

Gambella Floods Report

Gambella People's Regional State: Air Survey , 2 August 1996

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1. Introduction/Objective

Since June 1996 continuous heavy rains in the highlands of central Ethiopia caused the Gilo, Baro and Akobo rivers in Gambella People's Regional State (Region 12) to overflow, flooding some 35 villages and numerous corn fields in that area. The Central Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC) dealt with the situation by sending relief goods (food and non-food items). Although the flood situation - which had affected an estimated number of 23,000 people with reportedly 16 persons killed by the end of June - was considered to be within capacities of the national authorities, the continuation of the rains gave reason for concern and further close monitoring.

Moreover, during the month of July reports from South Sudan indicated that the overflow of the Akobo river (which forms the border between Ethiopia and Sudan along the southern and south-western boundaries of Gambella Region) had caused heavy floods in the Sudanese region of Pochalla (north of the Sudanese town of Wunshaiye). Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) France/Switzerland sent a team out of Nairobi (Kenya) to the Pochalla area (which is controlled since March 1996 by the SPLA - Sudan People's Liberation Army) to deal with a very serious emergency situation affecting an estimated 40,000 Anuak people, with initially no possibilities of OLS (Operation Lifeline Sudan) to intervene due to the denial of air access by the Khartoum Government. Meanwhile DHA Geneva stated in its "Information Report No. 1" on "Sudan - Floods" (12 August, 1996) that a Needs Assessment Team from Operation Lifeline Sudan is currently in Pochalla and that starting 13 August OLS begins relief operations to provide food and medical supplies. (Preliminary estimate indicates relief needs to be food, fishing equipment, shelter materials and medicines.)

In order to investigate a possible expansion of the Akobo floods into the Ethiopian side of that area - and as well considering the general situation in the region (as mentioned in the paragraph above) - MSF-Belgium Ethiopia took initiative to launch an aerial survey to Gambella People's Regional State, inviting representatives from other agencies, including the UNDP's Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia (EUE), to participate in the mission.

The objective of the mission was to conduct an aerial survey of the three main target areas (Akobo, Gilo, Baro) in order to declare or to rule out a flood related major emergency situation in Gambella Region. It has to be noted that the team, using a MSF-chartered light aircraft ("Cessna Caravan"), spent two hours flying time over the target areas (while total flying time out of Addis Ababa and back was nearly seven hours, including one refueling stop in Jimma) without the possibility of landing in the target zones. Flying at an average altitude of 1,900 meters above ground and trying to stay clear of the Ethiopian-Sudanese border, it became evident that the mission could deliver general findings without having the opportunity to assess humanitarian conditions on the ground. Furthermore, it should be noted that at times even with the help of accompanying Gambella officials and the pilot's maps and instruments it

was extremely difficult to determine the exact position and the corresponding names of locations. Adding to this difficulty was the fact that due to rains in the highlands numerous tributary rivers appeared in the landscape - these are tributaries to which no maps have assigned names.

The mission took place on 2 August, 1996 and covered the Zones of Gog/Jor, Akobo and Jikawo in Gambella People's Regional State (Region 12).

The missions participants were:

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John Bridle	MSF-Belgium
Joachim D. Ahrens	UNDP-EUE
John Jock Chol	Anglican Church, Pochalla, Sudan
Tesfaye Risso	RRC (DPPC) Gambella
Kan Gaiwak	Ministry of Health, Gambella
Mulubrhan Seifu	Information Officer, Regional Council, Gambella

2. Aerial assessment

Taking off from Gambella airport, where the Addis group was welcomed by Okelo Oman, President of Gambella Region, and joined by regional officials (see participants above), the team headed southbound to meet the Akobo river at a location south of Pochalla while keeping strictly to the Ethiopian side of the area. Crossing the Gilo river west of the towns of Gog and Pugnido, no serious flooding was seen from the air and the track road leading to that area from Gambella appeared to be in acceptable condition. Reaching the Akobo, the picture changed dramatically with the river (which forms the border between Ethiopia and Sudan) overflowing into both countries. Besides the heavy rains in the highlands, a second cause for the floods seems to be plugs of hyacinth water plants, which had at places clogged the Akobo and Oboth rivers (the latter being in Sudanese territory) and which had been suddenly washed away by the increased flow of the rivers. The mass of water previously retained then overflowed the river banks. However, on the Ethiopian side no flood damage could be identified since the respective area appeared - if at all - very sparsely populated. Neither could the team identify any agricultural land (with the exception of grazing land perhaps) to be affected by the floods on the Ethiopian side. Continuing the exploration by following the Akobo in a Northwest direction, members of the team were able to spot, at a distance, the flooding of Pochalla area (Sudan), with waters covering a respectable area at a location with GPS coordinates N 07° 10. 50' by E 34° 05. 00'. Again, in terms of population and agriculture there seemed to be no significant reason for concern for the Ethiopian side of that area. Moreover, from flying altitude the team got the impression that the floods had already passed their peak and waters were receding in some places.

After having explored the area near Pochalla, the team's aircraft followed for a short while the course of the Akobo further downstream, viewing a river more or less restricting itself to its original flow, to turn then north/north-west in order to meet and follow the Gilo river. Despite some pocket floods along an eight kilometre stretch from N 7° 36. 96' by E 34° 06. 94', the villages spotted in that area appeared to be unaffected, as they were located on elevated ground and therefore quite safe from the low level floods. However, the accompanying Gambella officials expressed concern about the possibly evolving situation in case the floods should increase. Further west the Gilo appeared to confine itself to its banks.

Crossing Gambella Region diagonally in a Northwest direction - flying over dry, green, sparsely populated land - the team reached the area of Adura, where again no reason for concern was observed. Then, turning east in order to get back to Gambella, reaching the Baro

river, numerous villages in the area between Jikawo and Teylut could be seen. The most affected areas were about 20 minutes flying time west of Gambella at N 8° 15. 80' by E 33° 52. 69'. Some two dozen of villages were flooded, with the water reaching half way up the Tukul walls. The team's impression was that most of the settlements had been abandoned by their inhabitants. From the plane only one person was seen walking on an elevated path. This particular area is part of a number of localities affected by floods that occurred earlier in June.

3. DPPC Findings and Actions

In an Inter-office Memorandum (dated 24 June) the Early Warning Department of the Central DPPC stated that continuous rain, which had started on 6 June, had caused the Gilo and Akobo rivers to overflow, flooding 35 villages and corn fields on both sides of the rivers. Up to then, reportedly 16 people had been killed while a total number of 23,000 people were reported to have been affected, and a total of 17,125 people had been identified as "highly affected." As an emergency response, the DPPC sent 50 MT of grain to the region, planning furthermore to send supplementary food, clothing, utensils and plastic sheets. However, it was stated that the Region was facing serious transport and distribution problems (lack of boats and helicopters).

On 11 July, the Gambella Bureau of the DPPC sent a report to the Central DPPC in Addis Ababa stating that in the Jikawo area around 8,000 people were affected, while in Gog Jinjer 17,000 were affected by floods; 7,500 people were affected in Dimma (where reportedly another four people had died). Loss of livestock and property was reported from various areas. At that point the Gambella Bureau of the DPPC requested further support with food, medicine, shelter materials, clothes and utensils.

This request was pointed out again and addressed to the mission participants from Addis Ababa during the aerial assessment on 2 August. Moreover, the Gambella officials stressed the dire need for adequate means of transport. Gambella currently has only one motorboat with the capacity of carrying only 1 mt of material. For this reason, they said, they had been unable to distribute all the relief items sent earlier by the DPPC. The Regional Representative of the DPPC emphasised that at least five heavy duty motorboats would be required and helicopter support would be desirable, especially in view of further relief goods expected to arrive (as announced by the central DPPC at the end of July).

Furthermore, the Gambella officials stated that in addition to the Baro and Gilo rivers the Bonga river was starting to give reason for concern. While in Itang (5,000) and Lare (2,000) displaced people were being accommodated, the representative of the regional Ministry of Health mentioned only minor health problems with no epidemics being reported. The Gambella officials generally agreed that the current situation in their region lies within national handling capacities. Observing an increasing tendency of floods and a corresponding rise in the number of affected people, serious concern for the near future was expressed by the local officials.

In response to the general situation in the region, and in order to meet regional concerns, the Central DPPC in Addis Ababa decided on 5 August to preposition, as a matter of preparedness, a contingency reserve of 600 mt of food, 2,000 blankets, 6,000 pieces of used clothes, 60 rolls of plastic sheets and household utensils. Moreover, the DPPC is currently conducting a one to two week ground mission (which started on 8 August) to the Gambella Region for detailed assessment. The prepositioned relief goods, now stored in Gambella town, would be distributed based on the findings of this ground mission.

4. Conclusions

Overall, the aerial assessment conducted on 2 August gave the impression that a major emergency situation requiring an international appeal can be ruled out for the time being. However, while the areas visited along the Akobo and Gilo rivers appeared to be only moderately affected by floods, there is reason for concern regarding the Jikawo area along the Baro river.

The circumstances of the aerial mission permitted only a brief and very general overview. Detailed follow-up assessments can therefore be recommended. In this context, the effort of the Central DPPC (the ground mission planned to start 8 August) must be highly appreciated, since further close monitoring is imperative. Moreover, we support the suggestion of MSF Belgium that another aerial survey be conducted in the second half of August (preferably with a helicopter which would allow landing where appropriate). It is expected that the imminent DPPC mission would provide the assessment details badly needed to recommend further steps. In establishing local disaster preparedness, however, it would be welcomed if the national authorities could look into possibilities of improving transportation means and distribution in Gambella Region.

NOTE

Traveling back to Addis Ababa, the team observed heavy flooding in the Gefersa lake area (ten minutes flying time west of the capital), where numerous fields are inundated, and the Jimma Road, built on an embankment, seems to be in danger of being damaged. A brief ground assessment of that situation is recommended.

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