

Speech by Meles Zenawi during the 13th Annual Pastoralists' Day celebrations,

Jinka, South Omo, 25/1/2011

Even though poverty and backwardness are a concern for the whole country, it is worse for the pastoralists. In the previous backward and biased government policy, there wasn't a systematic plan and no meaningful work was done for the pastoralist areas. The pastoralist's life is nomadic and relies on raising cattle; because of this it was difficult to provide quality healthcare and education. The lack of water and grazing has made keeping livestock difficult and has had no satisfying outcomes. Our government realized this problem and made plans with the pastoralist community. Now we have started working on big infrastructural development such as roads, electricity, and telecommunications. This effort will continue, stronger than ever, for the next five years. Our efforts to provide education and healthcare, according to the pastoralists' lifestyles, achieved good results. We have learnt many useful lessons from this experience. To share this good experience in all other pastoralist areas, and to minimize, or possibly eliminate, the gap between other regions of the country and pastoralist areas, we stand to do an excellent job in the coming five years. We can say these efforts have been fruitful when pastoralists' lives are improved sustainably and permanently.

Most of our people here are pastoralists and they live with a shortage of water. The most important thing we have to do to improve the pastoralists' lives is to solve the water shortage. If we solve the water problem that will help cattle raising to become productive and modern. In solving the water problem, depending on the pastoralists' interests, they could have irrigation systems to improve cattle grazing or they could even be involved in farming to improve their lives. That is why we say that water is the backbone of any kind of development around pastoralists' lives. Our successful experience has made us certain that any development in pastoral areas, more than in others, has to focus on water development.

There are some people who say they are concerned for the pastoralists, but really they want the pastoralists and their lifestyle to remain as a tourist attraction forever. The pastoralists don't want to live as a tourist attraction. They want a stable, improved life. Taking this into consideration we should ignore the false propaganda of people who want pastoralists to be a tourist attraction. We are standing strongly by the idea of creating opportunities for pastoralists to live securely according to their own interests. Providing the necessary support will be the key feature of our development work in pastoralist areas.

Today, we are celebrating the 13th annual Pastoralist Day in Jinka, the main town of South Omo. This reminds me of the first time I saw this beautiful place. There was a big flood disaster. It took so many lives and did so much damage. When I was there I saw our huge fertile land covered by the flood. People and their cattle, who survived this catastrophe, were clinging to small islands made by the flood, waiting for the government to rescue them. During this situation I had a chance to talk to these pastoralists and they said their need for water was the reason for them settling in a dangerous flood-prone place. They requested the government to establish an irrigation system so that they could have a permanent solution to save them from such disasters. From then on, the regional administration tried to work on a small irrigation system within its resources, and achieved encouraging results.

The Federal government is working hard to bring a permanent solution. The Gigel Gibe 3 dam is developing rapidly and when it is finished the flood, which has been a huge problem for years in this region, will end forever. It will then be possible to create a big irrigation system in this wide and fertile area of South Omo. Following the good results we have achieved in the Afar region, the government is planning, and working hard to establish, a 150,000 hectare sugarcane development in this area starting this year. When this development work is done, we believe that it will transform the entire basis of the area. This will benefit the people of this area and hundreds of thousands of other Ethiopians, by creating employment. The pastoralists who live around this area will be given some fertile land from this irrigation system, which can be used for their own cultivation. There will be support for the pastoralists to combine agriculture with modern cattle herding.

Our efforts to build a dam on the Omo River to eliminate the flood, to create a huge irrigation system and give pastoralists a sustainable income and a modern life, are facing roadblocks. Our limited capacity to execute this work, and limited financial aid, did not allow us to go as fast as we wanted to. There are some people who want to block our freedom to use our rivers, and to save our people from poverty. They are creating huge propaganda, but they don't stop there. They are blocking us from getting financial loans from abroad to finish the project. There are also some people who are the best friends of backwardness and poverty, but claim to be concerned about environmental conservation. They don't actually do anything tangible. They just want to keep the pastoralists as a tourist attraction and make sure no development happens in pastoral areas. They team up with the people who don't want us to use our rivers to broadcast their propaganda. There can't be anyone more concerned for our environmental conservation than we are. We are determined to speed up our development in an environmentally-friendly way. We want our people to have a modern life and we won't allow our people to be a case study of ancient living for scientists and researchers.

The strategy we are trying to implement will enable pastoralists to be the first beneficiaries of development in their area. Even though the promoters of backwardness and poverty pretend to be environmentalists and to be concerned for pastoralists, we will continue to stay strong and stand by our development with our own resources. Those people who tried to force us not to use our own rivers didn't get their way because we proved by our actions not only that we have the will to build a dam and develop but also that we have the capacity to do so, using our local resources.

On this occasion, I assure the people of South Omo, especially the pastoralists, that the time of losing your cattle or life because of the Omo flood, is over. In the coming five years there will be a very big irrigation project and related agricultural development in this zone. I promise you that, even though this area is known as backward in terms of civilization, it will become an example of rapid development. I also want to assure you that the work we have started in this area on infrastructure and social development will continue stronger than ever. I want to assure you again that all our development work will be in line with protecting the environment and the friends of backwardness and poverty, whatever they say or do, can't stop us from the path of development we are taking.