

Half Million Afar Pastoralists Risk Displacement and Environmental Disaster In the Awash Valley of Ethiopia!

The Afar people in Ethiopia live in the north-eastern part of the country known as the Afar Regional State. The pastoralist Afar of the area is mainly dependent on livestock rearing. The traditional Afar economy survived for centuries by adapting a lifestyle of pastoralist, being opportunistic and utilizing scarce resources by migrating from place to place. The Afars have strong ties to their ecosystem and have unique traditional values that promote harmony between human, livestock and nature.

Recently, the TPLF-led Government in Ethiopia is carrying out a huge irrigation project with aim to establish a big sugar cane plantation as well as two sugar factories both in lower and middle awash valley menacing the livelihood of over a half million people and fauna and flora. The project was established as a state company in its own right, taking responsibility from the Ethiopian Sugar Industry Support Centre. The project was launched under the joint auspices of the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Water Resources at the beginning of 2005. Out of five sub-regions (zones) of the Afar State, four southern sub-regions are directly affected by this project.

To support water supply of the project two huge dams are being built in Tandaho and Kassam-Kabana at Sabure. The land clearing activities is being carried out with intensity destroying the forest, livestock and animal life in the region. The shortage of grazing area due to clearing of the land for plantations and government-instigated investment, to get space for irrigation, has created serious tribal confrontations with detriment of lives. Moreover, the loss of grazing land, water sites and increased government backed investment meant greater poverty among the Afar pastoralists in the region. This irresponsible action is leading not only to the destruction of the Afar as pastoral society but also have a long-term and irreversible impact on ecosystem of entire Awash Basin. So far, no alternative livelihood is being thought for the Afar pastoralists except displacement.

The Kesem-Tendaho project is expected to cost over 20 billion Birr and to share 3 percent of the world sugar market. Up on completion, the project is expected to produce sugarcane through developing over 100,000 hectares of land. The project is expected to become fully operational in 2008 and is projected to produce over 900,000tn of sugar, 300,000tn of molasses and 200 million litres of ethanol annually at full capacity. Some of the Chemicals used in the plantation are threatening life in the region. About 200 000-300 000 labourers from the highlands, maybe imported from Tigrean militias, to acquire own Party base in the Afar region. The experience of the past party policy of labourers brought from other region has proved that the government has intentionally instigated -local conflicts between the Afars and the government-brought labourers which is usually an ample opportunity for repressive measures against the Afars. Furthermore, the environmental impact of the project is huge, since the Awash River is currently the most polluted river in the country, where industry wastage released and forbidden chemicals are used on state plantation without any restriction in the region. To support the project a huge armies are stationed in both the lower and middle Awash valley. Serious conformation between the Afar and the armies is taking place frequently. Pastoralists who question the project or do not remove their homestead from the project sites are threatened, imprisoned and killed, without even getting any formal charges against them. Although the opposition by the Afar people is growing by all means day by day the Afar did not get the due international attention yet.

What are lessons learned from previous projects with similar intentions? One, which had a great impact on the Afar, was the agricultural development in the Awash Valley. Seeing its great potential for irrigated agriculture already in 1962 the Awash Valley Authority (AVA) was established with a special Charter, which authorized it to monitor and advance the Awash Valley resources, during which time commercial farmers invaded the valley. While the agenda of AVA clearly stated the government's objectives, obviously it contained nothing about the future of local Afar. The *dergue* applied a similar policy by introducing State Farms, took even more lands, leaving the Afar no place to go. The TPLF-led Government in Ethiopia has intensified its involvement too in the Valley through state-backed investors and directly government financed huge projects.

The TPLF-led government has decided to intensify the grip on the Afar land, where the party-affiliated Tigrean supremacy in the region has been systematically imposed. For instance, the Afdera salt lake investment, in the northern Afar, is solely dominated by state-backed Tigrean investors. In the same region of the Afar an oil exploration is going on without the consent of the Afar people. However, the question has been throughout who owned the land in the Afar region? In the Afar traditional society, land is a communal property, and therefore cannot be claimed by an individual or authority without the general public consent. Those who cultivate land, or graze it, do so by virtue of being members of the clan with corporate rights. The territorial extension of a clan is not exactly defined and the distribution of land among clans has never been necessary prior to the introduction of agriculture in the Awash Valley in 1960s. Nothing has more seriously threatened the Afar traditional rights than the individual freehold over land, introduced by commercial farms in the Awash Valley and consolidated by subsequent regimes in the county.

The Afar Human Rights Organisation (AHRO) believes that the lives of our people, fauna and flora of the region are in serious danger. Our Organisation setup a committee to support Afar pastoralists affected by the Sugar project. You can contact and support the committee through e-mail: "*AFAR HUMAN RIGHTS*" <ahro2006@hotmail.com>

We call up on all human rights organisations in UN, EU, USA and others!
We call upon international community to pressurise the TPLF-led government to withdraw its fatal project operation from the Awash Valley immediately!
Stop all forbidden chemical use in the plantation of the Awash Valley!
Stop all types of international assistance to the project in the Awash Valley!
Boycott sugar and cotton production from the Awash Valley!
Release all Afar pastoralists imprisoned without charges in connection to the project!

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