



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL

Justice, Peace and Freedom

Gambellan Governor's Visit Brings International Publicity to Genocide Despite Attempts to Evict Press

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Thanks to the visit from the government-appointed governor of Gambella, Omot Obang Olum, himself a suspected genocide collaborator, the story of the genocide of the Anuak on December 13-15, 2003 has reached an international audience through the Associated Press' story that is now circulating in thousands newspapers throughout the world. The Anuak Justice Council counts this a great victory for unveiling the truth about the heinous crimes committed by the EPRDF military and government-incited militia groups against the Anuak.

On May 31, 2008, the Anuak Community Association of North America (ACANA), hosted a meeting in Minneapolis where Omot Obang Olum, accompanied by five other Gambella government officials, was invited to meet with the Anuak community for the first time following the genocide. Many Anuak objected to the meeting and some boycotted it as the wrong way to address the man they hold responsible for the massacre of 424 of their relatives, friends and community members.

The head of the community, Akway Cham, voiced his stance that ACANA was simply providing a place where Anuak could ask the hard questions, hoping that it would aid Anuak in dealing with this loss so that they could better help the community back home.

But, the Ethiopian government officials had a different goal. Evasion, denial, deceit and illusion reigned. At one point, Akway Cham felt pressed to confront Omot Olum and the other members of the panel for evasive answers and asked them to give more direct answers, but most felt that the lies, deceit, manipulation of the facts and outrageous denials of what everyone knew to be the truth, continued anyway.

Signs of this were apparent even before the meeting when the long arms of Mr. Meles Zenawi attempted to reach across the world to exert its TPLF-style repression of the press at the Four Points Sheraton in Minneapolis, Minnesota. They wanted to make sure that they maintained perfect control of information and therefore, they did not want the press there, of which there were six present. Among them was one of the best friends the Anuak have in the press, Doug McGill. Who did they choose to harass? None other than McGill!

Doug McGill was a previous reporter for the New York Times, a bureau chief for Bloomberg News in Tokyo, London and Hong Kong. He is also a teacher and an independent journalist. When the Anuak massacre occurred, his Anuak friend enlisted his support and he became the voice of the Anuak even traveling to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and to the refugee camp in Pochalla, Sudan to investigate and report on the human rights crimes. However, before the meeting, one non-Anuak Ethiopian—probably a representative of the Meles regime—warned McGill that he was “not invited to this meeting” and told him that “this is not for you!”

As the meeting was supposed to start, McGill was sitting with an Anuak translator and other press when this same man came with the hotel manager and a few others of similar mindset to shamelessly force McGill out of the meeting. As they attempted to evict McGill, McGill warned him that it would be in violation to the Bill of Rights providing freedom of the press and that he would get a lawyer and sue for this infringement of those rights. At least one of those Anuak in charge said privately, “This is America and we follow the laws of this country. He should stay!”

Akway Cham intervened and told McGill that he could stay and asked him to agree to not ask any questions. He told him he would give him an opportunity for a private meeting following the larger meeting. McGill agreed to this. However, it appeared that the decision to allow him to stay created a reaction from the Ethiopian Embassy headquarters in Washington D.C. as there was some advice to then cancel the meeting. The whole decision process further delayed the beginning of the meeting significantly due to some alleged division between decision makers. Finally, nearly an hour later, it was decided to hold the meeting.

However, as the meeting began, it became apparent that language was going to be used to obstruct communication—to the obvious advantage of the Meles government. The audience was told that it would not be in English—a common language to most after living in the US for so long—but instead, it would be conducted in Amharic, Anuak and Nuer rather than in English, Anuak and Nuer. Many of the Anuak are not very proficient in Amharic and have not spoken the language since they came to the United States. Some Anuak have no understanding of it at all having grown up in Sudan. Regardless, even the governor, Omot Olum, spoke Amharic rather than his indigenous language, Anuak.

When Anuak opposed this, he refused to change to the Anuak language. Some hours later into the meeting, he finally did. Some were suspecting that this was a tactic used to create one more impediment to the press, as fewer Anuak could interpret it or even understand it. Additionally, it was seen as a possible tactic by those non-Anuak government officials to monitor closely what was being said. Regardless, the Anuak interpreter for the McGill, the Associate Press and others was very proficient in both languages.

The reception of these Gambella leaders by the Anuak was diverse, but heroes of the day emerged. To start with, some boycotted the meeting, refusing to enter into a dialogue under these tightly controlled conditions with a “criminal”—someone they believed was directly responsible for the killing of the Anuak. These are people who stood up for their principles. In doing so, they stood up for truth and justice and against political propaganda, especially given through the mouth of a suspected “perpetrator of genocide.” They were convinced that lies and enticements from the government would be laid out to entrap the Anuak into coming back to invest their money so that they would forget about the horrors of what happened to their loved ones.

Some others decided to attend the meeting, most giving the delegation a cool but civil reception. A number of these showed determination and courage as they asked hard questions, convinced that they wanted to stand up to face this man to hold him accountable for what he had done. Many were frustrated that they never had a chance to ask their questions. Some even spoke out at the meeting that they were being deliberately screened from asking questions because they would not be favorable to Omot Olum.

Of those given the chance to ask the questions—about twenty—only about five of those questions were not directly related to the genocide. These questions directly confronted Omot Olum with the hard facts that contradicted the elusive answers and denials he continued to present to the listeners.

The Anuak all knew that Olum had been the Chief of Security for the region at the time and that he had been the one who most believed had provided the names of the over 400 Anuak leaders who were later

targeted and killed during the massacre. Only an Anuak who knew the Anuak community and knew those among them who would be the greatest threat to the government control of regional affairs could have provided that list.

The beliefs were corroborated by reports from Genocide Watch, Human Rights Watch and others where testimony from witnesses all concurred that Omot Olum was the one to come up with the list even though Olum denied there was any list, calling it “misinformation.” Omot Olum, never answered, “No, I did not do it,” or “Yes, I did,” but instead kept asking rhetorical questions like, “Why would I give the names of my own people?” Or, “Would I forget Ethiopian law?” Or, “I didn’t have the right under God to do it.” However, many of the victims’ in Gambella, even knew what number their loved one was on that list!

In a “Meles-style” disclaimer, he never acknowledged the Ethiopian military’s deep involvement in the killing, blaming other groups in the region for them. He then minimized the importance of determining even an estimate of the number of Anuak killed and pointed most of the blame for why it happened on the “weak governance” of the former governor, Okello Akway. He gave himself credit for taking charge of the situation after Akway fled the country. Yet, as one Anuak woman angrily pointed out, the human rights crimes never stopped under his charge and continued on under his leadership--- why?

Even though Omot Olum publicly accused Okello Akway for leaving the country because he was fearful, we know that Okello was the real hero. One Anuak man asked Omot Olum at the meeting why he never died during the massacre of the Anuak leaders. However, most know the answer to that question—that he did not die, nor did he have to “run for his life” because obviously, as a government collaborator, he was never in any danger from the perpetrators of the genocide—the Ethiopian National Defense Forces and the government with which he remains close friends. The only ones he had to fear were Anuak who might want to revenge the deaths of their loved ones who died under his watch—perhaps that is why he discharged his Anuak bodyguards and replaced them with the TPLF.

On the other hand, Okello Akway was the real hero who refused to conform to the EPRDF government directives out of his principles, breaking all his ties to them as he stood up for the truth. This was a man of courage who was ready to give his life.

Omot Olum was the one in fear who caved in to the pressure from this regime of death. By adopting the foundational principles of Meles—lying and deceit—he was rewarded for selling out on his people by his subsequent appointment as the un-elected governor. He did not need to flee for his life, because he was now initiated into the ranks of loyal collaborators. On the other hand, Okello Akway became a prime target of the EPRDF fury and had to flee for his life. He had seen Omot Olum hand over the list of the Anuak to be killed, something that could later on indict Omot Olum and others.

There were many other men and women—including Nuer, Highlanders, and others whose acts of courage should be lifted up in memory as the real heroes of Gambella who protected the Anuak from death. They saw their friends and neighbors as human beings, upholding the principles of God our Creator in caring about the lives of His creation.

The meeting lasted six hours. Doug McGill stayed through to the end in order to conduct the promised private interview with Omot Olum; however, even though Akway Cham attempted to hold up his end of the deal, Olum had no such intention. As Doug asked him for that interview, he was surrounded by “bodyguards” and quickly left the room.

In response to McGill’s persistence, he simply said, “Later,” but there was no “later.” One of the bodyguards physically shoved McGill away and the group “disappeared” into a private location. What is really wrong with Ethiopia came to the Four Points Sheraton on that day. Even the little bit we saw was too much. Imagine what it is like where there are no restraints!

Back in Gambella, the people fear Olum and hope that Anuak here, living in a free country, will not trade in development for justice. They hope that the people will not forget about them but will unite and speak out in their behalf with a loud voice because they can only speak in whispers. One Anuak said, “Since the killing, Omot Olum has never went to the Anuak elders, traveling throughout the region to talk to the people. I am wondering why he is traveling thousands of miles away to talk to the Anuak in North America when we, the real victims, are right here?” The only reason we can think of is that he has been sent there by his boss, Meles Zenawi, in order to silence the Anuak in the Diaspora as they have done it here!”

During Omot Olum’s talk, he told the Minnesota Anuak: “We need you in Gambella. You need to become part of the democratic Gambella. Now, there is peace in Gambella and the Ethiopian government is wanting you to come back to invest in helping develop your region. We need the Anuak to come back home to build up the region. Without Anuak from America coming back, there will not be progress. We especially need the educated Anuak.”

One of the Anuak from Kansas responded privately by saying, “Omot should start by exhuming the bodies of those in the mass graves first before he offers the living to come back and possibly killed them like the others!”

We expect the same when Omot Olum visits Canada this weekend. He is planning to meet with the Gambella people on Saturday morning, June 7, 2008. Location First Church of the Nazarene, 65 Richard Way S.W. Calgary Alberta. There will be some Anuak who will boycott the meeting and others who will want to confront him. The blood of their fellow Anuak cries out for real answers!

Let us keep up our battle until justice comes not just to Gambella, but to all nine regions of Ethiopia! May God lead and help us as we fight for truth, justice and freedom!

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