

Gambella Report Gambella People's Regional State: Flood Assessment 22 - 27 September 1996

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1. Introduction and Objective

The long rainy season in the Ethiopian highlands brought this year a great amount of water causing rivers to swell and to flood certain areas in different parts of the country. In Gambella People's Regional State (Region 12), which is situated in the Southwest of Ethiopia bordering Sudan and mainly populated by lowland indigenous people (Anuak, Nuer and others), the Gilo, Baro and Akobo rivers started to overflow in June due to continuous heavy rains in the central highlands. Areas along those rivers, particularly Jikawo wereda along the Baro, were affected by floods to various degrees at various times.

While the central Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC) responded to the needs of the affected population (23,000 by the end of June 1996) and continuously monitored the situation on the ground, the UNDP Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia (EUE) carried out a joint air survey with Médecins Sans Frontières (Belgium). The 2 August aerial assessment, using a light aircraft, and therefore without the possibility of landing in the target areas, was summarised in the EUE report: "*Gambella Floods Report - Gambella People's Regional State: Air Survey, 2 August 1996*" (report updated as of 14 August 1996) and ruled out "a major emergency situation requiring an international appeal". The report, however, emphasised that the Baro river (particularly in the Jikawo area) would continue to give reason for concern.

The objective of the latest mission, undertaken 22 to 27 September 1996, was therefore to mainly re-assess the flood situation in Gambella People's Regional State and obtain a comparison to the situation found during the aerial survey. Traveling by car, it was planned to visit, in addition to the regional capital town of Gambella, the weredas of Itang and Jikawo along the Baro river, and Gog and Jor along the Gilo river. Moreover, it was intended to gather updated information on the present movement of refugees from Sudan into the region. While EUE carried out this mission alone (the previous missions partner was unable to participate due to a shortage of field personnel), we were supported and accompanied in the field by the Regional Bureau of the DPPC (Ogud Ajak Ojuwato, Deputy Commissioner; Ibrahim Mifta, Early Warning Officer) and the Administration of Gambella Region (Ato Paldouol, Social Affairs).

2. Field visit to Itang

The wereda of Itang has a population of 33,609 (16,853 male, 16,756 female) while the town of Itang has a population of 3,649 (2038 male, 1611 female). The wereda administration, which provided the aforementioned figures during the missions field visit, also stated that the population, being mainly Protestants, consists of 75 % Anuak with a remaining population of Nuer people. Livelihood is predominantly determined by agriculture (maize and sorghum), while fishery and, to a minor extent, pastoralist activities are also pursued.

Itang town is located on the banks of the Baro river at a road distance of 53 kilometres west of Gambella town. Access through a track following the Baro on its northern side is particularly difficult during the rainy season allowing passage by 4WD vehicles and short-haul trucks only. Even these vehicles are facing the risk of getting stuck in one of the many mud pools on the way. A traveling time of two hours to cover the 53 kilometres can be considered as expeditious. Details are elaborated on at this point in order to illustrate the logistic constraints (more on this below), when it comes to deliver (relief) goods or to launch assessment missions to the area.

The mission visited Itang town on 24 September 1996, and walked extensively around the area accompanied by regional and wereda officials (the latter led by the Itang wereda council President Obang Oriami). The overall picture presented a situation where, at the time of the visit, the floods were clearly receding and local residents busy draining their tukuls (some of them positioned very near the river bank) and preparing to move back into their homes. However, considerable areas of the town and its surroundings were still found to be under water (at different levels between ankle deep and waist deep).

Around shelter facilities located just behind the wereda's administration building, where at previous peak times up to 1,500 people sought temporary refuge in, pools of stagnant water were to be noted. A similar situation was to be found in the town's market, where swampy ground, stagnant water and still flooded areas were observed with numerous houses standing in water. While the latest flood in Itang had occurred, according to local information, on 19 September, the partial recession of the waters has created hazardous sanitary conditions, particularly in the market area. Fish, some meat, vegetables and wheat (the latter at a price of 1 birr per 800 grams) were on sale in the market but no sorghum or maize was available, although both are locally cultivated staple crops. According to wereda officials, all local agricultural production was destroyed by the floods.

The mission also visited, along the northern bank of the Baro, a 1 hectare field of wetland rice production project which, given the flood frequency of the river, was an ideal agricultural location. This pilot project was initiated by the Bureau of Agriculture in June this year, and the first harvest is due in October.

The most recent flood period in Itang forced around 2,000 people out of their homes. While at the time of the visit about 100 families had returned to mud filled homes, the rest of the displaced families continued to stay with relatives and, a lesser number, at shelters set up by the administration.

Although the DPPC is adequately assisting the affected population with relief food (other quantities earmarked for Itang awaiting transport in Gambella warehouse), wereda officials were concerned about the visibly poor sanitary conditions. Particularly mentioned was the fear of malaria, dysentery caused by amoebae, gardia and typhoid. According to the regional bureau of the DPPC in Gambella, the matter is being discussed with the regional branch of the Ministry of Health.

3. Jikawo wereda

Although included in the mission's objectives, a field visit to Jikawo wereda was not possible. While road access was described by local authorities as being not feasible (poor track conditions; safety risks), transport by motorboat on the Baro river was not available at the time of the mission's visit. However, the Jikawo administrator, Tut Pal, confirmed that the wereda (population 31,000, 75 % Nuer, 25 % Anuak, mainly pastoralists), is still flooded to a significant extent. While - according to the administrator's information - 52 villages were affected by floods with displaced people mainly taking refuge in Lare, relief goods stored at Itang warehouse and earmarked by the DPPC for Jikawo were facing transport and distribution problems (lack of motorboats and short haul trucks). Regarding the health situation similar concerns as in Itang were raised.

According to a DPPC mission carried out 8 - 25 August, assistance has been granted to Jikawo until the end of October, after which the situation would be reviewed again.

4. Akobo wereda

Akobo wereda (estimated population 59,000, mainly Nuer) is accessible by air only as there are no roads and the area has security problems for boat-traffic; communication with Gambella depends on army radio operations. The wereda administrator, James Okan, who at the time of the mission was visiting Gambella, pointed out that Akobo was currently affected by the worst floods in five years with waters covering almost the entire district's surface (with the exception of Akobo town). While fishing, agriculture and livestock (one third each) represent the population's main means of income, all crops (maize and sorghum) were destroyed by floods that are expected to recede only by the end of October. The DPPC is airlifting regularly relief food (sorghum), but according to information given by the administrator, the wereda suffers from a serious shortage of household items, blankets, plastic sheets, mosquito nets, medicine, agricultural tools, while malaria is apparently affecting 90 % of the population.

5. Field Visit Pugnido

Pugnido town, formerly part of the combined wereda of Gog and Jor, has been, since July this year, the capital of Gog wereda. Updated population statistics were not available at the time of the visit. The population figure given still refers to the former twin wereda of Gog and Jor: 90,620 people - predominantly Anuak.

Pugnido, also host to a refugee camp with 43,237 inhabitants, is located 105 km south of Gambella town (travelling time 2 hours 15 minutes) on the northern bank of Gilo river. The road is fairly good and poses no problems up to Abobo and the nearby Alwero Dam, which became operational recently with a capacity of 75 million cubic metres of water to serve 10,000 hectares of land, therewith considerably increasing development possibilities in the region. However, two stretches of road between the dam and Pugnido are prone to flooding in the rainy season, making access difficult for most vehicles and impossible for long haul trucks. Furthermore, access to the settlements along the course of the Gilo river is possible only by helicopter or boat.

According to information obtained during the visit from the Gog wereda Council President, Oriami Ojulo, seven out of a total of ten kebeles in Gog were affected by floods, while in neighbouring Jor wereda all eleven kebeles were affected. In both weredas over a combined total of 15,000 people were affected along the Gilo river, and nearly all crops of maize and sorghum were destroyed. While flooding had started in June, a peak level was reached in

early July, receding slowly thereafter to reach a new high by mid-September. Assistance by the DPPC to the affected people began in early August.

The mission visited one flooded area between the southern outskirts of Pugnido town and the northern bank of the river, which itself was impossible to reach due to the lack of boats. While at this particular location, which was currently used as a bathing place by local inhabitants, only a few houses were seen flooded at a distance near the actual river, whereas the town itself was dry, being on elevated ground. Given logistic constraints faced by the team, visits to flooded villages up and downstream were not possible. According to local officials, nearly all the people who had temporarily abandoned their flooded homes had since found shelter with relatives.

The area actually seen by the mission did not give the impression of a very serious situation and was certainly not to be compared to the conditions encountered in Itang. Slowly the floods seem to recede but even so land preparation for the next season is not possible. However, while pastoralist activities are minimal, fishing all along the river represents an important source of livelihood. With the flood situation being less serious along the Gilo river than along the Baro, also health problems seem to exist to a lesser extent. Nevertheless, malaria and typhoid were mentioned as possible risks. Medical needs are currently covered by the Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA), both for the refugees and locals.

6. Gambella wereda

Flooding in Gambella wereda started on 12 July, mainly affecting agricultural activities. The latest DPPC report of 3 September states that while 298 hectares of maize had been covered by water, no houses were inundated in the wereda. However, since 1,951 households were facing food shortages, the DPPC is providing assistance up to the end of October. While in early September the Jejewe river, a tributary of the Baro river, had flooded parts of Gambella town, affecting again some 2,000 people to whom relief assistance was provided. The situation had returned to normal by the time of the mission's visit, and the overall conditions in the wereda were described by officials as being satisfactory at the present time.

7. DPPC Response and Logistic Constraints

The Central DPPC, both on its own and through its regional bureau, is regularly monitoring the flood situation in Gambella Region. As reflected both in the findings of an extensive DPPC mission to the region (8 - 25 August 1996), and in the situational analysis of the Gambella DPPC bureau, it is understood that there currently is no major emergency in the region, with floods receding in various parts. However, there is to a certain extent concern that the Baro could overflow again, causing new floods or raising existing flood levels mainly in Itang and Jikawo. Meanwhile, the situation is well under national control with the DPPC distributing relief aid.

Relief Aid provided by the DPPC (updated as of Mid-September)

Wereda	Beneficiaries	Relief Aid Distributed
Gambella	2000	1.94 MT food, 472 blankets, 23 rolls plastic sheets, household utensils
Itang	22,868	1.8 MT food (0.71 MT earmarked)
Jikawo	10,000 (est.)	134 MT food (16 MT earmarked), 13,200 pieces of clothing
Akobo	30,000 (est.)	225 MT food (no distribution in August due to transport problems)
Gog + Jor (combined)	17,125	240 MT food (17 MT earmarked), 15 barrels of cooking oil
Dimma	7,975	113 MT food, 3000 pieces clothing
Abobo	not affected	---
Godere	not affected	---
	Total: 89,968	Total: 716 MT food (+other items)

*Source: Gambella Regional Bureau of DPPC
(figures are rounded and cumulative, covering July to mid-September 1996)*

It was pointed out by the authorities that the regional DPPC has sufficient stocks in its three warehouses in Gambella, Itang and Pugnido, and the Central DPPC is prepared to stock up supplies when needed. However, as reflected in the table above, some quantities of food, although “earmarked” for distribution in specific weredas, are still on hold in the warehouses. The reason for this are significant logistic constraints. The few roads in the region are, particularly during the rainy season, in a bad condition. Although the regional DPPC has short haul trucks at its disposal, these vehicles are only operational to a limited extent and are aged vehicles lacking spare parts. Moreover, local authorities also stated that there is a serious shortage of field-worthy 4WD vehicles to conduct necessary assessment field trips (therefore the opportunity to join the EUE mission was warmly welcomed).

Besides the lack of operational cars, there is clearly a shortage of motorboats: According to information obtained, the regional DPPC has only one motorboat. For air lift relief operations one army helicopter is available.

8. General Situation (Refugees)

Security concerns and certain inter-ethnic tensions characterise the general socio-political situation in parts of Gambella Region.

Information obtained informally during the mission’s visit indicates that, particularly in Akobo wereda, the situation was volatile during September. The area is populated mainly by Nuer (90%) and most of them support the “Southern Sudan Independence Movement” (SSIM) led by Riek Majer. This faction is backed by the Khartoum Government (which allegedly also appointed directly the SSIM leader) and opposed to John Garangs anti-Khartoum “Sudan People’s Liberation Army” (SPLA). Against this background, apparently armed clashes took place during September in Akobo wereda. In this context it has to be noted, that rumours about a recent refugee influx from Sudanese Akobo into Ethiopian Akobo could not be confirmed or substantiated.

Sudanese factional fighting occasionally also spills over into Jikawo and Itang weredas. UNHCR was operating a refugee reception centre (named “Therpam”) on the road between Gambella and Jikawo (located 2 km West of the Itang-turn-off). Located 2 km west of

Therpam is another settlement. On 21 July the UNHCR reception centre was attacked. Twelve people were killed and an equal number seriously injured - the victims were mainly Anuak people. Consequently UNHCR suspended the operation of Therpam reception centre and asked the authorities to relocate the adjacent settlement elsewhere (nearer to Jikawo and the border). Further consequences of the 21 July incident are increased safety risks in the area between Itang and Jikawo - and generally rising tensions between Anuak and Nuer people in Gambella Region.

UNHCR is running three refugee camps in the region with a total number of 72,391 inhabitants (as of 1 September 1996). The breakdown: Bonga 16,992; Dimma 12,162; Pugnido 43,237. Tensions apparently exist in Pugnido, where 70% of the camp people are Nuer while the indigenous local population are mainly Anuak. In late July, 20 Nuer from the Dimma camp were killed, apparently by the Surum who, together with Amharas and Gurage, form the local population. Conversely, the situation in Bonga camp, mainly populated by Uduk people, who are well accepted by the indigenous locals, is free of tensions.

While tensions between Anuak and Nuer reportedly have risen since the 21 July Therpam incident, there are also tensions between local Nilotic people and the Highlanders (Amharas, Oromos etc.). Although many regional government officials are Anuak (with some Nuer represented as well), key civil service, business, banking and engineering posts are mostly filled by Highlanders. In Gambella hospital, for instance, according to local information, out of the 14 doctors none belongs to one of the indigenous Nilotic groups, among which there is clearly a lack of qualified professionals in general. Frustration among the local population is also increased by the feeling that refugees "get aid for free" while their own development needs are being neglected.

9. Conclusion

While areas visited by the mission clearly presented a post-flood-situation with waters receding (Itang, Pugnido), there is, according to information obtained from local officials, still reason for concern regarding the situation in Jikawo and Akobo weredas. Overall, however, no emergency requiring international support could be identified by the mission. However, regarding Itang it is recommended that the authorities in charge look into how to avert possible health risks posed by poor sanitary conditions.

The Government authorities seem to be well in control of the situation in terms of relief goods allocation. Nonetheless, as confirmed by the regional DPPC, the existing logistic constraints (see above) must be faced in order to improve transport facilities as a measure of preparedness, and also to fulfill the actual needs. The Region, having certain structural problems that are easily aggravated by natural calamities such as floods, needs to increase its prevention and preparedness capacity.

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