

# Gambella

## The impact of local conflict on regional security

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### Introduction

#### *Rationale*

The Gambella region has seen factional fighting and inter-community violence since the last two decades. There have always been clashes between the Anuak and the Nuer, mainly over resources and for socio-cultural reasons. Historically resource-based clashes and small-scale skirmishes attributed to values embedded in identity and culture have been common in the area. What is striking, however, is the transformation in the nature and intensity of conflicts over the last two decades. The major defining moments that transformed the conflict in Gambella were the Sudanese civil war and the political transformation in Ethiopia in the early 1990. Both led to the regionalisation of the conflict and to some extent, seem to have altered traditional competition and rivalry, which are at the centre of this study. Why is the Gambella region prone to conflict? What converts local/traditional disputes, which have always been there, into open large-scale regional conflict? The purpose of this study is to analyse the context, identify the origins, and explain the key determinants of the conflict in Gambella, its linkages with the political and security issues in Sudan and Ethiopia, and its impact on regional peace and security.

#### *Methodology*

The methodology applied for this research is drawn mainly from the strategic conflict assessment (SCA) model, which focuses on analysis of conflict structures, actors and dynamics.<sup>1</sup> Although for analytical purposes it is useful to divide analysis into these three areas, in reality they are closely inter-linked and should be viewed holistically. The first step has been to analyse the long-term factors underlying violent conflict in

the region in order to make an assessment of the structural vulnerability of the Gambella region to the outbreak or intensification of conflict. This involves identifying, mapping out and weighting, in terms of relative importance, the structural sources of tension and conflict. Attempts were also made to identify the linkages and connections between sources of tension in various sectors and levels. This will largely be covered by the analytical overview on the historical, geographical, socio-economic and political context.

Then, based on the above, an initial judgement of the key sources of conflict and tension is developed.

### Gambella conflict was transformed by Sudanese civil war and political transition in Ethiopia

There could be a range of views, sources and dimensions of conflict; indeed political instability within the Gambella region has been generalised, persistent and multidimensional. The value of the analysis applied in this research lies in the process of recognising connections and overlaps between sources of tension in various sectors and on different levels. To this effect, structural aspects such as security, economic, social and military are systematically listed and covered

according to local, national and international levels.

Thus, one of the methods focused on an analysis of ethnic rivalry and resource competition at local level and in the context of new developments in Ethiopia and the Sudan. This is complemented by an actor-oriented analysis focused on shorter-term incentives and the interests of the main protagonists. This involves a more dynamic profiling of a context with particular focus on actors in, triggers of and incentives for violent conflict. Focus was placed on the way in which local actors tried to react to the new political and security developments, participate within the new structures, mobilise their followers and take advantage of the situation, which largely explains the recurrence, or the intensity, of conflicts in the Gambella region. To this effect, it tries to look at how local disputes of



an economic nature continued to interact with new political actors and interests to change the levels and forms, if not the substance, of local conflicts.

In particular, the study attempts to establish an intersection between local disputes and the changing nature of the broader power structure at national level. In other words, by applying the methodology, the study attempts to investigate whether the political architecture is less flammable to local conflicts. This helps to understand what converts local disputes, which have always been there, into an open large-scale conflict. The study starts with a discussion of the background to the conflict in Gambella and the context in which it needs to be understood. Subsequently, the spill-over effect of the civil war in Sudan, the role of the restructured Ethiopian state, issues of identity, citizenship, and rivalry among the local elites for resources and power, and the impact of the CPA are outlined and contextualised in structured interactions with all the proximate causes of the conflict in the region.

The data in this research was collected in the period from mid June to the end of July 2006, mainly through an open-ended questionnaire with randomly selected individuals. The target group of the research included elders and clan leaders, intellectuals, government officials, former party functionaries, women, NGOs, the youth and religious leaders. The study attempted to select the respondents from various areas and different age groups. However, challenges were encountered in the process, such as the absence of full cooperation from respondents who were fearful for their own lives and those of their family members and relatives. Some names have been omitted to protect identities.

Researchers were constantly aware that their motives might be misinterpreted; hence they were careful to be as straightforward as possible about the purposes and scholarly nature of the research. It is not surprising that most of the respondents agreed to talk, provided that they remained anonymous.<sup>2</sup> Another problem with some of the respondents was a higher degree of emotional involvement with their ethnic groups. But, although they largely lack neutrality, this group of interviewees provided valuable information about the conflict. Restrictions on travel outside the town of Gambella, for environmental and security reasons, however, presented the most serious challenge. Chronic insecurity in large parts of the region, mainly because of ambushes by Anuak bandits, rendered data collection in the region an unpredictable and cumbersome undertaking.

Clearly, the field research has been conducted under enormous limitations, caused primarily by the security problem, owing to the intensification of the current violent conflicts in Gambella, which made it almost impossible to travel to most *weredas* (districts) to collect data. In addition, the unprecedented precipitation in the rainy season destroyed all-weather roads, which impeded the only transport system in the area. However, attempts were made to overcome these challenges by tracking down some informants who reside in the districts in Gambella town. Written sources on political developments in the Gambella region since 1991 are few in number and meagre in first-hand empirical information.<sup>3</sup> In addition, contributions are often geared towards the past or have a rather general outlook on the region. This research is based mainly on interviews with 39 selected individuals, a few unpublished sources that covered the region, and the previous knowledge and analysis of a senior researcher in the Centre for Policy Research and Dialogue (CPRD). Basically, the data in this study were collected in the field, unless the reference is cited.

### ***Theoretical framework***

Certain conceptual starting points and assumptions inform the study of the conflict in the Gambella region of Ethiopia and its sub-regional implications. The emphasis in this conceptual examination will be on those factors and events that are judged relevant to the realm of conflict in the region.

Recently much has been written on the subject of international, regional and localised (interstate) conflicts. In the past, international conflicts have basically been military confrontations, driven by political conflicts. However, most conflicts and protracted political crises today do not occur between sovereign states, but are of an internal or regionalised type (Collier 2000).<sup>4</sup> The countries of the Horn are confronted with varieties of endemic and protracted violence, as well as numerous potential conflicts at all levels: interstate, local and national. However, sources of and factors in war have changed significantly over time. This has led to a search by political leaders as well as scholarly experts for methods of understanding, managing and resolving these conflicts and social crises. A conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur (Deutsch 1973:10). In almost all social science discussions, the terms *competition* and *conflict* are used synonymously or interchangeably. Although competition produces conflict, not all instances of conflict reflect competition.

A conflict, whatever its reality, is usually about one of several types of issue. The most common is control

## **Most local conflicts and protracted political crises are internal or regionalised**



over resources. Such resources as space, money, property, power, prestige and food may be viewed as non-shareable. If two or more parties seek exclusive possession or use of a resource or a given part of it, conflict is apt to occur between them. Other deeper-rooted sources of conflict also exist, such as growing pressures arising from overpopulation, environmental degradation, which can lead to mass migration, underdevelopment and poverty, mainly in underdeveloped countries (Rubenson 1991).<sup>5</sup> In fact, the history of the wider region has been shaped by population movements and conflicts caused by ecological factors. The region has been affected by overgrazing, drought and soil erosion. Pushed by prolonged drought, pastoralists and their animals move into areas with better pasture and more water with the apparent intention of staying there.

This situation is complicated because resource endowment in the Horn is very uneven: for example, highlanders enjoy relative abundance of rainfall and fertile soils, while their immediate neighbours in the plains suffer from persistent drought (SPPE Report 1995). This, coupled with the multi-ethnic nature of settlements, increases the potential for intergroup conflict. Mobility as a way of averting conflict is coming to an end. Any movement in search of water or grazing land in an organised manner increases the temptation on both sides to cross the controversial boundary line.<sup>6</sup> It also leads to the breakdown of all previous mutual agreements that allowed both sides limited access to pasture and water in times of scarcity. Clearly, the Horn is replete with flashpoints, ranging from undemarcated or contested borders to intercommunal disputes over grazing land. Competition over renewable and non-renewable resources remains the main reason for contention among armed factions in the region.

In addition to the socio-economic decline, the degradation of the natural environment and the regular appearance of conflict, another factor refers to what some describe as the *militarisation* of rural poverty (Spillmann 1995). Successive projects of state building and wealth accumulation driven from the centre have targeted their peripheries, entrusting client groups with the task of policing the frontiers. This combines with the increasing availability of guns and veterans to help militarise ethnicity, weakening civil dispute and traditional conflict mechanisms. This is mainly true along all the national borders of Horn of Africa countries. Throughout the Horn, certain ethnic groups, typically living in borderlands, have become tribes-in-arms, their social structure and even sense of identity closely bound up with their military organisation and the AK 47.<sup>7</sup> New conflicts

are fought using trained militiamen that utilise modern weapons supplied by external forces (or neighbouring countries) that are new parties to the conflict and by illegal arms traders in the region. This can be explained by its history and geography.

Recent advances in understanding conflicts in Africa come from the political economy approach. This focuses on those actors of conflict who, motivated by economic interests, use conflict for their own ends. Related to this are the statistical relationships between the availability of lootable resources, demographic factors (such as the number of youth in society) and armed conflict. Indeed, this is central to the '*greed and grievance*' discourse (Collier and Hoeffler 2000; Cooper 2005; Studdard 2003). It argues that the presence of primary (mainly lootable) commodities may not trigger conflict, but definitely increases or prolongs conflict (Ross 2004). One of the most widely accepted hypotheses in this theory is that non-lootable resources, such as oil, gas and deep-shaft mineral deposits tend to be associated with separatist conflicts, which are often caused by ethno-political grievances over inequitable resource or revenue sharing and exclusionary government policies.<sup>8</sup> We need to be wary of taking Collier's theory on greed at face value. The *greed* aspect should not be limited to rebel leaders and lootable commodities, as Collier and Hoeffler (2000) want us to believe; rather it is related to the tendency by the political elite to monopolise power and resources. *Greed*, understood as economic opportunity or the potential for it, and *grievance*, perceived mainly as the experience of society as a whole, not only trigger conflict but are inherent causes of it.

### Greed and grievance not only trigger conflict but are an inherent cause

With access to resources, conflict research enters the realm of politics, the economy and the state. In all the group conflicts investigated in the Sahel and the Horn regions, access to natural and social resources, expressed in terms of justice, fairness, equitable sharing and equal development, was the primary concern of people in arms (Suliman 1999). Although there may be outside factors that influence these conflicts, they are mostly and primarily conflicts over governance, identity and resource allocation within a particular state (Kumar 1996). As such, conflict is deeply rooted in the societies and states of the region. It is a region in which recurrent wars, famine and social upheavals have long hampered the emergence of well-governed states. This is largely explained by its history and geography. But it is attributable in part to the nature of the state, which presides over unequal distribution of political power and natural resources. Owing to misguided or failed nation-building processes, most of the states in the sub-region do not reflect the interests and character



of all their citizens. This is compounded by the nature of coercive powers of the state, the projection and use of power by governments to suppress conflict (mainly along their peripheries), and ultimately the strength of militarism as a political culture.

Militarisation in the Horn, as in many developing countries, is partly a product of structural conditions that constitute a crisis for human security and the state. These conditions include a history of civil wars, authoritarian rule; the exclusion of minorities from governance; socio-economic inequity and deprivation; and weak states that are unable to manage normal societal conflict in a stable and consensual fashion. These conditions create a security vacuum that the state, groups and individuals seek to fill through the use of violence, sometimes in an organised and sustained fashion, and at other times in a spontaneous and sporadic manner. Even before the modern era, most of these countries evolved a culture that gave precedence to martial values, and gave short shrift to compromises, mercantilism and civic values.

Another important point of departure that has not yet been fully analysed, but is extremely relevant to the study, is the correlation between the number of veterans of earlier wars and the recurrence of conflict. North-east Africa is a heavily militarised area. A critical look at the conflicts in the sub-region suggests that this is almost certainly a much more powerful association. On another level, vulnerability to conflict is related to the internal power structure of the sub-region. Owing to the internal religious, ethnic and cultural divides in all states, combined with shared trans-boundary resources, it is difficult to think of a long-running violent conflict in the Horn that is limited to the national borders of a given country. Almost all conflicts in the sub-region at some stage and to various degrees have involved neighbouring states supporting the dissidents.

Local-level conflicts have become elements in the politics of destabilisation, because most of the neighbouring states use these disputes to pursue broader political objectives. The external sources of conflict are largely political (sometimes ideological) and territorial in nature.<sup>9</sup> In reality, there can be no separation of domestic and external sources of conflicts in Africa, particularly the Horn, because of the dynamic interaction between the two. Intrastate conflicts could easily become interstate. Conversely, interstate conflicts could have decisive effects on an internal or domestic conflict.<sup>10</sup> This has had enormous impact on local conflicts in terms of scope, intensity and visibility.

Although it is not one of the major causes, a contributing factor in almost all traditional and/or pastoral conflicts in the sub-region has been the role of values embedded in identity and culture. The culture of conflict refers to culturally specific norms, practices, and institutions associated with conflict in a society (Ross 2004). In sum, culture affects what people fight about and how they go about it. More important, but often forgotten in any conflict situation, however, is the role of perceptions. Indeed, many define conflict in terms of incompatible behaviours or divergent perceptions (Ross 2004; Deutsch 1973). A consideration of perceptions emphasises that conflict is a process, not a static condition, and that the change in subjective understandings over the course of a dispute is an important element. A cursory look at the conflicts in the sub-region reveals that conflict may occur, or is aggravated, even when there is no incompatibility of goals. Thus, to consider behaviours without perceptions is to ignore the motivations underlying an action, whereas examining only goals and perceptions does not distinguish among situations where similar perceptions lead to divergent behaviours. Some of the conflicts in the sub-region may not be about divergent positions on objective realities, but have to do a lot with divergent perceptions.

**Gambella has been ignored by governments, development agencies and political analysts despite its historical significance**

### **Understanding the conflict in Gambella**

#### ***Background to the study area***

The Gambella region, with a total area of about 25,294 square kilometres, is located in the south-western Ethiopian lowlands, bordering the Upper Nile and Jonglei states of the Sudan. The total population of Gambella is estimated to be nearly 248,000, which is one of the lowest population density areas in the country (Population and Housing Census 1994).<sup>11</sup> Clearly, this physical and numerical setting partly explains its socio-economic marginality and strategic sensitivity. In spite of its historical importance as a frontier between highland Christian Ethiopia and lowland Moslem Sudan, governments, development agencies and political analysts have generally ignored Gambella. Imperial Ethiopia had a vital economic interest in the Gambella region, which it had to compete with *and* protect from the British colonial establishment in the Sudan. This economic stake was related to the establishment of the Gambella commercial enclave (Bahru 1991:83). By the time the imperial regime departed from the political scene, therefore, the Gambella region was weakly integrated with the national centre.

The military-socialist regime that replaced the imperial regime (referred to below as the Derg) in 1974 had



pledged to redress such imbalances between the centre and the periphery. Some practical measures were taken to enhance a sense of belongingness to the national identity. Social services were expanded; ethnic inequality was condemned; attempts were made to promote local languages (a literacy campaign in the vernacular) and representation of the locals in the regional administration. In 1978 an Anuak and a Nuer were appointed as vice administrators of the Gambella district (Kurimoti 1994). When a limited form of regional autonomy was introduced in 1987, the involvement of the local people in the region's politics had significantly increased, ultimately occupying the two key posts of the regional administration and the party secretariat.

Such aspects of local empowerment, however, were overshadowed by the regime's projects of control and its attendant modernist zeal. As in other parts of the country, the so-called ideologically driven cultural revolution weakened local culture. In an attempt to stamp out traditional bases of power that were perceived to challenge the basis of the new power holders and its manifestation at grassroots level (the peasant associations), village chiefs and influential elders lost their power and influence (Aleme 1978:114). Since then, external encroachment in local/traditional power structures and economic systems has continued unabated. Despite these measures, the Gambella region and its population were loosely integrated into the Ethiopian state system before 1991.

Against the background of a limited and largely failed integration of the local people during the imperial and Derg regimes, the implementation of ethnic federalism by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)-led government in 1991 created a new political space and institutional design to further promote local empowerment. Gambella became part of the new political reconstruction in Ethiopia, divided into three zones and seven weredas almost on ethnic lines: the Anuak zone, which consists of four weredas, namely Gambella, Elwero-Oppeno, Gilo and Dima; the Nuer zone of Akobo and Jikowo weredas, and the Majengir zone of Godere wereda.<sup>12</sup>

In 2002 the population of Gambella region was 228,000, of whom 90,517 were Nuer, 62,586 Anuak, and 13,133 Majangar, while the exact number of smaller tribes such as the Komo and Opo could not be accounted for. About 61,766 were non-indigenous settlers from all over Ethiopia (Ministry of Federal Affairs 2004). Five ethnic groups consider themselves natives to the area, and the current Ethiopian government has defined these groups as

the indigenous people of the Gambella region. In terms of percentages, the Anuak represent 27 per cent, the Nuer 40 per cent, the Majangir 6 per cent, the Opo and the Komo 3 per cent (Population and Housing Census 1994). In terms of territory, however, the Anuak live in most of the weredas, which will complicate the nature of territorial and political power in the region. In the regional setting, however, the Nuer constitute the second largest people of the Nilotes in southern Sudan, whereas the majority of the Anuak live in the Gambella region in Ethiopia. The Anuak settlements in Pochalla district in southern Sudan are also central to the socio-political fabric of the Anuak, as this is the seat of the Anuak kingdom.

The incorporation of the Gambella region into the Ethiopian state at the end of the twentieth century introduced a new category of people of largely Amhara and Oromo origins (highlanders), the number of whom has grown in the course of time through spontaneous migrants of diverse ethnic backgrounds making a living as traders and civil servants. The boundary between the highlanders and the local populations is marked at different levels physically: the boundary is constructed by a discourse on colour in which the 'red' highlanders (lighter in their skin colour) are contrasted with the 'black' local population.<sup>13</sup> The term 'highlander' is also used as a metaphor for the Ethiopian state.

### Gambella's incorporation into the Ethiopian state brought with it diverse communities from within and outside Ethiopia

Since inception of the Gambella region, the Ethiopian state has been identified with and represented by people from the highlands. This was complicated by projects of control and other grand schemes launched by the Derg regime in the early 1980s. The ill-fated and imposed resettlement programme in particular had the effect of further alienating the local people, for it was implemented without due consultation of the host communities, and more than 60,000 highland farmers from northern and southern Ethiopia were brought to the Gambella region.<sup>14</sup> This is a major variable in the making of conflicts in the region.

Gambella attracts a lot of communities from within and outside the national borders of Ethiopia, especially since the region has rich natural resources, particularly the large expanse of arable land, huge surface and ground water resources, livestock and fish resources, and forest resources, which render the region best suited to agricultural development.<sup>15</sup> Oil reserves and other mineral resources add up to the region's natural wealth, which is a 'bonanza' for economic growth. In spite of its enormous natural resources and its tremendous potential for economic development, Gambella has remained one



of the most backward and poverty-ridden areas in the country. However, it has attracted the expansion of various communities into the region, not least the Nuer of Southern Sudan. This calls for a brief analysis of the socio-economic and contemporary political history of the region.

### ***Socio-economic and historical context***

This section is concerned with the long-term factors underlying conflict in Gambella through a study of the historical background of the conflict as well as geographical and socio-economic profiles of the study area. It is an assessment of Gambella's vulnerability to the outbreak or intensification of conflict.

The historical root of the Anuak-Nuer conflict can be traced back to the eastward expansion of the Eastern Jikany Nuer groups – Gaajak, Gaajok and Gaagwang – who were forced by the Shilluk to abandon the Sobat River before 1840. The Anuak were already settled along the banks of the rivers that drained into the Sobat, such that the Gilo and Baro also occupied the area around Nasir (Johnson 1986; James 2003; Berhanu 1973). In 1887 the Mahdist forces from Sennar on the Blue Nile raided the Baro downstream as far as Nasir. These forces returned to the Blue Nile through Baro, raiding a section of the Nuer on the Pibor, and forcing the Anuak to flee the Baro. The Nuer seized the opportunity given by this retreat to occupy parts of the Baro for themselves and this marked the beginning of the major Nuer encroachment onto Anuak land (Berhanu 1973).<sup>16</sup> Traditionally, it was a conflict between two socio-cultural groups and was related largely to sedentary and pastoral resources. The various Nilotic-speaking communities inhabiting Gambella are built around different modes of governance and pursue diverse livelihood strategies.

The agrarian Anuak had developed a more centralised political system, consisting of village states led by nobles known as *kuwari* (singular *kuwaaro*), whereas the agro-pastoralist Nuer were led by clan chiefs, and the Majangir Komo and Opo were more egalitarian with traditional socio-political organisations (Berhanu 1973; Young 1999). Although they are linguistically interrelated and engage in various forms of social and economic exchanges, they nevertheless form distinct ethnic communities. Ethnic boundary is thus marked by difference in livelihood strategies. The Anuak are peasant farmers of maize and sorghum. Similarly, the Opo are predominantly cultivators; while the Nuer practise transhumance pastoralism (steadily changing to agro-pastoralism); while the Majangir combine hunting and gathering with shifting cultivation.

As semi-pastoralists, the Nuer graze their cattle on the Gambella plains in the dry season (approximately November to May), and move to lands along the Sobat River in Ethiopia's rainy season (June to October); in addition they engage in simple cultivation.<sup>17</sup> The Nuer had thus developed a pattern of movement with their cattle during the dry season from their permanent villages in Jikawo-Sudan to the rangelands of the banks of the Baro River in the Itang district of Gambella. The Anuak had relatively good relations with the Nuer before successive military defeats by the Nuer forced them to move eastwards until they reached the escarpment and the resistance of adjacent Oromos. The Anuak and the Nuer of the Sobat, Baro and Pibor (along the Ethio-Sudanese border) lived in varying degrees of cooperation and confrontation: the Nuer married Anuak girls; Anuak boys were given Nuer initiation marks on their skin; the Anuak lived in Nuer villages; and milk and grain were exchanged, which benefited both groups. There was frequent intermarriage, exchange of cattle and mingling of settlements. In this way many Nuer came to live permanently with the Anuak in the Itang area.<sup>18</sup> Gradually, however, the Nuer

moved east in waves because of fighting with the Dinka to the west, population pressures, and later to escape British taxation (Young 1999).<sup>19</sup> In the early days, the Nuer were sensitive to the Anuak mode of production, and were very careful that their cattle did not destroy Anuak cultivated fields. Social controls inhibited raids against these immediate neighbours, and relations with people directly on the border of the Nuer settlement were more relaxed.

### **Incompatible modes of production and clashing livelihoods caused conflict between the Nuer and Anuak**

Large-scale hostilities continued between the two, however, largely owing to the incompatible modes of production and livelihood. Traditionally, a major cause of the Nuer-Anuak conflict is animals trespassing onto Anuak farmland where they live in mixed settlement or in neighbouring villages. Initially, Nuer settlers would attract relatives and politely request their Anuak friends to allow the newcomers to stay for some time. The newcomers also invited relatives and through time the number of the Nuer grew. This was the case for much of the second half of the twentieth century.

Eventually, the Nuer gained confidence and began to allow their cattle to graze on the farmed fields of the Anuak and were ready to fight when asked why they were not looking after the cattle. The backbone of the Nuer economy centres on cattle, which, according to Kong (2006), often clashes with the way of farming practised by the Anuak, especially in a situation where they are not regulated. The Anuak usually prefer to live far from the Nuer, because they regard the Nuer cattle as threats to their farming businesses and to



their resource management in general. Cattle do not respect boundaries, which often offended the Anuak (Kong 2006). Outnumbered and frustrated, the Anuak were forced to abandon their land to the Nuer (Kong 2006).<sup>20</sup> In the past this was always the trigger when these two communities came into close proximity. The Nuer agro-pastoralist pattern of transhumance is thus a *modus vivendi* with the changing volume of the waters, which determines their wet and dry season settlements.

During the wet season the Nuer and their cattle move to upland settlements away from flooding, while during the dry season they move to the banks of the rivers, where the moisture provides abundant pasture. The pools and lagoons that are formed by the flooding offer fish reserves to the Nuer. Traditionally, the Anuak-Nuer conflict can be explained by the incompatibility (antithesis) of the expansionist nature of the Nuer and the Anuaks' strong emotional ties with their land, particularly the Nuers' crucial search for grazing land and drinking water in territories belonging to the Anuak. But hostilities were contained because both communities used to resolve them using traditional mechanisms (Choul 2001).<sup>21</sup> In their early encounters, the balance of military and political power was in favour of the Nuer, who occupied large Anuak territories in the Sobat and Akobo regions along the present-day boundary between Ethiopia and the Sudan (Johnson 1986; Dereje 2003). At the onset, the Anuak used war as the only option to stop the advancing Nuer, and it worked.

Interestingly, in the early stages the Anuak reportedly had the capacity to defend themselves because of their early accessibility to firearms, which they acquired from Ethiopian highlanders (Kong 2006). Indeed, in 1911–12 well-armed Anuak nobles led a counter-offensive against the Nuer to recover lost territories and to augment wealth through cattle raiding (Bahru 1976). The involvement of the Anuak rulers in the profitable ivory trade enhanced the rise of their political and military power (Johnson 1986).<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile at a later stage the Nuer began to be involved in the ivory-for-firearms trade and in due course they reached a military balance with their traditional competitors (Johnson 1986; James 2003; Dereje 2003). This in turn led to the stabilisation of relations and inter-ethnic exchanges. Thus, confrontation based on a balance of power gradually gave way to socio-economic cooperation. Moreover, by 1914 the renewed Ethiopian campaign along the border brought the Anuak and Nuer together in their recognition of the common danger, which drove them to make peace (Johnson 1986).<sup>23</sup> But the status quo was short-lived, as the Nuer shortly began to

advance towards Gambella and settle in formerly Anuak-inhabited territories.

By mid twentieth century, the Gaajak Nuer groups had occupied parts of the present-day Jikow district of Ethiopia, whereas the Anuak were in full control of most of the areas along the Baro River.<sup>24</sup> The Gaajak live on both sides of the Sudan-Ethiopian border and fighting in the Sudan during both civil wars accelerated their migration into Ethiopia, where they began to encroach deep into Anuak territories in Gambella. During the military (Derg) regime, many Gaajak Nuer were placed in high positions in local administration in Gambella. Since then, Nuer expansion has continued up to Gambella town, setting up pockets of settlements, until they established their major settlement in Itang.<sup>25</sup> In the course of their migration, the Jikany advanced to their present location by displacing other ethnic groups, including the Anuak, thereby occupying their lands. Although there were some interruptions, which slowed down eastern Jikany migration for some time, the migration never ended. It slowly gained momentum owing to new developments across the border. Clearly, the seasonal infiltration and eastward expansion of the Nuer into areas formerly occupied by the Anuak over the years would be the root cause of the conflict in Gambella.

### The Nuer became more aggressive, continuously invading the agrarian land of the Anuak to find grazing for their cattle

The different ways of life of the two groups had a bearing on the nature of migration and conflict. Some ascribe the continued displacement of the Anuak to the nature of their economic life, which, it seems, made them vulnerable to continued incursions by the Nuer. The Anuak often left their land before the Nuer settled, which is pretty much the pattern the Nuer used to acquire

more lands (Johnson 1986; Dereje 2003). The Nuer had developed different mechanisms of adopting and assimilating the people they conquered into their society, though this was obviously not unique to their expansion into the Gambella region. Their captives attracted relatives living outside Nuer society to come and settle with them.<sup>26</sup> It is not surprising that the continued eastward push of the Nuer, owing to the infighting in South Sudan, aggravated the conflict in Gambella. A contributing factor was cattle raids, but both communities value courage, fighting ability and autonomy, and as a result intra- and inter-tribal conflict are common (Young 1999).<sup>27</sup> As such, historically, the conflict had cultural dimensions, which in turn are linked to the way of life and social organisation of the two groups.

By and large, although the eastward expansion of the Nuer was always a threat to the Anuak, their relations were characterised by both conflict and



cooperation. The boundary between the two has become increasingly fluid, and has witnessed strains and stresses caused by the changing nature of the military and political balance of power, which, in turn, was dependent on socio-economic and ecological pressures. The balance of power has continued to oscillate over the years, first in favour of the Nuer, then the Anuak, and back again to the Nuer. The escalation of the civil war in the Sudan in the 1980s and political developments in both the Sudan and Ethiopia in the next decade were turning points in this regard.

The new developments brought with them new structures and actors of conflict, which drastically changed the nature and intensity of conflict among the communities in the area. Hence, the recent violent conflict in Gambella region can be explained by the complex process of interactions among the successive Ethiopian regimes, the SPLA, South Sudan rebel and tribal forces, South Sudan refugees and the local communities, mainly the Nuer, the Anuak and the highlanders.

### ***The Sudanese civil war***

By the second half of the 1980s, the western border regions and their inhabitants had become pawns in inter-state conflict between Ethiopia and the Sudan, itself a regional manifestation of the Cold War and the age-old mutual subversion between the two states. The region was also destabilised owing to the wars that plagued the area in the 1970s and 1980s. Sudanese government assistance to Ethiopian rebels was reciprocated with Derg support for the SPLM, allowing it to operate in the 1980s from bases in Ethiopia, most of which were in Gambella (Young 1991). Initially, the indigenous peoples of the region welcomed the SPLM because of its ethnic and religious affinities and shared opposition to the Arab and Moslem-based government of Sudan.

The areas of Gambella region bordering the Sudan had been intensively affected by devastating wars between the government and the SPLA, the Lou-Jikany conflict (1993–1994), and the armed conflict following the split within the South Sudan Independence Movement/Army (SSIM/A). The 1975 Akobo mutineers, led by Ananya 1 rebels who resisted integration into the national army, set up their camps in Gambella, and the 1991 SPLA-Nasir faction made an attempt to establish a reliable rear base in the same region. The movement of the Gaajak sub-clan of the Jikany Nuer into Ethiopia, which had been such a significant feature in the early twentieth century, was accelerated during the first civil war as many Nuer sought refuge from government troops and Nuer Ananya guerrillas

set up their bases across the border in Gambella (Kurimoti 2003).<sup>28</sup> The continued factional fighting in the immediate neighbouring territories affected the security situation in Gambella in several ways.

To start with, Sudan's civil war extended battlefields across the border into Gambella and intensified the insecurity and instability of the region. In addition, along with the SPLM came a large influx of Southern Sudanese (in the 1980s Gambella's Itang refugee camp was the largest in the world), with which the local administration and limited infrastructure were ill equipped to cope. More importantly, the presence of the SPLM and refugees brought political instability and ended most cross-border trade, including the Baro River linkage (Kurimoti 2003). It is not surprising that today most people in the area complain bitterly of the SPLM's lawless behaviour, destruction of wildlife, theft of cattle, rape of women and destruction of forests.<sup>29</sup> While the marginalised and threatened Anuak of Gambella took up arms against the Derg, the Nuer presence and influence in Gambella region in general was increased by the establishment of the SPLA

bases there from 1983 to 1991 (Young 1999). The administration of Gambella was literally shared between the Derg and the SPLA (which contained a lot of Sudanese Nuer), in which the SPLA in particular was in charge of security in and around the refugee camps and the border areas. However, relations between the Anuak of Gambella and the SPLA were by no means friendly because of atrocities such as theft, harassment, rape, robbery, torture, arrests and killings by undisciplined and heavily armed SPLA forces.

Encouraged by the Derg government, the Nuer established permanent settlements in Gambella region, displacing the Ethiopian Anuak. Many Nuer were placed in important positions in the local government in Gambella. With the intensification of Sudan's civil war, the heavy demands from both government and rebels such as *corvée* labour, forced recruitment and cattle raiding became unbearable (Dereje 2003).<sup>30</sup> The attendant destruction of social services and facilities as well as restricted pastoral mobility pressed the Nuer in particular to move to Gambella. On the other hand, with the commencement of the second civil war, the Cieng Reng Nuer clan was attracted by the facilities of the Itang refugee camp. Perhaps the most important attraction was the rich rangeland of Itang district, which provided the double advantage of pastoralism and riverine cultivation (Dereje 1973).

The Anuaks in Gambella gradually became discontented. They were mainly concerned by the prominence of Nuer politicians in the area, which

## The Nuer and Anuak become pawns in the 'cold war' between Sudan and Ethiopia





was facilitated by the close relations between the Derg and the SPLA. During the military Derg regime, many Gaajak Nuer were put into high positions in local administration in Gambella.<sup>31</sup> The Anuak, who resented conscription into peasant militia, the recruitment of thousands of young men into the national service to fight in the northern war, and the growing influence of the Nuer under the auspices of the SPLA, joined an Anuak-led rebel movement, the Gambella People's Liberation Movement (GPLM), created in 1979 with the support of the Sudanese government. The GPLM made hit-and-run attacks on government police posts and settler villages in Gambella region. It also fought against the SPLA, which allied with the Derg and oppressed the Anuak (Kurimoti 2003).<sup>32</sup> Although this was a small group of some 100 fighters (Kurimoti 2003; Johnson 2001), it did not deter the Derg from labelling the majority Anuaks anti-revolutionary and reactionary.

The Anuak grew suspicious when two Nuer occupied the most senior posts since 1986 as chief administrator and first secretary of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) (Johnson 2001).<sup>33</sup> The Anuak regarded the Nuer as agents of the oppressive Derg regime. There was an influx of thousands of Sudanese refugees into Gambella; some of whom were registered as refugees, but others settled in various places and became Ethiopian citizens.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, it was natural for the Anuak to accuse the Derg of conspiring against them by purposely bringing the Ajwil and the Nuer into Gambella region to dominate the Anuak and take their land, which they regarded as a sort of inter-ethnic conspiracy.<sup>35</sup> The other major source of Anuak resentment against the Derg was alienation of their land because of the regime's resettlement programme. Gambella, which was sparsely populated with rich water resources, became an ideal target for agricultural development. Mechanised agricultural schemes, irrigation projects including the construction of the Elwero dam, and resettlement projects were undertaken that brought some 50 000 to 60 000 settlers from the highlands, and all these projects were located on Anuak land. In fact, some Anuak villages were forced to integrate with the settlers. All these developments added to the discontent of the Anuak of Gambella, overshadowing the far-reaching social and economic changes undertaken by the Derg in the region.

The continued intrusion of the Nuer into Anuak-controlled areas had started to be felt by many Anuak. Local dissatisfaction had crystallised in the form of an Anuak liberation movement when in 1979 educated Anuak first took the political initiative by crossing the border and forming the GPLM (see above). The

Anuak-led rebel group attempted to develop relations with more powerful movements, initially in Sudan, then in Ethiopia – first with the Oromo liberation Front (OLF), and ultimately and more successfully with the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) (Johannsen 1986).<sup>36</sup> The SPLA launched its military campaigns from its bases in Gambella, whereas the various Eritrean liberation movements were supported by the successive regimes in the Sudan. However, as some argue (Young 1999), opposition movements in the Gambella region, as in Benishangul, were generally weak politically and militarily, and slower to take form than elsewhere, while – given strong cross-border connections – Sudan played a crucial role in their emergence.

The Gambella People's Democratic Movement (GPDM) launched a guerrilla campaign, but was unable to mobilise more than a negligible portion of the population and never held any liberated area (Young 1991; Dereje 2003). Partly related to the influence from the SPLA, the various rebel groups operating along the border were undisciplined, leaving an embittered local population who joined the refugee camps as a form of self-initiated security arrangement or took up arms to resist the mounting social and political problems. The SPLA became increasingly involved in Ethiopia's wars in return for the Derg's military and logistical support by attacking anti-Derg forces in the area – the GPLM and the OLF – and victimising civilian populations associated with them.<sup>37</sup> Further, the SPLA committed a number of atrocities, mainly against the Anuak in various areas of Gambella at different times, bringing a new level of violence that was traditionally unknown to the region.

### The Anuak became increasingly isolated as the Nuer, SPLA and Derg formed a loose coalition against the Anuak

In September 1989, the SPLA forces attacked the rich Anuak agricultural village of Pugnido and burned it down, killing 120 people, including women and children who were burned in their *tukuls*, which had been locked from the outside by SPLA soldiers. The SPLA men carried out the massacre under the pretext that the villagers had planned to rob the refugee camp near the village. After four days, SPLA forces and Anuak militia fought at Akada, in Itang, and 10 SPLA men and 14 local people were killed.<sup>38</sup> In a prior act of atrocity in 1987, SPLA soldiers massacred about 16 civilians (most of them women and children) and militiamen in Akado village, the former American mission in Itang district. The Derg government made very little effort to intervene and protect the Anuak against atrocities by the well-armed and ill-disciplined SPLA forces.<sup>39</sup> Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that many Anuaks resented the regime and took up arms against it.



A corollary to the geopolitics of the 1980s and the Sudanese civil war was the rise of the refugee phenomenon with massive adverse effect on the economic life and political process of the Gambella region. The region hosted thousands of South Sudanese refugees and insurgents who arrived from the eastern parts of Upper Nile and Jonglei states, populated mainly by the Nuer, Anuak, Murle, Dinka, Lou and Maban. The sheer size of the refugee population, well beyond 300,000 by the mid 1980s, by far outnumbered the local population (Kurimoti 1997). Apart from the ecological costs of such a huge influx of people, the refugee establishment greatly undermined the local economy. Imported grains to feed the refugees had the effect of depressing the local market. As in many other places (such as the extension of the Issa into Afar lands) the expansion of the Nuer not only resulted in the loss of territory, but it has also disturbed traditional resource management and resulted in the intensification of the conflict (Kurimoti 1997).<sup>40</sup>

Continued Nuer pastoral incursions, refugee flow, and the damage done by development projects to the local resource base all aggravated enmity and conflict between the two major groups in the region. In the past, there had been enough empty corridors, which served as buffer zones, now there were practically none. As in other cases (Medhane 2003), mobility as a way of averting conflicts is ending. In the absence of ecological (also territorial) buffer zones, mobility and scarcity made conflict inevitable (Medhane 2003; Suliman 1995). But the influx of the Nuer was also interpreted as a political challenge to Anuak supremacy in Gambella. Above all, the presence of armed groups facilitated the trade in small arms and the ultimate militarisation of society, a process that has greatly undermined aspects of inter-group integration.

A complicating factor was the flow of arms. Intelligence from informants shows that the Nuer and the Anuak have easy access to arms. Informants from both sides explained that they have easy access to arms from the SPLA, but they never accept that the SPLA supports them. These arms have increased the casualties of the conflicts, and both the Anuak and the Nuer are seeking more arms. Though difficult to identify, there are markets for illegal arms in the region. In addition, the SPLA previously had a camp in Gambella. When it left the area, a large quantity of the population seized the arms, which exacerbated the conflicts that are recurring today. The Anuak, however, claim that the Nuer benefited more, because they gained much of the armaments from the SPLA.<sup>41</sup> Nowadays, both groups are fighting with relatively better arms than in

previous times, hence the greater destructiveness of the conflict in material and human lives.

The refugee factor is critical to the ongoing conflict in Gambella because it has undermined the historical balance in inter-group relations. To host the refugees displaced from Sudan, over the years the UNHCR and local authorities have constructed refugee camps in the region. The problem is complicated because the three big camps – Dimma, Bonga and Punido refugee camps – were constructed in traditional Anuak territory and only one such camp was constructed in Itang wereda in Nuer territory.<sup>42</sup> The movement of Nuer refugees into Anuak settlements led to violent encounters. Anuaks frequently clash with the refugees when they leave their camps and cross through Anuak villages. Occasionally, the Anuak also rob the refugee camps and kill people. In most of these killings, Sudanese Nuer were killed and Ethiopian Nuer usually sided with the Sudanese Nuer, leading to ethnic violence between the two groups (Suliman 1995:77; Young 1999; Dereje 2003). The flow of refugees to the Ethiopian side will change the

demography of the region and become vital to the issue of power and wealth sharing in Gambella. Some of the Nuer refugees were readily integrated into the broader Ethiopian Nuer community, serving to shift the population balance in their favour.

Meanwhile, the UNHCR's provision of education for refugees and those living adjacent to the camps largely benefited the Nuer and led to their advancement, further challenging Anuak dominance. The spillover effect of a civil war in a neighbouring country, Sudan, on social and political developments in the Gambella region of Ethiopia has

been enormous. The Anuak strongly question the loyalty and citizenship of the Nuer, since most of them were in refugee camps before they were elected as government officials.<sup>43</sup> It is not accidental that Anuak animosity with the Nuer grew as ever-larger numbers of Nuer fled to the territory to escape the war in Sudan in the 1980s. (This will become a hot political issue because of the introduction of new governance structures in 1991.) Since political power at local level increasingly relied on numbers, the Anuak looked with suspicion at the influx of Nuer to the Gambella region. Obviously, the status, integration and citizenship of Nuer refugees turned out to be controversial.

## **The Post-1991 Period**

### ***The immediate aftermath***

When the EPRDF moved to south-western parts of Ethiopia in 1990/1991, the Derg army quickly

## **Influx of Sudanese Nuer refugees further tilted the balance of power in favour of the Nuer in Gambella**



evacuated Gambella, and the EPRDF forces, accompanied by a small contingent from Gambella People's Democratic Movement (GPDM), occupied the region. The EPRDF seizure of political power in Ethiopia in May 1991 drastically altered the interstate system with fundamental changes in military alliances and regional security. The collapse of the Derg resulted in the breakdown of economic and military supply lines from Ethiopia on which the SPLA had previously depended. Indeed, the SPLM/A was expelled from the area. This led to new politico-military developments in Sudan, which will have their own impact on the conflict in Gambella. Internally, however, the regime change in 1991 brought the Anuak group into the ascendancy of power. On attaining power, the GPDM removed the predominantly Nuer leadership that had dominated the province under the Derg, and settled old scores with its now weakened ethnic rival.<sup>44</sup> Control over local power, however, became more contested, which intensified rivalry and conflict over the next few years, the more so because shortly before the fall of the Derg regime, power in Gambella was in the hands of the Nuer (Kong 2006).<sup>45</sup> This became a source of tension in Gambella region, as the other groups (notably the Nuer) sought to reverse or challenge the legitimacy of Anuak-dominated regional power.

This dramatic politico-military change immediately caused a mass exodus of three closely related groups of people into the neighbouring country, Sudan. These were SPLA officers and their families; all of the Sudanese refugees from the various refugee camps; and Ethiopian Nuer government officials and their families.<sup>46</sup> The SPLA administration of the refugee camps in Gambella had anticipated the fall of the Derg regime, and when fighting broke out there, they organised mass evacuation of the camps. That was done relatively smoothly. Although removed from the region and beset by factional fighting, SPLA combatants continued to influence developments in Gambella, which worsened the security and political situation in the region.

In the aftermath of the split within the SPLM/A in 1991, South Sudanese armed groups returned to Gambella and conducted targeted attacks on the Anuak and settler communities (discussed below). With the deployment of EPRDF forces and the subsequent relative pacification of the Gambella region, Ethiopian Nuer and former Nuer Derg officials who fled to the Sudan gradually started to come back to Gambella. They found that the new regional government was predominantly an Anuak government under the GPLM.

## ***New structures, new opportunities***

The next section attempts to provide a coherent interpretation of political developments within the Gambella region by focusing on interactions between the main actors and emergent political structures. Generally, political instability and violent conflict in Gambella materialise in different forms, namely shifting alliances and successive changes within the regional government, recurrent ethnic fighting and the consequent redefinition of sources of entitlement among local actors, mainly the Anuak and the Nuer. Retracing the political and institutional evolution of the region since 1991, it tries to show that the conflict in Gambella is attributed to weakly institutionalised political systems; unrepresentative political arrangements (real and perceived); a sense of alienation and marginalisation; the presence of weak political parties, including their political exploitation of ethnic differences; and weak conflict management institutions and mechanisms.

The regional government has been unstable and inefficient, unable to create popular support and participation. One might ask whether local politicians are accountable to local people, and are pursuing their own ends or the agendas of external actors. Does the spread of political power reflect a balance of ethnicity? Looking into the nature, interests and conduct of the main local actors in the region will help our understanding. The role played by external (regional) actors is mainly that of aggravating instability in the region.

### *The Anuak and the Nuer*

The new regional leaders, the Anuak GPLM, immediately claimed that Gambella is Anuak land and the Nuer should not be allowed to live there, let alone engage in regional politics (Dereje 2003, Kong 2006). The Anuak typically viewed the region as a whole, particularly Gambella town, as their own territory, and the Nuer as interlopers and Sudanese; indeed the area of the town inhabited by the Nuer continues to be known as 'New Lands'.<sup>47</sup> The Anuak believe that they were outnumbered by the Nuer from the Sudan, which gave the Nuer an opportunity to raise the question of representation and power sharing. The continued influx of the Nuer, with the knowledge and possible approval of the EPRDF, is increasingly interpreted by this group as a grand design by the Nuer and the highlanders to weaken Anuak supremacy in the region. Arming themselves with machine guns left in parts of the region by the SPLM/A, the Anuak went on rampant killing and assassination of Nuer intellectuals who decided to come back after they left for security precautions

## **Collapse of the Derg in 1991 resulted in ascendancy of power and control of the Anuak over the Nuer**



(Kong 2006). This action, coupled with the monopoly of power by the Anuak, stimulated the Nuer to establish their own political party (Young 1999).

Oral sources<sup>48</sup> show that meetings were held in both Ethiopia and Upper Nile province, home of Sudan's Nuer, and the result was a political programme that provided the basis for the formation of the Gambella People's Democratic Unity Party (GPDUP), which was immediately recognised. The Anuak saw the Nuer party as a serious threat and challenge to the leadership of the GPLM. The new rulers of Gambella continued to blame the Nuer for atrocities committed against them by the SPLM/A in 1985–90, arguing that the Nuer held the governorship of the region at the time and that the SPLM/A came to Anuak land through and/or because of the Nuer.<sup>49</sup> They used this argument as an exclusive basis of legitimacy to continue to rule the region. The other was their struggle against the Derg. But soon the main issues, which were related to settlements and new entitlements to power and resources, began to surface. The new actors had to participate within the emerging structures and respond to the new opportunities created by the political dispensation in the country.

Judging from their demographic size, settlement pattern and experience in modern politics, the two native groups who have dominated the political process in the Gambella regional state are the Anuak and the Nuer. As stated, the Anuak claim to own the regional state or at least aspire to be the sole deciding political force in the regional government. Various bases of entitlement are forwarded to justify this claim: current settlement pattern (area of influence or land size), history (being indigenous) and contribution to the regime change and degree of connection with the highlands and/or the national centre. Indeed, in the competition for power, the Anuak elites defined their Nuer counterparts as foreigners.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, the Nuer invoke their own socio-cultural arguments to justify their claim. They argue that they have the right to stay in the area and acquire Ethiopian citizenship, partly because, according to written sources (Dereje 2003),<sup>51</sup> the timeframe for localisation as provided by Nuer culture is shorter and very flexible. Moreover, according to Nuer culture, ultimately natural resources belong to *kwoth* (God). The Issa Somali, when confronted with entitlement claims from the Afar, raise a similar argument (Medhane 2000). As such, the Nuer have tried various ways of defending their political position in the region.

The exact history and peopling of the Gambella region has yet to be established. (And this study does

not claim to have decided on that.) Existing historical works and oral traditions, nevertheless, accord relative seniority to the Anuak in most of the current districts of the Gambella region (discussed in detail in previous sections). This has induced mutual contestation and ultimate radicalisation of their political strategies. These conflicting political strategies of entitlement have underlined the escalation of rivalry and violent conflict in the Gambella region. The controversy is complicated by the incompatibility between the territorial and numerical settings, themselves the result of recent population movement. In this regard, the 1994 population census was critical.<sup>52</sup>

The census showed a marked numerical superiority of the Nuer over the Anuak, and based on this, the Nuer political elite began to press for a new formula for power sharing in the region (Dereje 2003).<sup>53</sup> This was what the Anuak were afraid of and did not want to hear. The Anuak fiercely contested the census results, saying, among others, that the census left many Anuak *kebeles*<sup>54</sup> uncounted. They claimed that the Nuer population figure was inflated because many of the Nuer who were included were migrants from Southern Sudan or from the refugee camps. The Anuak live in six of the nine districts of Gambella, although they are also dispersed along the major rivers of the region. Nuer settlements, however, are largely confined to two districts. Overnight the Nuer were transformed from a largely 'foreign' people to an ethnic majority.<sup>55</sup> Almost exclusively, Nuer now inhabit Anuak lands and the Anuak widely regard the continual shrinking of their territory as a threatening development.

Since the unit of administration and political action of the federal establishment is the wereda, ownership of weredas has a direct bearing on the power and wealth-sharing arrangements at the regional level. Clearly, the determination with which the Anuak oppose the Nuer claim to areas formerly considered Anuak land goes beyond the mere issue of territory and control over traditional grass and water points. It has to do with entitlement for power as a resource from the regional state down to the local level. This is another way in which we see a marked change in the interest of actors and the way they perceive and approach political contest. Unlike the past, when conflicts were mainly over control or use of grazing areas and riverbanks, control over territory is now important to the extent that it helps to legitimise power at zonal and regional levels, where the new resources are found. Thus the controversy over territory and citizenship and the conflict between the Anuak and Nuer elites over who controls the administrative centres may not be because the agricultural value of the land in the

The source  
of conflict  
goes beyond  
incompatible  
livelihoods to who  
controls power  
at the wereda  
power structures



weredas gives direct economic benefits, but because political control of these weredas leads to direct access to the resources of the state.<sup>56</sup> The focus is not on the traditional ecological zones, but on new choke points of financial resources, that is, the wereda and regional power structures, which largely depend on numbers and on how many weredas are controlled by each group. Violent conflicts have broken out between the two ethnic communities in which education and jobs have usually been the points at issue. Which language is taught in which district has come to signal political ownership of the district under contestation and the region in general (Dereje 2003).

Today's conflicts are between well-organised ethnic political parties who prefer to articulate their claims of entitlement in relation to the new political dispensation in Ethiopia. Thus, it is not surprising to see that at present the main theatre of conflict in Gambella is the regional capital and the various administrative centres. This does not mean access to water and grazing land has stopped being a point of controversy. But it has lost its primacy and importance, and the priority of the local elites has shifted to the control of political structures, where lucrative resources are available. Although resource and territory continue to drive conflict, their meaning, dimension and relevance have shown marked changes. Unlike the past, when traditional conflict among individual cattle herders and agriculturalists was the dominant feature, today's conflicts are between well-organised and armed ethnic political parties. Not surprisingly, until 2003 the most frequent outbreaks of ethnic violence in Gambella pitted the Anuak against the Nuer.

In June 1994 violent clashes between the two groups in Itang wereda claimed many lives and government rule and order was dismantled (Tirsit 2003). The scale and intensity of violence and destruction was such that, for a couple of days, the regional administration lost control. Some 380 houses were destroyed by fire (Tirsit 2003).<sup>57</sup> The violence reached a bloody peak in 2002, a year that saw over 100 people killed in clashes that displaced several thousand people. Violent Anuak-Nuer conflict subsided only by late 2003, but the resulting respite was an extremely brief one, as ethnic conflict between the Anuak and highlanders (involving the Ethiopian army) had been simmering throughout this period (Dereje 2003; Kong 2006).<sup>58</sup> All these events, however, did not change the situation because the Nuer continue to expand and assert themselves in the region.<sup>59</sup> As a result, tension continues to rise between the two groups, mainly along the Baro riverbanks. Realising their military weakness, the Anuak are demanding that the government help them

to check Nuer expansion and reclaim lost territories. To their dismay, nothing much came out of the federal government to help arrest the continued expansion and influence of the Nuer.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, in recent years other tribes from South Sudan, particularly the Lou Nuer, have begun to put pressure on the Nuers and Anuaks of Gambella, a new development that aggravates the security situation in the region (to be discussed separately).

Understandably, the Anuak perceive or interpret the continued push of the Nuer as a deliberate and calculated move to destroy them. The Anuaks also accuse the EPRDF-led government of failing to protect them from Nuer attacks and gradually allowing the Sudanese Nuer to return to Gambella. As such, continuing expansion of the Nuer is wedded to the need to produce evidence for a belief in conspiracy, that is, the fear that the Nuer will ultimately take over Anuak lands. Increasingly, the highlanders are being perceived as accomplices in this conspiracy (Dereje 2003).<sup>61</sup> With the Nuer increasingly assuming a political role in the region, the Anuak became progressively more suspicious of the central government and antagonistic towards what they call highlanders. This will partly shape the course of the relationship between the Anuak-dominated GPLM and the EPRDF in coming years.

#### *The GPLM and the EPRDF*

The year 1991 marked a turning point for Gambella, similar to other peripheral regions of Ethiopia. In spite of the poor economic and political background in the region, the EPRDF recognised that its own emphasis on national self-determination meant that local demands

for self-administration could not be convincingly denied. The communities in Gambella have their own national state, which appears to be one of the most visible political steps ever taken by the Ethiopian state to integrate its historical minorities. At national level, educated Anuak and Nuer have assumed important portfolios such as ambassadorial posts and in other federal institutions.<sup>62</sup> This has meant a vast flow of financial resources from the federal government to the Gambella region to meet the demands of the new political reality, which is above all reflected in the form of a construction boom and expansion of social services. Given the level of underdevelopment in Gambella, and the desire of the EPRDF to reward its political allies, a considerable amount of central government money has flowed to the region, most of it to the state sector.

True, this has created unprecedented new career opportunities for local actors in the civil service, but

### Gambella moves beyond subsistence livelihood with the setting up of political administrations and the rise of an educated elite community



the allocation and distribution of this 'new' money will become a bone of contention. As part of local empowerment, affirmative actions have been taken, especially in the field of education and in the job market. The EPRDF government has made major efforts to educate regional officials and improve skills levels. As a result, educational facilities in Gambella have shown remarkable growth: an 85.8 per cent increase in the number of elementary schools with a 79 per cent increase in the student population in only ten years (Dereje 2003).<sup>63</sup> Several training opportunities were also made available. A particular point of attraction for the new generation of educated local people, however, is the new government-sponsored Ethiopian Civil Service College (ECSC). It was established specifically to meet the urgent manpower need of the regional governments in the context of decentralisation and devolution of power from the central government, such that nations and nationalities have the right to determine their own affairs and the capacity to do it (Dereje 2003).<sup>64</sup> Local empowerment is also reflected in the redistribution of administrative power. In post-1991 Gambella, local people occupy all the administrative posts.

Inevitably, population figures became a matter of considerable dispute, and both leading communities claim their numbers were seriously underestimated in the recent census. Given this reality, it is not surprising that party politics in the post-1991 period have been tumultuous. On the social scene, measures have been taken to promote local languages, although for practical reasons Amharic is retained as the language of the new regional government. The three major languages of the region – Anuak, Nuer and Majangir – are taught in the schools as mediums of instruction and as subjects. The regional bureau of education has supported popular culture through printing folkloristic literature. Although the development of the local culture has a long way to go, it has already had the effect of regaining ethnic pride and individual dignity.<sup>65</sup>

All these efforts cannot alter the fact that Gambella has a difficult climate; has low execution capacity; is malaria ridden; is far from potential markets in the Ethiopian core or Sudan; conflict has escalated; infrastructure is minimal; and it is a long way from political stability. The low level of political development in Gambella means that the EPRDF will continue to play a greater role in local administration, which will trigger a great deal of opposition from the Anuak elite (those who later created the Congress party) who eventually formed a rebel movement. The need for policy coherence and implementation at national level and part political control at local level

seem to have increased the propensity of the EPRDF to interfere in the affairs of the region, and that is not liked at all, especially by the veterans of the GPLM.<sup>66</sup> Many Anuak in the GPLM had consistently shown a tendency to operate independently of the EPRDF and resented the interference of federal government agents in the affairs of running the regional government.

EPRDF representatives to Gambella, as in other peripheral states, operating out of the Prime Minister's Office and later the Ministry of Federal Affairs – officially considered advisors – played a crucial role in political decision making. It is acknowledged that these representatives participate in general council meetings, reconcile differences between coalition parties in government, and conduct the crucial *gimgema* (evaluation) sessions (Young 1990; Dereje 2003).<sup>67</sup> In many instances, such as in 1997, EPRDF-led evaluation sessions resulted in the dismissal and jailing of the chairman and vice-chairman of the region (Young 1991). This angered many in the GPLM.

Before the establishment of the Ministry of Federal Affairs in 2002, the dubious and quasi-legal office of the political advisers represented the federal government. Ostensibly, the office was designed to provide services as part of capacity building of the new regional states. Practically, however, the office functioned as de facto 'king-maker', wielding substantial clout in the region's politics (Young 1999; Dereje 2003).<sup>68</sup> The political mandate of this office was never clearly defined, but its tentacles were ubiquitous in the political economy of the region. In fact, political denunciations and pseudo-criminal charges against party and government

officials constitute another effective strategy in political disputes between and among factions. The issues of citizenship (maximised by the Anuak) and corruption (maximised by the Nuer against Anuak officials) continue to be used to invoke or legitimise the ousting or imprisonment of officials and seldom translate into a formal legal process involving the judiciary.<sup>69</sup> Most are accusations of corruption and mismanagement or claims of supporting what are euphemistically referred to as 'the anti-peace elements', common to almost all EPRDF-led conferences conducted over the years (*Ethiopian Herald* 12–14 August 1997).

The removal from office of successive presidents of the region has been rationalised on the grounds of unspecified corruption charges. The accusations or rhetoric used by the various local actors is mostly of motivated denunciations to be understood in their relations with the federal government. Thus, the vulnerability of the local actors to manipulation and

Difficult  
climate, limited  
capacity, malaria,  
low political  
development  
continues to rock  
political stability



the approaches applied by political actors from the centre seem to have contributed to the fracture of the regional establishment, hence unstable regional administration. The federal government, which could have been instrumental in arbitrating interest disputes, failed dismally to play its proper role. Indeed, its actions created discontent, which will form the basis for future dissent.

Nonetheless, the day-to-day affairs of the regional state continued to be in the hands of local politicians, mainly the Anuak. Then, the question would be, which section of the Anuak? This created dissatisfaction among a sizeable section of the Anuak elite, mainly veteran leaders of Gambella People's Liberation Front (GPLF) who later created the Congress, which was the precursor of the 'new' GPLF.<sup>70</sup> Coupled with the hostile relations with the highlander and Nuer communities, this is central to the present conflictual relationship between the EPRDF-led government and the newly created Anuak armed political movement. Clearly, one of the major problems in Gambella is the failure to create strong political leadership and form a workable political community that articulates its interests at regional level. Far from it, local actors have proved to be parochial, corrupt and incapable, and are locked in conflicting strategies of entitlement, the net result of which is the escalation of rivalries at various levels as fragments of the regional state are captured by one group or another, causing structural paralysis.

It is a truism that the solution to every conflict forms the basis for further conflicts, and this is certainly true of the post-1991 political architecture and its application in Gambella. Ethnic federalism, regardless of how well intentioned it was, did not give local actors the power and influence to prevent conflict. The primary reasons that the new political structure has so far failed to bring stability to the region is because the post-1991 political order produced new political minorities, and the various groups have failed to strike a political bargain and articulate a regional interest. Instead, they have sought to capture fragments of the regional state and its institutions. In the event, they have all increasingly realised the 'rationality' of violence in the politics of group entitlement. Understandably, these antagonistic relations between the two camps will impact negatively on the positions of the Anuak political elite against the highlander community.

### *The highlanders*

On taking power in 1991, the Anuak GPLM had cordial relations with the highlanders in and around Gambella town. But many Anuaks despised the

settlers, accusing them of occupying their land. It is telling that one of the structural issues – permanent occupation of land as a vital resource – continues to be central to inter-group hostilities in Gambella. When the Derg soldiers evacuated the area, Anuak villagers started to attack settlers, plundering their livestock and crops, setting fire to their houses and killing them indiscriminately with rifles and spears.<sup>71</sup> Since the settlers (unlike those in the towns) occupied land in the rural areas, they were the first to incur the wrath of Anuak villagers. Such was the cause of the bloody attack in May 1991 at Ukuna, an area to the east of Abobo town, where 700 Anuak and 3,000 highland settlers lived (Dereje 2003).

The highlanders had settled in Gambella because of the opportunities in that region. Some of them had lived in the region for many years; some have great-grandparents who were born there and know no other place they can call home. But, in a dramatic reversal of power relations, the highlanders who had dominated the region's politics have now assumed a subordinate political status. Affirmative measures

include preferential treatment for locals in the job market (Dereje 2003).<sup>72</sup> Despite this, the highlanders continue to have incentives to work in the region, where there are opportunities for professionals. In fact, the new Gambella regional state continues to be so deficient in local professionals that it has to rely on professionals from other regions and from the centre.<sup>73</sup> Well, the politics of inclusion that aims at promoting the local people has reflected within itself exclusionary currents. By definition, the highlanders emerge as a residual category in the new political dispensation, because they 'belong' to one of the ethno-regional states. They are

neither recognised as a separate political constituency nor reorganised by their ethnic affiliation.<sup>74</sup> Despite their formal political subordination, the highlanders constitute an inconvenient minority in demographic, economic, linguistic and political terms.

According to the 1994 census, the highlanders constitute 25 per cent of the region's population, which makes them the third largest group. Economically they dominate the exchange sector. More decidedly, they provide more than 50 per cent of the skilled labour in the new regional bureaucracy (Dereje 2003). Although affirmative action has already produced a generation of educated local workforce, the highlanders are still predominant in the civil service sector. On the other end of the political spectrum, however, unhappy Anuaks perceive the continued presence of the highlanders as a threat, and fear being squeezed from different directions by the two forces (the Nuer and the highlanders). The widespread perception among

The Anuak  
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their land, and the  
highlanders on  
economic and  
political power



the Anuak is that whereas the Nuer are bent on evicting them from their lands, the highlanders are forcing them from economic and political power.<sup>75</sup> This has created resentment among the Anuak, who believe that these two forces are working to bring the existence of the Anuak people to an end. As stated, many Anuak bitterly resented the arrival of the settlers who were brought to Gambella by the Derg. In May 1991, groups of Anuak villagers attacked and murdered large numbers of highlander farmers who had been living alongside them near the town of Akobo. More recently, a number of ambushes that have been attributed to the armed Anuak have left scores of highlander civilians dead.

The result has been innumerable numbers of violent conflicts between the two groups, which became more deadly in 2003 when countless numbers of people lost their lives on both sides. A series of ambushes along major roads contributed to a widely shared sense of insecurity within Gambella's highlander community. Individuals who record abuses reported to Human Rights Watch that at least 44 people have been killed in ten such ambushes since November 2003 (*HRW 17(3a)(2005)*).<sup>76</sup> It has been argued elsewhere in this study that the status of the highlanders became more complicated, and indeed a thorny issue in the conflict in Gambella. (The increasing apprehension among the Anuak vis-à-vis the highland population and the central government has already been referred to.) This reached its peak on 17 November 2003, when five private contractors working on a road rehabilitation project outside Akobo (40 km south of Gambella town) were ambushed and killed. All five were highlanders and in both Gambella and Addis Ababa the attack was widely blamed on Anuak bandits; no one was ever arrested or tried for the murders. This attack in particular aroused a great deal of fear and anger within the highlander population that live in Gambella region.

The massacre in Gambella town one month after the incident was sparked by a similar and exceptionally vicious attack. On 13 December 2003, a brutal ambush, allegedly committed by armed Anuaks, sparked a bloody three-day rampage in the regional capital in which the government army joined highlanders in the destruction of the town's Anuak neighbourhoods. When the amputated bodies of these workers were displayed in the centre of Gambella town, the highland residents immediately turned into an aggressive mob, and killed hundreds of Anuaks (*HRW 17(3a)(2005)*).<sup>77</sup> According to the Ethiopian government, the perpetrators of the killing were all non-indigenous, referring to the highlanders (Ministry of Federal Affairs 2004). This incident led

to insecurity, as many fled to join either the Anuak insurgency in Pothole-Sudan or the bandits inside Ethiopian territory. Though not new, this incident was a turning point in Gambella's long history of conflict and insecurity. Clearly, it was a watershed in relations between the Anuak and the highlanders, and by extension the EPRDF-led central government. The attack in Dima, a goldmine area, on 30 January 2004 claimed more civilian lives than any other single incident since the December 2003 killings in Gambella town (Anuak Justice Council 2004).<sup>78</sup> These incidents will deepen the animosity between the two communities and aggravate instability in the region.

## **Inventory of the Main Actors, Interests and Current Positions**

### ***The Anuak***

Immediately after taking power, GPLM leaders had to deal with three major internal and external challenges: maintain internal unity among themselves, improve relations with the new EPRDF-led government in Addis; and resolve the Nuer problem. In all three cases, I believe, they did not succeed. Divisions beset the GPLM; most of its leaders increasingly challenged the dominant position and influence of the EPRDF in the region and took a hard-line position on the Nuer. These will determine the nature of the conflict between the Anuak and the EPRDF (by extension the highlander population) as well as the Anuak and the Nuer. Given the legacy of economic underdevelopment and the absence of basic infrastructures, post-Derg regional government was destined to be weak and unstable. The GPLM could not deliver and the socio-economic situation remained largely unchanged, which partly explains the continuous intervention, for good or for worse, of the EPRDF into the affairs of the region.

There has been a pronounced and chronic power struggle for leadership and senior posts since the GPLM seized political power in Gambella region. Divisions and conflicts among the Anuak elites became much more severe than during the Derg regime. Arbitrary appointments and dismissals became frequent.<sup>79</sup> The struggle occurred on two levels: among the Anuak who belonged to the GPLM; and between GPLM members and non-members. Another version of the division was between pro-Derg and anti-Derg Anuak groups. Still another factor for the division is assumed by many people to be between the Lul and Uppeno, or between the Anuak of Baro and those of Gilo (*HRW 17(3a)(2005)*).<sup>80</sup> Recent findings by the Criminal Investigation Department of Gambella Regional Police reveal that the split between the Baro

Resentment of highlanders by Anuak turns into bloody massacres, further deepening animosity and tensions in Gambella





and the Gilo Anuak has brought far-reaching political implications, mainly in Anuak-highlander relations. Many of the GPLM officers were from Uppeno (who developed good relations with the EPRDF and showed high regard for the highlander population), and dominated the 1991 regional government. The highlanders refer to this group as the 'Uppeno Boys', whose government they regarded as the 'mother of the highlanders', because of good relations between the Anuak and themselves (*HRW 17(3a)(2005)*).

Before the 1995 election, many government officials of this group, including the president of the regional state, Okelo Oman, were detained and expelled from the GPLM, and this facilitated the 'Gilo group' to seize power in the next election.<sup>81</sup> The Gilo Anuak emerged victorious and immediately began to pursue an anti-highlander policy.<sup>82</sup> The main source of discontent was lack of real devolution of power to the region and lack of commitment on the part of the federal government (historically associated with the highlander population) to check the continued encroachment of the Nuer onto both Anuak lands and regional political power. This had also threatened the dominant position the Uppeno Anuak had had in the police force since 1991. Previous Uppeno Anuak police personnel that lost their jobs through *gimgema* (evaluation sessions) immediately went to the bush to play a major role in subsequent Anuak-led banditry.<sup>83</sup> This being the case, the political measures taken by the EPRDF will not satisfy both camps of the Anuak; neither will they bring political stability.

In 1998 the EPRDF presided over (the Anuaks say 'dictated') the merger between the (purged) GPLM and the GPDUP to form an umbrella political grouping called the GPDF (Gambella People's Democratic Front). The GPDF was not a member of the EPRDF, but it was affiliated with and controlled by it. Within the GPDF, the GPLM and the GPDUP continued to function as the Anuak and the Nuer parties, respectively (*HRW 17(3a)(2005)*; Dereje 2003). This further angered large sections of Anuak intellectuals, particularly the Anuaks of Gilo (*HRW 17(3a)(2005)*). When a discontented group of Anuak established an opposition party, the GPDC (Gambella People's Democratic Congress) often referred to as 'Congress', the EPRDF-affiliated GPDF reacted fiercely to suppress it (*HRW 17(3a)(2005)*).<sup>84</sup> Instead of being a new forum to build confidence and trust between the two conflict-ridden communities, the political motif of the GPDF became the elimination of Congress. No serious effort was made to strike a political bargain and accommodation between the competing elites. This was justified on the grounds that Congress members represented

the militant Anuak, whose project was to get rid of the Nuer and the highlanders from Gambella (*HRW 17(3a)(2005)*). Although some ordinary Nuer and highlanders entertained a similar fear, the GPDC never had the chance to go public. If, at all, there is anything with which to judge its political credibility, its spectacular rise to pre-eminence, at least among the Anuak in the 2000 election, suggests that it is a political force with a wider social base than its label as anti-peace and narrow by the GPDF suggests.

In the run up to the 2000 election, members of the GPDC were imprisoned and their electoral successes in some districts were cancelled (*HRW 17(3a)(2005)*).<sup>85</sup> With the violent suppression of Congress, the first attempt at a meaningful opposition to the ruling GPDF was nipped in the bud, leaving an embittered constituency of largely Anuak extraction. Anuaks felt increasingly marginalised from political reconstruction in Gambella region. This will lead to the deterioration of relations with the EPRDF and the highlander community at large, spiralling mutual hatred and hostilities. Having removed an opposition, the GPDF fractured into its units and ultimately dissolved in 2003 in the wake of the killings in Gambella town. This particular incident further alienated the Anuaks. A large population of students and pupils from the Anuak, between 5,000 and 8,000, fled the country (Ministry of Federal Affairs 2004). Most Congress members crossed the border to start a new rebellion, GPLF II. The result was immediate in that an organised Anuak rebel group started to operate along the border areas and engage in brutal retaliatory attacks against civilians, most of whom were highlanders (Ministry of Federal Affairs 2004).<sup>86</sup> The way in

which local actors tried to react to the new political structure, mobilise their followers and take advantage of the situation largely explains the recurrence, or the intensity, of conflicts in Gambella.

The major dissident group in the area is thus the Anuak-led GPLF. Its attitude to resource distribution, be it political power, land or water resources, is central to its antagonistic relations with the other actors in the region, ranging from the EPRDF and the highlander community to the various Nuer armed/political groups. This group led by Anuak intellectuals and activists in the diaspora claims to protect the interest of the Anuak vis-à-vis what it calls the expansion of the Nuer and the highlander community in Gambella. It also complains that despite the ethnic federal structure, Anuaks are not allowed to govern themselves owing to interference from the EPRDF-led government. The Anuak diaspora from the US supports this group, which is centred on the

GPLM  
fractured over  
differing ideologies  
resulting in  
Anuak dissents  
and rebel  
groups



Pochalla-Nairobi corridor, and contacts are facilitated through Kenya.

This group is not monolithic and there are differing views on the means and objectives of struggle. While hardliners support armed struggle, others, particularly the Anuak Justice Council, oppose violent methods and encourage peaceful political change. The GPDM (which is a member of the United Ethiopian Democratic Front (UEDF)) also opposes armed struggle. In addition, in the Anuak dissident movement there are those who favour independence (mainly because of the potential of oil), others who favour joining Southern Sudan, while the majority want to remain part of Ethiopia under a fair representative political system. Identifying these groups and their interests greatly informs the mechanisms for conflict management. The group does not have good relations with the Nuer, the SPLA or the Ethiopian government. The level of cooperation with other dissident groups is at best low, even non-existent. There are other Anuak groups (at least two of them) that are engaged mainly in banditry, but the dissident group could use them for publicity. A Sudan-based insurgent group led by a former Derg official Thuwath Pal Chay, who aligns himself with the Ethiopian Patriotic United Front (EPUF), has also been active in the region for the last four years (Ministry of Federal Affairs 2004).<sup>87</sup> Reports obtained from the regional police indicate that Anuak insurgents are openly given military training by the SPLA administration at Pochalla in Sudan. They also enjoy the support of Anuak senior officials in Gambella, particularly from the Gilo group (Ministry of Federal Affairs 2004).<sup>88</sup>

Their main area of operation is the Pochalla–Dima corridor, along the major rivers of the region, from the north, the Baro (Uppeno), Gilo, Akobo, and Oboth, and Alwero, the tributary of the Baro, where most of the Anuak villages are found. The major towns of the region, such as Gambella, Itang, Pugnido, Abobo and Berhane Selam, which are located along these rivers, are strategically very important for the group (Ministry of Federal Affairs 2004).<sup>89</sup> Ex-GPLM members lead the Anuak rebel headquarters at Pochalla. Reports show that attempts were made to recruit and train from among the Murle and the Nuer, by the SPLA (Anuak) administration at Pochalla in order to increase the fighting force. The Anuak are also trying to win the Nuer over to their side, claiming that the highlanders are their common enemies. According to the latest information, the Anuak rebel group is divided into 15 segments, and each segment consists of 20 fighters.<sup>90</sup> These armed groups are still operating along the Bonga–Pochalla axis, and enjoy great support among peasant associations such as Ukunna, Terchari, and Dabang, in Abobo wereda

and also in the Anuak Pugnido village on the Gilo River. Many peasants in these areas are members of the rebel group, and even some leaders and many youth of the peasant associations have undergone military training at Pochalla, and have come back to their villages to train other peasants.<sup>91</sup> As a result, the areas along the border, especially the areas from Pugnido to Pochalla River, have remained unstable, pitting Anuak insurgents against the government army.

For example, on 30 October 2005 these anti-government forces made a surprise attack and killed 11 people, including the regional police commissioner, Mr Didumo (Ministry of Federal Affairs 2004).<sup>92</sup> The operation also targeted the military arsenal, and weapons were stolen.<sup>93</sup> This incident was politically motivated, and is very unlikely to have been conducted by Anuak bandits, whose main interest is robbery and looting. The problem is that the Anuak rebellion is not monolithic. It includes Sudan-based rebels fighting against the Ethiopian government for Anuak ‘self-determination’; farmers carrying out isolated revenge attacks against Ethiopian government soldiers and civilians; and a small number of radicalised gunmen who seem to target the highlander population as a whole. True, the major Anuak insurgent group, the Gambella People’s Liberation Front (GPLF), operates from Southern Sudan and has staged a handful of attacks inside Gambella. Oral sources, however, attest to the presence of at least one other armed Anuak group operating in Gambella, composed of perhaps two dozen fighters, led by a small group of former regional police officers.<sup>94</sup> There is convergence between the two groups such as the common hatred of highlanders, but there is clear divergence on the means and broad objectives of struggle.

The horrific attacks on passengers and settlers by Anuak bandits involved amputating and mutilating bodies. From 2003 to 2005, the group carried out a number of killings at different places. There were isolated killings of individuals such as settlers in the forests and on roads. The aim of such brutality, according to the captives, was to terrorise the highlanders and to hasten their evacuation from the region.<sup>95</sup> Recently, however, the potential of oil exploration is figuring prominently in the political position of the Anuak insurgency. The oil factor began to be entertained by the Anuak elite after the Derg brought the Russians to the region, who intensively surveyed the Baro-Akobo basins in 1987. After the survey, it was widely reported that the Baro–Akobo basins contain immense deposits of precious minerals such as gold and tungsten and also petroleum. Since then the Anuak have begun to feel overconfident and

### Anuak rebels seek support of Nuer in identifying highlanders as the common enemy



to talk a great deal about their Eldorado and their fertile lands.<sup>96</sup> But it was not until October 2005 that oil became part of official Anuak political discourse. Obviously, exploration for oil is a point of attraction for the holders of power from Addis to Khartoum and Juba.

The short-term interests of the GPLF are the release of Anuak 'political' prisoners and the cessation of exploration for oil.<sup>97</sup> In the medium term they want amnesty and freedom to operate freely as a political party in the region. In the long term, and based on follow up of the above demands, they want negotiations with the government that could lead to a political settlement in which the Anuaks control regional affairs.

### ***The central government***

Against this background, the Ethiopian military, for the past few years, has undertaken operations aimed at rooting out armed Anuak groups operating in Gambella, some of which are based in Southern Sudan.<sup>98</sup> However, this has not prevented similar attacks by Anuak rebels. The attack in Dima, a goldmine area on 30 January 2004, claimed more civilian lives than any other single incident since the December 2003 killings in Gambella town. In March 2004, armed Anuak attacked a highlander village near Akobo, known as Village 13 (Anuak Justice Council 2004). It remains unclear to what extent any organised group or groups are responsible for these attacks. However, according to Ethiopian government sources, around 200-armed Anuaks were involved in the killing in Dima (Ministry of Federal Affairs 2004). Several people, including Anuak villagers and some government officials and members of civil society, said they believed many of these attacks were acts of revenge. Revenge for what? And against whom?

Since the federal state and its military in Gambella are considered to be highlanders, many Anuak see highlander civilians as legitimate targets in reprisals for what they call government killing of Anuak civilians in December 2003 (Anuak Justice Council 2004).<sup>99</sup> Regardless of who was responsible for the series of attacks of the Anuak-led regional administration prior to 2003, contributed to the widespread perception that the regional authorities were not committed to stopping or even seriously investigating the attacks. That perception in turn fuelled the growing ethnic tensions that exploded with such violence on 13 December 2003. Some of these attacks have been particularly brutal. In spite of the efforts of federal and military authorities to bring the perpetrators to

justice, almost none of them have been arrested or prosecuted. In general, military interventions by the government usually stop short of altering the balance of power between the two groups. This does not mean that the government did not try to apply political measures to resolve the resource-based territorial conflict between the Anuak and the Nuer.

The interventions and policies pursued by the central government of Ethiopia, at different times, have greatly impacted on the situation in which the conflicting parties find themselves. As such, three points may be discerned. One is the extreme neglect and lack of interest shown on the part of the Ethiopian government and its officials on the ground in resolving the Anuak-Nuer conflict. Second, when they did intervene, they pursued unilateralist interventions, driven mainly by parochial party interests, often sidelining the sensitivities and interests of the conflicting parties, primarily the Anuak. Indeed, the measures have largely focused on controlling local players, as events surrounding the banning of Congress members show. Moreover, state intervention is focused on symptoms, not root causes, and is not sustained. At most, interventions by federal authorities focus on temporary reconciliation between the parties to the conflict rather than investigating its root causes and its resolution in a sustainable manner (Anuak Justice Council 2004).<sup>100</sup> Unless it influenced wider state security concerns, the government showed no interest in engaging militarily and politically. The interests or benefits the federal government sees in the region could be political (mainly in the form of maintaining the status quo) and economic, basically peace and development (Ministry of Federal Affairs 2004).<sup>101</sup> Then, the problem lies in the way in which it tried to achieve this objective.

### **Resolving the Anuak-Nuer conflict was not a priority on the agenda of the Ethiopian government**

In dealing with the problem, the central government increasingly relied on the security or military approach. This is partly attributed to the political culture dominant at national level; hence it deserves some analysis beyond the local context. The EPRDF-led government and regional authorities approached the problem of Anuak insurgency from a security point of view, and not a political one. True to its tradition, and faced with a security challenge, the EPRDF proved ill prepared to respond politically and instead drew on its traditions as a liberation movement and defined the problem as a security issue that would be dealt with using security means. An informed and flexible approach is needed, the more so because the Anuak rebellion is not monolithic, while the response of the government is one and the same. The central government needs to differentiate between the two and prepare response mechanisms accordingly.



Many Anuak and independent observers complain that the central government failed to establish police and military garrisons in the contested areas and along the most volatile border regions.<sup>102</sup> They recall that during the Haile Selassie period there were garrisons along the border, which were effective in controlling the situation. Well, the problem was not as grave as it is at present, but at least there was some mechanism. The situation became more complicated when the Derg left the border to the whips of a foreign force, the SPLA. The issue is that there is no Ethiopian authority along the border. The Ethiopian army is stationed mainly in Gambella and its environs, partly owing to the inhospitable climate of the border areas, partly owing to security, and because of other priorities. Locals say that dealing with instability and displacement of civilians along the border areas should have been the priority of the Ethiopian government and its army. After all, the seizure of Anuak land will ultimately mean the occupation of Ethiopian sovereign territory. In recent years, the focus of the army has been on Anuak insurgency and banditry, and it is reportedly reluctant to become involved in the Anuak-Nuer conflict (Ministry of Federal Affairs 2004).<sup>103</sup> Government intervention needs to go beyond short-term security interests. It is argued, quite correctly, that it should have discharged its responsibilities and prerogatives by establishing its presence adjacent to the border areas, implementing regulations of citizenship and forbidding members of both groups to carry rifles when coming to graze or water in the contested areas. Generally, government actions had resulted in a further loss of territory by the Anuak and indirectly damaged their security. (This point was explained in its historical context and in some detail in previous sections.)

The new EPRDF government in 1991 restructured what was a highly centralised state into a federation whose self-administering constituent units are ethnic groups. The measure was aimed particularly at defusing conflicts that had undermined previous regimes. No doubt, the implementation of a policy popularly known as 'ethnic federalism' has created a new political space and institutional design to promote local empowerment. This is reflected, among others, in the redistribution of administrative power. The local communities have their own regional state, as did other nationalities in the country. This arrangement solved another problem, but not the Anuak-Nuer conflict. It may have addressed whatever political domination and cultural hegemony existed prior to 1991 in the form of highlands-lowland dichotomy. But it failed to prevent the eruption of conflict at local level. This has become even more difficult when the area in question is part of a volatile neighbourhood.

## **Sudanese actors**

The Sudanese civil war, mainly the activities of the SPLA since the mid 1980s, has negatively impacted on the security of Gambella. The civil war in Southern Sudan has never been one in which the territories of armed groups were strictly demarcated or in which individuals had strong loyalties to these groups. Instead, it produced a patchwork of areas under the control of different armed groups and some of these areas and groups changed frequently. Groups joined to or aligned with the SPLA or the government of Sudan (GoS) might quickly go back to the opposition, perhaps to return again. With that in mind, the following section is a bare outline of the nature of key groups, their strategies and operation and spillover impact on the stability of Gambella and the wider region.

In August 1991 the splinter group from mainstream SPLA, the Nasir faction (SPLA United) and all of the former Nuer Derg officials who fled Gambella were in Nasir. Apparently, these groups, unhappy as they were about the strategic and political decisions of the EPRDF and the GPLM, must have combined their forces in the very well planned invasion of Gambella region in January 1992. One group came to Itang along the Baro River and the other advanced to Jor along the Gilo River. The invaders were predominantly Nuer, although forces from other ethnic groups such as the Dinka were included. The invading forces were in military uniforms, equipped with rifles, mortars, launchers and machine guns (James 2002; Kurimoti 2003).<sup>104</sup> They fought against Anuak villagers including former militia of Gambella. In Itang they captured and burned down 18 villages. In Jor nine villages were burnt, but Anuak villagers fought them fiercely and finally repulsed them (James 2002; Kurimoti 2003).<sup>105</sup>

As a result of the fighting, Itang and Jor areas were completely devastated. In the invasion of Itang and Jor, obviously the Nasir faction of the SPLA was involved in assisting the Nuer villagers and Nuer refugees. From the Anuak point of view, the Nasir SPLA leadership had deliberately planned and carried out the operation against them (James 2002; Kurimoti 2003). This and similar incidents in Itang are so critical to the conflict that today most Anuaks complain bitterly about them and consider the rectification as the single major precondition for durable peace with the Nuer. In similar fashion, in July 1992 a group of armed men, led by a Nuer prophet and in military uniforms, with many women and children came to Itang from Sudan. The Nuer men then started shooting and killing the highlanders and EPRDF soldiers. About 200 highlanders, including about 47

## **Ethnic federalism solved cultural hegemony in Gambella but not the Anuak-Nuer conflict**



EPRDF soldiers, were killed.<sup>106</sup> This may have been related to traditional Nuer expansion, which became politicised and militarised, with the coming of the SPLA to the region and later with the split in the organisation. As such, it will be premature to consider it an act supported by the SPLA leadership with an irredentist agenda for Gambella.

Arguably, the Nuers in the SPLA may have difficulty in openly advancing expansionist plans. But there is widespread perception in the area that some elements in the SPLA harbour hidden irredentist agendas for Gambella. However, evidence remains weak, even if it cannot be completely dismissed. Allegedly, many Southern Sudanese consider Gambella part of South Sudan and regard the highlands around Bonga, a locality called Baro Kello, as the border between Ethiopia and Southern Sudan.<sup>107</sup> What is clear today is that the SPLA as an organisation or the GoSS is desperate to have full and effective control in its areas of influence.

To this effect, in the short and medium term the SPLA aspires to control the activities of the various militias and Nuer tribes. But it lacks capacity and popular mobilisation. As such, it needs to team up with the Ethiopian government to consolidate its grip in the south. In the long run, what could be its agenda on the Gambella region? Nobody can tell. Despite the signal that the SPLA Anuak administration in Pochalla-Sudan and some Nuer sections of the organisation want to advance their own local agendas, there is nothing that shows that the SPLA leadership or the GoSS are openly involved in the politics of destabilisation against Ethiopia. Both sides need each other, at least for the time being. But there are potential spoilers.

At this point it is necessary to interject a brief description of the security situation in South Sudan after the peace agreement between the south and the north. Eighteen months after the signing of the CPA on 9 January 2005 no dividends of that 'peace' are evident anywhere on the ground bordering Gambella. This is owing to a combination of genuine practical problems (infrastructure, slow disbursement of insufficient funds), sabotage (the National Congress Party (NCP)) taking advantage of every element of the southern situation from militias to oil revenue and from border delimitation to tribal conflicts), incompetence (the southern administration is mostly incompetent) and corruption.<sup>108</sup> Although this deterioration is obvious all over the south, its most preoccupying point is the escalation of violence in eastern Upper Nile. The recent deterioration of security in the areas bordering Gambella has been caused by a combination of

factors: the omnipresence of light weapons; poor integration of militias into SAF or SPLA, in spite of the CPA and the Juba Declaration of January 2006; the rush of young and not-so-young men to get married; the deflationary monetary situation of the south; and, most importantly, the way in which the SPLA disarmament programme is being carried out.

In Upper Nile, the continuation of the improbably named 'Operation Finish' has caused renewed fighting between mostly Dinka SPLA units in charge of disarmament and the Nuer militias they were supposed to disarm (Kurimoti 2003).<sup>109</sup> The reasons are twofold: the continuing efforts of SAF to foster insecurity;<sup>110</sup> and SPLM's militarism and failure to develop viable systems of conflict resolution and public administration. SAF's military intelligence or the *Mukhabarat's* actions since the signing of the CPA, as has been the case for decades, have made it clear that it has not entirely stopped supporting militia groups and fostering instability in the south.

But the clumsy heavy-handed way in which SPLA commanders moved into the Jonglei state with a large force made up almost entirely of Dinka soldiers had deplorable effects. Far from stopping the Nuer sections and the Murle from killing one another, the operation added another ethnic dimension to the existing mess. Similarly the SPLA conducted civilian disarmament in Akobo, bordering Gambella.<sup>111</sup> The disarmament of Akobo is part of an attempt to combat lawlessness. Arms were once considered integral to life in the area. More than 1,000 men and boys in Akobo County relinquished their weapons to local authorities, asking nothing in return. In January 2006, a forced disarmament programme by the new SPLA authority sparked further violence in Jonglei state, as many in the region felt their guns were being taken by force. Disarmed villagers maintained they had no way of protecting themselves from nearby villagers who still possessed weapons (IRIN 2006).<sup>112</sup> Akobo residents in particular say they are still concerned about the threat of attack from the neighbouring Murle, asking, 'Who will protect us?'

The Lou and Murle are long-standing rivals and the Lou had been attacked several times by the Murle as late as April 2006. The Lou claim that 150 members have been killed in Murle raids since December 2005. Authorities say the police force must be built up so that it can protect civilians. Police officers lack training and uniforms, and often look like armed civilians. But supporters of voluntary disarmament stress that those who relinquish their weapons will be provided with more benefits than those who keep them (IRIN 2006). Although it was relatively peaceful,

### The weak security situation in southern Sudan has had spill-over effects into Gambella



the negative trickle-down effect of disarmament in Akobo is shown in terms of arms flow to the Gambella region. The price of armaments has also decreased.<sup>113</sup> The recent attempt to disarm Nuer groups inside the Ethiopian border, apparently without the consent of Ethiopian authorities, attracted suspicious reactions from the Ethiopian side. In fact, Ethiopian authorities oppose unilateral disarmament for fear that the Murle and the Lou might use the disarmament, or the confusion around it, to launch attacks on the Anuak and Nuer in Gambella.

The Ethiopian government argued that the communities on its side needed their weapons to protect themselves from the Lou and the Murle, and that the SPLA had to first, or simultaneously, disarm the two communities. It has also raised the issue of sovereignty and suspicion of SPLA's intentions. Ethiopian authorities also allege that the SPLA disarmament campaign is making the communities on the Ethiopian side, mainly the Jikan Nuer, vulnerable to Lou and Murle attacks.<sup>114</sup> Unilateral disarmament by the SPLA seems to have complicated, and in some instances, aggravated the fragile security situation on both sides of the border. As a result, civilian disarmament confined to just the south will inevitably not provide security. This needs to be rectified and properly managed, based on considerations of regional security. Of late, there seems to have been an appreciation of this fact among the SPLA leadership and Gambella regional government circles, but thus far there is little indication of the necessary political will or capacity to undertake such a coordinated and large-scale disarmament.

A complicating factor is the resurgence of large-scale cattle raiding across the border. In recent months (since June 2006) ethnic clashes have multiplied all over the south, some with a political overtone, others simply a result of conflict over resources and a total lack of economic opportunities. The Lou of South Sudan also began waves of raids into Akobo district from mid 2005 onwards. Then some thousands of armed Lou occupied Ethiopian territory and demanded Ethiopian citizenship (GPDC Monthly Report June 2006).<sup>115</sup> The cause was, as usual, a mixture of cattle and marriage problems.<sup>116</sup> Although resources continue to be the motivating factor, new social upheavals are largely responsible for the recent raids by the Lou into Ethiopian border areas.

Many men who did not marry for many years because they were fighting in the war (aged up to 40) now, because of relative peace, want wives, which has rocketed the bride price. At the same time, there is no cash, everybody has a gun, and herds have been

depleted by the war, which have led to widespread armed theft, cattle rustling and cross-border raids.<sup>117</sup> This by no means rules out the fact that the Lou have long suffered from shortages of pastureland in Akobo, Sudan, which partly explains the recent, but continued pressure on Gambella. The latest Lou attack was on 13 May 2006. They crossed the international border and attacked a village called Banbale, in Akobo wereda, the objective being a cattle raid (GPDC Monthly Report June 2006). The federal and regional governments appear to have done very little in response to these aggressive Lou (and Murle) attacks and raids on the Nuer of Akobo and Jikowo, which seem to be the most pressing security problem along the border. Reports show that Ethiopian government troops at the oil site have not done anything to help the attacked, looted and displaced Nuer of Jikowo.<sup>118</sup> Still another complicating factor is the emergence of large-scale cross-border cattle raiding by the Murle.

In fact, both Sudanese and Ethiopian Nuer described cattle rustling by the Murle as the major cause of insecurity in the area in recent months.<sup>119</sup> In places where the SPLA has a reasonable amount of control, such as Equatoria or Bahr-el-Ghazal, cattle rustling remains roughly under control.<sup>120</sup> But in Upper Nile, bordering the Gambella region, where the SPLA is in a conflict situation with the Nuer sections, as one commentator describes it,<sup>121</sup> all hell has broken loose. Partly, the conflict in Gambella and adjacent bordering areas has to do with forgotten and failed DDRs. Clearly, one major legacy of the conflict in the region is weaponry. The Derg army, the SPLA, and the Nasir Faction all left armaments in the area. With an abundance of guns, there are markets for weapons and ammunition,

so supplies can be replenished and more firearms acquired. The whole issue of tribes-in-arms in the Horn of Africa region is well advanced with certain sections of the Nuer bordering and/or crossing the border of Gambella region of Ethiopia. Many Nuer and Murle are configured in militarised mode. They seem to be accustomed to a certain level of violence, including homicide in inter-communal raids and disputes. The Murle are a pastoralist community of South Sudan who traditionally believe that all cattle belong to them and they have to gain them back through raids. They are always armed and are fierce fighters. The Murle regard raiding as heroism, and capture women and children.<sup>122</sup> Currently there have been new waves of Murle attacks and cattle raids of the Ethiopian Nuer.

On 14–15 April 2006 the Murle attacked the Pal Buol (also called the Lare) in Jikowo wereda, and 16 people were killed and 9 wounded. The attackers

### New social upheavals further complicate conflict in the Gambella region



looted more than 500 heads of cattle. On 22 April 2006, in another Murle attack on Ngor village in Jikowo wereda, 27 Nuer were killed and about 39 wounded, and 11 Murle were killed in the fighting. On 29 April 2006, the Murle of South Sudan made attacks and raids deep into Itang wereda on Puldeng and Berhanena Selam villages and in the incident 5 people were killed and 3 badly wounded. Because of the frequent attacks, thousands of Ethiopian Nuers have been displaced from their dry-season villages, and most have crossed the border to South Sudan for safety.<sup>123</sup> Apart from the culture of raiding, the Murle suffer from severe problems of pasture and water. Another complicated issue in these attacks is that they are targeted where oil exploration is being carried out (HEKS Gambella Report April 2006). Although feared for their military prowess and cattle rustling skills, the Murle are a small tribe that have always had to tread a careful path between their much larger Nuer and Bor Dinka neighbours in particular. The Murle are heavily armed and most people of the area suspected that the Khartoum government was involved in the supply of arms. The SPLA may not take sole responsibility for the problem.

Clearly, there is little or no control and restraint on pro-Khartoum Nuer armed militias such as Simon Gatwich's and the one led by Gordon Kong. For instance, in eastern Upper Nile the SAF is using Brigadier Gordon Kong, a Jikan Nuer and key SSDF warlord, on the Sobat around Nasir<sup>124</sup> to unload a lot of guns to a variety of Nuer sections (Bul, Dok, Gun, Gaajak, Gajuk, Mor), so that they fight one another. Kong is at large in Nasir, but he is losing allies and militia daily to the SPLA and is left with a small minority, based in the locality of Ketbec, his traditional headquarters. He has, however, continued to send some of his forces to Malakal for training by the SAF, where they are supposedly being trained for participation in the Southern Joint Integrated Units (JIU) on the government side (IAG Briefing SSDF April 2006). That said, elements of the White Army and forces of Kong (mostly operating from Adar) are still the cause of isolated, but recurrent problems in the area north of Nasir.<sup>125</sup> But the security situation in eastern Upper Nile was particularly unstable owing to the activities of the White Army – which largely drew its strength from within the Nuer cattle camps – and its habit of switching allegiance between the SSDF and the SPLA. All these represent a security threat on both sides of the border, since all of these forces are poorly disciplined, have had a couple of confrontations, and there were expectations that more could break out.

Simon Gatwich (Lou Nuer) is playing his own game, and so is the Murle warlord Ismail Kony.<sup>126</sup>

### The Gambella conflict has potential to become interstate as it appears to be serving regional interests

Indeed, cross-border raiding by the Murle constitutes the major security threat along the border.<sup>127</sup> Pro-Khartoum militia leaders such as Ismail Kony play an important role in the Murle being better organised and equipped.<sup>128</sup> Recurrent Murle raids are serious problems for the Nuer of Jikowo and Akobo districts of Gambella. It seems that the SAF and its affiliate the *Mukhabarat* support these groups, through its allies in the area, to get at the government of South Sudan, but the spill-over effect on the Ethiopian side is becoming devastating. Unless the SPLM (or GoSS) moves quickly to establish effective systems of administration, oversee programmes of development, and respond to widespread grievances, there is a real danger that adjacent border areas between Ethiopia and South Sudan will enter into another era of turmoil. This will also depend on the full implementation of the CPA.

There is growing frustration and disappointment among the people about what they perceive as lack of progress in CPA implementation. In the long term, the biggest threat to security on the border and Southern Sudan in general is not posed by northern subversion, but by the inability of the SPLM to effectively transform itself from a rebel movement into a strong and effective governing party. Nonetheless, the SPLM and northern Sudanese military intelligence are not the only external actors in the Gambella conflict.

#### **Other non-state actors**

Owing to the structure of the sub-region and the practice of governments, local conflicts always risk becoming interstate or regional conflicts. The conflict in Gambella is no different. Most of the governments in the region frantically struggle to divide and weaken internal enemies and their foreign interventionist challengers. Does the conflict in Gambella serve regional actors? In this particular case, yes, which is relevant to the politics of destabilisation engineered mainly by Eritrea, and targets almost all corners of the Ethiopian periphery, including Gambella. There are Ethiopian opposition groups that are partially or totally supported and controlled by the Eritrean regime, which intends to use them as pawns in a complex security and diplomatic game, aimed principally at hurting Ethiopia. This includes Thuwath Pal's group and OLF.

*Thuwath Pal's group:* This small group, led by a Nuer called Thuwath Pal (governor of Gambella during the Derg) is different from the other Nuer tribal armed groups in that it allies with pan-Ethiopian organisations and it is less certain whether it has a Nuer agenda, be it purely resources or political. Thuwath Pal is aligned



with Eritrea and Eritrea-supported anti-EPRDF armed groups such as the Ethiopian Patriotic Front and the OLF. This group has no clear political programme. Thuwath's group, like the Eritrean government, wants to destabilise the region and make things difficult for the EPRDF.<sup>129</sup> Nothing more, nothing less. Given its weakness and political naivety, this group will continue to be completely at the mercy of Eritrean or certain Sudanese 'friends' and could be forced to accept almost anything these forces want it to, which requires a different approach to engagement.

*The OLF:* As an Oromo insurgency movement, fighting against the Ethiopian government, the OLF seeks to secure an entry point along the western borderlands of Ethiopia and create an alliance with anti-EPRDF rebel groups, both Anuak and Nuer. To this end, the OLF, with the help of Eritrea (and possibly some elements in Sudanese army intelligence), is active on the border between Gambella and Wellega, the Anfillo-Dembidollo corridor, particularly Wanke and/or Pakag. Like the other Ethiopian insurgent movements, OLF members are given military training at Sawa with the support of the Eritrean government and are brought by plane to Pochalla, and then to Tirgol in the Akobo wereda of Gambella. Through Gambella, they travel to northern Oromo territories such as Mugi and Begi, where they recruit and train Oromo youth, most of them students.

But OLF's connections in the region are deep-rooted and interest in the area goes beyond the practical realities of waging an armed struggle. It is political. In fact, in the late 1980s the newly created Anuak rebel group, the GPLM, appealed first to the OLF for help. But the OLF made its support conditional upon the acceptance of Oromo supremacy in the area, among which the Anuak rebels acknowledge their followers as 'black Oromos'; something the movement was not prepared to do (Young 1999). Clearly, the OLF has grand ambitions in the area and regards Gambella region (partly because in the past it was under Illubabur province) as part of Greater Oromiya. Thereafter the GPLM was forced to sever relations and establish links with the TPLF. These groups, along with ex-GPLM members (in the new GPLF) and the EPF in recent months have reportedly made their base at Pochalla, the Anuak territory in the Sudan.

Because of recent developments in the region, mainly in Sudan and Somalia, Asmara is playing an increasingly important regional game, literally turning itself into a rear base for regional destabilisation and aspiring to become a small-size regional hegemony. Of particular interest is the recent rapprochement

between Eritrea and Sudan and its possible impact on the security of western Ethiopian regions, including Gambella. Both sides have denied the cooling off, but it is noticeable that this allows Eritrea to use Sudanese territory to infiltrate anti-EPRDF guerrillas into the western Ethiopian region of Kwara all the way to Gambella. It is not an exaggeration to argue that, although it is possible to manage the conflict in Gambella at local and national level, its resolution in a sustainable manner has to await the establishment of a workable and robust peace and security architecture in the sub-region.

### **Conclusion**

The Gambella regional state has seen protracted factional fighting and inter-community violence since the late 1980s. Political developments in the region have been shaped by events on either side of the frontier, as well as by complex relations among indigenous peoples, and between them and immigrants and officials from highland areas of Ethiopia. Despite its economic significance and strategic location, the Gambella region and its population had been loosely integrated into the Ethiopian state system before 1991. The physical setting partly explains its socio-economic marginality and strategic sensitivity. There have always been clashes between the two major communities – the Anuak and the Nuer – mainly over resources and for socio-cultural reasons. What is striking, however, is the transformation in the nature and intensity of conflicts over the past several decades. The sources of conflict have been aggravated in recent years as social and political formations evolve, and the role of traditional authorities in preventing and managing conflict declines. Prominent among these is the destruction of traditional values of solidarity on the question of land use and tenure. This ultimately led to the breakdown of all previous contacts and mutual agreements that allow agro-pastoralists limited access, in times of scarcity, to pasture and water. As grazing land became scarcer, the Anuak and Nuer stopped accommodating each other. Exclusivity is increasingly favoured over reciprocity. One important message of this study is that indigenous mechanisms need to be better understood and reviewed in terms of their functionality with particular reference to their relevance and application at various levels of conflict.

One reason for recurring violent conflict in the study area is the absence of democratic institutions to negotiate disputes and mediate competition. Poorly informed and planned conflict resolution interventions have worsened the insecurity. In almost all instances of

## Conflict resolution in Gambella depends on peace and security architecture in the sub-region





a series of conflicts in Gambella – as all over Ethiopia – there is little evidence of attempts at peaceful resolution. Many disputes lead to violent conflict. The struggles to subdue the regions or control the central state by the various contenders from the early period of state formation to the present day have been, in most cases, violent. Most of the new conflicts in the region, however, have emerged in the unique context of regional security shake-up, political transition and complex restructuring of the Ethiopian state. This study has highlighted the role of the Sudanese civil war and political developments in Ethiopia in interstate security. On the one hand, decentralisation and the establishment of administrative regions in Ethiopia have brought the government closer to the people. By doing so, it was intended that decision making would reflect local needs, though at the current time the regional governments remain highly dependent on the centre (and the national ruling party) for political and financial patronage.

The post-1991 political order in Ethiopia seems to have offered new opportunities to and increased the need by local elites to create new administrative centres to attract funds from the government. The nature of land and natural resource competition is changing from access and use, such as pastures and water points, to permanent claims to land and exclusive control of critical natural resources. Additionally, the war in neighbouring Sudan has provided new armaments, while political developments in Ethiopia have brought new sources of legitimacy and organisation by intensifying the need to organise along ethnic lines. The availability and accessibility of small arms and light weapons, including automatic machine guns and grenades, has dramatically intensified the level and deadlines of conflicts, effectively revolutionising their nature. To prevent the situation from becoming more violent will require that resource management and militarisation receive greater research and policy attention. Conflict in the Gambella region is likely to increase, unless the root causes are recognised and addressed simultaneously at local, national and sub-regional level. There is little evidence that this is being done. Central to all these is the expansion of the Nuer into Anuak lands. The central government has to ignore or subjugate the claims of the Anuak in order to maintain cordial relations with the Nuer or take hard political decisions to manage the problem. It is vital that the issues explored above are addressed if the conflicts are to be contained from aggravating regional insecurity.

At the same time, the inherently political and regional nature of such conflicts needs to be recognised. Many sources of conflict can only be addressed at regional and national level. Local-level conflicts have rarely been factored into regional stability. This study answers a number of critical questions concerning the linkages between local conflicts and

the sub-regional security order. However, the broader social, political, economic and historical context in which conflict at regional level occurs is vital to comprehensively understand the nature and outcome of local conflicts. These are embedded in geopolitics, the politics of destabilisation, militarisation, ethnicity, socio-economic deprivation, the (un) democratic institutions of the state as well as the absence of effective national and sub-regional dispute resolution mechanism. Therefore, though local level competition over natural resources does play an important role in conflict, it cannot be separated from broader national and regional issues. Indeed, it is among these variables that the deeper and enduring sources of the conflicts can be located.

## Recommendations

### *On the Anuak-Nuer conflict*

There is little capacity or knowledge to plan and coordinate conflict resolution effectively, thus:

- Consider options to resolve the most intractable problem in the region, the issue of land and territory between the Anuak and Nuer. Push for equitable (not necessarily symmetrical) sustainable sharing of contested resources.
  - To achieve success in this process it is important not to insist on the Western concept of ownership, usually rights and private ownership. The traditional African mode of production is based on collective ownership, understood as the right to use, rather than the right to have. Insistence on historical rights and similar connotations can only aggravate the situation.
  - The Nuer have to accept Anuak ownership of new lands. Traditional right over land is understood as right of use, not absolute ownership. Then, the Anuak must accept that rival groups and their animals have an inalienable right to survival. The two groups could reach similar agreements, provided that they are offered the right opportunity to talk to each other, discuss their problems and apply traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution. Thus, the support of traditional conflict resolution institutions through recognition of their importance to conflict prevention and resolution is essential. Though traditional mechanisms exist, these are under increasing pressure and there is a risk that their potentially positive input will be lost. Hence, learning and applying traditional methods of conflict prevention and management must be a priority for regional and national conflict prevention and management strategies.
  - Apply broadened alternative dispute resolution, unofficial conflict management, particularly interactive problem-solving workshops to deal



with the Anuak-Nuer problem. Problem solving is educational. The notion that joint decision making (with or without the help of third parties) produces the best possible decisions is commonly agreed. Three distinct processes have been part of two-track efforts to date: small, facilitated problem-solving workshops or seminars; efforts to influence public opinion through the media and in other ways; and the development of cooperative economic and other activities that provide incentives and institutional support (much like those above) for continued cooperation among the parties (Pruitt and Rubin 1986:123–130; Keashly and Fisher 1990; Susskind and Cruikshank 1988:34–39).

- Understand that focusing on traditional mechanisms is both pivotal and urgent. Making use of traditional mechanisms in regional strategies may become more difficult as social realities change and transformation takes place in Southern Sudan and the Gambella region of Ethiopia, exclusive state agendas become stronger and nationalist identities more firmly established. Therefore, it is vital that work should begin now to ensure that a firm basis for conflict prevention/resolution is established across borders and the region.

### ***At political level***

- Consult, re-engage and recommit to bringing the moderate Anuak political elite and those in diaspora to a peace process. The Ethiopian government should avoid military solutions to political problems and try to resolve the problem of insurgency in Gambella through political means. Instruct Gambella regional leaders to liaise with the administration of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the Anuak king in Pochalla-Sudan.
  - Various traditional institutions in the area use customary methods to prevent and manage conflict. However, these are rarely employed in high-level conflicts involving the central state, which plays an exaggerated role in every aspect of conflict prevention, management and peace building. Poorly informed and planned conflict resolution interventions have worsened the insecurity. Religious institutions in particular could play a larger role in preventing and managing conflict, given the respect they command. Prepare plans for engaging traditional leaders, mainly Nuer prophets, in the whole process.
  - There is urgent need for the Anuak political elite to revisit their strategy. Resorting to violence and rejection could be counter-productive and has the potential to derail the whole system and reverse the gains made by the Anuak since 1991.

- Similarly, the federal government needs to recognise that very little can be achieved in terms of peace and economic development in the region without bringing on board the Anuak intellectuals and main players of the Anuak diaspora in the political reconstruction of Gambella.
- Introduce mechanisms to define who is who in the Nuer camp. Generalised accusations against all Nuer clans do not help.
  - Strengthen border control and immigration offices in controversial areas that are critical to political solutions.
  - Introduce dual citizenship for affected populations, maintenance of existing citizenship where administration changes hands, and/or codification of the rights of non-citizens living on either side of the border.
  - Consider deployment of (or stationing) the army in strategic border areas such as Akobo, Jakaw, Kotgar, Brubie to have better handling of issues along the border.
  - Consider mechanisms for the separation of forces, creation of security zones and encampment locations.
  - Avoid or minimise the obstacles to border commerce as a result of military and security measures.
  - Conduct joint patrols along the border with the SPLA administration in the area.
  - Open the border to cross-border trade immediately.
  - Ensure displaced Anuaks are returned and protected. This must also be done for the internally displaced Nuer from Mekoy (Matara wereda) who were recently displaced by the Lou.
- Open debate and define the status of the highlanders. Unless nativity is properly debated and addressed in the context of ethnic federalism, any reversal of policy may aggravate mutual suspicion and hostility. The best way would be to clarify the issues, create consensus and then introduce the reforms.
- Undertake an immediate disarmament programme. Begin to discuss immediately with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) or the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS), and coordinate with each other to the extent possible on the parallel initiatives cited above. Be aware that Nuer disarmament is critical for peace in Gambella. In addition:
  - Establish a comprehensive nationwide programme for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants and tribal militias.
  - Appreciate the significance of working together with the Ethiopian side from planning to implementation.



- Make sure the approach to civilian disarmament takes into account regional political and security issues; ensure enough support is given to win over opponents through consultation, and clarify whether the army or the political authorities are ultimately in control.
- Take extra care of the situation of recently absorbed South Sudan Defence Forces (SSDF) components.
- The GoSS should regard assistance of Anuak refugees as a priority that needs to be combined with protection and demilitarisation of refugee camps.
- With civilian disarmament continuing in South Sudan, both the SPLM and Gambella state need to seriously and critically assess recent experience, develop genuinely consultative relations, and endeavour to find means to pacify the population in the area that relies on peaceful and voluntary approaches.
- The SPLA should be called to clarify its position on Gambella and tell its administrators in Pochalla-Sudan to do the same and exercise control over them.
- Both sides should appreciate that the solution goes beyond managing awkward governance challenges. It requires dealing with the troublesome legacies of past wars. Above all, this raises a crucial issue of initiating a re-examination of forgotten or failed DDR processes in the area in question.
- Recognise that local and international NGOs could be instrumental in developing a grassroots peace constituency. Several non-governmental agencies (NGOs) could play pivotal roles in initiating peace processes between and among the communities, and between the Ethiopian government and the Anuak opposition.
  - Try to use the good offices of NGOs operating in the region, which include ACORD,<sup>130</sup> RCCHE,<sup>131</sup> PACT,<sup>132</sup> HEKS<sup>133</sup> and the local NGO known as Gambella Peace and Development Council (GPDC). This is mainly true of PACT Sudan, but also of PACT Ethiopia, which is actively engaged in grassroots peace efforts along the border. It is time to understand that regional authorities have so far failed to resolve the conflict. Sometimes their actions intensify the conflict instead of resolving it.
  - Conduct consultations with religious institutions such as the Catholic Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Mekane Iyesus Church, the mosque (Moslem community elders), and non-governmental organisations (INGOs) such as the Ethiopian Red Cross, which has already formed the Advisory Board in the GPDC, and facilitate reconciliation. Their role will include, but will not be limited to:
    - Advocacy for peace
    - Promotion of dialogue across conflict lines, such as contact between the protagonists and the Anuak administration in Pochalla-Sudan and the Gambella regional government
    - Promotion of dialogue on post-conflict issues
    - Promotion of assistance to people affected by the conflict, for example internally displaced persons (IDPs) and Anuak refugees in Sudan
    - Support for social service provision and income-generating projects such as micro-credit
    - Encouragement as well as engagement in policy debate and monitoring of post-conflict rehabilitation and reconciliation programmes. The above efforts by NGOs in the region will bear fruit only if they are encouraged, supported and coordinated with the GoSS and the Ethiopian governments as well as the active engagement of regional organisations

### ***The African Union and IGAD***

- The African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), including governments in the region, particularly the Ethiopian government, should seriously work towards the full implementation of the CPA, and provide capacity building to the SPLM (or GoSS), so that it moves quickly to establish effective systems of administration, oversee programmes of development, and respond to widespread grievances. In addition:
  - At the level of *conflict prevention and peace building*
    - The AU and IGAD need to complement the work of NGOs and work on confidence-building measures between the two sides.
    - IGAD can also play a crucial role in creating an atmosphere that is conducive to the functioning of regional mechanisms and institutions such as management of shared resources and cross-border pastures. IGAD's experience and wealth of information on the Karamoja triangle could be used to complement traditional mechanisms and NGO-led resource management initiatives. It is time that IGAD and its Conflict Early Warning Unit (CEWARN) broaden their mandate and activities in two respects: by expanding their activities in the area; and amplifying their research from purely resource issues to the political economy of pastoral conflicts.
    - Similarly, IGAD has the responsibility to encourage and oversee the promotion of intra-regional trade.
  - At the level of *conflict resolution and containment*
    - IGAD and the AU should focus on restriction of arms flows, and prohibition of the use of military bases in neighbouring countries. Liaising with the UN mission in South Sudan and learning from the UN monitoring team in Somalia would help. Clearly, this calls for an



institutional interface between Africa's peace and security mechanisms and the UN, as well as international financial institutions that design and oversee post-conflict transitions.

- The AU and IGAD need to be part of improving the overall security situation and managing the post-conflict transition by providing peace-keeping or observer forces as appropriate; monitoring adherence to security protocols in the event of an agreement between the GoSS and the Ethiopian government or even the Gambella administration. Small-scale but effective monitoring should extend to the return and resettlement of refugees and IDPs, and economic reintegration of demobilised former combatants.
- Assistance and follow-up in the promotion of regional integration, cross-border trade and joint development ventures along the border will in the long-term help in managing post-conflict transition. This feeds into the AU and IGAD's concerns with regional integration and continental development.
- The AU and IGAD must refocus their engagement in and support of DDR and security sector reform. With the backing of international organisations, they can facilitate financial and technical assistance to the requirements of demilitarisation in the region. While trying to address the underlying causes of conflict, the two organisations must attend to the tendency of using force among those in power or aspiring for power. Part of the solution lies in the broader task of dismantling armed consciousness in the region, which requires security sector reform and demilitarisation at all levels.
- Recognise the issue of governance as central not only to conflict prevention, but also to the successful management of post-conflict transition. To start with, it addresses the problems of marginalisation and helps to build inclusive and representative governments. In the long run, transparent and democratic governments are more likely to invest in non-violent processes of civil problem solving, and hence avoid violent conflict and militarisation. This will automatically extend to peaceful cooperation with neighbours, which is an essential component of security communities. The two organisations need to give special emphasis to the preconditions in terms of democracy, civil society and demilitarisation for establishing a regional security order.
- The AU (and IGAD) must play a pivotal role in initiating moral standards against the use of force to resolve conflicts and common values that promote the subjective conditions for a possible peace and security order. They can bring a gradual but effective impact on peace by encouraging consensus on core values of

rule-bound behaviour, monitoring and following up commitments, and documenting those who failed to honour their promises.

- Involvement in these activities would not only help to create peace and security in the region, it would give the two regional organisations visibility at local level, and help them to command respect and credibility among the population.
- Succinctly put, conflict resolution in the Gambella region and Southern Sudan will require greater research and policy attention to the nature of states, the extent of militarisation, the legacy of past wars, the mechanisms of customary resource management and traditional dispute resolution, as well as interventions, including peace agreements.

## Notes

- 1 The SCA is adopted from the guidance notes prepared by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) as a resource for analysing conflicts for partner policy and research agencies in January 2002. CPRD's principal researcher believed that it is useful to reconcile it with this particular study as it provides a comprehensive analysis of the conflict situation and helps to outline, comparatively easily, policy prescriptions.
- 2 In the references, those who agreed to be mentioned are referred to by their names as informants, while for those interviewees who wished to remain anonymous, only the words 'Field notes' appear in the reference.
- 3 Most of these have approached the problem from an anthropological point of view. A notable exception is the paper by Dereje Feyissa (2003), which goes beyond anthropological study and covers the dynamics of political developments.
- 4 Of the 27 major armed conflicts that occurred in 1999, all but two took place within national boundaries.
- 5 Population movements of the Oromo in the 16th century are cases in point.
- 6 The conflicts between farmers and pastoralists in the Jebel Mara mountains in western Sudan, the Borana Oromo and the Somalis in the Afar and the Issa in Ethiopia, the Nuer and the Anuak along the borders between Ethiopia and Sudan, the Baggara Arab pastoralists in southern Kordofan and the Dinka of Bahr el Ghazal, and ethnic clashes in the Gash Setit area in Eritrea between highlanders and the minority Kunamas are proof that economic and ecological factors have not only triggered the conflict, but are inherent causes of it.
- 7 This is evident in the areas ranging from the Afar in the north-east to the Nuer in south-western Ethiopia all the way to Darfur.
- 8 Field notes.
- 9 Somali irredentism, the Ethio-Eritrean conflict since 1998 and Khartoum's attempt to export political Islam in the mid 1990s are vivid accounts of this argument.



- 10 See the Beja study by John Young in this series.
- 11 Available at: <[www.csa.gov.et/text\\_files/publication\\_population\\_census.htm](http://www.csa.gov.et/text_files/publication_population_census.htm)>. [Accessed March 2007].
- 12 One significant development regarding Gambella regional state is the inclusion of Godere wereda in the region in 1991, which for the first time enabled the Majangir to play important role in regional politics. Of all the communities in the region, the Majangir had close relations with the Anuak.
- 13 Field notes. It has to be emphasized that the river often provided fish not only for Makuéy residents, but also for good numbers of Gaat-Jaak Nuer and several Anuak groups during the dry season. Because of the lack of water supply to Makuéy, the residents of Makuéy had to find ways to settle in. However, because there were no empty lands on the bank of the Baro River, since other Nuer sections owned all the lands jointly or individually, the Makuéy residents resorted to grabbing whatever land was available by any means necessary.
- 14 As a result local communities were displaced. Having no other options of survival, Makuéy (of the Nuer) residents left to settle near the bank of the Baro River. Such was the origin and development of traditional resource-based competition in the area that in the past environmental factors were behind localised conflict in Gambella.
- 15 By 1885 they were beginning to settle along some of its tributaries such as the Pibor.
- 16 Informant.
- 17 Field notes.
- 18 Informants. Sometimes a single Nuer comes to an Anuak village and asks an Anuak friend to allow him to settle on a plot of land temporarily for the dry-season pasture. Such Nuers always make friends with the Anuak and provide milk freely for their children, and show other friendly gestures. Oral sources attest that the relationship began when a Nuer granted a goat to an Anuak friend and in return the Anuak gave the Nuer some tobacco, which was highly valued by the Nuer. After the establishment of this friendship, the Nuer might ask for a piece of land for himself and his family to cultivate and settle, which was usually accepted.
- 19 Field notes.
- 20 Field notes.
- 21 If significant damage is done, a special committee is formed to estimate the loss, which the herder has to pay. Sometimes such a committee over- or under-estimates, and this may lead to reluctance to pay the compensation, which would naturally lead to conflict.
- 22 At the beginning of the twentieth century, Anuak nobles who had acquired firearms while taking advantage of the expansion of the Ethiopian empire state had the upper hand in terms of military and political power. The Anuak were also involved in ivory trading with the highlanders, at first for cattle and then for firearms.
- 23 The emerging status quo forced the Nuer to use inter-ethnic marriage as an economic strategy to swell their resource bases. Some Nuer frequented certain Anuak villages during the dry season, mainly for pasture, but this also involved grain-for-milk exchanges, which benefited both communities.
- 24 The exact history and peopling of the Gambella Region is not yet established. Existing historical works and oral traditions, nevertheless, accrue a relative seniority to the Anuak in most of the current districts of the region. Although both groups have a history of migration and share a Nilotic origin somewhere in present-day Southern Sudan, oral sources claim that the Anuak have migrated to their present-day settlements since the 18th century. Nuer migrations to the Gambella region, on the other hand, started in the second half of the 19th century.
- 25 Nuer elders.
- 26 Informants. In fact, I would say that Nuer migration resembles that of the Oromo mass movement in terms of converting their captives and adopting or integrating all to one's society and changing placenames to a Nuer name.
- 27 Almost all Nuer and Anuak informants agree on this point.
- 28 Informants.
- 29 Field notes.
- 30 Informants.
- 31 Informants. They claim that before the commencement of the civil war in the south, only Thuwath Pal's family from the Shemshagn of the Gaajak-Jikan Nuer were living in Gambella town.
- 32 For instance in 1987 the GPLM carried out attacks on police posts and settler's villages along the Baro river and after many battles eight GMPL men were captured, including the commander of the organisation, Okelo Uman, who later became the president of the region. In a hunt for alleged collaborators, some 80 Anywaa were killed by the police and militia in Gambella town and 29 men were arrested.
- 33 The Anywaa of Gambella referred to the Sudanese refugees and the SPLA as *Ajwil*, that is, people who have a 'government' of their own in Gambella.
- 34 Informants.
- 35 Informants.
- 36 Informants. See also Johanneson, 1986.
- 37 Informants. The OLF was operating in the area with the support of the Sudan government.
- 38 Informants. In September 1986, a Nuer SPLA soldier named Choul Baraw, who also acted as a witchdoctor, quarrelled with his commander, defected and settled in the Nuer village of Berhane Selam, at Itang. Here he organised the local Nuer and marched against the Wanke village of the Opo people. These forces attacked Wanke and killed three Anuak, three highlanders and five Opo. During all these atrocities the local government took no action.
- 39 The exact causes of the SPLA's atrocious actions are unknown, but a key informant (Bekele 0) indicated that it was the intention of the SPLA from the beginning to recruit and involve the local Anuak in the SPLA movement, and therefore the atrocities, killings, harassment and intimidations directed against the Anuak were to convince them that Gambella was part of Southern Sudan. The GPLM was fighting against



both the Derg and SPLA, and therefore the SPLA sought to avenge the losses it had suffered

40 Informants.

41 Informants.

42 Informants.

43 Field notes.

44 Agua Alemu, an Anuak, became president of the region until his assassination a few years later.

45 Informant. Gambella region, which was part of the Illubabor region during the Derg regime, was never governed by a non-Habasha (collective name for all highlander nationalities that came from different parts of the Ethiopian highlands) until 1987, when Thuwath Pal Chay (Nuer by ethnic background) was appointed governor and stayed in the position until 1991.

46 Informants. This report was confirmed in the discussions with South Sudan Nuer elders.

47 Field observation.

48 Informant.

49 The SPLM/A had committed atrocities against all, including the Nuer, and specifically the Gaat-Jaak Nuer, who are neighbours of the Anuak in the region. Accusing the Nuer could have been one way of asserting a claim to the region and their hold on power.

50 The Anuak, unlike some of the Nuer, believe that they are Ethiopians and only the Cienyejaany and Tiang sub-clans from the Gajaak clan and Gajock clan from Nuer believe that they are Ethiopians. However, the other clans of Nuer that are found in Ethiopia, such as the Ciengcaan sub-clan and the Law clan, oscillate between Ethiopian and Sudanese identities.

51 A study by Dereje reveals that an individual Nuer could easily change his clan affiliation and place of residence. In the new exclusionary context in which they have found themselves, Nuer defend their movements as part of the 'natural' order of things. From this perspective, let alone century-old migration, recent and ongoing population movements are culturally made plausible and morally defensible.

52 <[www.csa.gov.et/text\\_files/publication\\_population\\_census.htm](http://www.csa.gov.et/text_files/publication_population_census.htm)>.

53 Informants attest to the war with Eritrea for the increase in the political profile of the Nuer at the regional level.

54 A *kebele* is a small administrative unit, similar to a ward, a neighbourhood or a localised and delimited group of people. It is part of a wereda, or district.

55 The Anuak land claim makes up at least 70 per cent of the region's land mass. Some Anuak even entertain an irredentist claim over the two districts of Jikaw and Akobo, which are currently predominantly settled by the Nuer.

56 Informant. Former members of GPLM state that the Anuak could have learned to live with the loss of their land to the Nuer, but not the total loss of political power at local level in traditionally Anuak areas.

57 Field notes.

58 Field notes.

59 For instance, according to informants from both

communities, as late as the 1990s on both sides of the Baro River the riverbanks were under the control of the Anuak. However, at present the Anuak occupy only its southern part, while in some places they have lost both sides.

60 Mainly Anuaks complain that the army is not doing its job.

61 Informants and field notes. Although political power was dominated by the GPDM, a formula has been worked out on how to share it, by which eleven positions on the executive council of the regional government were divided evenly, with the Anuak and Nuer each holding five positions and one held by a third group, the Majangir. The other representatives are elected at large, supposedly based on their proportion of the population, but according to the 1994 census the Nuer numbered 64,473, while the Anuak totalled 44,581.

62 A good example is Ethiopia's ambassador to Ghana and later Japan in the second half of the 1990s.

63 Informants. The numbers of secondary schools rose to six and the Teacher Training Institute was enlarged. In 1997 the institute was upgraded to include junior secondary school teacher training and in 2001 a public administration institute was also established, and is providing instruction for local officials.

64 In a period of 10 years, between 1992 and 2002, around 250 students from Gambella have been enrolled in the ECSC, of whom about 150 graduates are currently working in the Gambella regional state.

65 Informants. Almost all informants hail the measure. The restoration of traditional Anuak chieftainship, the *Kwaro*, is an example.

66 Informants. Young and others also somehow captured this point.

67 Informants.

68 Field notes.

69 Field notes.

70 Informants.

71 Informants. Another atrocious attack on the settlers by the Anuak was at Abulla, near Abobo, with 500 households of about 3,000 people. The survivors of the massacre bitterly recall the atrocities committed on the settlers. They said that in May 1991 the Anuak came out of the bush with their guns and told them to leave everything behind and abandon the area. While the settlers were evacuating as they were told, the armed Anuak opened fire and indiscriminately killed the settlers. Only those fortunate ones who could run to the forest were spared. Girls were taken to the bush and raped by the Anuak. The survivors of this settlement camp retreated to Gambella airport area, and these hungry settlers marched to the abandoned military camp in desperate search for food. Here another human tragedy took place – almost all of them were killed by the heavily armed Anuak forces. The Anuak seized the weapons in the camp and disarmed the militia and party members. Thus the highlanders were at the mercy of the Anuak of the GPLM. The informants recall the brutal massacre at Camp 1, where



- these armed men killed the wife of the chairman of the camp and cut her breasts when they could not find him at the house. They reported that the massacre and the plundering continued for 10 days.
- 72 The preferential treatment includes employment opportunities for the *tewelaj*, as a 'birthright', and a two-year experience bonus to give them a more competitive edge vis-à-vis the *mete*.
- 73 Around 50 per cent of civil servants in the Gambella regional state are highlanders.
- 74 Indeed, at the height of local empowerment in the mid 1990s, attempts were made to force the highlanders out of the Gambella region.
- 75 Field notes.
- 76 In the same year a bus carrying South Sudanese refugees was ambushed near the Alwero River and 35 of them were killed.
- 77 Field notes. Cf Crimes against humanity, acts of genocide and ongoing atrocities against the Anuak people of south-western Ethiopia. Genocide Watch and Survivors' Rights International Field Report. This is known to almost all the informants. According to HRW 7(3a)(2005), as many as 424 people were killed, almost all of them Anuak. The attackers burned down over 400 houses and ransacked and looted many of those left standing.
- 78 Informants.
- 79 Informants.
- 80 Informants. *Lul* means forest, in this case the forest around Pugnido, and Gog along the Gilo River, and Uppeno, in *Anywaa* means the Baro River. Owing to their positions on the status of the highlanders, the *Lul* are considered moderate, while the Gilo are extremist.
- 81 Mainly informants stress this point.
- 82 Informants. Many highlanders, mainly Oromiffa speakers, lost their jobs in the civil service and the anticipated peace and development programme was overshadowed by another phase of political in-fighting. As a result, some grieved Anuak elements went to the bush and began to ambush vehicles on the roads and kill people. All of the victims were highlanders, whom this Anuak group call the 'red' people, and who are supposed to leave Anuakland.
- 83 Informants. Almost all the 600 police recruits of 1991 were Uppeno Anuak, which created discontent among other ethnic groups. After the 1995 election, however, of 600 recruits to the police force, 300 were recruited from other ethnic groups.
- 84 The controversy around the imprisonment of Ujulu Bach and his replacement by Ottow Uwero is related to the event.
- 85 Field notes.
- 86 On 30 January around 200 armed Anuaks, who claimed to be political leaders of the Anuak people, massacred hundreds of miners in Dima.
- 87 Informants.
- 88 Informant.
- 89 Southern Sudanese Nuer informants such as Panom Chol also reinforce this argument.
- 90 Informants. Reportedly their leader is a certain Amin, a former Ugandan refugee.
- 91 Informant.
- 92 The attack took place at night around 1:00 am and claimed the lives of six policemen, five civilians, and two prisoners. Apparently the rebels were not interested in killing prisoners except these two, who were targeted because of their ethnic origin, since both were highlanders.
- 93 Informant: Some of the attackers turned out to be Sudanese Anuak carrying refugee identification cards supplied by ARRA and some of them, particularly those from Dima refugee camp, were registered as Nuer. For example, in May 2006 these rebels killed a merchant named Hailu at Bonga, and two of them were captured. The police investigation of the captives shows that one was an Ethiopian Anuak from Pugnido refugee camp, while the other was a South Sudanese refugee from Dima camp.
- 94 Informants.
- 95 Informant. An elderly Anuak informant with typical Anuak openness said that the 'red' people should stop digging their land for oil, and they did not want the construction of houses and roads because all these would bring more and more highlanders to their land to use their resources at their cost. He continued, 'We will use them [resources] when our eyes will be opened.' He presumably meant after the Anuak acquired general education.
- 96 Leaflets supposedly distributed in the region and through the Internet in mid June 2006.
- 97 Informants. Last June leaflets by the group that calls itself the GPLF mentioned the two points as preconditions for talks with the government of Ethiopia.
- 98 Field notes.
- 99 Informants.
- 100 Almost all informants, Anuak and Nuer alike, characterise the intervention by the central government as not more than a fire brigade.
- 101 Statement by the Ministry of Federal Affairs, 2004. In fact, the Ethiopian government explained incessant conflicts in Gambella in terms of lack of development and poor governance.
- 102 Informants. They recommend that the army should be stationed in Akobo, Jakaw, Kotgar, Brubie, the former military camps, for better handling of the situation and not in Gambella town.
- 103 There is widespread perception in the region that the army is quick to take punitive measures against Anuak dissidents and does not respond when the Nuer attack Anuak villages.
- 104 According to informants, the forces included many women and children who were busy collecting ripened maize from the field while armed men were fighting. The size of each group was presumably more than six hundred soldiers.
- 105 Kurimoti (2003) discusses the incident in detail.
- 106 The informant was the former administrator of the Itang district. A young Nuer prophet called Wutunyang, who had controlled Nasir for 24 hours, led them. It is not clear whether this is the same Wutunyang



- who was killed recently in the aftermath of the SPLA disarmament controversy in Upper Nile.
- 107 Informants. Figures implicated in this agenda are mainly Nuer heavyweights in the SPLA such as Riek Machar, John Luc, and Timothy Taban Juch.
- 108 The speech by Salva Kiir on 5 April 2006 to the Interim Political Bureau of the SPLA indicated that the instability in South Sudan is related to armed groups encouraged by sources that are not comfortable under the peace atmosphere ushered in by the CPA, and others attributable to ethnic and sectional clashes over pastures and water points. Also discussions with Gerhard Prunier and John Young. Both conducted field visits to the area from June to August 2006.
- 109 SPLM Secretary General Pagan Amum admitted to 300 casualties and the SSDF militia coordination claimed 3,000. The reality is somewhere in between, but closer to the SSDF figure than the SPLM one.
- 110 This is motivated by its desire to make it much more difficult for the SPLA to effectively challenge SAF's position in the oilfields of Abiyei, northern and western Upper Nile, and Malakal, all of which are rapidly becoming focal points in the conflict between the SPLA and SAF.
- 111 Extracts from investigations conducted in South Sudan by Gerhard Prunier, July 2006.
- 112 Mainly Akobo residents say they are still concerned about the threat of attack from the neighbouring Murle saying, 'Who will protect us?'
- 113 Informants.
- 114 Discussions with the vice president of the Gambella region.
- 115 Informants. See also GPDC Monthly Report, June 06.
- 116 Informants. Discussions with Gerhard Prunier clarified this point.
- 117 The bride price has shot up to about 140 cows all over the south, about seven times what it was before 1983 and three-and-a-half times what it was two years ago.
- 118 Informants.
- 119 Informants. According to Southern Sudanese Nuer informants, Sudanese Nuer are accusing Sudanese Anuak of letting the Murle devastate Lou Nuer lands, an accusation rebuffed by the latter.
- 120 There are nevertheless dozens of casualties every week.
- 121 Extracts from investigations conducted in South Sudan by Gerhard Prunier, July 2006.
- 122 Informants. Some say they transfer captured children to Uganda, possibly to join the LRA.
- 123 Informants. See also GPDC.
- 124 Gordon Kong hates both Paulino Mathiep (a former militia rival) and the SPLM regime in Juba. (He revolted against Garang alongside Lam Akol and Riak Machar in August 1991.)
- 125 Separate discussions with Young and the vice president of Gambella region. The White Army is a loosely organised militia around cattle camps made up of children from the Lou.
- 126 On 22 September, Ismail Kony announced that he had joined the SPLA, though it is too early to conclude.

- 127 Sudanese Nuer elders.
- 128 Locals say the Murle possess a lot of Egyptian-made bullets, implying Egyptian and Sudanese support.
- 129 All informants say they do not know whether the group has a political programme at all.
- 130 ACORD (The Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development), Available at: <[www.acord.org.uk](http://www.acord.org.uk)>.
- 131 RICCHE (Research Centre for Civic and Human Rights Education), Available at: <[http://www.oxfamamerica.org/partners/RCCHE\\_partner](http://www.oxfamamerica.org/partners/RCCHE_partner)>.
- 132 Pact Organisation, Available at: <<http://www.pactworld.org/>>.
- 133 HEKS (*Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirche Schweiz* or Swiss Interchurch Aid). Available at: [www.heks.ch/](http://www.heks.ch/).

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## About this paper

The Gambella region has since the mid-1990s witnessed factional fighting and inter-community violence between the Anuak and the Nuer, mainly over resources and for socio-cultural reasons. Although these two communities have historically clashed over resources and cultural identity-related issues, the nature and intensity of conflicts over the last two decades has been transformed by the Sudanese civil war and the political realities in Ethiopia in the early 1990s. This study focused on the regionalisation of the conflict, as well as the traditional competition and rivalry, to answer questions such as: Why is the Gambella region prone to conflict? What converts local/traditional disputes, which have always been there, into an open large-scale regional conflict? The paper lays out a set of recommendation of how to the Ethiopian government, IGAD and the AU can resolve conflict and build peace in the Gambella region.

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