

To Sir Malcolm Bruce, Chairman, International Development Committee, House of Commons

From: Survival International
Subject: Lower Omo, Ethiopia
Date: 18 February 2014 19:57:03 GMT

Dear Sir Malcolm,

A good deal has happened since we last wrote to you, in March 2013, about the forced villagisation of the tribal peoples of the Lower Omo.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights has now admitted Survival's complaint that the villagisation process is in breach of the African Charter on Human Rights. We have submitted a substantial body of evidence in support of our allegations, including many interviews with individuals who have borne the brunt of the Government's policy. We attach a copy of the Commission's call on the Ethiopian authorities to halt the villagization while this evidence is assessed, which the authorities have chosen to ignore.

In January 2014 the US House Appropriations Committee made it a requirement of the new Appropriations Bill that development assistance in the Lower Omo cannot be used to pay directly or indirectly for forced evictions, but only to support initiatives on which the affected communities have previously been consulted.

By contrast, the attitude of the UK authorities remains one of apparent indifference. Despite the Secretary of State's promise to the House that DfID would visit the Lower Omo to examine the "very serious" allegations of abuse that had been reported to it on a previous visit, no examination has taken place.[1]

We have repeatedly tried to find out why this is, but have got nowhere. DfID has told us only that it continues to raise its "concerns" with the Ethiopian Government "at the highest level." Whatever this entails, the approach manifestly does not work.

We know this because we have recently obtained from a covert source a copy of the Villagisation Plan for the Lower Omo. The Ethiopian authorities produced this document in 2012, but have done their best to keep it under wraps. It is not hard to see why.

The Plan reveals that virtually all Bodi and Mursi, as well as many thousands of Dassenach and Nyangatom, are to be villagised, apparently without any attempt at prior consultation. The Plan talks instead of the Government's "firm resolve to ensure sustainable development by changing the life style of pastoralist communities," and of the need to bring about their "cultural transformation." That many of the communities of the Lower Omo do not actually want to change their life style, or to be "culturally transformed," is neither here nor there.

The Plan does not comply with any of the "Good Practice Guidelines and Principles Regarding Resettlement" which DfID and other members of DAG had prepared a year earlier, ostensibly to ensure that the Ethiopian Government would avoid precisely the situation that it has now brought about in the Lower Omo. DfID may or may not have "expressed its concern" about this, but has done nothing practical to put matters right.

DfID tries to justify its failure to act on the basis that UK funds are not used directly to pay for villagisation, but this is absurd. The Department contributes very significant sums to the PBS programme, which is probably the most important source of revenue for the zonal

authorities of South Omo. It is inconceivable that they do not use this money directly or indirectly to pay for the new “villages” which make villagisation possible.

In an update of its Operational Plan for Ethiopia in June 2013, DfID announced that the UK would “continue to work closely with the Government, NGOs and international development partners to promote and safeguard human rights, including placing a strong focus on respecting human rights in the underlying partnership principles governing aid to the Government.”

But these are just words printed on paper. The UK can only “promote and safeguard” the rights of the peoples of the Lower Omo in practice if it follows the US example and makes future aid conditional on satisfactory assurances that it is not used directly or indirectly to fund forced evictions, but only for programmes on which the communities themselves have been effectively consulted. If it does not do this, the UK might well be among those blamed for the humanitarian disaster that will very likely follow in the wake of forced villagisation throughout the Lower Omo.[2]

We have copied this letter to all members of the IDC, as well as to all members of the APPGs on Tribal Peoples, on Ethiopia and Djibouti, and on International Development and the Environment. We would very much like to meet with you and/or with one or more of your colleagues on the IDC to discuss how DfID can be held accountable for its failure to act on its own policy.

Yours sincerely,

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[1]<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm2012/cmhasard/cm121105/text/121105w0003.htm#1211054500043>. Please also consult this Oakland Institute report that quotes from transcripts of some of the meetings that took place during this visit:

<http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/ignoring-abuse-ethiopia>

[2] For the reports of three independent experts who have worked in the region for many years and who share our alarm about what is happening in the Lower Omo, see

www.survivalinternational.org/news/9125