

MEDIA RELEASE

Gambella's Sport for Peace and Development Festival promotes ethnic unity

Gambella Town, Ethiopia, June 4, 2007: The Gambela Peace Olympics, a sport festival promoting peace and development amongst Gambella Region's ethnic groups, was held over the weekend in a bid to bring about constructive dialogue and long-term peace among the region's often feuding ethnic groups. Consisting of team and track events, the festival was arranged by sports promoters Athletic Resources Service International (ARSI) with support from UNICEF, PACT Ethiopia as well as the regional government and other stakeholders.

Gambella's population of 240,000 consists mainly of Anuak, Nuer, Opo, Megenger and Surma tribal groups and most recently other Ethiopians who have settled from the highlands. Recent Gambella history has been marked by inter-ethnic conflict for mineral assets, grazing land and access to the rivers. This has had an adverse effect on the region's children, who are often denied access to basic services.

"Our council understands the positive impact of such promotional activities in addressing the realities on the ground in our region," stated Omod Obang, president of Gambella Region. "I would like to thank the organisations who made the Peace for Sport and Development Festival a reality," he said addressing the participants before the event.

Through the organization of a 'Peace Olympics' which ran alongside roundtable discussions as well as musical and cultural events, stakeholders aimed to strengthen the peace-building process in Gambella.

The sporting weekend included volleyball, basketball, relay and sprints. The winners were presented with awards and recognitions of their achievement.

Each of the tribes brought their own cultural additions to the sports festival, with traditional dancing and singing. Local youth groups staged a peace song in different languages to emphasise the importance of cultural unity.

Roundtable debates among different ethnic groups were organised. Amongst the items discussed were peace in the region, migration patterns, livestock and crop requirements as well as education and accessibility.

Also speaking at the event, UNICEF Representative Bjorn Ljungqvist said: "I have been to Gambella now three times over the last year and I can say that I am very happy with its progress.

There cannot be any development without peace and here in Gambella you have taken that very seriously...the festival taking place today is a celebration of that change towards peace, which is based on respect for one another."

The event also promoted youth clubs and youth associations to continue as active agents for peace building in Gambella region. Nationally, UNICEF is committed to improving the situation of children affected by poverty and conflict and believes that youth are effective change agents if provided with proper guidance and support.

An Alliance Review Meeting was held before the festival between the event's key partners and the Gambella Regional State Government Council. Participants considered past achievements and mapped out challenges for the future development of Gambella Region.

It also allowed UNICEF and the UN in general to renew its commitment to the region, which suffers from underdevelopment and a prolonged refugee problem. Key stakeholders acknowledged that with the advent of a long-term peace, humanitarian organisations could begin to focus on the long-term Millennium Development Goals for the region.