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“Children and the Culture of War in Gambella, Ethiopia”

Statement by Jill Anderson, Representative of the Gambella Development Agency

May 5, 1991. Civil war started in Gambella, Ethiopia. 2400 elementary students were locked in their classrooms by their teachers. They were told to stay in the school for their protection. They would be safe there. The thundering sounds and smells of war surrounded them as they laid on the floor. An eleven year old Anuak boy said to his friend, “The floor is hot---the school may be on fire. We may be dying.” Being the tallest in the class, he broke an upper window, jumped out, only to see the school engulfed in flames. The boy had the courage to not run away, but instead, climbed a tree, re-entered the burning school and helped 17 others escape before the roof collapsed, trapping the rest of the children in a fiery grave.

He ran through the smoke to the river and hid himself under a rock for three days, not daring to move as soldiers moved about above him. As night came, he listened to the cries of a baby as it sat on its motionless mother, floating in the shallows of the river. As the noises of war subsided, this boy ran seven miles to his home, over blackened, smoldering land, filled with the blood of the innocent men, women and children, caught, in the throes of war. He ran towards his family.

As the boy caught sight of his home, he saw the devastation of fire and the unrecognizable, charred bodies strewn around. The boy cried. He cried for his mother. He cried for his father; his brothers and sisters---his childhood. He finally decided, “I will walk until I die.”

This started his 1600 mile walk through the crocodile infested rivers and over the icy mountain heights with thousands of retreating soldiers as the threatening sounds of tanks followed. He could go no further. The four soldiers who helped him were slowed down as his legs swelled and his nine toenails fell off. He said, “Build a fire and let me die.” But instead, he miraculously recovered. He made it to Kenya and now to the United States.

By God’s grace, the boy found an older brother in the U.S. By God’s grace, he discovered his entire family was alive. They had a funeral for him and his brother six years before. As he explained to his mother as he heard her voice for the first time in six years, “I am your youngest son,” she collapsed on the floor. A sign was put up on their home. It read, “Our sons have been found!”

Today, there are military troops in this boy’s Anuak village outside Gambella Town. They are again killing the innocent. This boy has not yet seen his family. The sad thing is---he may never. They are in danger right now. By tomorrow, they may be dead.

The child asks, “Why are we fighting? Why are we suffering like this?”

We ask, “Will society be better for the children ---the adults of tomorrow?” Your children will be sharing this world with my children? This is not just about the Anuak. This is about living together. This is about caring about our neighbor.

Ethiopia

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Crimes like this have horrendous consequences for the victims. The culture of war is replacing the culture of the Anuak. Displacement, humanitarian need and trauma are the fruits of this new culture spawned by violence. Over 10,000 Anuak have fled to Pochalla Sudan for safety. Only last week, eight of these children, all younger than age 15, were on their way to Sudan, trying to escape when they spotted military. As they started to run for safety, six were shot and killed. Two are missing. Ninety-five percent of the children in the Gambella region are not going to school. Those who tried, became the servants of the military who had a strong presence at the school. The children are in fear. In Sudan, there is no school in the refugee camp at all. Children are suffering the most due to the lack of food, clean water and medical care. Many are now orphans or separated from their families. Fifty-one percent have witnessed the brutal massacre of a parent or other close relative. Many of the girls have been raped. Many of these rapists may be carrying HIV. A fourteen year old girl was gang-raped by seven men in military uniform. The humanitarian situation is critical as the majority of children are malnourished. As the rainy season has started, the situation will only worsen. Genocide is not only achieved through guns, machetes and pangas.

A human rights report on the genocide of the indigenous Anuak is titled with a quote from the perpetrators. They told their victims, "Today is the day for killing Anuaks."

But,---Mr. Chairman, today is the day for the Permanent Forum to exert its influence. Today is the day to have the courage to climb back through the window. These Anuak children will never be the same. Violence has robbed them of their childhood, their families and their culture. Violence is robbing Ethiopia of its future.

The voice of the 11 year old was not heard in 1991; nor were the voices of the 2400 children who died in the school fire. No more, Mr. Chairman. Now we must listen. I appeal to you. Address this crisis before there are no more Anuak children!

Thank you.

To view the Genocide Watch and Survivors' Rights International joint report please visit:
<http://www.genocidewatch.org/Today%20is%20the%20Day%20of%20Killing%20Anuaks.htm>

To view the list of names of 424 people killed in December 2003, please see:
www.genocidewatch.org/EthiopiaANUAKSMASSACREDGAMBELLAREGIONDEC13-15.htm

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