

Written Statement by Society for Threatened Peoples

a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

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MAIN CONTACT PERSON:
ULRICH DELIUS
P. O. Box 2024
D-37010 Göttingen

Phone: +49 (0)551 49906-27
Fax: +49 (0)551 58028
E-Mail: asiens@gfbv.de

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Item 3: The Right to Food and “Land Grab” in Ethiopia

There has been a documented trend in recent years of foreign governments and private firms investing and acquiring large tracts of land in other countries for the purpose of agricultural production and export. While the trend is global, increasingly the countries where these deals are taking place are in largely under- or undeveloped regions in Asia and Africa.

Ethiopia offers farmland for investment

In Africa, Ethiopia has been a leading country offering fertile rural areas to national and international companies for leasing. Ethiopia's Agriculture Minister Tefera Derbew declared in February 2011 that his country is proposing to transfer another 3.6 million hectares of land to investors from overseas. Some 1.8 million hectares have been offered for farming to Indian investors since the year 2008. So far 307.000 hectares of land have been transferred in Ethiopia to investors from overseas, mostly on the basis of a 70-year lease. The controversial policy is targeting especially lowland areas in the south-west of Ethiopia, the east and south of the country.

Increasing pressure on Ethiopian peasants

Ethiopia regularly suffered from famine in the last decades. In February 2011, once again the Government of Ethiopia and international aid agencies have appealed for US-\$226.5 million in relief aid for almost three million people, especially in the Somali and Oromiya regions of Ethiopia, due to poor rains and food shortages.

Therefore public opinion is divided over the extensive land programmes under way. The need for agricultural development to improve the food production is universally acknowledged but there are concerns that in its attempt to attract investment, the government of Ethiopia is not considering sustainability. With 85% of the Ethiopian population living in rural areas and being dependent on farming for their livelihood, losing access to arable land, their most crucial asset, will seriously undermine thousands of households' ability to earn a living and produce and purchase enough food. Being stripped of the land will force many smallholder farmers to abandon their activity, plunging many families deeper into rural poverty as landless labourers, and endangering their food security. The current large-scale foreign land acquisition in Ethiopia may further jeopardize the welfare of the poor farmers by depriving them of the safety-net function that this type of land use fulfils.

Peasants, non-governmental organisations and environmentalists have expressed their concerns about the possible poverty and environmental impacts of this agricultural expansion. But public protests against the controversial programme have been forbidden by the authorities. Individuals expressing concern in interviews and in the public have been targeted by state

security. Local government representatives expressing criticism in regard to the ambitious leasing programme have been forced by the authorities to resign. Furthermore, the implementation of the programme has been widely criticized because of its focus on a very limited number of regions and for its lack of any real participation of the local population.

Large scale relocations will endanger access to food

Tens of thousands of peasants will be relocated from fertile land and will have to abandon their traditional land which has been leased to investors. Indigenous peoples like the Anuak in the Gambella region will lose their traditional hunting zones which will be transformed to huge plantations. Several indigenous peoples and smaller ethnic groups in Ethiopia will face assimilation and extinction due to the loss of their traditional livelihood and access to food.

Peasants in Ethiopia are complaining about the impact of the land leasing. Despite this criticism and local protests which harshly have been put down, the government of Ethiopia claims that the land which has been leased to foreigners is unoccupied, idle or unproductive land. Unfortunately the Ethiopian authorities are not committed to respect the value of land to indigenous peoples and traditional rural communities. Land is always a valuable livelihood source to peasants, nomads and other rural people. Sometimes the land is used for the purpose of animal grazing, hunting or gathering wood for construction and energy. There is no “idle” or “unoccupied” land which is free for distribution without risking the violation of the right to food of millions of marginalized peasants.

The government of Ethiopia stipulates that foreign investors will have to satisfy domestic food needs before they can export. But the foreign companies are planning to plant cotton, palm oil, rubber, oilseeds, horticulture and even sugar cane which traditionally has not been produced by Ethiopian farmers. Obviously all plantations are aiming to increase agricultural exports, using the most fertile land and scarce water resources in Ethiopia.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to urge the Government of Ethiopia to:

- stop land leasing to national and international investors,
- ensure the participation of the local population in the planning and implementation of new plantation projects,
- respect the traditional land rights, culture and values of indigenous peoples and smaller ethnic groups,
- guarantee basic human rights and free access to food to the rural population,
- immediately stop the relocation of peasants for agricultural projects of national or international investors.