mainly the weredas of Asosa, Kumruk, Menge, Sherkole and the Special Wereda of Begi-Tongo. Due to the situation in these areas near the border area, a total number of 10,432 people are displaced and getting relief assistance from the DPPC.

Three factors are leading to the volatile situation in Asosa Zone and, to a lesser extent, in Kamashi Zone. The main factor appears to be banditry which seems to prevail mainly in the weredas west of Asosa town, along the Sudanese border. According to information obtained locally the population mainly face dangers emanating from ordinary *shifita* (bandit) activities. The mission was informed by local officials that many of the bandits are former Derg Government officials still hiding in the bush, while others seem to be composed of ex-officials of the current regional government, who were dismissed from their posts. For instance a major clean-up among regional government officials took place in June this year when the regional council "sacked seven bureaux and department heads on the grounds of embezzlement and inefficiency", as the "Ethiopian Herald" reported in its 4 July 1996 edition. According to local information the "combined groups of *shiftas*" (Ex-Derg and dismissed government officials) are not only behaving as common robbers but pursuing a revengeful scorched earth policy, killing almost the entire population of villages attacked, burning down the villages and fields thereafter. The latest such incident reportedly took place in September.

The two other factors, although apparently of minor magnitude, adding to the security risks are cross border movements of the Sudanese civil war parties and a simmering tribal conflict between the Gumuz and Berta, which was basically settled two years ago but in some areas may still have some minor repercussions up to date.

4. Logistic Constraints

Benishangul-Gumuz suffers from inadequate infrastructure and logistic constraints in terms of transportation and communication. The capital Asosa, having an airstrip which is served by Ethiopian Airlines from Addis Ababa three times a week, is accessible by vehicle only on a dead end road. Although the road continues theoretically to Kurmuk near the Sudanese border, travel is discouraged for safety reasons. The road north of Asosa is therefore usable only as far as Komosha and Mege. Some years ago there used to be a motorable track leading northeast linking Asosa with Guba in Gumuz/Metekel in the northern part of the region. Presently the road is, according to local information, non-existent. Plans to (re-)construct the road exist, but no budget and therefore no timing is given. This means, in order to reach the Metekel zonal capital of Pawe from Asosa, one has to drive a long detour through Gimbi, Nekemte (Wollega), Bure (Gojam) and Chagni.

The zonal capital Kamashi is not easy to reach by road either. Located some 29 kilometres north of Mekenejo-junction on the Gimbi-Asosa road, there is a turn-off eastwards to Kamashi a distance of only 32 kilometers but a trip of 2-3 hours. Given the poor road connections between the zones of the region, it is easy to imagine the problems in traveling from one wereda to another. Off the roads mentioned above, the common means of traveling in the region is by foot or by donkey.

In terms of telecommunication the region faces a lack of infrastructure. As the mission was told, while there is a telephone line linking Asosa with Nekemte and Addis Ababa, telephone connections within the region are non-existent. The regional bureau of the DPPC does not have a operational radio-communication system either. There used to be such a radio connection with Pawe some months ago, but since the unit broke down due the the lack of maintenance and spare parts, silence reigns the air.

The limited development of infrastructure is as well reflected in the region's health care system. There are two hospitals in the region - one each in Asosa and Metekel zone - in addition to some health centers and clinics. A doctor working with the regional Bureau of Health, however, pointed out a lack of specialist doctors, professional medical personnel, lack of medical equipment and a shortage of medicine.

5. DPPC on Difficult Ground

Given the logistical and safety constraints affecting everybody in the region, one can imagine the obstacles facing the work of the Regional Bureau of the DPPC. To transport relief goods the Bureau has four short haul truck at its disposal but they are operational only to a limited extent due to the lack of spare parts and maintenance. For field assessments there are three motorcycles (one for each zone) but no 4WD vehicles at all. Reports from the kebeles and the weredas are therefore mainly forwarded by messengers who travel on foot or by donkey, which means most reports are outdated by the time of arrival in Asosa. As mentioned above, no radio communication is available.

The regional DPPC also feel there is a lack of understanding at most levels regarding the importance of implementing the national policy of Disaster Prevention and Preparedness. This lack of understanding appears even to include the regional line departments. As the mission was told, the line departments have altogether eight new field vehicles at their disposal. But even for the current DPPC pre-harvest survey they were not prepared to contribute a car. Nor was for instance the Bureau of Agriculture in the position to appoint one of its officials to accompany the visiting DPPC team.

Although all zones and weredas have early warning committees, there seems to be a lack of awareness about the concept of Disaster Prevention and Preparedness. Much needs to be done in terms of capacity building since many officials don't give enough consideration to what early warning is about. This leads, according to officials from the Regional DPPC Bureau, to "inefficiency, discrepancies and erroneous decisions". Moreover, information material (guidelines) sent to the region and then forwarded to the zones and weredas were so far available in English only - not in local languages.

Against this extremely difficult background the regional DPPC is this year providing relief assistance to 29,000 beneficiaries, out of which 6000 in the Metekel zone (Gumuz) are drought victims, whereas the rest are people displaced in the other two zones. These displaced people are not living in special shelters or camps but are, according to local tradition, accommodated by relatives privately. While the regional DPPC was allocated a total of 4,495 tons of grain to carry out its relief assistance, 1,480 tons were actually received and transported to the region's two main storage facilities in Asosa and Pawe. But due to the logistic constraints and inadequate storage facilities at wereda level, only a minor amount of that relief food was actually distributed to beneficiaries.

There is also, due to the lack of communication, some uncertainty about the actual situation in some weredas - such as Tongo Special Wereda (allegedly ethnic conflict), certain weredas in Kamashi zone (possibly floods have damaged crops) and Pawe Special Wereda (unknown number of hectares devastated by wind). Depending on later findings regarding those areas, the number of people in need of assistance might increase.

6. Conclusion

As the descriptions above make evident, there is clearly a lack of infrastructure in the Region of Benishangul-Gumuz. Although in the capital Asosa the mission obtained the impression that while the basic needs could be met, the suggestion was noted that perhaps donors could look into funding the badly needed road northeast out of Asosa, which would effectively link the Benishangul with the Gumuz part of the region. Moreover, it is recommended that efforts are made to increase the general awareness of the importance of the National Policy on Disaster Prevention and Preparedness, to raise capacity building and to improve the cooperation between the line departments and the DPPC.

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