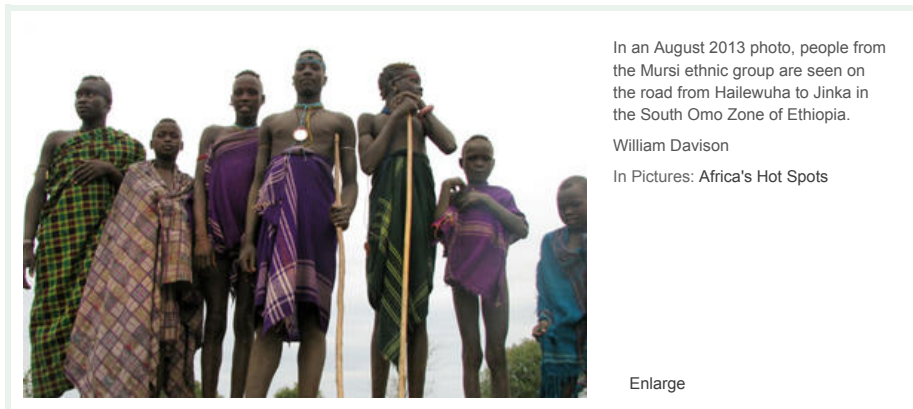


In Ethiopia, more land grabs, more indigenous people pushed out

A journalist's visit to South Omo, where rights groups say police have raped women and otherwise pressured locals to leave an area tagged to become a huge sugar plantation, was quickly curtailed by authorities.

By Will Davison, *Correspondent* / September 16, 2013



HAILEWUHA VILLAGE, SOUTH OMO, ETHIOPIA

As night wore on in a remote valley in southern Ethiopia, one policeman dozed and another watched a DVD comedy on a battery-powered laptop.



In Pictures: **Africa's Hot Spots**

Related stories



Think you know Africa?
Take our geography quiz.

Are US and UK 'turning a blind eye' as Ethiopia uproots natives?

Did West ignore rape charges related to Ethiopia land grab?

Focus

East Africans told to resettle: Are these 'land grabs' or progress?

Ads by Google

Pur Refrigerator Water Filter
Find The PUR® Water System That's Right For You - Shop Online Now!
www.PURwater.com

Subscribe Today to the Monitor

[Click Here](#) for your **FREE 30 DAYS** of The Christian Science Monitor

Close by, in a clutch of thorn trees and grass huts, an ethnic Mursi man tried to explain to outsiders why he is so concerned for his people, who have lived here as semi-nomads for generations but may soon be evicted to make way for a giant sugar plantation.

"We Mursi [people] do not accept this ambitious government ideology," the man said of an official state plan to house them in new villages in exchange for their compliant departure. He is speaking in the village of Hailewuha, his face lit by flashlight. Cattle shuffle and grunt nearby.

"What we want is to use our own traditional way of cultivation," he says.

Ethiopian officials say the Mursi, like a growing number of ethnic or tribal groups in Ethiopia, are voluntarily moving out of their ancient lands; human rights groups say this is untrue.

Weekly Digital Edition

The ongoing controversy is not new in Ethiopia, and "land grabs" by governments for lucrative leasing deals have become a story across the continent.

For example, in Ethiopia's lush Gambella region, in the western area bordering Sudan, locals have been forcibly relocated to make way for the leasing of farms to foreign firms. This year, the World Bank and British aid agencies were swept into controversy over charges they helped fund the relocation including salary payments to local officials involved in the clearing of land.

The Mursi have lived in Omo for centuries. Partly for this reason they get frequent visits by tourists and anthropologists alike. Tall and elaborately decorated, their scarified bodies are daubed with paint and ornamented by hooped earrings and bicep bangles.

But now the Mursi may be those most affected by government operations to overhaul South Omo, an area that officials in Addis Ababa are calling economically and socially backward.

The plan would turn this scrub and savanna into about 700 square miles of state-owned sugar plantations that would in turn require building Ethiopia's largest irrigation project.

The water to feed the sugar cane year-round is to come from the Omo river, and is made possible by Gibe III, a partly Chinese-funded hydropower dam that may be completed as early as next year. The cane will be processed at some five local factories.

The people of this valley, the Mursi, Bodi, and Karo, some of whom number only a few thousand, would need to reduce their cattle -- their most prized possessions. Then many if not all will move into enlarged permanent villages.

Controlling the flow of the river will mean the end of an annual flood that makes fertile a strip of land for crops once the seasonal waters recede. An ongoing attempt to control Mursi traditions now means that at public meetings, state authorities implore the group to end "very bad" cultural practices like stick fighting and their characteristic lip-plates.

To be sure, Ethiopian authorities promise new jobs, public services, and plenty of irrigation for every Omo household that agrees to move out.

But this is not the view of international human rights groups who claim that Ethiopia is broadly and constantly harming locals as part of an authoritarian model of development.

In the most recent salvo, the Oakland Institute accused the state of using killings, beatings, and rapes as methods of forcing South Omo residents to accept the sugar cane projects. The California-based advocacy group also accused Western aid agencies and some US and British officials of covering up evidence of the abuses they heard about on research missions.

Instead of investigating claims made by Survival International, Human Rights Watch, and the Oakland Institute, Ethiopian authorities smear them as anti-development.

These groups help "drag Ethiopia back to the Stone Age," is how the prime minister's spokesperson, Getachew Reda, recently described Oakland's agenda.

"We have a scar from them [critics]," says the chief administrator of South Omo, Molloka Wubneh Toricha, about the activists and journalists who make the 400 mile journey from Addis Ababa to the Kenya-border area, hoping to monitor developments. "They try and blacken our image."

Yet in the single nighttime interview the Monitor was able to conduct with the Mursi, the criticism of the rights groups were echoed: "The government uses our ignorance and backwardness to control us," said the Mursi man. "They force us to do farming.... Those who have been in the bush shall settle together in common village and be brothers. But our leaders do not accept this."

It is impossible to verify whether these comments reflect the community's opinion since officials and police prevented further inquiries by reporters in a trip there in August.

While regional officials at first permitted access to the Mursi, a few hours later, the administration backtracked.

Reporters on an independent visit were forced to camp next to the Hailewuha police station. A security commander regularly called in on a shortwave radio to check that the journalists were still corralled. Senior regional police arrived the next morning to escort them back to the regional capital, Jinka.

Later, apologetic officials in Jinka all had the same explanation: there had been a "misunderstanding."

Yet rather than a genuine mix-up, the obstruction seemed to stem from a basic mistrust of outside eyes and voices. Mr. Molloka said journalists frequently "divert" the views of residents: "This is what burns our hearts," he says, "at public meetings we told all the people not to give information to journalists."

With media muzzled and most civil society initiatives stifled by restrictive laws, there is little independent information about what is happening in South Omo.

Along with the plight of the Mursi, for example, little is known about the impact of as many as 700,000 migrant workers that may move here to work on the sugar cane plantations.

Tewelde Woldemariam, a scholar and senior figure in the ruling party, who left in 2001, and an academician, Fana Gebresenbet, argue that the people, cultures, language and rights of South Omo people, which are theoretically protected by the constitution, are threatened by the new influx of migrant workers.

"Unless the problem is realized and mechanisms to tackle it are put in place, this demographic change puts the cultural and linguistic rights of the indigenous ethnic groups...at great risk," they wrote for a conference in April at the Institute for Peace and Security Studies at Addis Ababa University.

The sugar and resettlement projects are well-intended but the scholars note there is little official response about possible adverse effects.

"The attitude of lumping everyone who raises the possibility of negative consequence of the development project on the local culture as one who wants to permanently perpetuate the pastoral lifestyle for tourist purposes is rampant at all levels of the region," they said.

The Mursi man that was interviewed at night said this: "If we will be mixed with external people, perhaps we will be exposed to some contagious diseases like HIV/AIDS which we have never experienced in life."

One important failing of trying to engineer and control the future of Omo, say analysts sympathetic to the nomads, is that local residents are kept from the design and involvement in policies concerning them.

The Mursi man who we spoke to asked: "The government forces us to accept this project. Do you think this is a good way?"

Related stories

Think you know Africa? Take our geography quiz.

Are US and UK 'turning a blind eye' as Ethiopia uproots natives?

Did West ignore rape charges related to Ethiopia land grab?

Focus

East Africans told to resettle: Are these 'land grabs' or progress?

From The Web

by Taboola



Anyone can see your Arrest Record!

[Access now](#)

Instant Checkmate



Billionaire Tells Americans to Prepare For "Financial Ruin"

Moneynews



The Instagrammys: 14 Beauty Pros to Follow Now

Elle



We Can't Help But Stare? Miley Cyrus Photos

StyleBistro



How to Buy Must-Have Products for Next to Nothing

QuiBids



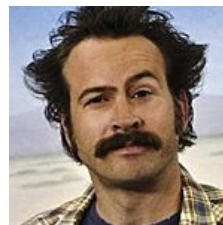
7 tips to avoid locksmith scams

Angie's List



The Death of Stainless is Here

Reviewed.com



Top 10 Athletes Turned Actors of All Time

Rant Sports