

Interview with Fr. Tesfaya Petros from Gambella, Ethiopia

Date: 07/07/2015

City of birth: Gambo, Ethiopia

Age: 39

Since 2005 priest

Vicar general since 2011

Parish priest from: Akwaya Jawk Sacred Heart

- 1) Dear Abba Tesfaye, the diocese of Gambela is near to the Sudanese boarder where the civil war is going on. Who is fighting there and why? What is the actual situation at your place as a consequence of this ongoing civil war in South Sudan?

South Sudan is a neighboring country of Ethiopia, especially to Gambella. In this country there were two big tribes. The first is Dinka, the other one is Nuer. So the president of South Sudan is Salva Kiir and he is from Dinka tribe. The vice president was Rech Machar, he is from Nuer. After the removal of the vice president the war exploded between the two tribes. There is a conflict between the government and the rebel groups means the Nuer people. From that time the vice president encourages his people to demonstrate, to oppose the government of South Sudan, from that time the war broke out. Now the war is between the two big tribes. The majority of the Nuer people run to Ethiopia, which is the nearest country for them. And now we have more than 200 000 refugees from South Sudan in Gambella. After the arrival of the refugees in Ethiopia especially in Gambella area, I can say that there is a big change regarding many things. The change cannot be seen in positive side, it is very negative. For example, high price of food, high price of labor. And also many international organizations are involving there to support the South Sudanese refugees. The arrival of the refugees also affects the local people. The refugees are settled on the land of the local people, especially the Anuak people. There is a big problem that will even continue that will not stay like this, but the government of Ethiopia gave the chance for the refugees to stay in Ethiopia, since there is a war they cannot do anything. Many local people also want to join the refugee camps because they have everything there, food, health services, education,



these kinds of services are free. So you might be also pushed to join a refugee camp if you are from Gambella.

Another thing is that a big land is taken for the settlement of the local people and the number of these refugees and as well the number of Ethiopian Nuer is now a bigger number so cannot compare with Anuak. It created an imbalance.

- 2) This means that the critical situation that has been already taken place between the different ethnics at Gambella still has worsened. I think of the tensions between the Anuak who have always lived there and the Nuer from South Sudan and the Highlanders who have come in order to work in the agribusiness and others more. What is going on between them?

In Gambella originally there were five tribes in that area. Anuak and Nuer are the majority. There are further three tribes who represent the minority: Mejenk, Komo and Opo. These are the people from that land even if they come from South Sudan or Uganda, but they consider themselves as from there, from that land. And there are other people who arrived. The highlanders who have a brown color and they come from the highland part from Ethiopia. Gambella is a lowland area. There is a tension between the Anuak and the Nuer, there is a tension between the highlanders and the Anuak. Besides that there are also international investor like Saudi Star from Saudi Arabia, Join an Ethiopian investor or the Ethiopian richest person which is Mohammed Alamudi with the Saudi King family and the other one is Karuturi that is the biggest exporter of agriculture in India and now they also investing in Ethiopia especially in Gambella the they took 300 00 hectares of land. The other part of Saudi Star is 300 000 acres so 600 000 hectares of land was given to the international investors. Also the national investors have land in Gambella area **but you don't** see the involvement of the local people. It does not create employment for the locals. The local people are not considered as hard workers. The investors they want hard workers. The local people are not hard workers because they are not accustomed to the habit of work. It is because of the area the dust area and the hot climate. So the investors prefer to have the highlanders. **You don't know** what is gonna happen in the future. It might explode. So this is the situation among the locals, the dwellers, the people from other parts and also international investors.



- 3) In the last month Gambella as well as big parts of Ethiopia have experienced a very high temperature together with the moisty weather because of the nearby river. What does this mean for the wellbeing of your people?

My area is one of the hottest regions in Ethiopia. The majority of my people settle around the banks of the river. The river is the life for the people, they drink from that, they use it for cleaning their clothes even to take a shower, that river is everything for them. If the river is not there the people cannot survive. And the life of the people also depends on fishing. At the same time during the rainy season they can be affected by flood. But people don't want to leave that place, they remain there, if there is water they look for a higher place and built there houses higher.

- 4) Very often it is said that agribusiness together with a concentration of land in the hands of few people is necessary in order to produce more and realize the national food security. What is your experience?

For me this is a kind of slogan because they say we are working for the food security but until now I do not see these kinds of things. Because I think the main aim of these big internationals is that they want to export food to India or to Saudi Arabia. They grow rice. Until now I didn't see this rice in the market of that area where they are selling with a low price. The target is to export and to get a high price. The people are not able to pay this high price. They don't have any income. They are selling fish, selling mangos when it's ready and when they get maize also. I do not see food security. They have to involve the local people. They have to teach also the local people to be an independent farmer. You are not going to give them the crops for free. So I do not know why they call it food security.



- 5) Ethiopia is known as one of the few countries where the main religion is Christianity especially the Coptic Church. How is this in your country and what is the role of the Catholic Church?

Ethiopia is known as an island of the Christians and the majority of the Christians is from the Orthodox Church. And we as a Catholic Church we play a big role in development activities like education. The Catholic Church has many schools in the country and also these are special schools, the level is very high and morality is given to pupils. So people prefer to send their children to catholic schools. The church is well known for the development activities: education and health services. We have hospitals, health centers and small clinics. We are contributing for the community especially in terms of education. And we also include the poor ones. The role of the Catholic Church at a national level is big because there is a kind of association from different religious groups, from orthodox, catholic, Muslims and Christians. Whenever there is something they discuss together. These groups live very respectfully without a problem. So I am also representing the catholic church in the region of Gambella, sometimes we also have a meeting with orthodox, protestants, Muslims and Catholics together. So whenever there is a problem of peace we go together to create reconciliation. So as much as we can we are trying as Catholic Church and we are everywhere in each direction. The Catholic Church is working without dividing the people and giving a service for all human being. And even when you are employing the workers you employ from all religion without a problem. The meaning of Catholics is universal. We are for everybody not only for our people. We include everybody. The church is doing a great thing in Ethiopia.

- 6) It is known that we have a Latin rite and an orthodox rite in the Catholic Church of Ethiopia. Why is this and where? What does it mean for the minority church in your country?

We have both a Latin rite and as we call it Ethiopian rite in our country. This is richness for the country and the Catholic Church. The Ethiopian rite is mostly practiced in the Northern part, the central part and south west part of Ethiopia. The Latin rite is practiced in the South and West part of Ethiopia. Also you can see it in the Eastern part of Ethiopia. This is not



something that divides people but it brings people together to worship one god. So this Latin and Ethiopian rite does not affect one to the other. We practice with the minority the Latin rite. People they pray in their own language they listen the word of god in their own language without any problem. They also pray in their own mother tongue. So having both rites is a gift for the church.

- 7) Ethiopia belongs to the countries with the lowest income in the world. Is this opinion correct? Which are the reasons that make it so difficult for your country to overcome the situation of poverty?

Maybe this question may be raised 25 years ago, because after the communist regime completed, we are trying to do something good and to privatize organizations. Nowadays Ethiopia is one of the countries which is growing very fast, every year you can see the development, now people may think that in the past time there was hunger in Ethiopia, but today it is very different, some parts of the country are very poor but the country is growing very fast. I can give you an example, road access, the road from the capital city until the boarder of South Sudan is asphalt. The government is investing much amount of money for infrastructure. In terms of food security you can also see an improvement because every year the number of people in need of food is decreasing. In the past time there were 18 million now we have maybe 4 million. And the government is also working on the agriculture part to ensure food security. They are trying to support the farmers and teach the farmers. So they change the cereals every year they grow on their fields in order to sustain the fertility of the soil. In some parts there are question marks but in some parts there are real improvements. Beside the capital Addis Ababa also cities in the other parts are growing such as Awassa in South Bahar Dar in the North. There is a big change in the country. The economy of the country is growing for 11% each year.

- 8) For a very long time if not for centuries Ethiopia has been governed by Amhara. Many of us still remember the name of the emperor Haile Selassie. When has this changed and why?

It was almost 40 years ago the time where the emperor left the country, this emperor was at the power for many years and he was asked to leave his position by the communist party



and they were mostly from Amhara that is a tribe – after that the communist party was leading the country for 17 years but they finished. In the time of the emperor the country was under many problems. At the same time the emperor helped the country to introduce to the other world. As you said the emperor is well known even in Europe because when the Italians were trying to colonize us he was trying to ask the support from the British and from other countries. When the communists had the power the situation was bad. Nowadays Ethiopia is following ethnic federalism meaning that each ethnic has a representative in the parliament and each region has its own governmental system besides some things that are in competence of the central government. The aim of the government is to share the resources of the country equally.

- 9) Ethiopia is neighboring Somalia where we have a civil war since a long time without a functioning government. What does this mean for your country and is there a special relationship between people in Somalia and Ethiopia?

Somalia has nowadays a government, we do not know which kind of government is there but the situation of a neighbor can affect the other country. If Somalia is not in peace, Ethiopia may not be in peace. There are Ethiopian Somalis as well as Somalis from the original one so we have also a big land in the eastern part of the country which belongs to the Ethiopian Somalis. So government is trying to have a stable peace in Somalia by sending soldiers on behalf of the African Union to create peace. Our government is very strong in peace security, because Ethiopia is one of the peaceful countries even if we are a neighboring country of Somalia we are not the ones who are attacked first, but Nairobi, because we have many Somalis in Ethiopia. It would have been easy for them to attack us but they didn't do. Why? Because our security is very strong. The Ethiopian Somalis are living peacefully in Ethiopia, they have their own region and they share equal resources with other Ethiopians. The government is trying to defend the country from any kind of tensions which is coming from that side.

Dear Abba Tesfaye many thanks for your interview and for your perspectives given to us regarding your country and your diocese. We wish you all the best, thanks for having been our guest.

