

## Former Minnesota resident US helps Okwa Omot get out of prison in Ethiopia

Written by Douglas McGill, The McGill Report  
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Okwa Omot is now sleeping safely in a warm bed at his home in Washington, D.C. That is something of a miracle considering that only two week ago – and for 107 days before that – he was sleeping on freezing cold concrete floors in Ethiopian prisons, accused of treason and threatened with execution.

The 32-year-old hotel housekeeper and U.S. citizen had traveled to Ethiopia in July to visit family members he hadn't seen for nine years.

Instead, he was arrested for inciting revolution and shut away in prison.

He was released after friends in Minnesota and U.S. Embassy officials in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, worked to convince Ethiopian authorities that Omot posed no threat to their country.

The prison system of Ethiopia is one of the world's great, dark secrets.

The Ethiopian government denies that systematic human rights abuses occur there, even as human rights groups, with support from the U.S. State Department, claim that Ethiopia runs one of the most brutal penal systems on earth – a system that is a linchpin in a dictatorship that rules Ethiopia through raw fear under Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.

Omot's experience supports that bleak view of Ethiopia's prisons, and the story of his three-month ordeal offers a rare inside glimpse into that world.

### Ethnic Cleansing

On July 26, Omot was arrested near the village of Dimma, Ethiopia, by nine Ethiopian police who grabbed him under a tree where he was resting.

"We heard you were coming," the police told him. "We know that in America you plot against Ethiopia, but we have our supporters in America too, and they told us to expect you."

Omot is a member of the Anuak tribe, whose indigenous territory straddles southeast Sudan and western Ethiopia. Since 1991, when the present Ethiopian regime took power, the Anuak have been the target of intense ethnic cleansing by the Ethiopian government according to Human Rights Watch and other groups.

Omot fled that ethnic cleansing in 1992, spending three years in refugee camps in Kenya before settling in the U.S. in 1995. He became a U.S. citizen last year.

Never politically active, Omot raised suspicions on his recent trip by entering Ethiopia not through airport customs in Addis Ababa, but rather by the traditional Anuak way, which is walking across the border from an Anuak village in Sudan, to the Ethiopian Anuak village of Dimma.

### Old-Timers

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Omot feared for his life every moment in prison.

“You will die like a dog now if there is no one to defend you,” Omot recalls his jailers in Dimma taunting him. “They said, ‘In America, Black people are treated like slaves and there are no white people who will come from America to save your life.’ I told them, ‘Did you see that in America we now have a Black president?’ They said ‘Shut up!’”

After five days in Dimma, Omot was moved to a bigger prison in the town of Gambella, the capital of the western state of the same name, and the heart of the Anuak’s indigenous homeland.

The Gambella prison has for many years housed hundreds of Anuak men accused of plotting against Ethiopia.

Although Omot was not able to count the number of prisoners himself, old-timers in the prison told him there were 475 prisoners being held there, of whom only 20 or so were not Anuak.

“One night a group of soldiers came to me and said, ‘We are going to teach you something,’” Omot recalls. “They blindfolded me and shoved me into a pickup truck. When they took off my blindfold they pushed me to the ground and I was surrounded by dead bodies. They were mostly skeletons but with pieces of clothing still stuck on.

“The soldiers told me, ‘Unless you confess you will look like those bodies. You will die just like they did. We will kill you right now.’”

### Independent Reports

Instead of collapsing, Omot became calm.

“A man can never live to 200 years,” Omot told his captors. “‘Life comes to an end for everyone. I have nothing to tell you. If you want to kill me, kill me.’ They put the blindfold back on and drove me back to the prison.”

Another day in Gambella, Omot was snatched from his cell and taken to the office of Omot Olom, the governor of the region.

Olom is deeply feared among the Anuak as a planner of one of the worst massacres ever carried out against their tribe, on December 13, 2003, when uniformed Ethiopian soldiers moving door to door executed some 425 Anuak men and boys in Gambella on a single day.

The fact of the massacre, and Olom’s involvement in it, have been corroborated by independent reports including a 2004 report by Genocide Watch, and a 2005 report by Human Rights Watch connecting Olom to “crimes against humanity” committed against the Anuak.

Now meeting Olom face-to-face, Omot again feared for his life.

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“He called me an American terrorist,” Omot said. “He said, ‘Omot, we know your history. You killed Ethiopian people before you left to live in America, and you have been sending money from America to kill Ethiopians. And now you are coming back to support terrorists living in Gambella. We are either going to kill you or destroy your passport.’”

### Maekelawi Prison

A ray of hope appeared for Omot when a consular official from the U.S. embassy, who had been alerted to Omot’s arrest by Anuak friends living in Minnesota, flew from Addis Ababa to visit him in the Gambella prison.

That visit saved his life, Omot said. Thanks to the embassy’s intervention, he was transferred to the Maekelawi federal prison in Addis Ababa, where U.S. embassy officials were able to visit him more often.

But his trials were not yet over, as Maekelawi is an infamous dungeon of horrors.

Tales of torture, extrajudicial execution, solitary confinement in shackles, and brutal conditions at Maekelawi are legion in Ethiopia.

Tens of thousands of street protestors, journalists, and opposition politicians over the years have spent long stretches in Maekelawi – sometimes never leaving.

### Lights Off

At Maekelawi, Omot was thrown into a dark basement cell, which he shared with another inmate.

“It was cold as a refrigerator,” Omot said. “I thought I was going to die from the cold. I had one thin blanket but I needed much more to stay warm.”

In his 17 days underground, the dim overhead lights mysteriously went off on four different occasions, after which each time he heard shuffling sounds in the darkness.

His cellmate told him that when a person died in prison, the lights were turned off while the body was picked up and taken away.

Michael Gonzales, a U.S. embassy spokesman in Addis Ababa, confirmed that Omot is a U.S. citizen and that a consular official met with him in Gambella and the Maekelawi prison in Addis, to win his release last week. Senior U.S. embassy officials also contacted Ethiopian officials on Omot's behalf, Gonzales said.

Apee Jobi, an Anuak American who lives in Brooklyn Park, MN first alerted the U.S. embassy in Ethiopia about Omot’s arrest in early August, and worked with embassy officials towards his release.

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Jobi said Omot's arrest and imprisonment was standard operating procedure today in Ethiopia, as part of the system of fear that supports the regime of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.

Many ethnic groups in Ethiopia are suppressed using these tactics, Jobi said.

"From the point of view of the government, loyalty means innocence," Jobi said. "But if you are a stranger, you are guilty. But it doesn't mean you have committed a crime."

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