

Ethiopia: US Government Wants Gambella Violence Investigated

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The US government has called for "transparent, independent" inquiries into clashes in Ethiopia's troubled western border region where hundreds have been killed.

In a statement from Washington on 20 February, the US said the government must investigate allegations that its troops were involved in the killings. Adam Ereli, the US government deputy spokesman, also told journalists in Washington that the crisis in Gambella region was "deteriorating" following fighting between ethnic groups and the Ethiopian armed forces.

"Fully transparent and independent investigations by the government would encourage restoration of peace in the troubled region," Ereli said in a statement.

The government, however, rejected the allegations that its troops were involved in the fighting, and told IRIN that they were restoring order.

The US call came as two human rights organisations condemned the international community for its silence over the "atrocities" being perpetrated in Gambella, which is about 800 km west of the capital, Addis Ababa. The US-based Genocide Watch (GW) and Survivors' Rights International (SRI) alleged that the Anyuak ethnic group was being subjected to rape, executions and torture.

Clashes first erupted in Gambella in early December after eight government officials were attacked and murdered while travelling in a United Nations vehicle. The Anyuak, who make up around one-third of the 228,000 people who live in the remote region, were blamed for the attack and targeted for brutal reprisals, in which hundreds of people were killed.

Gambella is a fertile, but swampy, malaria-infested area, which borders war-torn Sudan. It

is however also rich in natural resources like gold and oil, which, GW and SRI say, may be serving to fuel the three-month orgy of violence, inasmuch as the Anyuaks believe that much of the land in the area belongs to them.

"The Ethiopian government continues to deny, downplay and mis-characterise the massacres as justifiable responses to the Anyuak attack," said their 23-page report. "The fact is that most of the victims have been unarmed Anyuak civilians who were hunted down and murdered," Keith Harmon Snow, the report's author, asserted. "Numerous assailants have been identified, including government officials, soldiers and civilians," he added, while also calling for an independent inquiry into the killings.

"Numerous reports indicate that summary executions, mass rape and disappearances continue to occur in contravention of international legal standards," he said. Snow's report was compiled after conducting interviews in January and February with Anyuaks who had fled across the porous border into neighbouring Sudan.

In a statement released last week, the government said 200 people had been killed in one attack led by Anyuak at a gold mine, and 10,000 people had fled the region.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Food Programme say they have evacuated all their international staff from parts of western Ethiopia.

The killings mark some of the worst violence for years in Ethiopia, a landlocked country of 70 million people divided into numerous linguistic and ethnic groups. The Ethiopian Human Rights Council said earlier this month that ethnic violence was increasing in the country as a result of government policies forming local administrations along tribal lines.

But the government, a four-party ethnic coalition which has been in power since 1991, accused the group of being politically motivated and dismissed its accusations. "These statements from the human rights groups are not correct. The government troops are not there to kill Anyuaks, they are there to make peace. We have stated this time and again," Zemedkun Tekle, the information ministry spokesman, told IRIN.

The federal affairs ministry, which is investigating the violence, was unavailable for comment on the latest claims surrounding the fighting in Gambella.