

Human Rights Watch (Washington, DC)

Ethiopia: Army Commits Torture, Rape - Gambella Atrocities Follow Attack On Commercial Farm - New 'Villagization' Abuses

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Press release

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The Ethiopian military responded to an April 2012 attack on a large commercial farm in Gambella region with arbitrary arrests, rape, and other abuses against scores of local villagers. Forced displacement, inadequate resources, and other abuses against Gambella's population persist in the second year of the government's "villagization" program.

On April 28, 2012, unidentified armed men attacked the compound of Saudi Star Agricultural Development Plc., a company that has leased thousands of hectares of land for rice farming in Gambella region. The gunmen killed at least one Pakistani and four Ethiopian employees. Gambella residents interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that in the following days and weeks, Ethiopian soldiers went house to house looking for the gunmen in villages near the Saudi Star camp, arbitrarily arresting and beating young men and raping female relatives of suspects.

"The attack on Saudi Star was a criminal act but it does not justify reprisals against Gambella's population," said Leslie Lefkow, deputy Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "The Ethiopian government should put an immediate end to abuses by the military in the region and investigate and prosecute soldiers found responsible for these heinous acts, regardless of rank."

Human Rights Watch has previously reported on the Ethiopian government's policy of "villagization" or resettlement of Gambella residents from their traditional lands to clear the way for the commercial farms. The government has used threats, intimidation, and violence against those who resist moving.

Hundreds of villagers from Abobo woreda (district) fled the military operation and crossed into neighboring South Sudan in the months since the attack on Saudi Star. In June Human Rights Watch interviewed more than 80 recent arrivals from Gambella in South Sudan.

Witnesses described to Human Rights Watch the military's human rights abuses against people in the vicinity of Saudi Star. The day after the Saudi Star attack, Ethiopian soldiers shot and killed four of the company's Anuak guards, accusing them of complicity in the attack. In April and May Ethiopian security forces entered the five villages closest to the Saudi Star compound in Abobo woreda, rounded up scores of young men and detained them in military barracks in Gambella. Many alleged that they were tortured.

One former detainee told Human Rights Watch: "They said we were to go into the bush and show them where the rebels are - with whom they claimed we had a relationship. They beat me after I said I didn't know where the rebels are. After they beat me they took me to the barracks. I was in custody for three days. At night they took me out and asked me to show them where the rebels are. I said I don't know. So they beat me and took off their sock and put it in my mouth to stop the screams."

Human Rights Watch heard six accounts from women and girls of rape by soldiers either in their homes or in detention, when the soldiers could not find the male relatives they were seeking.

Numerous credible sources in Gambella believe the April attack is linked to the government's villagization program and the leases of land. The attack followed a March 12 attack by armed men on a bus in Gambella in which 19 people were killed. It is not clear whether the two incidents are linked.

The gunmen who carried out the attacks have not publicly identified themselves or their motives, but one man interviewed by Human Rights Watch claimed to have been among the group who attacked the Saudi Star compound. He said that the April attack was in retaliation for the land leasing by Saudi Star and other foreign investors in Gambella region.

Most of the attackers were reportedly captured in May by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in Pochalla, South Sudan following a gun battle that left four of the attackers and two SPLA soldiers dead. Tensions have remained high in Gambella since.

"The military's abusive response to the Saudi Star attack is only making an already turbulent situation in Gambella worse," Lefkow said. "After what the people in the region have suffered at the government's hands, the only thing that will begin to clear the air is a comprehensive and independent inquiry into the situation."

Villagers who recently fled Gambella to South Sudan reported new abuses by the security forces under the villagization program. They reported a persistent lack of services in the sites to which they had been moved, despite government pledges to provide them. And existing villages from where people were moved are being destroyed to prevent people from returning to their original homes.

Human Rights Watch urged the Ethiopian government to stop the arbitrary arrests, beatings, and intimidation of Gambella residents and to release those who have been arbitrarily detained. The government should investigate and prosecute military personnel and officials implicated in human rights violations associated with the villagization process.

Many of those forcibly displaced by the villagization program are indigenous people. Under Ethiopian and international law the Ethiopian government needs to obtain the free, informed, and prior consent of indigenous people it wishes to move and compensate them for their loss of assets and land.

"The abuses we found in the government's relocation program in Gambella a year ago are still happening today," Lefkow said. "Whatever the government's rationale for 'villagization,' it doesn't justify beatings and torture."

Details about arbitrary arrests, beatings, and torture; rape and sexual violence; and attacks and "villagization" in Gambella follow.

Arbitrary Arrests, Beatings, and Torture

Between June 23 and June 29, Human Rights Watch conducted a research mission to Gorom refugee settlement, South Sudan, and interviewed 80 people who had fled the crackdown and villagization in Gambella.

Several dozen Gambella residents described to Human Rights Watch the Ethiopian military's mass detention of scores of villagers, primarily young men, in Abobo woreda in late April and May, accusing the villagers of

supporting what the soldiers referred to as "the rebels." They said that men, women, and children were forced to march through the bush looking for so-called rebels and were beaten if they did not find any, or if they did not provide any names of suspects to the soldiers.

One man described being stopped by soldiers while carrying food, and then being forced to help them search for firearms in Perbong village near the Saudi Star farm. "The [soldiers] asked me 'Where are you taking this food? To the rebels?'" he told Human Rights Watch. "They checked the food, told me to lie down, and beat me all over my back. [They said]: 'We will take you to Perbong to check houses one by one. If we find a gun, we will kill you.' So we went to the community leader's house, my house, and others' houses and they found nothing, so they released me."

A dozen villagers said they were detained, then beaten and tortured in military barracks by soldiers until they revealed a name of an alleged rebel. Most victims described frequent beatings with sticks and rifle butts. Some also saw or experienced other forms of torture.

An 18-year-old named Omot told Human Rights Watch that in April he was arrested by soldiers in his home village and accused of being a rebel. He was taken with his arms tied behind his back to the military barracks in Pugnido where he was detained for two months. He said he was beaten daily on his back and legs with truncheons. After his release soldiers came to his home and threatened him again, causing him to flee to South Sudan.

A local police officer described being arrested by soldiers and accused of supporting the rebels. Soldiers detained him in Gambella's military barracks where they tied him up and beat him repeatedly, often at the urging of a federal government security official who told them, "Beat him, he has something to say." After his release the soldiers came to his home and beat him unconscious in front of his wife. His wife said the soldiers beat their four year old son in front of them. The family fled to South Sudan.

Ethiopian soldiers detained and tortured people in locations in addition to the military barracks. One witness said he was detained in a makeshift prison within a school in Chobo-Mender and witnessed soldiers torturing a young man by making him walk on hot coals. He told Human Rights Watch: "I saw a young guy who was forced to stand barefoot on fire coals for 15 minutes. Soldiers would push him back on whenever he would try to get off. He was

blistered half way up his calves. 'I am going to die,' he would say. 'Then show us where the rebels are,' said the soldiers."

Another local police officer described being beaten and tortured inside Saudi Star's compound by Ethiopian soldiers shortly after the attack: "They said to us, 'As people are being killed, yet you have not died, you must know who was behind this.' So they took me to the Saudi Star farm and beat me there, inside the compound. There were many of us there: two police and others who had been picked up in the sweep. When they saw that I was not ready to talk, to say what they wanted me to say, they started removing my toenails. They were asking a lot of questions about the others who died: 'Don't you know who did the killing?'"

All youth appear to be at risk from the soldiers. An 18-year-old student at Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia's capital said that soldiers beat him and his friends when he returned to Gambella for a vacation shortly after the Saudi Star attacks. After showing his student ID card he was told by soldiers: "You are educated, you know all the political issues and things about governments so you are the ones encouraging the rebels." They beat him unconscious.

Rape and Sexual Violence

Ethiopian soldiers frequently arrested and abused the female family members of young men they were seeking. Three women and a girl told Human Rights Watch that soldiers arrested, detained, beat, and then raped them to pressure them to disclose their male relatives' whereabouts. Two additional women said that they witnessed other women being raped in detention.

One woman said her husband had been arrested after the attacks because "the soldiers said he knew where the rebels were." When she went to the prisons to try and find him, soldiers followed her back to her home and raped her, she said. Her husband's whereabouts remain unknown.

Another woman described what happened after soldiers arrested her in Wancarmie and took her to the military barracks in Gambella: "One night they took me out of the cell and said, 'Show us where your husband is or else we will rape you.' I persisted saying that I didn't know where he was. Then finally they raped me. After that they released me and I decided to leave the country."

Attacks and "Villagization" in Gambella

After the attack on the Saudi Star compound the Ethiopian military targeted five villages, all within a 16-kilometer radius of the area leased by the company. These villages had been affected by Ethiopia's controversial "villagization" program, a three-year plan to relocate 225,000 people in Gambella - and over 1.5 million people across four states nationally - from their existing villages into new settlements purportedly to better provide them with basic services.

Human Rights Watch documented serious human rights violations associated with the first year of the villagization program in Gambella in 2011. The January 2012 report "Waiting Here for Death": Displacement and "Villagization" in Ethiopia's Gambella Region described how the Ethiopian government and military forced reluctant villagers to leave their homes and build new villages in arid, infertile areas, often intimidating, arresting, and beating people who refused to move. The most abuses were recorded in Abobo woreda, the location of the Saudi Star concession.

Many of the recently arrived villagers in South Sudan interviewed by Human Rights Watch in June said they had fled Gambella because of abuses experienced in connection with the villagization program, as well as the recent military operations following the Saudi Star attack.

They described new abuses in the second year of the government's villagization program, including forced displacement, arbitrary arrests, and torture in detention. The new settlements are located far from water sources and the land is typically dry and arid. More than a year after people were forced to move to these villages virtually none of the promised basic services such as schools and clinics have been provided. To prevent resettled villagers from returning to their original homes soldiers have allegedly been destroying infrastructure in the old locations.

All of the Gambella residents interviewed by Human Rights Watch and who fled to South Sudan told Human Rights Watch that their resettlement was involuntary.

A 17-year-old girl from Abobo woreda who had recently arrived in South Sudan said that soldiers killed her father when he refused to move from their farm near Tegne to the new village: "We were sitting at our farm and soldiers came up to us: 'Do you accept to be relocated or not?' 'No.' So they

grabbed some of us. 'Do you want to go now?' 'No.' Then they shot my father and killed him. We all fled into the bush. I still do not know where my sister or husband is."

Human Rights Watch found that regional and state government officials appear to have a role in the forcible relocation of villagers. The former committee head responsible for villagization in Gog woreda told Human Rights Watch: "I was told [by regional officials] to make the community aware of the need to move. All the responses from the people were rejections, they did not like it. We went back and did our report [to the regional parliament] that they did not want to go. Parliament blamed me and said, 'Why do you tell us this? Go do it by force.' [A senior state official] said this to me directly. We then went with the military and did it by force."

Villagers who have been unwilling to move or refuse to mobilize others to do so have been arrested and mistreated by the soldiers. An elder from Batpul village said he was ordered by woreda officials to organize the villagers and persuade them to relocate. "There were many trees and food in the old place and nothing in the new place so I refused to get them to agree," he said. "Government officials told me, 'Since you do not accept what government says, we jail you.'" The elder was jailed in Abobo for 17 days. "They turned me upside down, tied my legs to a pole, and beat me every day for 17 days until I was released."

Soldiers burned down tukuls (huts) and broke water pumps in the original villages as soon as villagers were moved to their new locations, the displaced villagers told Human Rights Watch.

One man from the Majangere ethnic group, who lived in Gooshini village in Godere woreda, described the forced relocation in his village: "Those that resisted the second time were forced by soldiers to roll around in the mud in a stagnant water pool then beaten." He said he returned to his old village after dark for seven nights before deciding to flee to South Sudan. Each night he saw that more and more of his village's farmland had been cleared by the bulldozers of an Ethiopian investor who had been awarded the land by the government.