

## Anuak

Population: 46,000 (1994 National Census).

### Profile

Anuak are hunters, agriculturists and fishers living in the fertile Gambella forest region of south-western Ethiopia.

### Historical context

These people date from the first millennium BCE with a culture preoccupied with cattle raiding and millet growing.

At the end of 1979 their land was seized by the government and there were attempts to draft them into the army and into forced labour on collective farms. Many Anuak fled into the bush in an attempt to reach Sudan and were shot and imprisoned. During the 1980s Mengistu forcibly resettled in Gambella some 60,000 peasants, mostly lighter-skinned 'highlanders' from other parts of Ethiopia. At the same time there was an influx of Nuer fleeing Sudan's civil war and settling on traditionally Anuak lands. Tensions rose as competition for land and water intensified. Anuak numbers halved within a generation.

### Current issues

In March 2005, Human Rights Watch reported that the Ethiopian military had been conducting a campaign of murder, rape and torture against the Anuak since December 2003, and that these abuses possibly amounted to crimes against humanity. Following a series of Anuak militants' attacks on highlanders, notably eight government officials, the army allegedly killed 400 Anuak civilians that month in retribution. It then proceeded to raid Anuak villages, leaving many more dead and displaced. The killings came six months after the Ethiopian government offered a concession for oil exploration in Gambella to a Malaysian company, Petronas.

Through 2004 the government in Addis Ababa sent additional government troops to Gambella, most of them highlanders, where they continued to engage Anuak militias. Anuak leaders claim that their civilians were also targeted by the army, and there have been claims of retaliatory killings of highlander civilians in early 2004 by Anuak militants. According to Human Rights Watch several hundred Anuak and highlanders died during the course of the year. In response to criticism, in March 2004 the government organized a superficial public inquiry into the December 2003 events that blamed abuses on a few rogue soldiers but absolved the army of any wrongdoing.

In November 2005 an Anuak militia group attacked a police station, killing the state police commissioner and three others, and sparking a shoot-out. In April 2006, there were reports that the Ethiopian Army was cooperating with the Sudan People's Liberation Army to disarm Anuak along the border. Amnesty International reported in May 2006 that, since December 2003, the Ethiopian

government had detained 900 Anuak opposition members without trial, though it had released 15 former senior officials in December 2005. Tensions rose again in June 2006 when attackers thought by aid workers to be Anuak militia members ambushed a bus travelling from Addis Ababa to Gambella, killing an estimated 14-30 civilians. In the immediate aftermath, water and power were cut to Gambella town, and Ethiopian troops and highlander militia enforced a curfew. In September 2006 a Dutch humanitarian NGO reported that more than 44,600 internally displaced persons - Anuak, Nuer and highlander alike - were living in camps and in dire need of assistance.

Although in May 2006 Petronas announced that its first test well had proved barren of oil, land use rights in Gambella remain contentious, and efforts to discover oil could yet intensify the struggle for control of the region.