



Breaking the Cycle of Conflict in Gambella Region

Assessment Mission: 23 December - 29 December 2002

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1. Introduction and background

Gambella National Regional State is situated in the south-western part of Ethiopia. The region borders with Benishangul Gumuz and Oromiya regions to the North, the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPRS) and the Sudan Republic to the South, Oromiya and SNNPRS to the east and the Sudan Republic to the west.

Agro-ecologically, the region is dominantly lowland (kolla) with a few midlands (weyna-dega). Recession riverside agriculture is common, particularly maize and sorghum, and widely practiced by Anyuua people along the Baro, Gilo and Akobo rivers. As the region is generally not cereal self-sufficient, alternative income sources such as fishing are important sources of food. Wild food consumption is part of the daily dietary intake given the still partly untouched bush land and natural forest resources. Most of the Nuer population reside along the Ethio-Sudanese border (Akobo and Jikawo woredas), where it is too dry for rain fed agriculture. Therefore, livestock constitutes the primary source of income.

Gambella is rich with various ethnic compositions. The major ethnic groups include the Anyuua, Nuer, Mezengir, Opio, Komo and people from Amhara, Tigray, Oromiya and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR). Their location also varies according to the ethnic group (see table 1, p. 3).

The UN Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia (UN-EUE) conducted a field assessment to Gambella region between 23 and 29 December 2002. The main focus of the assessment mission was to look into and understand the dynamics of ethnic relationships, the livelihoods of various ethnic groups and what are the contributing factors for the constant ethnic conflict that characterizes the region. Discussions were held with the Gambella Regional Council, with local political and social organizations of the Anyuua and the Nuer and with various NGOs and UN organizations operating in the region. This report will be used as a presentation tool in an upcoming workshop entitled 'Settlement and Resettlement in Ethiopia: Population Displacement, Pastoralist Sedentarisation and Peace-Making' to be held in Addis Ababa in January 2003.

2. Mission Findings

2.1 Tribal make up of Gambella and their distinctive livelihoods

According to the 1994 Population and Housing Census, the total population of the region is approximately 182,000. Gambella is an interesting place where various ethnic groups live engaged in different livelihoods.

The Anuaks¹: The Anyuua are believed to have come from the so-called ‘Cradle Land of the Nilotes’ or from further southeast near Lake Rudolf and Victoria in Kenya and Uganda (Omat, 1996). They are mainly crop dependent people with fishing and hunting as their supplementary income sources. The Anyuua constitute around 27% of the total population of the region and live along the riverbanks. Most of the Anyuua are found in Abobo, Dimma and Gog woredas (Population and Housing Census, 1994).

The Nuer: The Nuer people are largely livestock dependent and are mostly found in Akobo Jikawo and parts of Itang woredas. During rainy seasons, Akobo and Jikawo become flooded and the people therefore migrate to the highlands with their cattle until the riverbanks recede. According to the 1994 census, the Nuers are the majority group, representing 40% of the population of the region (Population and Housing Census, 1994).

The Mezegir: The majority of the Mezegir live in Godere woreda and in some pocket areas of Gambella and Abobo. While they are mostly dependant on beekeeping, they also practice some cultivation in settlement areas (Hedlund, Sewonet & Beyene, 2002). They represent 6% of the total population in the region.

Other groups: People from Amhara, Tigray and SNNPR (e.g. Wolayita) live in settlement areas in Abobo, Gambella and Itang woredas and practice sedentary agriculture. However, many highlanders reside in town as businessmen and women representing 24% of the total population (Population and Housing Census, 1994).

Opo and Komo represent minority ethnic groups. As it will also help us to understand the dynamics of the ethnic composition in the region, it is important to mention here that there are

An Anyuua woman in Gambella town, Gambella woreda (Photo by Abraham Sewonet, UN EUE, December 2002)



¹ For Anuaks, the term ‘Anuak’ has no meaning or sense. Rather they write and call themselves as Anyuua. Therefore, the author will use this term in the report. Anyaak means, “to share something”.

three refugee camps in Gambella region under the protection of UNHCR and ARRA. These are Bonga (in Gambella), Punido (in Gog) and Dimma (in Dimma). These refugees are largely Sudanese Anyuua in Punido (29%), Nuer in Punido and Dimma (57% and 79% respectively), Dinka, Shuluk and Uduk.

Table 1: Ethnic groups and other population groups residing in Gambella region

	Urban	Percent	Rural	Percent	Total	Percent
"Sudanese Tribes"						
Anyuua	9831	36%	34750	26%	44581	27%
Nuer	3014	11%	61459	45%	64473	40%
Mezengir	64	0%	9286	7%	9350	6%
People from various highland areas of Ethiopia						
Amharas	4639	17%	7927	6%	12566	8%
SNNPR	1334	5%	12170	9%	13504	8%
Oromos	5890	22%	4635	3%	10525	6%
Tigrayans	1341	5%	1255	1%	2596	2%
"Other Tribes"						
Opos and Komos	1067	4%	3735	3%	4802	3%
Total	27180	100%	135217	100%	162397	100%

(Source: Housing and Population Census, 1994)

Table 2: 2002 Refugee Camp Population in Gambella

Refugee camps	Punido		Dimma		Bonga	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Tribes						
Nuer	12,086	57%	11,083	79%		
Anyuua	7,216	29%	300	2%		
Uduk					13,832	95%
Others	3,565	14%	2,490	19%	689	5%
Total	22,867	100%	13,986	100%	14,521	100%

(Source: WFP Refugee Unit Addis Ababa, December 2002)

2.2 Major causes of conflict

Control over natural resources

Though insignificant in its nature and causality, inter-group conflict between the Anyuua and Nuer can be traced as far back as the early 20th century. Livelihoods pursued by these two groups are one of the major causes for conflict. As mentioned above, while Anyuua are primarily cultivators, the Nuers are mainly pastoralists. Traditionally, the two groups have reciprocal arrangements whereby the Nuers have access to grazing land and the Anyuua benefit from milk and some cattle provisions. Whenever small conflicts arise, elders from both groups gather to arrange for blood payments made in the form of a certain number of cattle as compensation lost human lives. Elders break weapons such as spears symbolizing that no more fighting and revenge will take place². Gradually, however, these traditional conflict resolution mechanisms have started to erode for

² Traditional conflict management mechanisms are known as 'Wilok' by Nuers and as 'Carlok' by Anyuua. Interviews with members of both groups and NGOs indicate that most of the traditional conflict resolution institutions have dissolved through time.

various reasons. According to some elders, Ethiopian State administration took conflict management responsibilities from clan and group leaders and placed it in the hands of the local 'Kebele' administrations. As populations increased, access to grazing land and water became scarce³. Large numbers of Nuer with their cattle encroached on Anyuua territory and remained there for a longer period than the traditionally limited grazing season permits. With time, some started to settle and even inter-married with Anyuua. While this tradition helps in resolving conflicts between the two groups, it is also said that the Nuers in particular benefit from these arrangements because the dowries that are required usually come in form of large numbers of cattle as gifts for the bride. The Anyuua, on the other hand, cannot afford to pay large numbers of cattle as bride wealth because they do not possess large numbers of livestock, they being primarily agriculturalists.

The push factors from Southern Sudan including the war between the government of Sudan and Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) has caused large numbers of Nuers to cross borders and settle in Gambella region of Ethiopia. It is also argued that better social services such as education, health and markets in Gambella town, compared to woredas of Jikawo and Akobo, where the majority of Nuers live, have attracted many to Gambella town. Due to this constant influx of Nuers, the Anyuua have felt dominated by those who initially came in small numbers that have steadily brought their presence to a major one in the region. Unless appropriate development initiatives are put in place, it is foreseeable that more Nuers will come to Gambella town in response to both pull and push factors indicated above.

What tribe or ethnic group constitutes the majority in Gambella region?

This question is the second most important factor that has contributed to a constant struggle between the two groups. It is well known that being a majority group means more seats in the government parliamentary system and other political privileges such as, for example, higher budget allocations. According to the 1994 population census, the Anyuua represent 27% while the Nuers represent 40% of the total population in Gambella region. However, the Anyuua do not acknowledge the legitimacy of the census claiming that the number of the Nuers is high because the Ethio-Sudanese border is difficult to control and therefore Sudanese Nuers keep infiltrating into Gambella region. An example is cited for Jikawo woreda where Nuers from Sudan crossed to be counted during the population census in 1994. Many Anyuua also believe that the 1994⁴ census was conducted during the rainy season when most of the Anyuua villages were inaccessible and resulted in many Anyuua being uncounted.



The Nuer boys in Gambella town (Photo by Abraham Sewonet, UN-EUE, December 2002)

What language should be taught in school?

³ The current drought that hit most parts of Ethiopia has also affected Gambella region. Due to shortage of rainfall, pasture land and water has become a contentious resource over which the Anyuua and Nuer are presently fighting.

⁴ The next census will be in 2003/2004 (1996 Ethiopian calendar).

Until recently, this has also caused solemn conflicts between the two groups. Both groups claim that their own language should be taught in schools in Gambella region. Since 1995, both languages have been taught. Eventually, however, Nuer teachers are said to have left the teaching profession to join other government posts. Due to this, books in Nuer language are no longer produced. Currently, only the Anyuua language is taught up to grade 10. The Nuers, on the other hand, argue --- quoting the 1994 population census showing their majority representation in the total population --- that their language should be taught in schools.

Access to arms

As a border area, people in Gambella region have easy access to arms. This is considered to be one of the major reasons why the conflict has escalated with heavier casualties compared to conflicts fought with traditional arms such as spears. Arms are easily accessible owing to the SPLA presence on the other side of the border adjacent to Gambella region and due to frequent movement of people from Southern Sudan into Ethiopia. Another aspect of easy access to arms in the region dates back to the Derg military period. During that time, SPLA elements used to hide out in Gambella. When the relationship between Ethiopia and the Sudan improved, the Ethiopian government expelled remaining SPLA elements from Gambella. The retreating rebels from Sudan are believed to have left important caches of firearms behind (Gebre Selassie & Sisay, 2001). Even though the Ethiopian government attempted to disarm illegal arm owners, the Nuers still appear to have access to weapons. For the more sedentary agriculturalist Anyuua, disarmament was an easier task than disarming pastoralist Nuers who are constantly moving.

2.3. Current conflicts and consequences

Recently and particularly since early 2002, ethnic conflict and clashes have increased in Gambella region. The present conflict is largely waged between the Anyuua and the Nuers in Itang woreda. While the underlying cause is accredited to reasons mentioned above with particular emphasis on struggles for arable land along the riverbank that the Anyuua normally farm, other conflicts have occurred in recent times, including clashes between the Sudanese Anyuua and Dinka in Fugnido refugee camp that caused 42 casualties among the camp dwellers⁵. Late in 2001 and early in 2002, there were also conflicts between Anyuua and Mezengir in Gog and Abobo woredas and between Mezengir and Sheko in Yeki woreda of SNNPR that extended to Godere in March 2002.

The various conflicts have caused displacement in many parts of Gambella region. Even though DPPC, ICRC and some charity organizations have made food and non-food contributions, this assistance is said to be insufficient. The situation in Ilea village, Itang woreda where more than 10,000 Anyuua IDPs are concentrated, deserves close follow up.

⁵ Fugnido refugee camp is comprised of refugees from Anyuua, Dinka, Nuer and Nuba. It is believed that this ethnic mix in the camp has contributed to the conflict.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

Four important factors are responsible for the escalating ethnic conflict in Gambella region. These include control over scarce natural resources such as water and grazing land, the question of majority population in the region and what language should be taught in school, and, a general feeling or apprehension among Anyuua that they are being dominated by the pastoralist Nuers who enter Anyuua territory in search of grazing land and water.

Even though the 1994 population census shows the Nuers as the majority population in Gambella region, the Anyuua object to the census results. For the next population census in 2003/2004, it will be important to identify who is of Ethiopian nationality and who is not. Once the breakdown of the population is determined, it may become easier to decide what languages should be taught in what schools in the region.

As a long-term solution throughout Gambella region, it is of paramount importance that peace and stability be re-established in Southern Sudan. Development initiatives along the Ethio-Sudanese border would contribute to minimizing uncontrolled influxes of people from Sudan into Gambella town. Meanwhile, strict arms control along the Ethio-Sudanese border could be an important factor in minimizing conflict and casualties in the future.

Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms should be included in the peace talks and processes. Current local political tribal organizations such as the Anyuua Development Association and the Nuers Development Association could play a major role in peace and reconciliation discussion process. Some NGOs in Gambella such as the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD), have substantial experience and untapped potential to continue working closely with local community members and elders. Peace talks and panels could be organized to bring the two groups together. Educating the young generation on the importance of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms is equally important.

The conflict-displaced population in Ilea of Itang woreda need close follow up. As the conflict is a very sensitive issue, any food and non-food assistance should be targeted in a transparent manner or else the assistance itself might cause further conflict. This could be done by involving all stakeholders such as local and international NGOs, UN agencies and churches, as well as Anyuua and Nuers communities (Hedlund, Sewonet & Beyene, 2002).

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3 January 2003

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4. Annex

Abbreviations

ACORD	Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development
DPPC	Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission
ICRC	International Committee for Red Cross
IDP	Internally Displaced People
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
SNNPR	Southern People Nations and Nationalities Region
SPLA	Sudanese People Liberation Army
UN-EUE	United Nations Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissions for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Programme

List of related reports and papers

Housing and Population Census (1994) Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Office of the Population and Housing Census Commission (1995), The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia, Results for the Gambella Region, Volume I, December, Addis Ababa

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