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Events of 2015

Ethiopia is a federation of nine regional states, encompassing a range of languages, ethnicities and cultures. Besides a variety of indigenous communities, including Afar and Anuak, there are also a significant number of ethnic groups, such as ethnic Somalis, who, as a predominantly Muslim community in the majority Christian country represent a religious minority too. In principle, to accommodate this diversity, the Ethiopian Constitution devolves considerable power to its different communities, including autonomous governance arrangements and the right to maintain their own language, culture and history.

In practice, however, many of the country's minorities and indigenous populations remain vulnerable to human rights violations such as loss of land and lack of access to basic services. These abuses take place in a political context largely monopolized by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), an alliance of regionally based parties that has governed the country since 1991 and has been widely criticized for its repressive practices. Nationwide elections in May resulted in the EPRDF and its allies securing every seat in parliament, a process condemned by opposition parties as unfair.

Among those marginalized by the current government are the Oromo community, which constitutes the largest ethnic community in the country, with some estimates suggesting they comprise between 25 and 40 per cent of the population. Though socially, economically and religiously diverse, Oromo are united by a shared language, also widely spoken in northern Kenya and parts of Somalia. Despite their large numbers, Oromo have suffered a long history of exclusion and forced assimilation by the Ethiopian government, leading to the decline of their pastoralist lifestyle. An ongoing source of anger is the government's proposed expansion of the capital city of Addis Ababa into the politically autonomous Oromia Region, which could lead to the displacement of thousands of Oromo farmers and remove the annexed territory from Oromo control. Reminiscent of earlier displacements of Oromo communities by the government, as well as forced resettlement of other communities into Oromo territory, the plan has provoked a series of protests by Oromo demonstrators, culminating in a student protest in December 2015 in which 10 people were killed and several hundred injured.

The government's development policies in other parts of the country have also impacted heavily on some of the more marginalized indigenous peoples. This is particularly the case in the Lower Omo Valley and Lake Turkana, a recognized United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site and one of the most culturally diverse areas in the world. In particular, there are concerns over the ecological destruction of the forests surrounding the Omo River, linked to the controversial Gilgel Gibe III hydroelectric power plant. Besides generating electricity from a large dam constructed on the river, the project is also designed to provide irrigation to a raft of state- and foreign-owned agricultural plantations developed in the area on appropriated land.

The government has repeatedly failed to ensure adequate contingency plans are in place for pastoralist and indigenous communities while they carry out their development projects, forcing communities off their ancestral land. This displacement in turn leads to conflict between resettled communities, loss of property such as livestock, restricted access to grazing land and erosion of culture. While the international debate continues over the dam's ecological and domestic impact, the livelihoods of over 200,000 indigenous people, including Bodi, Kwegu, Mursi and Suri communities, risk being severely compromised. The Kwegu people, for example, who live in the south-west of the country along the Omo River, are facing a food crisis due to widespread irrigation for plantations in the area that has deprived them of essential water and fish supplies.

Similarly, other state-led developments have been largely implemented without consultation or accommodation of indigenous and pastoralist communities, causing them to lose large areas of ancestral land to foreign corporations to accommodate sugar cane plantations and other investments. A recurring element in these projects is a process of forced relocation known as 'villagization', whereby pastoralist groups are resettled in makeshift villages, often far away from livelihood opportunities, natural resources or basic services. Many instances of these have been linked with development assistance programmes financed by international donors such as the World Bank. In January 2015, an internal report by its internal watchdog panel was leaked, reportedly identifying an 'operational link' between funding provided by the World Bank and the forced displacement of Anuak living in the Gambella region. Further evidence emerged during the year suggesting that these relocations, carried out by the Ethiopian military, had been accompanied by frequent human rights abuses, including violence and sexual assault.

The disturbing impact of such large-scale projects has caused several international donors to re-examine their approach towards support for such projects. Following on from national legislation passed in the United States in 2014, prohibiting development aid from being used for any project that would lead to displacement of communities without their consent or compensation, in February 2015 the United Kingdom (UK) confirmed that it was withdrawing development funding from Ethiopia's Promotion of Basic Services programme and realigning its aid portfolio. Although officially not connected to long-standing criticisms of Ethiopia's villagization programme, this change in policy came in the wake of a multi-donor report released by the European Union, highlighting significant problems with the Ethiopian government's practices, as well as a lawsuit brought by an Anuak man alleging that UK development aid had funded human rights violations against him and his family in the Gambella region.

The damage caused by development-induced displacement to minority and indigenous cultures in the region has been substantial. Besides the impacts of evictions from traditional lands and loss of access to grazing areas that have supported pastoralists' livelihoods for generations, it is estimated that there could be an influx of as many as half a million workers from other parts of Ethiopia into planned sugar plantations in the Lower Omo region, transforming the social context for established communities such as the Bodi and Mursi. The government has done little to alleviate these pressures. While its ecological and energy projects deprive indigenous peoples of their ancestral lands, preventing them from practising their cultural and spiritual traditions, it has also

marketed the unique practices of these communities to promote tourism – a situation that has frequently led to humiliating or exploitative practices. Mursi and Suri people, for example, increasingly unable to pursue their traditional livelihoods, now rely on performing ritualistic dances and posing for photos for foreign visitors to earn money.

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