

US, UK, World Bank Among Aid Donors Complicit in Ethiopia's War on Indigenous Tribes, Opening the Way to International Agribusiness

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Young Mursi cattle herders. Photo: Rod Waddington via Flickr (CC BY-SA).

USAID, the UK's DFID and the World Bank are among those covering up for severe human rights abuses against indigenous peoples in Ethiopia's Omo Valley, inflicted during forced evictions to make way for huge plantations, writes Will Hurd. Their complicity in these crimes appears to be rooted in US and UK partnership with Ethiopia in the 'war on terror'.

In the fall of 2012 my cell phone rang. It was an official from Department for International Development, DFID – the UK government aid agency. He implored me to remove his name from a [transcript of an audio recording](#) I'd translated. He worried he might lose his job, which would hurt his family.

I'd translated for this official and his colleagues, both from DFID and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), during a joint visit they made, in January 2012, to the Lower Omo Valley of Southwest Ethiopia.

They wanted to talk to [members of the Mursi and Bodi ethnic groups](#) about a controversial government sugar development project. DFID was indirectly helping to fund the forced eviction and resettlement of thousands of people affected by this project, through a World Bank-organized funding program called 'Promoting Basic Services' (PBS).

DFID was the biggest state contributor to this program, which had also been accused of indirectly funding resettlement of Anuak in the nearby Gambella region. In Gambella, vast land leases were being given to international and domestic companies. During the visit to the Omo Valley, I turned on an audio recorder.

What struck me about the phone conversation with the DFID official was how much concern he had for his own livelihood and family, and how little concern he and DFID were showing for the hundreds, or even thousands, of families in the Omo Valley.

I acted on his request and left him unnamed.

Aid to 'help the poor' opens the way to international agribusiness

The resettlements were happening to clear the land for industrial-scale, international and national, companies. The donors deny a connection between the resettlements and the land

leases, but the connection is all too obvious.

The [behemoth Gibe III dam is under construction](#) upstream on the Omo River. Its control of the river's water level allows irrigation dams and canals to be built in the Omo Valley for plantations.

PBS is a \$4.9 billion [project led by the World Bank](#), with UK and other funding, under the guiding hand of the [Development Assistance Group](#) (DAG). The DAG is 27 of the world's largest donor organizations, including 21 national government aid agencies.

The full membership of the DAG comprises: the African Development Bank, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, European Union, FAO, Finland, France, Germany, IMF, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain (AECID), Sweden, Switzerland, Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TIKA), UK (DFID), UNDP, UNESCO, USAID, and the World Bank.

It is supposed to provide teacher and health worker salaries and water development in these resettlement sites. This is controversial in itself-only providing services to people who move off their land into resettlement sites - but some of the money was used by the Ethiopian government to pay for implementation of the resettlement scheme.

DFID and the DAG say that this resettlement plan is entirely about providing services to the people. If they believe this, they gravely misunderstand the aims of the Ethiopian Government, which have to do with political control.

Ethiopia's long-standing plan to pin down the pastoralists

Most of the groups targeted in the southwest are people who depend on cattle and tend to move with the cattle-pastoralists. Pastoralists are difficult for governments to control. For the last 118 years pastoral peoples in the Omo Valley have successfully dodged many of the abuses suffered by settled agricultural tribes in the region, at the hands of the state.

The pastoralists simply gathered their cattle together and moved away, returning when government forces had left. With the help of the DAG, the government is now planning, finally, to pin the pastoralists down in resettlement sites.

David Turton, an anthropologist who has worked in the Omo Valley for more than 45 years, warned me about the possible motives of DFID and USAID for visiting the Omo at that particular time - January 2012.

"They may be reacting to the recent Human Rights Watch report which severely criticized their role in resettlement activities in Gambella", he wrote. "It's known that Human Rights watch is planning a report on the Omo, which is likely to be equally critical."

"So, by going to the Omo now, DFID and USAID will be able to argue that they have been keeping 'a close eye' on events there. In other words, their trip may have more to do with protecting their own backs against politically embarrassing revelations than with protecting the human rights of the Mursi and Bodi."

But I'd once had a good experience with the World Bank, when it refused to give money to a conservation organization that was threatening to evict indigenous people from their land in

the Omo Valley. I thought it might do good to show these aid agencies the gravity of the situation.

Off to the Omo Valley

We set off in a Land Rover through the grasslands of the Omo Valley. We stopped in a small Mursi village and arranged a meeting with approximately 40 Mursi. At the beginning, a Mursi man asked me, *“Did you bring these people?”* meaning did I vouch for them. “Yes”, I said.

This let the Mursi feel they could speak freely. DFID and USAID heard many accounts from the Mursi of forced eviction, beatings, rape, and coercion in agreements with the government. Some of these accounts were firsthand. We went on to a Bodi village and heard much the same thing.

Here is a translator telling what the Bodi next to him said:

“This man used to live in the Usso area. In that place one was able to grow a lot of grain ... The government has thrown him out of his place and he doesn’t know what to do. His former place is behind that mountain. He says they are going to give it to someone else, a plantation investor.”

The accounts were irrefutable and I thought they must cause the donors to act. Months went by and the donors said they could not substantiate human rights violations in the Gambella region. But they had refused to visit Anuak refugees, although invited by the Anuak themselves, who had been evicted from their land in Gambella.

These Anuak were now living in refugee camps in Kenya and Sudan where they could have spoken of their experiences without fear of government reprisal. I was worried that the donors would also say they could find no evidence of violations in the Omo Valley.

So, I wrote DFID and USAID asking if anything had been done. I told them I had the tape recording transcripts. Had they taken this up with the DAG? I got the above call from a DFID official, after which they stopped responding to emails.

The donors report

Later DFID and USAID [said in their report](#) that the allegations of human rights abuses they had heard during their visit to the Omo Valley *“could not be substantiated”*.

The then British Minister for Overseas Development, Justine Greening, reported the same to UK Parliament. DFID and USAID had used the Mursi and Bodi to protect their reputation, and the reputation of the Ethiopian government.

But I had the tape recording.

At this time, there was strong disagreement between the [reports that Human Rights Watch](#) had published out about resettlement in the Gambella region, and the accounts that members of the DAG were putting out of their investigative trips to the same region.

Human Rights Watch was on the ground as the resettlement was being implemented and they also visited Anuak who had fled to refugee camps outside Ethiopia. From both populations they received reports that forced evictions, murders, and beatings had

occurred.

The DAG, on the other hand, was saying it could not substantiate any human rights abuses. So, where was the disconnect?

One of the translators for the DAG investigation in Gambella said the communities had told DAG “to their face” of the human rights abuses. But still DAG reported nothing. What was important about the audio recording I’d made was it showed the inside of this investigation process by DAG, and it wasn’t pretty.

I heard in detail about one of the subsequent DAG trips in the Omo Valley in early August, 2013. Ethiopian government representatives had gone to a village in Bodi and told them they were bringing foreigners to ask what the Bodi thought of the resettlement.

The Bodi said, *“This is good. When they come we will tell them the truth! How you swindle us, what you did wrong and about the people who abused us. We will tell it straight!”* Some days later the villagers saw the caravan of aid agency officials and government officials drive past, on their way to another village.

Pushback

I published the recordings, HRW published a [report about abuses in the Omo Valley](#), the World Bank Inspection Panel investigated the Bank’s resettlement program in Ethiopia, and earlier this year the tide began to turn. [DFID pulled its funding](#) from the PBS program.

The World Bank Inspection Panel report on the [PBS program was also leaked](#). It contained damning evidence of human rights violations, and although the World Bank rejected the report findings, World Bank president [Jim Yong Kim admitted to serious flaws](#) with its resettlement programs.

This is all to the good, as the aid agencies have been faced with the consequences of their actions, but it doesn’t mean there are any protections for the ethnic groups of Southwest Ethiopia. The plantations and dam are moving ahead as before.

In April, [reports surfaced that the Kwegu](#), the smallest ethnic group in the Omo Valley, were starving. They were not able to grow crops below an irrigation dam the government constructed on the Omo River for its sugarcane plantations. The Kwegu were giving their children to the cattle-herding Bodi to look after, so the kids would have milk to drink.

How can a \$4.9 billion program be implemented and leave people starving? The answer, I think, is aid may not be the primary function of some of these organizations. Aid often is a way of paying a foreign government to provide a service for the country ‘giving’ the aid.

The long strings attached to aid

The US government needs Ethiopia as a stable and strategic place to carry out military operations in ‘the War on Terror’ in East Africa and the Middle East. The Horn of Africa has long been Washington’s ‘back-door of the Middle East’. [The US now has a drone base](#) in Arba Minch, with range to Somalia and Yemen. Arba Minch is not so far from Mursi territory. Aid has a long history of murky dealings.

In 1990, when the US was trying to get clearance from the UN to attack Iraq in the Gulf War,

it bribed many UN member states for 'yes' votes with debt relief, gifts of weapons, and other things. When Yemen defied US wishes and voted against the attack, a senior American diplomat declared, *"That was the most expensive 'no vote' you ever cast."* In three days, a \$70 million [USAID project was cancelled](#) to one of the world's poorest countries.

On its website, [DFID explained its decision](#) to pull its funding from the PBS Program as follows: *"Recognising Ethiopia's growing success, the UK will now evolve its approach by transitioning support towards economic development to help generate jobs, income and growth."*

But in the UK High Court where it was fighting a case brought against it by an Anuak refugee, 'Mr O'. [DFID said that it had pulled out of the PBS Program](#) because *"of ongoing concerns related to civil and political rights at the level of the overall partnership in Ethiopia ... and continued concerns about the accountability of the security services."*

The DAG [published a letter to the Ethiopian government](#) on its website in February this year, in which it reported on visits it had made in August, 2014 to the Omo Valley and Bench Maji Zone. In this letter, it announced that it had found *"no evidence of the Ethiopian Government forcibly resettling people."*

The truth is very different

Many more Bodi and Mursi have been imprisoned since the plantations started. Some were imprisoned after disagreeing with plantation and resettlement plans in meetings. Bodi cultivation sites and Mursi grain stores were bulldozed against their wishes.

Bodi have been in armed conflict with the police and military about the plantations. The Bodi were forbidden by the government to plant at the Omo River and told to move into the resettlement sites. When food aid didn't arrive they went to plant against government wishes.

The Mursi were told by government officials that if they didn't sell off their cattle, the cattle would be injected with poison. This caused the Mursi in the north to leave their best cultivation land on the Omo River and in the grasslands in order to protect their cattle. They've lost three annual harvests so far as a result.

Thousands of acres of Bodi territory were taken for the plantations and the Bodi ended up with small plots of land with no shade. When the Bodi left these plots, the government took them back for sugarcane. The DAG missed all of this. When are the DAG aid agencies going to start aiding the people of the Omo Valley, and Gambella, instead of participating in their demise?

Ethiopia has the right, and need, to develop its economy and industries, but impoverishing some of its most vulnerable people in the process is counterproductive.

The Mursi and Bodi have been trying to implement the [Mursi-Bodi Community Conservation Area](#). This would capitalize on the already abundant tourism and wildlife in the area, in conjunction with Omo and Mago National Parks. If the government were to approve this, and let it be fully implemented, it may provide benefits for both local people and state.

Will Hurd lived in Ethiopia for eight years, primarily with the Mursi of the Southwest, who are now threatened by a 175,000 hectare sugar plantation. He speaks the Mursi language. He is

director of the small non-profit, [Cool Ground](#).

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