

Suri people under pressure: The Malaysian Plantation in Koka, Ethiopia

There are serious changes in the south-western part of Ethiopia, which hosts some of Africa's most fascinating and colorful ethnic groups. Things are changing very fast and not everything is for the better for the people there, like for example the Suri people around Kibish, Tulgit and Koka. The Ethiopian Agriculture and Rural Development State Minister Aberra Deressa once claimed: "*... at the end of the day we [do] not really appreciate pastoralists remaining in the forest like this ... pastoralism is not sustainable ... we must bring commercial farming, mechanized agriculture, to create job opportunities to change the environment.*" In 2011 the Ethiopian government started a 5 years development plan for the region around the Omo River. It covers among others state-run sugar plantations and factories in South Omo, the Gibe III dam, a resettlement program and the Malaysian plantation in Koka.



In October 2012 I visited the Koka plantation which is operated by the Malaysian company Lim Siow Jin Estate. The plantation was founded almost 2 years ago. Right now around 140 people are working on the farm, among them also a few Suri people. The manager of the plantation explained me the master plan of the 55-year leasing contract between the Malaysian owner and the Ethiopian government, which is quite impressive. The plantation has a size of about 31.000 ha, which is half the size of Singapore. The plantation grows palm oil, sesame and rubber trees. For 2013 an airport is planned, and in the near future a number of factories. The plantation is far away from the harbor (Djibouti), so transportation will be a problem. Since the target of the plantation is the world market, the plantation is planning to process the raw material in new factories directly on the farm, and the transport will be managed by airplane. At the end of the leasing time over 40.000 people should work on the plantation and in the nearby factories.

On the one hand the investment of the Malaysian company sounds very reasonable for a poor development country like Ethiopia. However, you need to know, the plantation is located right in the middle of the cattle places of the Suri people around Koka, and in Koka itself only one stone building existed a few years ago: the school founded in 2003. Between March and April last year many Suri people were killed in a fight between Dizi and Suri people because some Suri villages were moved by the government. Here you can read an interview with Tenomeri Ulikiwo, a Suri man (May 11, 2012), what the Suri people think about the plantation:

"Now in Suri area there are many problems. The recent issues are about the Malaysian investment plantation. In the beginning the Suri were saying maybe this is a good thing. Later, the plantation cleared all the grass and all the trees,



Ethiopia, Surma

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many trees that were important to the Suri. The government was supporting the plantation. The Zonal and Regional governments were saying these investors were sent by the prime minister, so not to interfere with them. The Suri people became very angry about this plantation. The plantation diverted the water from the Koka River, there was not enough water for the cattle and the river dried up downstream. After that the Suri said this plantation is not good. First the plantation planted corn to ready the soil. Then the Suri brought all their cattle to the plantation to eat the corn, some of it half grown, some of it full grown. When the plantation realized this they dug a moat all around the plantation. The Suri cut trees down to make a bridge to the plantation and they went and stole the corn from the plantation and now many Suri have full grain stores. After that the plantation brought many soldiers to protect the crops. The Malaysian plantation paid taxes to the Dizi woreda and the Dizi liked the plantation very much so the Dizi woreda helped them to expand and they demarcated with a GPS. On February 11, 2012 they came with a GPS and marked trees, rocks and cooking stones in a village and said this land has been given to the plantation and the Suri must leave this village. The Suri became angry and they started fighting with guns. The government called to another area, Maji, by radio to report this and in retaliation the government killed 54 unarmed Suri in the market place of Maji. Some were wounded and died later. Some say the total was 57 some say 65. After this event five more Suri were killed by soldiers.

On April 29th, 2012 the government went with soldiers and for two week tried to prevent the Suri from planting crops. This was to force the people to be hungry and accept moving into the resettlement site. Most of the Suri are afraid to go to the place where they plant crops. Only a few went. In one village near the Malaysian plantation, three houses were burned down, with money, gold and grain stores inside. This was done by the plantation workers.

Two Suri were imprisoned, their hands were tied with ropes and they feet were chained. They were tied up tightly for so long that their arms and hands barely work now. The Suri that were imprisoned some were killed. When it was time to empty the latrines the guards hung the latrines around the handcuffed prisoners necks, while they went to empty them. When the Suri and Dizi were fighting and Suri prisoners were captured the guards allowed the Dizi people into the jail to beat the Suri people severely. Families were not allowed to visit these Suri. Some Suri who did nothing, were randomly picked up on the road and were given prison sentences of, 18, 20 and 25 years. No witnesses testified against these people.

The government has now sent many police and soldiers to stay in the Suri area. They haven't done anything yet but the Suri are worried about what these people will do. They have brought big guns mounted on the backs of trucks. There are now four shembel, commanders, with their battalions in Suri area. There may be 1000-2000 soldiers now in Suri area."



I was very upset when I read the interview. Sadly, the situation described in the interview was confirmed by the Suri people when I was there in October 2012. Several articles were published in the media about ongoing massacres of the Suri people for the last year and a half. Some of the facts are certainly wrong, and not every article is trustworthy. But the point is the resettlement program, the presence of the Ethiopian military, the fights and the dead people - all of that is reality. I can understand that the Ethiopian government opens Ethiopia for foreign investors. But when you talk to Suri people, you see they are very angry about how they are

treated. Also Suri people like progress and development, because they see the good things like construction of roads, schools or clinics. But the current development is destroying their traditions and their basis of life. It would be better, the Ethiopian government participated the Suri people in the whole process. The development might be slower in that case, but it would be more sustainable and the Suri people had the chance to keep their traditional life. Many Suri people think about leaving the area to Sudan or Kenya. Well, this could also solve the problem, but in this case Ethiopia will inevitably lose another fascinating ethnic group in the southwestern part.

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