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CONFLICT TRENDS ANALYSIS / FEBRUARY 2025

CONFLICT TRENDS IN GAMBELLA STATE (2018-2024)

BY OJOT MIRU OJULU

SUMMARY

- Since 2018, Gambella has experienced several conflicts. While some can be categorized as a continuation of protracted conflicts in the region, others can be attributed to the post-2018 political changes in Addis Ababa. The major conflicts include, Anywaa–Nuer conflict, the OLA and GLF/A—government conflict, refugees–host community conflict, Majang–highlander conflicts and the cross-border conflict.
- The most protracted and violent conflicts, however, have been fought between the Anywaa and the Nuer communities. These two ethnic groups have been entangled in conflict for many decades, albeit with varying degrees of intensity. However, the direct involvement of South Sudanese Nuer White Army militia in support of their Ethiopian Nuer kinsfolk, and the mobilization of Anywaa youths from other areas set apart these recent conflicts from the previous one.
- The political change in Addis Ababa in 2018 and subsequent proliferation of armed groups throughout the country, especially the OLA and GLF/A insurrections, have aggravated the local conflicts in Gambella. This combined with the dissolution of regional special forces in April 2023 created a security vacuum that further exacerbated existing local conflicts in the region.
- Beneath the shifting faces of conflicts in the Gambella region, four underlying factors are discussed as the major causes and drivers perpetuating conflicts in the region, namely: disputed ethnic territorial boundaries; conflict in South Sudan and refugee influxes to Gambella; contested inter-ethnic power-sharing schemes; and access to economic resources and opportunities. Hence, the paper argues for the following recommendations:
 1. The need for a comprehensive peace process that entails genuine peace dialogues and agreements between adjacent kebeles, especially in Itang woreda, along with robust security arrangements to enforce those agreements and deter peace spoilers.
 2. The need to thoroughly review all the current informal power-sharing schemes and renegotiate a model that is both acceptable to all ethnic groups in the region and can better serve the interests of the region.
 3. Ensuring peaceful co-existence between refugees and host communities through innovative approaches that integrate both communities.
 4. Targeted economic empowerment of indigenous communities, especially addressing youth unemployment, including through affirmative economic programmes.

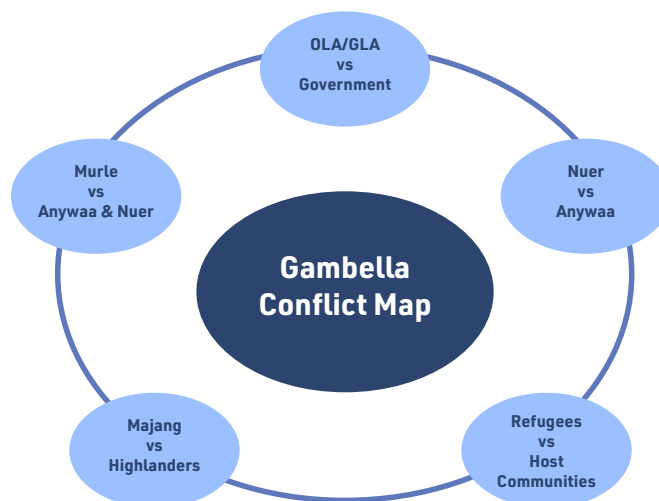
INTRODUCTION

Located in the south-western part of Ethiopia along the border with South Sudan to the west, Oromia Regional State to the north-east and Southwest Ethiopia Peoples' Regional State to the south-east, Gambella is one of the 12 member states of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Unlike the seven regions named after the dominant ethnicity resident in the state,¹ Gambella is one of the five multi-ethnic regional states. It consists of five indigenous ethnic groups—the Anywaa (also known as the Anuak), Nuer, Majang, Opo and Komo—along with other Ethiopian ethnic groups collectively referred to as 'highlanders'.

Gambella is known for multi-layered ethnic and intercommunal conflicts.² The most protracted and violent conflicts have been fought between the Anywaa and the Nuer, the largest ethnic groups in the region. These two ethnic groups have been entangled in conflict for many decades, albeit with varying degrees of intensity. The root causes of these conflicts are historically attributed to the classic competition over resources and incompatible modes of production that characterize the relationship between sedentary farmers and agro-pastoralists in Africa; in this case, the Anywaa are the former and the Nuer the latter. Until recently, this has been the dominant narrative, both locally and nationally, used to understand Anywaa–Nuer conflict. This paradigm is, however, problematic because it implies a primordial animosity that simultaneously obscures the traditional symbiotic interactions between these two groups. That is, beneath the farmer–pastoralist conflict label lies a complex web of conflict drivers and constantly shifting dynamics that need to be unpacked to better understand the underlying causes of these conflicts, which pose major challenges for sustainable peace in the region.

In particular, it is necessary to analyse conflict in the post-2018 period, since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali assumed power. Although peripheral regions such as Gambella play a marginal role in national politics, they are not immune from the ramifications of turbulence in Addis Ababa. On the contrary, these regions are arguably the most vulnerable to federal interference in regional affairs. As such, an investigation of how the recent political changes in Addis Ababa contribute to conflict and peacebuilding in Gambella can offer addition insight and nuance on ways forward.

Figure 1. Gambella conflict map since 2018



Source: Author compilation, drawing on various news items and interviewee contributions.

- 1 Regions named after the dominant ethnicities resident there include: Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, Harari, Oromiya, Somali and Tigray.
- 2 Dereje Feyissa, 'A National Perspective on the Conflict in Gambella', in *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, eds. Svein Ege, Harald Aspen, Birhanu Teferre and Shiferaw Bekele, Trondheim: Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 2009. Accessed 14 January 2025.

MAJOR CONFLICTS POST-2018 REFORM

Since 2018, Gambella has experienced several conflicts. While some can be categorized as a continuation of protracted conflicts in the region, others can be attributed to the post-2018 political changes in Addis Ababa. In terms of post-2018 conflict, it is useful to measure the level of intensity, consequences and impacts on the wider web of conflict in the region. The Gambella conflict map provides a snapshot of the major conflicts and actors in the region since 2018.

THE 2018 POLITICAL CHANGE

In the wake of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali and his team taking control of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in Addis Ababa and the subsequent transition to Prosperity Party (PP), there were high hopes for change and a break from the past throughout the country in 2018.³ Gambella was not an exception: Several public demonstrations were held in support of the new leadership. Some regional leaders were immediately replaced by loyalists of the soon-to-be PP.⁴ In Gambella, however, EPRDF-era leadership remained intact and in power for eight months. This ignited frustration among youths, who were impatient to see leadership changes in Gambella, too. Even though the then regional leaders switched allegiance to the new leadership in Addis Ababa, this did not sway the youth to back down on their demands for new leadership in the region. Hence, organized youth group movements started to emerge, calling for reform and leadership change in Gambella.⁵

The loudest voice for change came from Dhal-Diim,⁶ a predominantly Anywaa youth movement. Created on 28 July 2018, Dhal-Diim defines itself as a nonviolent and non-political civil rights movement with the objective to demand reform in the region in alignment with the vision of the new leadership in Addis Ababa. According to the movement, 'The governor [president of Gambella] and his supporters are resistant to the change and fighting tooth and nail to fit into the new system.'⁷ Soon, this movement became synonymous with the 'Gatluak Tut (former president of Gambella region belonging to Nuer ethnic group) must go' protests. A predominantly Anywaa youth movement calling for the removal of a Nuer president was perceived by Nuer youths as a direct attack on the Nuer-led administration.

In response, Nuer youth created their own movement to support the Gatluak administration: Goa-ni-mal.⁸ Hence, when Dhal-Diim organized anti-government protests, Goa-ni-mal organized its own counter protests in support of the administration. In addition to protests on the ground, both youth groups were active on social media (in particular Facebook), mobilizing their supporters and sometimes posting what might be considered inflammatory content.⁹ What started in Gambella as support rallies for the PP against the EPRDF, gradually drifted to the local Anywaa–Nuer rivalry, setting the scene for a new outburst of Anywaa–Nuer conflict.

In July 2018, when these protests first began, they were conducted peacefully on both sides. By September 2018, however, the protests took a violent turn, when some Anywaa youth protesters under Dhal-Diim umbrella blocked the road linking the office of the president to his residence. It is alleged that upon hearing the news that the road to his residence was blocked, the then president, Mr Gatluak Tut, ordered the military to clear the road. Without coordination with the local police, the military went to the area and opened fire on the protesters, killing three Anywaa youths on the spot and wounding many

- 3 Mohammed Ademo, 'Why I'm coming back home to Ethiopia after 16 years in exile', *Al Jazeera Opinion*, 30 June 2018. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/6/30/why-im-coming-back-home-to-ethiopia-after-16-years-in-exile>.
- 4 *Ethiopia Observer*, 'The Ethiopia's Somali region gets new president', 22 August 2018. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2018/08/22/the-ethiopias-somali-region-gets-new-president/>.
- 5 Interview-3, Anywaa youth, Gambella, 3 September 2024.
- 6 The Anywaa term 'Dhal-Diim' means 'resist oppression'.
- 7 Dhal-diim News, Facebook post, 6 August 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/12EPmNXbGSf/>.
- 8 The term 'Goa-ni-mal' means 'peace is good'.
- 9 For example, see : Goa-ni-mal News, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/goaNiMalNews/> and Dhal-Diim News, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/Dhaldiim/>.



other bystanders at 120-Mazuria, a busy junction in Gambella town.¹⁰ This incident raised a red flag in Addis Ababa, eventually precipitating the change of leadership in the region. As a result, in October 2018, Omot Ojulu, an Anywaa, was appointed president and Thankuay Joack, a Nuer, vice president.¹¹

The new administration enjoyed relative peace during its initial period. Even at the height of the war in the north with Tigray, and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) violence in West Wollega zone of Oromia, Gambella remained a safe haven for both ethnic Tigrayans persecuted in other regions for alleged support to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and ethnic Amharas fleeing mass OLA atrocities in West Wollega.¹² This period was short-lived, however, given the creation of the Gambella Liberation Front (GLF) in October 2021 and its consequent alliance with the OLA, which soon after sparked a wave of violence in the region.

GLF VIOLENCE

The GLF was established by Gatluak Boum Pal, a disgruntled EPRDF-era politician, after he lost the 2021 national election as an opposition party candidate. In the run up to 2021 national election, Gatluak Boum established an opposition political party: The Gambella People's Justice for Peace and Democratic Movement (GPJPDM), predominantly made up of Nuer people from Gatluak's clan.¹³ As is often the case in Gambella, some people interpreted the creation of the GPJPDM as yet another attempt to counter the Anywaa-dominated opposition political party, the Gambella People's Liberation Movement (GPLM).¹⁴ To large extent, the GPJPDM can be described as one of the post-EPRDF offshoots of the TPLF after it lost control of leadership in Addis Ababa in 2018 and retreated to Mekele.

The 2018 appointment of Omot Ojulu to the regional presidency of Gambella is interpreted by some Nuer elites as the establishment of a political alliance between the Oromo-led federal government and Anywaa elites in Gambella. Therefore, Nuer elites in Gambella had to seek an alternative alliance, which they found in the TPLF. Gatluak Boum was one of the participants at the Coalition of Ethiopian Federalist Forces forums held in Mekele between 2019 and 2020. The coalition was created under the auspices of the TPLF and was intended to counter the unitary interests of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's administration. It is therefore not surprising that when the TPLF turned to armed struggle under the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF), Gatluak Boum's GPJPDM party also followed suit by rebranding itself as the GLF with a military wing, the Gambella Liberation Army, hereafter referred to as GLF/A.

Although publicly the GLF/A claims to be fighting 'against Ethiopia's Prosperity Party led government',¹⁵ on the ground, the majority of GLF/A targets are Anywaa civilians.¹⁶ After its creation, the GLF/A was accused of kidnapping Anywaa boys and killing Anywaa farmers and civilians they encountered. For example:

- In September 2021, two Anywaa boys bathing in Jebjebe River were shot dead, purportedly by the GLF/A. In retaliation, Anywaa youth in Gambella town attacked Nuer civilians, resulting in the death of two Nuer, according to the regional government.¹⁷
- In the same month, a pregnant Anywaa woman travelling from Abol to Gambella town was also killed, allegedly by members of the GLF/A, near *Behr-Behreseb* (ብሔር ብሔረሰብ [nations

10 Arefaynie Fantahun, 'Arrests in Gambella stoke tensions', 10 October 2018. Accessed 10 January 2025, <https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2018/10/10/arrests-in-gambella-stoke-tensions/>; Interview-3, Anywaa youth, Gambella, 3 September 2024.

11 ENA, *Regional States in Ethiopia Forming Respective New Regional Governments*, 30 September 2021. Accessed 9 January 2025, https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/en_28909.

12 Interview-1, Anywaa intellectual, Gambella, 1 September 2024.

13 Interview-4, Nuer regional official, Gambella, 3 September 2024.

14 Interview-5, Anywaa opposition politician, Gambella, 5 September 2024.

15 <https://ethiopia.me.uk/forums/topic/the-established-gambela-liberation-front/>.

16 Interview-1, Anywaa intellectual, Gambella, 1 September 2024.

17 Elias Tegegn, 'Gambella region accuses GLF of recent attacks', *The Reporter*, 4 September 2021. Accessed 9 January 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/11919/>.

and nationalities]) area.¹⁸

- In January 2022, two Anywaa boys were kidnapped by the GLF/A on their father's farm in Abol *woreda* (third-level administrative division) in an attempt to recruit them as fighters. One boy escaped and came back to his family in Abol but the second boy remains missing.¹⁹
- In May 2022, two elderly Anywaa farmers were shot dead while farming in Golli settlement on the outskirts of Gambella town, allegedly by the GLF/A.²⁰

Apart from individual killings of Anywaa civilians, the GLF/A never really engaged in direct confrontations with the government security forces, except when they were being pursued after kidnapping or killing civilians. Despite its online propaganda, GLA forces on the ground do not seem to have been as strong as the group claimed. It is alleged that Gatluak Boum mainly recruited his fighters from destitute Nuer refugee boys and those from within his own clan.²¹ However, these isolated killings perpetrated by the GLF/A, along with other similar incidents that took place soon after its alliance with the OLA, raised alarm in the regional government. According to regional government sources, despite repeated regional government pleas for the reinforcement of the regional security forces, or at least more ammunition for the regional special force, these calls were not heeded in Addis Ababa.²²

JOINT OLA-GLF/A ATTACK ON GAMBELLA TOWN

On 14 June 2022, the OLA together with the GLF/A conducted a major attack on Gambella town. According to witnesses, this is the first ever significant gun fight in town history.²³ Neither the OLA nor the GLF/A clarified the objective of the attack.

The attack was claimed to be extremely well organized and executed, occurring with professional military precision.²⁴ It started around 5.00 a.m. from three directions: 03 kebele (lowest administrative division), 04 kebele and through the main road to Dembidollo town in Oromia. Purportedly, the plan was for these three forces to converge at the regional council office.²⁵ By 8.00 a.m., the forces that came through 03 kebele had already broken through the defensive lines of the regional special force, which was poorly armed. At around 10.00 a.m., they had advanced to less than 100 m from capturing the regional council office.

In contrast, those who entered Gambella town via the Dembidollo road faced stiff resistance from the federal police stationed on the road. Those who came through 04 kebele also met strong resistance from the regional special force. By the time these two flanks of OLA-GLF/A attack were about to break through and join the 03 kebele forces to capture the regional council office from their respective directions, the scattered regional special force had regrouped, and reinforcements had arrived from nearby militias, along with more ammunition from Bonga police training camp. These combined factors dealt a devastating blow to the OLA forces that were already in town.²⁶

Despite GLF/A claims of a joint attack with the OLA, according to eyewitnesses, the GLA forces only showed up at entry points to the town and withdrew earlier so they did not participate in the actual fight in the town.²⁷ By 1.00 p.m., the OLA forces were in retreat. Given that the regional special force and local militias had already closed off all exit points out of Gambella town, however, OLA members ended up hiding in individual houses. Moreover, lack of knowledge about the town layout meant some

18 Interview-3, Anywaa youth, Gambella, 3 September 2024.

19 Interview-3, Anywaa youth, Gambella, 3 September 2024.

20 Interview-3, Anywaa youth, Gambella, 3 September 2024.

21 Interview-4, Nuer regional official, Gambella, 3 September 2024.

22 Interview-4, Nuer regional official, Gambella, 3 September 2024.

23 Interview-5, Anywaa opposition politician, Gambella, 5 September 2024.

24 Interview-5, Anywaa opposition politician, Gambella, 5 September 2024.

25 Interview-5, Anywaa opposition politician, Gambella, 5 September 2024.

26 Interview-3, Anywaa youth, Gambella, 3 September 2024.

27 Interview-5, Anywaa opposition politician, Gambella, 5 September 2024.

combatants even ended up running the wrong direction. As a result, the OLA forces suffered heavy casualties in this attack. The regional special force also suffered casualties, with more than 20 dead and many others wounded, according to a regional government sources.²⁸

Right after the regional special force contained the OLA forces, the OLA and GLF/A online activists who had been reporting about the capture of Gambella town in the morning then turned their attention to human rights issues in the afternoon, creating the hashtag, #OromoMasscreinGambella. One post using this hashtag reads: ‘Gambella regional government in collaboration with Abiy’s Biltsigina military force has killed over 50 unarmed Oromo civilians so far in Gambella, Ethiopia town on the border of Sudan.’²⁹ Hence, instead of the OLA–GLF/A attack on Gambella town, the Oromo massacre became the national headline, primarily propagated by OLA–GLF/A affiliated and sympathetic networks.³⁰ The GLF leader, Gatluak Boum, took this as an opportunity to sever relations between what he saw as the Oromo-led federal government and the Anywaa-led regional government of Gambella.³¹

Three months later, in September 2022, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) released a report holding the Gambella regional special force responsible for the extrajudicial killing of civilians.³² The scope of the report is mainly limited to the purported human rights abuses by the regional special force after the 14 June attack, leaving out the broader context of the OLA–GLF/A atrocities against civilian populations before the attack. In addition, the EHRC also fails to report on the role of the federal police force, which were also part of the fight against the OLA–GLF/A attack, thus solely attributing all accountability to the regional special force.³³ In response, the regional government issued a statement criticizing the report of being exaggerated and biased, based on interviewing supporters of the OLA and TPLF in the region. The regional government further asserts that: ‘The report is deliberately crafted to incite clashes between native ethnic groups of the region and their Ethiopian brothers and sisters.’³⁴

Subsequent to the EHRC report, a total of 12 members of the Gambella police (including former police commissioner) and the regional special force were arrested and detained in Addis Ababa in connection with the OLA–GLF/A attack on Gambella town in June 2022.³⁵ On 1 July 2024, the Federal High Court Lideta Division First Constitutional and Terrorism Criminal Bench acquitted the former Gambella

28 Interview-4, Nuer regional official, Gambella, 3 September 2024.

29 HENOK G. GABISA on X: Gambella regional government in collaboration with Abiy’s Biltsigina military force has killed over 50 unarmed Oromo civilians so far in Gambella, Ethiopia town on the boarder of Sudan. http://x.com/henokgabisa/status/1537765251810308097?t=N4c7QhBvYF_W9hPIJg3H8w&s=19. posted on 17 June 2022 at 02:53 PM.

30 Mihret G/Kirstos & Assefa Molla, ‘News: At least 50 civilians killed in extra-judicial execution by security forces, armed groups in Gambella: new report’, *Addis Standard*, 29 September 2022. Accessed, 10 January 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-at-least-50-civilians-killed-in-extra-judicial-execution-by-security-forces-armed-groups-in-gambella-new-report/>.

31 Interview-1, Anywaa intellectual, Gambella, 1 September 2024.

32 Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, በጋምቤላ ከተማ በክልሉ የጸጥታ ኃይሎች፣ በኦሮሞ ነጻነት ሰራዊት (ኦነግ ሸኔ) እና የጋምቤላ ነጻነት ግንባር (ጋነግ) ታጣቂዎች የተፈጸሙ የሰብአዊ መብቶች ጥሰቶች ላይ የተደረገ ምርመራ ሪፖርት (Investigation report on human rights violations committed by the regional security forces, Oromo Liberation Army (OLF Shene) and Gambella Liberation Front (GLF) militants in Gambella city), Addis Ababa: EHRC, 28 September 2022. Accessed 10 January 2025, በጋምቤላ ከተማ በክልሉ የጸጥታ ኃይሎች፣ በኦሮሞ ነጻነት ሰራዊት (ኦነግ ሸኔ) እና የጋምቤላ ነጻነት ግንባር (ጋነግ) ታጣቂዎች የተፈጸሙ የሰብአዊ መብቶች ጥሰቶች ላይ የተደረገ ምርመራ ሪፖርት.

33 EHRC, በጋምቤላ ከተማ በክልሉ የጸጥታ ኃይሎች.

34 Mihret G/Kristos, ‘News: Gambella region rejects Rights Commission’s report, calls it “irresponsible”’, *Addis Standard*, 3 October 2022. Accessed 10 January 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-gambella-region-rejects-rights-commissions-report-calls-it-irresponsible/>.

35 ‘News: Court convicts 12 former Gambella region police members, passes stiffer prison terms’, *Addis Standard*, 24 July 2024. Accessed 10 January 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/court-convicts-12-former-gambella-region-police-members-passes-stiffer-prison-terms/>.

regional police commissioner, Abula Obang, and other two defendants, citing insufficient evidence.³⁶

DISSOLUTION OF REGIONAL SPECIAL FORCE

On 15 April 2023, the chief of staff of the Ethiopian National Defense Force announced the dissolution of the regional special forces: ‘From today there is no organization and structure called regional special force’ in Ethiopia.³⁷ Before this official announcement, on 10 April 2023, Gambella region announced the dissolution of its regional special force—one of the first regions to do so.³⁸

Unlike other regions (for example, Amhara) where the dissolution was resisted, in Gambella the dissolution was smooth but not without scepticism. That is, it was widely believed the dissolution of the Gambella regional special force aimed to weaken the regional government, with some even seeing this as retaliation for the defeat of the OLA forces.³⁹ Regardless of the motives for the dissolution, the process itself did not give rise to violence, as did occur in Amhara. Nonetheless, the disappearance of the regional special force created a huge security vacuum, reinvigorating existing ethnic tensions.⁴⁰

Resurgence of Anywaa–Nuer conflict

One of the immediate consequences of the dissolution of the regional special force was the rapid resumption of the Anywaa–Nuer conflict, which spiralled out of control. Less than a month after the dissolution of the regional special force, an incident between two villages in Itang special woreda⁴¹ rapidly spread to other woredas, expanding into full-scale conflict between the Nuer and Anywaa.

Table 1. Timeline of major Anywaa–Nuer conflicts (May 2023–April 2024)

Date	Conflict
Mid-May 2023	Attack on Anywaa in Ponywa village under Itang special woreda.
June 2023	Clashes between Anywaa and Nuer villages in Itang special woreda.
June 2023	Conflict spreading to Gambella town and Pinyudo town in God woreda under Anywa zone.
Late June 2023	Anywaa couple shot in Agul Nyang (04 kebele) in Gambella town.
1 July 2023	Anywaa youth attack Nuer neighbourhood (referred to as a Behr-Behreseb area next to 04 kebele) in Gambella town.
20 July 2023	Nuer militia from Ethiopia and South Sudan attack the Anywaa in Pino village in Itang special woreda.
25 July 2023	Anywaa militia attack Nuer in Leer village in Itang special woreda.
August 2023–March 2024	Small skirmishes continue between the Anywaa and Nuer in Itang special woreda, Gambella town and Pinyudo town in Gog woreda under Anywa zone.
4 April 2024	South Sudanese Nuer militia supported by Ethiopian Nuer militia attack four villages in Jor woreda under Anywa zone.

Source: Author compilation, drawing on various news items and interviewee contributions.

36 የጋምቤላ ክልል ፖሊስ ኮሚሽነር የቀድሞው ዋና ኮሚሽነር ከንፁሃን ግድያ ጋር ተያይዞ በተከሰሱበት ክስ ነጻ ተባለ (The former chief commissioner of the Gambella Regional Police Commission was acquitted of charges related to the killing of innocents), *Fana Broadcasting Corporate S.C.*, 1 July 2024. Accessed 10 January 2025, <https://www.fanabc.com/archives/251902>.

37 ‘Chief of Staff of the Army announces dissolution of regional special forces’, *Fana Broadcasting Corporate S.C.*, 15 April 2023. Accessed 10 January 2025, <https://www.fanabc.com/english/chief-of-staff-of-the-army-announces-dissolution-of-regional-special-forces/>.

38 Interview-4, Nuer regional official, Gambella, 3 September 2024.

39 Interview-5, Anywaa opposition politician, Gambella, 5 September 2024.

40 Interview-11, Anywaa official from Anywaa zone, interviewed in Abobo, 13 September 2024.

41 Itang woreda used to be part of Anywa zone. Due to repeated conflicts between Anywaa and the Nuer, however, it was designated as a special woreda in 2003 reporting direct to the regional government instead of Anywaa zone.

In mid-May 2023, Anywaa internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Itang special woreda who had been previously displaced because of conflict decided to go back to Ponywa, their village. According to them, their Nuer neighbours in Leer kebele were not happy about their return. At one point, some villagers went to the forest to cut trees for reconstruction and one of them (a man) disappeared. The Anywaa suspected their Nuer neighbours in Leer kebele of killing the man.⁴² The Nuer rejected the allegations. According to Nuer sources, the man who disappeared was blind and got lost in the forest but the Anywaa nonetheless blamed them for the disappearance.⁴³ In the midst of this tension, an Anywaa farmer whose canoe had drifted downstream wanted to search for it. Even though he was discouraged from doing so by other Anywaa members due to the tensions, he insisted on going, so was accompanied by another man. When they travelled downstream, they found the canoe tied down in the Nuer village of Leer. They talked to the leader of the village, who peacefully handed over the canoe to them, after a small payment had been made to the people who had pulled it out of the river and secured it. On their way back upstream, however, they were shot at by two Nuer, with one of the Anywaa men killed. Upon hearing the gun shots, the villagers in Ponywa rushed to the scene and killed both Nuer shooters. In response, all the residents in Leer village mobilized their forces and attacked Ponywa village, killing four people and burning the newly constructed *tukuls* (round-shaped home) to the ground. The remaining Ponywa residents abandoned their village and returned to their IDP settlements in Ilea kebele.⁴⁴

During the days that followed, armed Nuer militia members from Leer and neighbouring Nuer kebeles launched a series of attacks on nearby Anywaa kebeles in Itang special woreda. By the end of May 2023, three more Anywaa villages (Otal, Potok and Owalo) were destroyed and the villagers displaced. The combined population of all of the Anywaa villages in this area does not match the Nuer population, which vastly outnumbers the former. Moreover, the Nuer in this border area have easy access to supplies of weapons and ammunition from their kinfolk on the other side of the border in South Sudan. From June 2023 onwards, isolated killings and small-scale shootings between adjacent Nuer and Anywaa villages in Itang special woreda happened on an almost daily basis, with both sides sustaining casualties.⁴⁵

By June 2023, the conflict had spread to Gambella and Pinyudo towns, where the Anywaa and Nuer live in adjacent neighbourhoods. In Gambella town, the conflict was more intense around Addis Sefer, Ominigna, 04 kebele (Agul-Nyang), and *Behr-Behereseb* (ቤሮር ቤሮረሰብ) areas. In late June 2023, an Anywaa couple were shot in Angul-Nyang purportedly by Nuer men from the neighbouring *Behr-Behereseb* settlement, a new Nuer settlement near 04 kebele.⁴⁶ In retaliation, on 1 July 2023, Anywaa youth conducted a surprise attack on the settlement, killing nine Nuer and wounding four others but also losing some of their men.⁴⁷ The attack on the *Behr-Behereseb* settlement became a rallying point for Nuer both in and outside the country—among Ethiopian and South Sudanese Nuer alike. The Nuer diaspora (primarily in the United States, Canada, Australia and Europe) launched resource mobilization campaigns via zoom meetings and Facebook live shows.⁴⁸

On 20 July 2023, more than 2,000 well-armed Nuer, many coming directly from South Sudanese White Army militia, marched into Pino village in Itang special woreda. Due to their large number and the advanced weapons they carried, the small Ethiopian army unit stationed in the area did not try to stop them. By early afternoon, Pino village was under full attack. Despite the attempts of the villagers to defend themselves and their village, by evening the village had fallen in the hands of the Nuer militia, the members of which reportedly killed everyone they found in the village, except for those who managed

42 Interview-8, Anywaa official from Itang special woreda, Itang, 7 September 2024.

43 Interview-9, Nuer official from Itang special woreda, Itang, 10 September 2024.

44 Interview-8, Anywaa official from Itang special woreda, Itang, 7 September 2024. This account summarizes many similar stories collected from various other interviewees.

45 Interview-8, Anywaa official from Itang special woreda, Itang, 7 September 2024.

46 Interview-1, Anywaa intellectual, Gambella, 1 September 2024.

47 Interview-2, Nuer intellectual, Gambella, 1 September 2024.

48 Social media, especially Facebook, plays a key role in agitating and mobilizing conflict. For example, see: Naath Media Network, <https://www.facebook.com/NMNTV24Hour/>; Gambella Contemporary Issue, <https://www.facebook.com/p/Gambella-Contemporary-Issue-100083223368063/>; and Gambella Liberation Front/Army, https://www.facebook.com/p/Gambella-Liberation-FrontArmy-100022161941324/?locale=nl_BE.

to hide. In this attack, more than 40 Anywaa people were killed and more than 20 wounded.⁴⁹ The Nuer attackers also suffered casualties. For the first time, this attack left behind clear evidence of the involvement of South Sudanese Nuer militia in the conflict; for example, some of the dead Nuer militia members had South Sudanese IDs and wore South Sudanese militia uniforms.⁵⁰

The news and pictures from Pino angered many Anywaa both in and outside the country. As a result, volunteer Anywaa youth from all Anywaa woredas went to Pino. On 25 July 2023, they launched an attack on Leer village, inflicting serious damage but also losing some of their fighters.⁵¹ According to the EHRC's report, 19 Nuer people were killed, and 11 others wounded in the Leer attack.⁵²

For the next nine months, both Anywaa and Nuer reverted to small-scale isolated shootings in and around Gambella town and Itang special woreda. On 4 April 2024, however, Nuer militia from South Sudan, accompanied by small number of Nuer from Ethiopia, launched a simultaneous surprise attack on four villages in Jor woreda. Some of those who were attacked claim that the force numbered more than 4,000, double that of the number of Nuer militia members who attacked Pino in July 2023.⁵³ Jor is one of the most isolated Anywaa woredas, without road or telephone connections. In the attack, more than 100 Anywaa people were killed in these four villages, hundreds of cattle were raided and many children were abducted.⁵⁴ In the end, the regional government dismissed four officials from their positions on the basis that they failed to adequately fulfil the responsibilities assigned to them by the government and the party, particularly amid intensifying security issues in the region.⁵⁵ As result of pressure from the military, seven children were returned, all from South Sudan, offering additional evidence that the attackers were indeed from the South Sudanese Nuer White Army militia. One person from the regional government with knowledge about the return of the children indicates that Nuer zone paid a ransom for the children.⁵⁶

What sets apart these conflicts from the previous Anywaa–Nuer conflict is the direct involvement of South Sudanese Nuer White Army militia in the conflict.⁵⁷ This raises a question about the ambitions of some Nuer elites to build a Naath Nation.⁵⁸ The fact that most of the online mobilization for the conflict was run by well-known supporters of Naath Nation, their frequent reference to Gambella as part of the Naath Nation and the role played by the Naath Media Network only increases suspicion about

49 Interview-5, Anywa opposition politician, Gambella, 5 September 2024.

50 According to witnesses and photographic evidence, some high-ranking South Sudanese militia were killed in this conflict and left behind with their south Sudanese militia uniform and flag. Interview-5, Anywa opposition politician, Gambella, 5 September 2024.

51 Interview-9, Nuer official from Itang special woreda, Itang, 10 September 2024. This account summarizes many similar stories collected from various other interviewees.

52 EHRC, (An investigative report on human rights violations in different areas of Gambella caused by conflicts and insecurity in various periods since May 2015) በጋምቤላ ክልል የተለያዩ አካባቢዎች ከግንቦት ወር 2015 ዓ.ም. ጀምሮ በተለያዩ ወቅቶች በተከሰቱ ግጭቶች እና የጸጥታ መደፍረስ ሁኔታዎች ሳቢያ የደረሱ የሰብአዊ መብቶች ጥሰቶችን በተመለከተ የተደረገ የምርመራ ሪፖርት.

53 Interview-12, Anywaa resident in Jor woreda, Gambella, 14 September 2024.

54 Interview-12, Anywaa resident in Jor woreda, Gambella, 14 September 2024.

55 Gambella Regional Gov't Press Secretariat Office, Facebook post, 8 April 2024, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbidoEsLmCHN51cZUM2wQ4B7pGaRmNVGyY1se5cc2qPASkX45q3a6PjXNbdFw7sMBMYapl&id=100057435909546.

56 Interview-4, Nuer regional official, Gambella, 3 September 2024.

57 The term 'White Army' is a name for an ethnic Nuer militia organization in central and eastern Greater Upper Nile in South Sudan, formed around 1991 by Riek Machar, currently vice president of South Sudan, for the dual purpose of defending Nuer cattle herds from neighboring ethnic groups and fighting in the Second Sudanese Civil War between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army and the Sudanese government. For example, see: John Young, 'Popular Struggles and Elite Co-optation: The Nuer White Army in South Sudan's Civil War' Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2016. Accessed 10 January 2025, <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/HSBA-WP41-White-Army.pdf>.

58 The Naath Nation is an aspiration of some Nuer elites to build an independent Nuer state made up of Nuer territories in South Sudan and Ethiopia. In some of their propaganda materials, the whole Gambella region is included on the map of the future Naath Nation.

the ulterior motives behind recent conflicts.⁵⁹ According to sources present at the meeting of the first Ethiopia–South Sudan Joint Border Administrators meeting⁶⁰ that was organized after the Jor attack, the question of Naath Nations was raised by the Ethiopian National Intelligence and Security Services as an issue of concern.⁶¹

On 15 August 2024, in a surprise move, the Gambella regional president and vice president were replaced by the federal government. According to state media, ‘These leadership changes were prompted by the need for transitional leadership capable of addressing the public’s demands for peace, development, and good governance’.⁶² Against this explanation, some observers suspect other ulterior motives for the change of leadership such as renewed interest by the federal government in resource extraction (for example, gold mining and large-scale agricultural investments) in Gambella via the insertion of more pliant leadership.⁶³

Increased cross-border raids by the Murle

Another immediate consequence of the disarmament of the regional special force is the increase in the number of cross-border raids and attacks by Murle ethnic groups. The Murle are known for frequent cross-border cattle raids and the abduction of children, which serve two main purposes: economic and cultural. Economically, more cattle and more children mean more wealth for the family. Culturally, Murle youths who bring more cattle and children from neighbouring ethnic groups are highly regarded as heroes in the community and therefore are more respected.⁶⁴ In 2016, the Murle conducted a large-scale cattle raid in the Nuer zone, killing more than 200 people, abducting more than 100 children and taking hundreds of cattle.⁶⁵ This incident contributed to the justification for the creation of the regional special force to contain such attacks.

With all its weaknesses and problems, one of the main achievements of the regional special force was its ability to decrease and deter cross-border attacks by the Murle. In Gambella, this was the primary mandate of the regional special force—to patrol the lengthy and treacherous Ethio–South Sudanese border against intruders. To their credit, nothing on the scale of the 2016 attack took place after the creation of the regional special force.

With the dissolution of the regional special force, however, the Murle have exploited the security vacuum to their advantage, resuming cross-border cattle raids, attacks and the abduction of children in Gog, Dimma and Jor woredas. With the start of the dry season in November 2024, more raids and attacks can be expected from the Murle; for example, on 14 October 2024, four children (1 boy and 3 girls) were abducted by Murle in Kutbuudi village in Gog woreda. Likewise, in December two men were killed in Dimma woreda allegedly by Murle assailants.⁶⁶

59 For example, see: Naath Media Network homepage on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/NMNTV24Hour/>.

60 ‘First Ethiopia–South Sudan Joint Border Administrators meeting kicks off’, *Fana Broadcasting Corporate S.C.*, 4 July 2024. Accessed 10 January 2025, <https://www.fanabc.com/english/first-ethiopia-south-sudan-joint-border-administrators-meeting-kicks-off/>.

61 Interview-11, Anywaa official from Anywaa zone, Abobo, 13 September 2024.

62 ‘Gambella Region Appoints New Leadership in an Emergency Council Session’, *Ethiopian Broadcasting Company*, 15 August 2024. Accessed 10 January 2025, <https://www.ebc.et/english/newsdetails.aspx?newsid=7518>.

63 Interview-1, Anywaa intellectual, Gambella, 1 September 2024.

64 Makak John Gile, ‘Identifying the Causes and Implications of Murle Child Abduction Practice, and its Impacts on Children: A Case Study on Ethiopia’s Gambella Region and South Sudan Border’, Human Rights Center Antonio Papisca, no date. Accessed 13 January 2025, <https://unipd-centrodirittiumani.it/en/topics/identifying-the-causes-and-implications-of-murle-child-abduction-practice-and-its-impacts-on-children-a-case-study-on-ethiopias-gambella-region-and-south-sudan-border>.

65 ‘Ethiopia attack: 200 people dead, 100 children missing’, *Al Jazeera*, 18 April 2016. Accessed 13 January 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/4/18/ethiopia-attack-200-people-dead-100-children-missing>.

66 Interview-11, Anywaa official from Anywaa zone, Abobo, 13 December 2024.

HOST COMMUNITY VERSUS REFUGEE CONFLICTS

Gambella is the largest South Sudanese refugee host region in Ethiopia, with seven refugee camps, all of which are in Anywaa zone. The conflict that started in Itang special woreda between the villages of Ponywa and Leer rapidly expanded to all woredas where the Anywaa and Nuer live as neighbours. This includes refugee camps (predominantly Nuer) and host communities (predominantly Anywaa). Taking into consideration the fact that the refugee population by far surpasses the number of their adjacent host community, Anywaa anxiety with respect to refugee integration under the UN Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) is understandable.⁶⁷

Refugee vs host community conflicts are not new. After the Anywaa–Nuer conflict erupted in Itang, however, both the number of these conflicts has increased tremendously, and the level of violence has intensified. Table 2 is a partial list of incidents, demonstrating the level of violence affecting both Nuer refugees and Anywaa host community members since mid-2023.

Table 2. List of victims from host communities and refugees, by date

Date	Host community	Date	Refugee community
17 January 2024	Bachak Oman Ogud, former member of Ethiopian national basketball team, was pulled from a car and tortured; his body was dismembered by Nuer refugees from Tierkidi refugee camp	20 July 2023	Five Nuer refugee women who went out to collect firewood were shot at by Anywaa shooters; four escaped and one was killed
3 September 2023	Nine Anywaa children were attacked by Nuer refugees from Pinyudo refugee camp while playing in the river; one of them (a thirteen-year-old girl) was killed and the others escaped	13 July 2023	A public bus was attacked, purportedly by Anywaa shooters, between Tarphan and Gambella; one refugee was killed and two others were wounded
12 July 2023	Anyaali village was attacked by Nuer refugees from Tierkidi refugee camp; three people were killed (a woman, a girl and a man)	23 June 2023	Gunyel refugee camp was attacked, purportedly by Anywaa shooters; one refugee was killed and others were wounded
10 July 2023	A pregnant woman was killed in Pinyudo by Nuer refugees; in a separate incident the same month, two women who went to collect firewood in a forest behind Pinyudo refugee camp were found killed and hanged from a tree, purportedly by Nuer refugees	11 June 2023	A Nuer refugee was shot and wounded, allegedly by Anywaa, while riding a bicycle between Pinyudo town and Pinyudo refugee camp 2
22 June 2023	Nuer refugees from Pinyudo blocked the road between Pinyudo and Abobo towns; after stopping an NGO car, they pulled Wekwa Akway out of the car, the only Anywaa passenger and a staff person at the Carter Centre (the other passengers were all highlanders), and killed him with sharp tools, in front of his colleagues	12 April 2023	A Nuer refugee woman in Pinyudo was stabbed to death by Anywaa youths between Pinyudo town and Pinyudo refugee camp

Source: Author compilation, drawing on various news items and interviewee contributions.

The list in Table 2 includes incidents from mid-2023 onward. It is not an exhaustive account of the fatalities over this timeframe. According to Anywaa residents who reside near the refugee camps, the total number of host community fatalities caused by refugees could exceed 50 people since 2023.⁶⁸ According to an EHRC report, at least 27 refugees have lost their lives in and around the refugee camps and 12 have sustained minor and serious injuries as a consequence of the Anywaa–Nuer conflict that

67 UNHCR, 'Briefing note: Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) Ethiopia (July 2018)', ReliefWeb, 17 Aug 2018. Accessed 10 January 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/briefing-note-comprehensive-refugee-response-framework-crrf-ethiopia-july-2018>.

68 Interview-10, Anywaa official from Gog woreda, Pinyudo, 13 September 2024

erupted in 2023.⁶⁹

OTHER CONFLICTS

Although the Nuer–Anywaa conflict is the most violent and damaging conflict in the region, there are also other conflicts taking place in Gambella. Other indigenous ethnic groups have also been affected in various ways.

In 2023 in Majang zone, for example, conflict broke out between indigenous Majang farmers and highlander migrants from different parts of the country. For years, Majang zone has been a primary destination for the spontaneous migration of highlanders seeking land to farm due to its vast natural forest, which is suitable for coffee and other cash crop farming. Previously when encountering a huge influx of highlander farmers, the Majang would leave their area and go deep into the forest to avoid conflict with the newcomers. As this trend of highlander migration has grown drastically over recent years, however, the Majang are left with no more forest in which to run. As Seyoum stated:

Though the identity of the Majang people of Gambella region of Ethiopia is inherently attached to specific forestland environment and its resources endowment, current evidence has showed that the indigenes of Majang have come under a serious threat from Highlander land grabbers leading not only to the displacement of a significant number of the people of Majang but also destruction of their forestland, water sources and wild habitats at a frightening rate.⁷⁰

This in turn has created demographic anxiety among the Majang community, who now are a minority population group on their own homeland, the Majang zone. Hence, having no other place to go, the Majang have started to resist the further destruction of and intrusion in their forests.⁷¹ The recent conflict in Oromia region also produced more migrants looking for new farmland in the Gambella region, particularly in Majang zone. This new wave of migration from Oromia has also created conflict between the indigenous Majang communities and migrant highlanders. Moreover, the creation of the Southwest Ethiopia Region has resulted in violent border disputes and conflicts between the Majang community and neighbouring ethnic groups resident in this new region. Efforts are underway by leaders of both regions to resolve these conflicts.⁷²

The Komo people in Gambella, who are situated between Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz at the border of OLA-controlled territories in Oromia, have been victims of repeated attacks, robbery and forced conscription by the OLA. In August 2024, the OLA attacked Mao-Komo special woreda in Benishangul-Gumuz, which resulted in the displacement of many Komo people to Pokong kebele in Abol woreda in Gambella. The Komo people in Gambella have also been victims of GLF/A attacks and robbery because they are settled in remote areas close to training camps for the OLA and the GLF/A. Similarly, the Opo people, another minority ethnic group in Gambella, have been affected by GLF/A activities due to their proximity to areas where the GLF/A operates, with many of them displaced from Wankey, their village in Itang special woreda.⁷³

69 EHRC, (An investigative report on human rights violations in different areas of Gambella caused by conflicts and insecurity in various periods since May 2015) በጋምቤላ ክልል የተለያዩ አካባቢዎች ከግንቦት ወር 2015 ዓ.ም. ጀምሮ በተለያዩ ወቅቶች በተከሰቱ ግጭቶች እና የጸጥታ መደፍረስ ሁኔታዎች ሳቢያ የደረሱ የሰብአዊ መብቶች ጥሰቶችን በተመለከተ የተደረገ የምርመራ ሪፖርት.

70 Seyoum Mesfin, 'Brief 8: Indigenous Majang People at Risk in Gambella Region, Ethiopia: The time to take action on Land Grabbing is now', UPEACE Africa Policy Series 1/2 (2014): 1.

71 Interviewe-12, Majang official, Gambella, 14 September 2024

72 Gambella Regional Gov't Press Secretariat Office, Facebook post, 23 December 2024, 10.46 a.m., <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1Fe5wUgnAo/>.

73 Interview-7, Kumo politician, Gambella, 7 September 2024.

UNDERLYING FACTORS

Beneath the changing faces of conflict in the Gambella region, there are at least four major underlying factors that drive and perpetuate the various conflicts in the region. These include: ethnic territorial boundaries; conflict in South Sudan and subsequent refugee influxes; contested inter-ethnic power-sharing schemes; and access to economic resources and opportunities.

ETHNIC TERRITORIAL BOUNDARIES

The historical root causes of the Anywaa–Nuer conflict date back to the second half of the nineteenth century, with the eastward expansion of the Eastern Jikany Nuer groups—the Gaajak, Gaajok and Gaagwang—which were forced by the Shilluk to abandon the Sobat River before 1840.⁷⁴ By this time, the Anywaa were already settled along the banks of the tributaries of the Sobat River and occupied the area around Nasir.⁷⁵

This early eastward expansion of the Nuer to Anywaa territories was primarily driven by the quest for access to and control over natural resources such as pasture and water. Since the introduction of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia in 1995, however, control over land has gained a political significance—more representation and access to state resources at regional state levels. In the 1990s, when Gambella was promoted to a regional state, the region was administratively divided into nine woredas, some of which were inherited from the previous Derg structure (1974–1991). These were Akobo and Jikaw woredas (predominantly Nuer), Abobo, Abol, Dimma, Gog, Itang and Jor (predominantly Anywaa), and Godere (predominantly Majang).

Because they had a larger number of woredas than any other ethnic group, this administrative structure gave the Anywaa an upper hand in representation at the regional state level in the early 1990s. In addition, the Anywaa justified their claims to the political leadership of the region by referring to their settlement history as more indigenous than that of the Nuer as well as asserting that theirs was a more authentic Ethiopian citizenship than the Nuer, the majority of whom straddle both Ethiopia and South Sudan.⁷⁶ The Nuer contested Anywaa dominance of regional leadership, citing their numerical majority as reflected in the 1994 national census.⁷⁷ They then launched a series of attacks on neighbouring Anywaa villages in Itang woreda between 1997–1998. As a result of federal government pressure, the administrative structure of the region was redrawn to give the Nuer an equal number of woredas as the Anywaa had. Instead of splitting existing Nuer woredas into more woredas to create parity, the government merged several Anywaa woredas; for example, the two woredas of Abobo and Itang were merged into one woreda to become Alwero and Openo woreda; likewise, Gog and Jor, two separate woredas, were merged into one woreda (Gog–Jor woreda). Itang woreda was also taken away from Anywaa zone and designated as a special woreda shared by both the Anywaa and Nuer in 2003. Later, however, the newly merged woredas became too big for administrative purposes and were subsequently restored to their original status.

Continued Nuer expansion into traditional Anywaa territories remains one of the primary drivers of conflict and violence in the Gambella region. For the Anywaa, this expansion represents a threat to their survival as distinct ethnic group. It also invokes historical memories of lands from which they have been completely erased by the Nuer:

In the years to come there would be no Anywaa left in the Gambella region. Nasir [in South

74 Medhane Tadesse, 'Gambella: The impact of local conflict on regional security', Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2007, 5. Accessed 13 January 2025, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/123907/2007_05_01_Gambella.pdf.

75 Medhane, 'Gambella', 5.

76 When the Anglo–Ethiopian boundary agreement was signed in 1902, most Anywaa lands were placed on the Ethiopian side of the border, whereas most of the Nuer were on the Sudanese side of the border. Because of this, the Anywaa consider themselves to be more Ethiopian and more indigenous to Gambella than the Nuer, most of whom migrated to Ethiopia in the 1980s.

77 Dereje Feyissa, (2011), *Playing Different Gambella: The Paradox of Anywaa and Nuer Identification Strategies in the Gambella region Ethiopia*, New York, Oxford: Berghahn Book.

Sudan] was ours; the Nuer took it. Jikaw and Akobo were ours; the Nuer took them. Wherever we go they would follow us. They take our land, they take our rivers, they take our people.⁷⁸

According to Tap Manytap, a Nuer elder from Makot village in the Itang district, the Nuer respond to such Anywaa claims as follows:

The Anywaa do not like other people and they say all the land of Gambella is ours. This Baro River, is it the Anywaa who dug it all? Is it not from kwoth [God]? Who owns water? Humans can drink, cattle can drink, and animals can drink water from Baro because kwoth gave us all these things. If somebody says do not go to the river, is that person a kwoth? You came from Gambella town. Have you seen many people living in all the areas [between Gambella and Itang]? The Anywaa live only along the banks of the river. Where does Ethiopia start? You cannot finish the land. It is the land that finishes the people.⁷⁹

SOUTH SUDAN CONFLICTS AND REFUGEE INFLUX TO GAMBELLA

Despite the continuous eastward expansion of the Nuer in the nineteenth century and spontaneous settlements during the early 1960s, the Anywaa were by far the largest ethnic group in the Gambella region until the late 1970s.⁸⁰ This quickly changed in the mid-1980s, however. With the sudden influx of (mainly Nuer) refugees due to the Second Sudanese Civil War, the demographic composition began to gradually change in favour of the Nuer.

By the time of the first Ethiopia census in 1984, the Nuer population had almost caught up with that of the Anywaa. At this time, the Anywaa population numbered 30,499 people, while the population of the Ethiopian Nuer was 27,827.⁸¹ During the second census, in 1994, however, the Nuer population nearly tripled, making them 40 per cent of the population in Gambella Regional State, while the Anywaa population was 27 per cent of the population.⁸² These census results were vigorously disputed by the Anywaa, who argued that the size of the Nuer population was inflated by the influx of Nuer refugees from South Sudan.

Gambella is the largest refugee-hosting region in Ethiopia.⁸³ Nearly all refugees in Gambella belong to the Nuer ethnic group. In addition to its obvious impact on the environment and resources, this refugee influx has directly contributed to the Anywaa–Nuer conflict in the region. During local conflicts, for example, Nuer refugees automatically become part and parcel of the conflict both as perpetrators and victims. For the Anywaa, the influx of Nuer refugees has created demographic anxiety as they witness regional demography significantly altering in favour of the Nuer, thus affecting the power balance in the region. Furthermore as Dereje noted, ‘Anecdotal evidence shows that some of Gambella’s Nuer political elites are using the refugees to gain political advantage, by issuing Ethiopian ID cards to Nuer refugees, causing tension between the regional political leadership and the federal institution of the

78 Dereje Feyissa, (2005), ‘Land and the Politics of Identity: The Case of Anywaa–Nuer Relations in the Gambella Region’, in *Competing Jurisdictions: Settling Land Claims in Africa*, eds. Sandra Evers, Marja Spierenburg and Harry Wels, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005, 212.

79 Dereje, ‘Land and the Politics of Identity’, 212.

80 Samuel Zewdie Hagos and Jan Winczorek, (2018), *Competition for land in the Gambella region: Victim perspectives*, Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2018, 32.

81 Central Statistics Agency, ‘The 1984 population and housing census of Ethiopia’, Addis Ababa: Central Statistics Agency, 1984. Cited in Samuel Zewdie Hagos, ‘Refugees and Local Power Dynamics: The Case of the Gambella Region of Ethiopia’, discussion paper 25/2021, Bonn: Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik gGmbH, 2021, 17. Accessed 13 January 2025, https://www.idos-research.de/fileadmin/migratedNewsAssets/Files/DP_25.2021.pdf.

82 FDRE Office of Population and Housing Census Commission Central Statistical Authority, (1994), *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia Results for Gambella Region, Volume I, Statical Report*. <http://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Population-and-Housing-Census-1994-Gambela-Region.pdf>.

83 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, (2024), Total Refugees and Asylum Seekers, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/eth>.

Administration for Refugee Affairs.⁸⁴

In February 2019, the Ethiopian government adopted a new refugee proclamation following the adoption of the UN Global Compact on Refugees. Proclamation No. 1110/2019 is often referred to as one of the most progressive refugee policy in Africa, granting a wide-ranging set of additional rights to refugees including local integration, a residence out-of-camp policy and the right to work among others.⁸⁵ Although adopted by an overwhelming majority, the new refugee proclamation was bitterly opposed by the only Anywaa member of parliament at the time, Ojulu Gilo. He argues that the proclamation was not presented for consultation, especially in refugee-hosting regions, and expressed his concerns that it might do more harm than its intended benefits.⁸⁶ In short, the large presence of South Sudanese refugees in Gambella (who are mostly Nuer), combined with successive Ethiopian government policies of favouring refugees over host communities⁸⁷ and the new global policy frameworks that aim for local integration of refugees such as the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) continue to be one of the underlying causes of conflicts in the region.

CONTESTED INTER-ETHNIC POWER-SHARING SCHEMES

Competition over regional political power remains a constant source of tension and violence among the communities in Gambella, especially between the Anywaa and Nuer. Since the creation of the region in 1995, questions are frequently raised about a range of sensitive topics: how many people are represented in the council from each ethnic group; how many regional council cabinet seats are allocated to each ethnic group; which bureau is headed by whom and so on. These are some of the most contentious issues that create divisions between the various ethnic groups in the region.

In the early 1990s, the Anywaa enjoyed relative superiority over the Nuer in the allocation of regional seats. At least two reasons account for this. First, the Anywaa had a higher number of woredas. Out of the nine woredas in the region at the time, the Anywaa were represented in eight of them (except for Godere). The total land area of Anywaa zone alone makes up 70 per cent of the landmass in the region. In contrast, Nuer zone covers only 24 per cent of the total land size of the region. As such, the Anywaa justified their superiority on the basis of their historic settlements and ownership of a sizable portion of land in the region. Second, the Anywaa had contributed to the war against the Derg alongside the TPLF, under the auspices of the Gambella Peoples Liberation Movement (GPLM). Hence, when the EPRDF took control of Addis Ababa, the GPLM became the custodian of the Gambella region. The Nuer, who were on the side of the Derg, were associated with the defeated regime as they had occupied the two most senior positions in the former Gambella district under the Derg regime; namely, the district administrator and party chair.

With the announcement of the 1994 census results indicating that the Nuer population exceeded the Anywaa population, the Nuer immediately invoked the democratic principle of majority rule in their argument for more seats and greater representation at the regional government level.⁸⁸ The Nuer also instrumentalized their participation in the 1998 Ethio-Eritrea war to delegitimize Anywaa claims that they are South Sudanese refugees. Combined with deteriorating relations between the GPLM and

84 Dereje Feyissa, 'The Spillover Effect of South Sudan in Gambella, Ethiopia', *Horn Affairs*, 18 November 2014. Accessed 13 January 2025, <https://hornaffairs.com/2014/11/18/the-spillover-effect-of-south-sudan-in-gambella-ethiopia/>.

85 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 'Refugees Proclamation No. 1110/2019', *Federal Negarit Gazette*, 27 February 2019. Accessed 13 January 2025, <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/eth216792.pdf>.

86 Ojulu Gilo, speech to members of the House of Peoples Representative, 17 January 2019. <http://www.facebook.com/share/v/151KwCcow9/>

87 Kurimoto, Eisei. 'The Derg brought the Dinka and Nuer on us: Effects of the Sudanese Civil War on the Ethiopian Anuak'. *Sudan Studies* 14 (1993).

88 Dereje Feyissa, *Playing different Games. The Paradox of Anywaa and Nuer Identification Strategies in the Gambella Region, Ethiopia*, Volume 4, New York/ Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011.

EPRDF, the tide started to turn in favour of the Nuer in early 2000s.⁸⁹ By the 2005 elections, the Nuer were allocated more seats in the regional cabinet, had an almost equal number of woredas as the Anywaa and Nuer zone received a larger budget allocation than Anywaa zone because the budget is allocated based on population size.

This did not, however, resolve tensions over regional political power. Since 2018, who sits as head of the cabinet (the regional president) has become the epicentre of confrontation between Anywaa and Nuer youths in Gambella. To a large extent, the Dhal-Diim Anywaa youth movement was born out of opposition to Nuer maladministration (real or perceived) when Gatluak Tut was the president (2013-2018). When an Anywaa was appointed as the regional president in 2018, the Gambella Liberation Front/Army (GLF/A) was created to challenge and delegitimize the Anywaa administration. Hence, despite the shifting focus of contestations (for example, the number of woredas, budget allocations, distribution of regional cabinet positions and the regional presidency), contested inter-ethnic power-sharing schemes continue to be one of the underlying causes and drivers of conflicts in the Gambella region.

ACCESS TO ECONOMIC RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Even though access to economic resources and opportunities does not seem to be a salient feature of recent post-2018 conflicts in the region, it occasionally appears as an underlying factor that is shared by all five ethnic groups indigenous to the region. When indigenous political elites try to rise above ethnic divides, they frame local conflicts as a cumulative result of the historical marginalization, exclusion and exploitative policies of successive Addis Ababa governments towards indigenous communities in peripheral regions such as Gambella.

The large-scale agricultural investment policies implemented under the EPRDF in Gambella serve as a good example. Between 2008 to 2010, more than 420 land-lease agreements were made in Gambella. Of the 420 firms that leased land in the region, only 12 were foreign, which means the rest were Ethiopian investors.⁹⁰ A look at the composition of these local investors reveals that none of them were members of the indigenous ethnic groups in Gambella. Although there are likely other reasons for the absence of indigenous investors, their deliberate and systematic exclusion from access to economic resources plays a major part. The vast majority (more than 90 per cent) of Ethiopian investors belonged to the ethnic Tigrayan group, which demonstrates a direct translation of the political dominance of the TPLF into economic dominance in marginalized regions such as Gambella.⁹¹

This is also the case for other private sector activities beyond agriculture. For example, in general, highlanders have a monopoly over regional economic activities in Gambella—from street vendors to construction, hotels, transportation and all other non-governmental sectors. In the past, the few indigenous peoples who tried to venture into private sector economic activity were systematically forced to quit or their assets were sometimes confiscated by the military under various charges.⁹² Since the 2018 reform, however, this is starting to change as few indigenous business people are getting loans from the banks for various types of investments.⁹³

89 The relationship between the GPLM and the EPRDF started to deteriorate for many reasons. For the GPLM, continued marginalization and lack of implementation of the right to self-determination are primary reasons. Despite the appointment of indigenous people in regional leadership positions, EPRDF cadres continued to run the region behind the scenes of the officially elected officials. For the EPRDF, GPLM leaders were labelled as narrow ethno-nationalists for demanding the same rights as other ethnically dominant regions.

90 Fana Gebresenbet, 'Land Acquisitions, the Politics of Dispossession, and State-Remaking in Gambella, Western Ethiopia', *Africa Spectrum* 51/1 (April 2016): 12. Accessed 14 January 2025, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/000203971605100102>.

91 Fana, 'Land Acquisitions', 12.

92 For example, some Anywaa diaspora who bought Isuzu trucks for transport businesses in the region had their cars confiscated by the military and their drivers were imprisoned under the charge that they were aiding rebel groups. During the large-scale land investments, potential investors from Gambella indigenous communities were denied loans by the development bank.

93 Interview-1, Anywaa intellectual, Gambella, 1 September 2024.

Likewise, NGOs providing humanitarian services to refugees in Gambella have long been accused of nepotism and the exclusion of indigenous peoples from job opportunities created in the humanitarian sector. In the aftermath of the South Sudanese civil war that began in 2014, Gambella became a popular place for job opportunities in the humanitarian sector as many international NGOs arrived in the region to respond to the influx of South Sudanese refugees. Due to their social connections and experience with NGOs, highlanders dominated the humanitarian sector with explicit discrimination against indigenous ethnic groups. This only changed when an NGO vehicle carrying only highlanders was attacked in 2018, after which NGOs began to hire more drivers from the indigenous ethnic groups.⁹⁴

Since most often the indigenous ethnic groups in Gambella are preoccupied with their own internal conflicts, such underlying factors are secondary to the drivers of local conflict dynamics. At times of relative peace, however, lack of economic opportunities for the youth and the dispossession of indigenous peoples from economic activities are identified as relevant underlying factors perpetuating conflict in the region.⁹⁵ Some interviewees even accuse highlanders of deliberately fomenting conflict among indigenous peoples as way of distracting them from seeing the obvious—the uneven distribution of access to resources and economic opportunities.⁹⁶

In general, ‘The imperfect ethno-cultural and political gains the federal arrangement delivered at the periphery are yet to be matched by socio-economic achievements.’⁹⁷ Hence, continued marginalization of indigenous peoples, no matter whether deliberate or by default, from access to economic resources and opportunities remains an underlying factor that both directly and indirectly fuels conflicts in the region.

THE ROLE OF NATIONAL POLITICS IN LOCAL CONFLICTS

During the EPRDF era, the role of the federal government via party cadres and federal institutions was explicitly pronounced in local conflicts. The former ministry of federal affairs is well-known for both its direct interventions in local conflict and dictating unpopular solutions. As such, during the EPRDF era, the federal government was generally viewed in Gambella as the invisible hand behind the conflicts in the region. During this era, the political parties that governed the peripheral regions—Gambella, Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz and Somali—were also treated as affiliate parties of the ruling EPRDF, which was made up of ethnic-based parties from the dominant ethnic groups of the Tigray, Amhara, Oromo and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region.⁹⁸

The Prosperity Party took a different approach. From the outset, the PP included formerly marginalized parties from the peripheral regions in its central committee, making them part of its overall decision-making bodies at the national level.⁹⁹ This meant that under the PP, Gambella was able to contribute to resolving national challenges instead of merely being on the receiving end of orders from the federal government as was the case under the EPRDF. This is one of the positive developments under the PP.

Under PP leadership, then, interference from the federal government in regional affairs significantly diminished. It is yet to be seen whether this was due to federal government preoccupation with the northern conflict at the time (2020-2022) or if this new approach is indeed a deliberate policy shift from the past. Whatever the reason, during the recent rounds of local conflict between the Anywaa and Nuer,

94 Interview-1, Anywaa intellectual, Gambella, 1 September 2024.

95 Interview-2, Nuer intellectual, Gambella, 1 September 2024.

96 Interview-5, Anywa opposition politician, Gambella, 5 September 2024.

97 Dereje Feyissa, ‘Centering the Periphery? The Federal Experience at the Margins of the Ethiopian State’, *Ethiopian Journal of Federal Studies* 1/1 (2013).

98 Aalen, L., (2002), *Ethnic Federalism in a Dominant Party State: The Ethiopian Experience: 1991-2000*, Bergen: CMI.

99 ‘Subsequently, the 2019 dissolution of the EPRDF and formation of the PP involved integrating all the representative parties of the Ethiopian federation’s member regions into the ruling party, in an alleged effort to unify the country.’ Jonah Wedekind, (2018), ‘Prosperity to Periphery? The Politics of Resource Extraction in Ethiopia, Post 2018’, Rift Valley Institute (RVI).

local Gambella residents generally perceive the conflict as of their own making rather than pointing fingers at the federal government.¹⁰⁰ In stark contrast to the past, when the federal government was blamed for interference, local actors now blame the federal government for not intervening to stop the violence.¹⁰¹

Nevertheless, the contributions of the overall volatile political environment at the national level to local conflicts, along with the spillover effects of conflicts in western Wollega in Oromia to dynamics in Gambella, cannot be underestimated. Political elites in peripheral regions such as Gambella understand their minority position and therefore tend to align with the perceived winning side at the national level. In the process of seeking these alignments, they sometimes end up fighting proxy wars. The GLF/A is a good case in point. Since its creation, the GLF/A has been a gamble on the part of a disgruntled local politician to gain local power by aligning himself with the TPLF and the OLA—should they win the fight at the national level.¹⁰²

The volatile political environment and prevailing insecurity in many parts of the country also mean that more security attention and resources are allocated to places with situations of high insecurity. From this perspective, a region such as Gambella might not be considered a top priority for the federal government. For example, when the OLA–GLF/A attacked Gambella in June 2022, there was no military presence in the region except for a few federal police. Hence, while the federal government per se now carries less blame for local conflicts, the overall instability at the national level nonetheless both directly and indirectly contributes to local conflict dynamics. This is exacerbated by the dissolution of the regional special force by the federal government: In the absence of a substitute force, a security vacuum was created that later contributed to local conflicts spiralling out of control and rendering local populations vulnerable to cross-border attacks and raids by armed militias from South Sudan.

PEACEBUILDING EFFORTS

Since 2018, despite a sharp rise in the number of violent conflicts, thus far no serious peacebuilding efforts have been implemented. Several trainings and peace conferences, organized by faith-based organizations or the federal ministry of peace, are exceptions.

The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) is the largest faith-based organization in the Gambella region, with the largest number of followers from indigenous populations. The EECMY has been the most active organization on peacebuilding initiatives in the region, providing various types of training on peacebuilding that target conflict areas in woredas such as Itang, Gambella Zuria and Pinyudo.¹⁰³ Given the magnitude of recent conflicts, however, which are characterized by intensive violence and destruction, these peacebuilding efforts at the grassroots level are inadequate for addressing the widespread and highly politicized nature of these conflicts.

The ministry of peace tried to organize a peace conference as well as sought to resolve the conflicts through traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. Since the event was facilitated under the auspices of the regional government, most participants were local PP cadres and there was little space for open and transparent discussion.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, the peace ministry attempt to implement a traditional conflict resolution mechanism called ‘*Guur-Tong*’ (literally means to unsharpen a spear) was a rushed event without the due process required by this tradition before the final ritual of slaughtering an animal and the blunting of a spear as a symbol of peace and commitment to do no more harm.

Mercy Corps, an international NGO, has also tried to implement innovative approaches to peacebuilding in the region by linking refugees and host communities through business. Through the business for

¹⁰⁰ Interview-3, Anywaa youth, interviewed in Gambella, 03 September 2024.

¹⁰¹ Interview-8, Anywaa official from Itang woreda, interviewed in Itang, 07 September 2024.

¹⁰² Interview-2, Nuer intellectual, Gambella, 1 September 2024.

¹⁰³ Interview-1, Anywaa intellectual, Gambella, 1 September 2024.

¹⁰⁴ Interview-5, Anywa opposition politician, Gambella, 5 September 2024.

peacebuilding project, Mercy Corps staff have managed to create space for dialogue among refugees and host communities—the first time this had been done in Gambella. The staff also organized a half-day training on conflict analysis and peacebuilding for the regional cabinet. The participants acknowledge that most of their responses to the conflict in the region are based on political decisions rather than on sound conflict analysis that addresses the root causes of the conflicts.¹⁰⁵

On 15 August 2024, Alemitu Umod was appointed as the new regional president, signifying an historical move as she becomes the first woman to hold this office in Gambella.¹⁰⁶ Regardless of their direct appointment by the federal government, both the regional president and vice president were welcomed by all communities in the region.¹⁰⁷ The first actions the new regional leadership took were to organize a peace march through various neighbourhoods in Gambella town and conduct consultations with community elders, religious leaders and local government officials. These actions were well received and successfully conducted without incident.¹⁰⁸ For the first time in years, the Anywaa were able to walk through Newland (a predominantly Nuer neighbourhood) and the Nuer were able to walk through 04 and 05 kebeles (predominantly Anywaa neighbourhoods).

On 9 September 2024, however, a Nuer lecturer was shot dead in 05 kebele on his way home from work at the Gambella health science and teachers training college. The shooter was an Anywaa youth from Pino village who had lost both his parents and two brothers during the Pino attack on 19 July 2023, according to several witnesses.¹⁰⁹ This reveals both the ongoing volatility of the security situation in Gambella and the need for a comprehensive peace process, especially one that engages victims from both communities, to end the cycle of revenge attacks.

The various peacebuilding efforts that have been undertaken in the region suffer from several major deficiencies. First, these efforts take a fire brigade approach to peacebuilding: They only respond to quell extreme violence.¹¹⁰ Once violence stops, no serious attempts are made to discuss and address the root causes of conflict to prevent a relapse into yet another cycle of violence. This approach seems to be used by both the regional and federal government.¹¹¹ Second, the region would have greatly benefitted from a system of coordination and information-sharing between various peacebuilding actors and initiatives. For example, the work being done by faith-based actors at the grassroots level would have been of immense value in informing the high-level peacebuilding consultations implemented by the regional and federal government. This opportunity was lost, however, in the absence of coordination. Likewise, the innovative approach adopted by Mercy Corps to build bridges between refugee and host communities through joint business ventures could have been further encouraged, scaled up and expanded to other areas. Finally, given the complexity of the conflicts in the region, in-depth research into the causes and drivers of the conflicts (especially based on inclusive and representative local consultations) could have significantly contributed to the development of well-informed and sustainable peacebuilding strategies in the region.

LOOKING AHEAD

After the appointment of new leadership in the region, Gambella experienced three weeks of calm for the first time since 2023, which was disrupted by the revenge shooting of the Nuer lecturer on 9 September 2024. Thus far, the Nuer community has shown restraint. Both sides have also condemned

¹⁰⁵ Interview-4, Nuer regional official, Gambella, 3 September 2024.

¹⁰⁶ EBC World, X post, 15 August 2024, 9.32 p.m., <https://x.com/ebczena/status/1824167367229739179>.

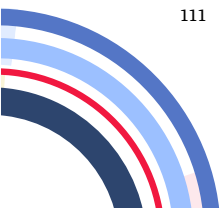
¹⁰⁷ Interview-4, Nuer regional official, Gambella, 3 September 2024; Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, 'Gambella Region Appoints New Leadership in an Emergency Council Session', August 2024. Accessed 10 January 2025, <https://www.ebc.et/english/newsdetails.aspx?newsid=7518>.

¹⁰⁸ Interview-4, Nuer regional official, Gambella, 3 September 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Interview-9, Nuer official from Itang woreda, Itang, 10 September 2024.

¹¹⁰ Interview-1, Anywaa intellectual, Gambella, 1 September 2024.

¹¹¹ Interview-2, Nuer intellectual, Gambella, 1 September 2024.



the shooting and are demanding justice for the victim. Looking ahead, at least five specific issues merit close attention from the regional and federal governments.

Renegotiating an acceptable inter-ethnic power-sharing model

The existing inter-ethnic power-sharing model designed during the EPRDF era has come under pressure and contestation from all sides. The fact that the model remains an informal practice subject to manipulation, depending on who is in power, has further eroded its legitimacy. There is need to thoroughly review all the current informal power-sharing schemes and renegotiate a model that is both acceptable to all ethnic groups in the region and can better serve the interests of the region.

Anywaa–Nuer relations in Itang woreda

Almost all Anywaa–Nuer conflicts either start or escalate in Itang woreda, where both communities live in close proximity to one another. Past attempts to return to and rehabilitate displaced Anywaa villagers under Itang special woreda have not only failed but have sparked fresh rounds of conflicts. Whatever concerted efforts are made towards peacebuilding in the region, given the scale of violence and damage caused, there is still high risk of (isolated) revenge attacks by both sides from those who have lost loved ones. Such revenge attacks could trigger whole-scale conflict if not managed carefully. There is, then, a need for a comprehensive peace process in the woreda that entails genuine peace dialogues and agreements between adjacent kebeles, along with robust security arrangements to enforce those agreements and deter peace spoilers. In particular, this process should involve truth-telling, justice, reparations for the victims from both sides and guarantees of non-recurrence of violence in these areas (backed up by effective enforcement).

Refugee versus host community relations

Even though this is one of the major drivers of conflict in the region, so far no meaningful interventions have been made to improve refugee–host community relations, except for the work done by Mercy Corps. There is an ongoing need for participatory and innovative peace processes that involve and seriously engage both communities.

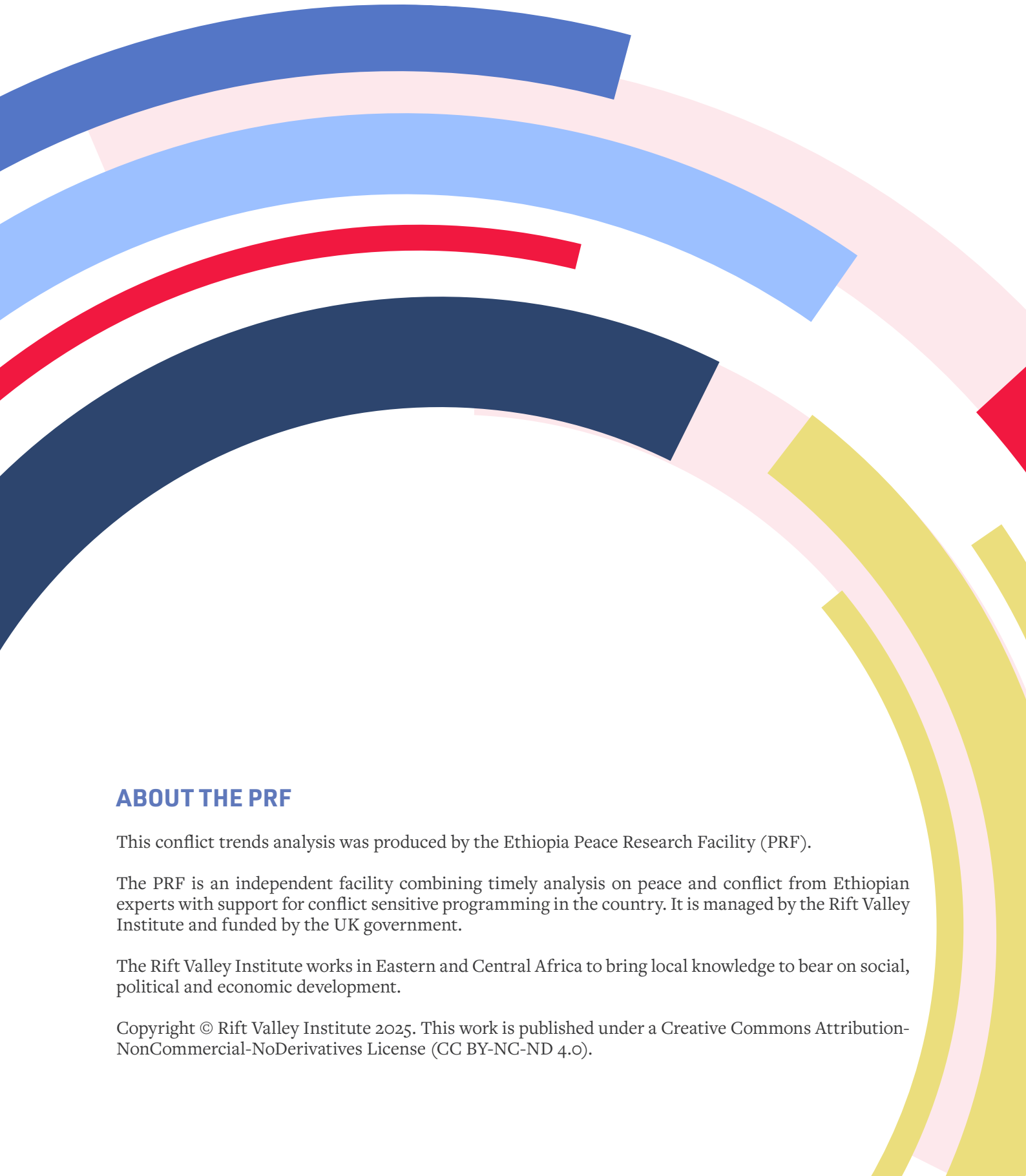
Cross-border attacks and raids

The Ethio–South Sudan border remains open to incursion by armed groups from South Sudan. In the absence of a clear security plan or arrangement, border attacks are liable to resume during the dry season (November–May), as is frequently the case.

Indigenous versus highlander communities and the federal government

Should the federal government aggressively pursue controversial development endeavours (for example, large-scale land investments and more recently mining) without close coordination with regional government and inclusive consultations with local communities, this holds a real risk of igniting conflicts between indigenous peoples and federal government, and by extension highlanders.





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