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Ethiopia: stealing the Omo Valley, destroying its ancient Peoples

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A land grab twice the size of France is under way in Ethiopia, as the government pursues the wholesale seizure of indigenous lands to turn them over to dams and plantations for sugar, palm oil, cotton and biofuels run by foreign corporations, destroying ancient cultures and turning Lake Turkana, the world's largest desert lake, into a new Aral Sea.

There is growing international concern for the future of the lower Omo Valley in Ethiopia. A beautiful, biologically diverse land with volcanic outcrops and a pristine riverine forest; it is also a **UNESCO world heritage site**, yielding significant archaeological finds, including human remains dating back 2.4 million years.

The Valley is one of the most culturally diverse places in the world, with around **200,000 indigenous people** living there. Yet, in blind attempts to modernise and develop what **the government sees as an area of 'backward'** farmers in need of modernisation, some of Ethiopia's most valuable landscapes, resources and communities are being destroyed.

A new dam, called Gibe III, on the Omo River is nearing completion and will begin operation in June, 2015, potentially devastating the lives of **half a million people**. Along with the dam, extensive **land grabbing** is forcing thousands from their ancestral homes and destroying ecosystems.

Ethiopia's 'villagisation' programme is aiding the land-grab by pushing tribes into purpose built villages where they can no longer access their lands, becoming unable to sustain themselves, and making these previously self-sufficient tribes dependent on government food aid.

A total disregard for the rights of Ethiopia's Indigenous Peoples

What is happening in the lower Omo Valley, and elsewhere, shows a complete disregard for human rights and a total failure to understand the value these tribes offer Ethiopia in terms of their cultural heritage and their contribution to food security.

There are eight tribes living in the Valley, including the Mursi, famous for wearing large plates in their lower lips. Their agricultural practices have been developed over generations to cope with Ethiopia's famously dry climate.

Many are herders who keep cattle, sheep and goats and live nomadically. Others practice small-scale shifting cultivation, whilst many depend on the fertile crop and pasture land created by seasonal flooding.

The vital life source of the Omo River is being cut off by Gibe III. An Italian construction company began work in 2006, violating Ethiopian law as there was no competitive bidding for the contract and no meaningful consultation with indigenous people.

The dam has received investment from the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, and the hydropower is primarily going for export rather than domestic use - despite the fact that **77%** of Ethiopia's population lacks access to electricity.

People in the Omo Valley are politically vulnerable and geographically remote. Many do not speak Amharic, the national language, and have no access to resources or information. Foreign journalists have been denied contact with the tribes, as BBC reporter Matthew Newsome recently discovered when he was **prevented from speaking to the Mursi people**.

There has been little consideration of potential impacts, including those which may affect other countries, particularly Kenya, as Lake Turkana relies heavily on the Omo River.

At risk: Lake Turkana, 'Cradle of Mankind'

Lake Turkana, known as the 'Cradle of Mankind', is the world's largest desert lake dating back more than 4 million years. 90% of its inflow comes from the Omo. Filling of the lake behind the dam **will take three years and use up to a years' worth of inflow** that would otherwise go into Lake Turkana.

Irrigation projects linked with the dam will then reduce the inflow by 50% and lead to a drop of up to 20 metres in the lake's depth. These projects may also pollute the water with chemicals and nitrogen run-off. **Dr Sean Avery's report** explains how this could devastate the lake's ancient ecosystems and affect the 300,000 people who depend on it for their livelihoods.

Tribal communities living around the lake rely on it for fish, as well as an emergency source of water. It also attracts other wildlife which some tribes hunt for food, such as the El Molo, who hunt hippo and crocodile. Turkana is home to at least 60 fish species, which have evolved to be perfectly adapted to the lake's environment.

Breeding activity is highest when the Omo floods, and this seasonal flood also stimulates the migration of spawning fish. Flooding is vital for diluting the salinity of the lake, making it habitable. Livestock around the lake add nutrients to the soil encouraging shoreline vegetation, and this is important for protecting young fish during the floods.

Lake Turkana is a fragile ecosystem, highly dependent on regular seasonal activity, particularly from the Omo. To alter this ancient ebb and flow will throw the environment out of balance and impact all life which relies on the lake.

Severely restricted resources around the lake may also lead to violence amongst those competing for what's left. Low water levels could see the lake split in two, similar to the Aral Sea. Having acted as a natural boundary between people, there is concern that conflict will be inevitable.

Fear is already spreading amongst the tribes who say they are afraid of those who live on the other side of the lake. **One woman said**, *"They will come and kill us and that will bring about enmity among us as we turn on each other due to hunger."*

Conflict may also come from Ethiopians moving into Kenyan territory in attempts to find new land and resources.

A land grab twice the size of France

The dam is part of a wider attempt to develop the Omo Valley resulting in land grabs and plantations depending on large-scale irrigation. Since 2008 an area the size of France has been given to foreign companies, and there are **plans to hand over twice this area of land** over the next few years.

Investors can grow what they want and sell where they want. The main crops being brought into cultivation include, sugar, cotton, maize, palm oil and biofuels. These have no benefit to local economies, and rather than using Ethiopia's fragile fertile lands to support its own people, the crops grown here are exported for foreign markets.

Despite claims that plantations will bring jobs, most of the workers are migrants. Where local people (including children) are employed, they are paid extremely poorly. 750km of internal roads are also being constructed to serve the plantations, and are carving up the landscape, causing further evictions.

In order to prepare the land for plantations, all trees and grassland are cleared, destroying valuable ecosystems and natural resources.

Reports claim the military have been regularly intimidating villages, stealing and killing cattle and destroying grain stores. There have also been reports of beatings, rape and even deaths, whilst those who oppose the developments are put in jail. The Bodi, Kwegi and Mursi people were evicted to make way for the Kuraz Sugar Project which covers 245,000 acres.

The Suri have also been forcibly removed to make way for the Koka palm oil plantation, run by a Malaysian company and covering 76,600 acres. This is also happening elsewhere in Ethiopia, particularly the Gambela region where 73% of the indigenous population are destined for resettlement.

Al-Moudi, a Saudi tycoon, has 10,000 acres in this region to grow rice, which is exported to the Middle East. A recent **report** from the World Bank's internal watchdog has accused a UK and World Bank funded development programme of contributing to this violent resettlement.

For many tribes in the Omo Valley, the loss of their land means the loss of their culture. Cattle herding is not just a source of income, it defines people's lives. There is great cultural value placed on the animals. The Bodi are known to sing poems to their favourite cattle; and there are many rituals involving the livestock, such as the Hamar tribe's coming of age ceremony whereby young men must jump across a line of 10 to 30 bulls.