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Mali helps Libya with leased farmland

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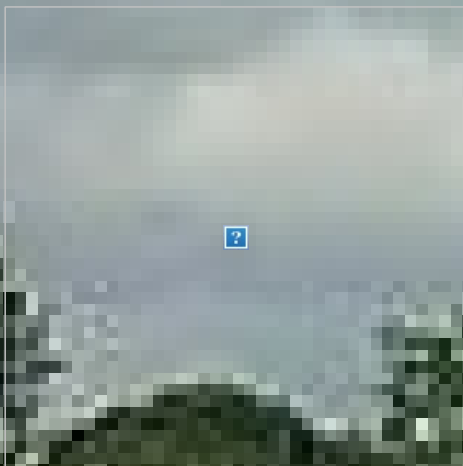
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PR's The World ? November 24, 2010

By Kati Whitaker

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Critics have called it everything from land grabbing to neo-colonialism. It's the practice of wealthier nations leasing vast tracts of farmland in poorer countries to secure a steady food supply for their own people.

According to the World Bank, there were 110 million acres of farmland deals across Africa and Asia last year, and the numbers are on the rise.

In the West African country of Mali, the government has granted Libya a 50-year lease on about 247,000 acres of prime rice growing land. But that deal is creating problems for farmers in Ke Macina.

A long irrigation canal cuts across miles of flat swampy rice fields.

The canal was built by Chinese contractors to supply the Libyan land development project known as Malibya.

Local farmers worry the canal will deprive them of water needed for their own fields. They're also angry that the construction has swept away their houses, villages, and orchards.

Teinte Tangara picks his way through the mud and rubble of a destroyed compound. He lived here with his wife and five children until the bulldozers arrived.

"Can you imagine how I felt when after all those years of living here - being told that it's going to be destroyed," he asked. "I've lived my whole life in this compound. I was born here, I was married here. This place has been ours since the days of my forefathers," he said.

He says less than half of the 150 families affected by the construction have been offered compensation. But Tangara says even those who got money didn't get enough to live on, let alone buy a new house.

"We feel betrayed," he said. "They gave us their word and they have let us down."

The farmer's union claims that the Malibyan deal was done behind closed doors and then presented as a fait accompli, a deal that effectively hands over control of Mali's main rice growing region to a foreign power.

Anger among the villagers has reached such a pitch that they have temporarily forced the suspension of work on the project.

It's not hard to see why.

Walking through the rubble to the edge of the canal, I make a gruesome discovery - a part of a human skull.

According to villagers, Chinese demolition contractors drove their bulldozers right through a cemetery. They turned up body parts and dumped them in a mass grave. Villagers say when the people here heard they were moving bodies, they came out with machetes and sticks to fight.

One villager said, "This is big shame. It's an insult to our culture, to our religious values, to basic human decency."

The farmers are now demanding a national forum on land acquisition. Spearheading the campaign is CNOP, a national group of farmers. The group's president, Ibrahim Coulibaly, says the Malibyan project is a flagrant violation of Malian law. "It's nothing more than banditry."

The problem is that few people here have papers demonstrating their rights to the land. That means the government effectively has control. To make matters worse, the Malibya contract gives Libya priority access to the irrigation water in the canal in times of shortage. The last two years has seen severe drought and farmers fear worse to come.

Several Malian officials declined to make themselves available for an interview for this story. But the government has said that it badly needs foreign investment to help ensure the country's own long-term food needs.

But opposition is growing here against land deals that seem to benefit the government, but not the people who actually live on the land, and the secrecy often surrounding these agreements only fuels suspicions that corrupt African leaders are selling their citizens short.

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