

PUBLIC

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UA 338/04 Torture / Detention without trial / Possible prisoner of conscience

ETHIOPIA Omot Ojullu Abella (m), civil servant, aged 47

Omot Ojullu Abella is reportedly seriously ill as a result of having been severely beaten by iron bars and rifle butts in Gambella prison in south-western Ethiopia on 13 December 2004. He is said to have sustained injuries to his head, back and arm, and to be denied medical treatment.

A possible prisoner of conscience, he was arrested a year previously on 13 December 2003, just before mass killings and arrests of members of the Anuak ethnic group took place in Gambella town, capital of Gambella regional state. His brother, Okuch Ojullu Abella, was one of those killed. Several hundred other people arrested at the time are still held in Gambella prison, incommunicado and without trial. Many have been tortured or ill-treated, and may be prisoners of conscience.

Omot Ojullu Abella is said to have been beaten in reprisal for commemorative events organized by Anuak exiles in the USA. In Gambella, the government banned any demonstrations or commemoration.

Omot Ojullu Abella is head of the administration and finance department of the regional government's health bureau. He is also a leading peaceful opponent of the regional and federal government through a political party he co-founded for the 2000 elections, the Gambella People's Democratic Congress (GPDC). He was detained without trial for a year in 2000.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Between 13 and 15 December 2003, mobs of civilian "highlanders" (people originating from the Amhara and Tigray regions of Ethiopia) and federal soldiers reportedly killed hundreds of members of the Anuak (also known as Anywaa) ethnic group in Gambella town. A subsequent government inquiry described how these events were sparked off by the killing of eight people, allegedly by an Anuak armed group, on 13 December. The eight included three staff of the federal government refugee organization and a police officer. Regional police reportedly put the mutilated bodies of the eight people on public display, leading to three days of ethnically-targeted violence. The inquiry reported that 65 people were killed and 75 wounded by civilians and soldiers, and 500 houses burnt down and looted.

Eyewitnesses and survivors have, however, claimed that several hundred Anuak people, including civil servants, teachers and students, were shot and hacked to death with knives and machetes. Many women were raped. Tens of thousands of Anuak people were displaced, many fleeing to Sudan, before the army restored order some days later. Hundreds were also detained and tortured, and are still in prison without charge or trial. No one is known to have been charged in connection with the mass killings.

The situation in the region remains tense, with many more people reportedly killed by soldiers in the past year. Twenty-eight leaders of the GPDC, including former regional governor Okello Nyigelo Olam, remain detained without trial in Addis Ababa, and may be prisoners of conscience.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send faxes/express letters to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- expressing concern about reports of the torture of Omot Ojullu Abella in Gambella prison on 13 December 2004;

- calling for him to be given urgent medical treatment, including hospital admission, and to be allowed access to his family, legal representative and doctor of his choice;
- expressing concern that he may be a prisoner of conscience, arrested for his non-violent opposition to the government, and urging that he and all others arrested in December 2003 are either charged with a recognizable criminal offence and given fair and early trials in accordance with international standards, or released;
- calling for an independent and impartial investigation into the treatment and legal status of several hundred people arrested at the same time as Omot Ojullu Abella during the ethnically-targeted killings of Anuak people of 13-15 December 2003.

APPEALS TO: (please note that you may have difficulty with these fax numbers, but please keep trying)

Federal Minister of Justice

Mr Harke Haroye

Ministry of Justice

P O Box 1370

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: + 251 1 520874

Salutation: Dear Minister

Minister for Federal Affairs

Mr Abay Tsehaye

Ministry for Federal Affairs

P O Box 1031

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: + 251 1 552030

Salutation: Dear Minister

Federal Commissioner of Police

Mr Workneh Gebeyehu

Ministry of Federal Affairs

P O Box 1031

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Salutation: Dear Commissioner

COPIES TO:

Prime Minister

His Excellency Meles Zenawi

Office of the Prime Minister

P O Box 1031, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Fax: + 251 1 552020

Salutation: Your Excellency

and to diplomatic representatives of Ethiopia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, If sending appeals after 28 January 2005.