

Ethiopia: A country for sale

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Sub-Title: The deal of the century



Supposing someone offered you the following land deal: would you take it or would you walk away believing it to be too good to be true?

For £150 a week (\$245), you can lease more than 2,500 square kilometres of virgin, fertile land - an area the size of Dorset, England - for 50 years, plus generous tax breaks.

If you walked away from it, you would have lost out on 'the deal of the century', perhaps the millennium. If you think this is a joke or some sort of wild and crazy exaggeration, see this [Guardian \(UK\) report and video](#) [2] on an incredible international land giveaway that is taking place in Gambella in Western Ethiopia and judge for yourself.

ETHIOPIA ON THE CHOPPING BLOCK

The Indian agribusiness giant [Karuturi Global](#) [3] is today the proud owner of the Ethiopian land. Karuturi did not ask for the land and did not even see it when a signed 50-year 'lease' was delivered to its offices in Bangalore, India, on a golden platter by Meles Zenawi, the dictator-in-chief in Ethiopia.

Karuturi project manager in Ethiopia Karmjeet Sekhon laughed euphorically as he explained what happened to Guardian reporter John Vidal:

'We never saw the land. They gave it to us and we took it. Seriously, we did. We did not even see the land. (Triumphantly cackling laughter) They offered it. That's all. It's very good land. It's quite cheap. In fact it is very cheap. We have no land like this in India. There [India"> you are lucky to get 1 per cent of organic matter in the soil. Here it is more than 5 per cent. We don't need fertiliser or herbicides. There is absolutely nothing that will not grow on it. To start with there will be 20,000 hectares of oil palm, 15,000 hectares of sugar cane and 40,000 hectares of rice, edible oils and maize and cotton. We are building reservoirs, dykes, roads, towns of 15,000 people. This is phase one. In three years time we will have 300,000 hectares cultivated and maybe 60,000 workers. We could feed a nation here.'

Ethiopia is on sale. Everybody is getting a piece of her. For next to nothing. The land vultures have been swooping down on Gambella from all parts of the world. Zenawi proudly claims '36 countries including India, China, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have leased farm land.' This month (March 2011) the concessions are being worked at a breakneck pace, with giant tractors and heavy machinery clearing trees, draining swamps and ploughing the land in time to catch the next growing season. Forests across hundreds of square kilometres are being clear-felled and burned - to the dismay of

locals and environmentalists concerned about the fate of the region's rich wildlife.

Karuturi, 'one of the world's top 25 agri-businesses' plans to 'export palm oil, sugar, rice and other foods from Gambella province to world markets'.

THE VILLAGISATION OF GAMBELLA AND THE IRONY OF HISTORY

To make way for Karuturi and the 896 other investors, the people of Gambella must be removed permanently from their ancestral lands. Over the past three years, tens of thousands of villagers have been forced to move as part of a so-called villagisation program. Zenawi's agriculture official said 'there is no movement of population' in Gambella. It is the 'choice' of the people to move to "villagised" centres where they can get basic services. Once they move, the official said, 'they have to abandon their previous way of life, and they can't ever go back to their villages'. Simply stated, Zenawi has imposed a contract on the indigenous people of Gambella: they will 'voluntarily' choose to give up their ancestral lands, their culture and their community in exchange for a clinic, a school and a road.

'Villagisation'(sefera) has a sinister and ugly history in Ethiopia. In the iron fists of the military junta (Derg) that ruled Ethiopia from the mid-1970s until 1991, 'villagisation' was a political and tactical counter-insurgency weapon. The Derg 'villagised' and 'resettled' populations in rebel-controlled areas to deny local support to rebels and create buffer zones. The Derg, like Zenawi's regime today, justified its 'villagisation' program as a 'development' and humanitarian effort aimed at providing food, clean water, health and educational services to needy populations.

At the onset of the 1984 famine, the Derg sought to resettle 1.5 million people from insurgent-controlled and drought-affected northern regions to the south and southwest of the country. The Derg said the people were relocating voluntarily. The northern insurgents, who now wield power, told the Derg victims of resettlement that they were being moved to concentration camps and would never return to the land where they were born ('where their umbilical cord was buried' to use the local metaphor). It is an irony of history that in 2011 we hear the same old story: the people of Gambella are 'voluntarily' leaving their ancestral lands and abandoning their traditional way of life in exchange for 'clean water, health and educational services' in villagised centres.

The Derg never asked people if they wanted to be resettled or remain on their ancestral land. Zenawi's regime did not ask the indigenous people of Gambella if they want to be permanently uprooted from their ancestral lands and be 'villagised' or corralled into reservations. The Derg could not have cared less about the people it was resettling as long as the resettlement policy advanced its counter-insurgency strategy. Zenawi could not care less about the indigenous people of Gambella as long it advances his investment strategy. It is all about war or money. The Derg never did an environmental and human impact study before it moved masses of people from the north to the southern part of the country. Zenawi's regime never did a credible ecological study before uprooting the indigenous people of Gambella.

Tens of thousands of people died in the Derg's resettlement program from illness and starvation. Families were separated as people fled the ill-equipped and ill-managed resettlement centres. But the indigenous people of Gambella face extinction as a minority in Ethiopian society. So says a 2006 [UNICEF field study](#) [4]:

'The deracination [uprooting from ancestral lands"> of indigenous people that is evident in rural areas of Gambella is extreme. It is very likely that Anuak (and possibly other indigenous minorities) culture will completely disappear in the not-so-distant future. Cultural survival, autonomy, rights of self-determination and self-governance are all legitimate issues for these indigenous groups, and these are all enshrined by international covenants and United Nations bodies - but all are meaningless in Gambella today.'

It is true that history repeats itself over and over again.

When the Derg implemented its 'villagisation' and 'resettlement' programs in the 1980s as a counterinsurgency strategy, it was not only morally wrong, it was criminal. It is no different for

Zenawi in 2011 to 'villagise' the indigenous people of Gambella and give away their ancestral lands for free to foreign investors who did not even ask for it. If it was a crime against humanity for Derg leader Mengistu to depopulate the northern rebel-controlled regions as part of his counterinsurgency strategy, it is no less a crime against humanity for Zenawi to depopulate Gambella to make way for his 'investments'. Mengistu was convicted of genocide by Zenawi in substantial part for Mengistu's use of 'resettlement' and 'villagisation' as a tool of counterinsurgency.

Mengistu never believed he would be held accountable; and today Zenawi similarly believes he will never be held accountable. But sometimes 'justice is like a train that always arrives late'. Justice will soon arrive for the indigenous people of Gambella.

THE GAMBELLA GAMBIT

History shows that the indigenous people of Gambella have been neglected, discriminated against and exploited over centuries of successive administrations in Ethiopia. But it was in December 2003 that the public rape of Gambella became known to the whole world. Before taking Gambella's 'best farmland', they took the lives of hundreds of Gambella's best and brightest over a three-day period that December. As Obang Metho, the tireless and tenacious young Ethiopian human rights advocate who was born in Gambella [described it](#) [5]:

'They targeted those individuals who were the voices of the community and have a say in the exploration and development of oil on their land. The killing squads went through Gambella town looking for the next Anuak to brutally kill [and]> they chanted, "Today there will be no more Anuak, Today there will be no more Anuak land." As they raped the women they said, "Today there will be no more Anuak babies." Within three days, 424 Anuak were dead.'

When I received the news, it was the darkest day of my life. My world was turned upside down. Among the 424 Anuak killed, I personally knew 317 of them. They were my family, my classmates and many others with whom I had been working to bring development not just to the Anuak, but to the region. Most were educated and outspoken. I have no doubt that I would have been one of the victims had I been living there at the time.

[Genocide Watch](#) [6] described this massacre as a 'major pogrom of terror and repression against the Anuak minority carried out by EPRDF soldiers and Highlander militias.' [Human Rights Watch](#) [7] concluded: 'Since late 2003, the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) has committed numerous human rights violations against Anuak communities in the Gambella region of southwestern Ethiopia that may amount to crimes against humanity.'

The [Anuak Justice Council](#) [8] reported 'genocide and crimes against humanity have continued, raising the death toll to between 1,500 and 2,500, and causing more than 50,000 Anuak to flee.'

ETHIOPIAN DEVELOPERS ARE CRIMINALS, INDIAN INVESTORS ARE HEROES?

A couple of weeks ago, Zenawi [condemned](#) [9] Ethiopian developers who were transferring their leaseholds on urban land in Addis Ababa as 'land grabbers' and 'speculators' who should be 'locked up'. He said developers were 'grabbing land that does not belong to them in any legal sense and misusing the land lease rights they were given for personal profit and speculation.' In Zenawi's eyes, Ethiopian developers are scammers and profiteers; but Indian investors who are given millions of hectares of the best land in the country are heroes and saviors.

But this is not about Ethiopian developers against Indian investors. It is not about the rights of local against international investors. It is about fairness and equity. It is about official wrongs and the human rights of some of the poorest, historically oppressed, discriminated and exploited indigenous minorities in Ethiopia. It is about a land giveaway of mind-boggling proportions to a foreign company to raise rice, edible oils, maize and cotton for export while millions of Ethiopians are starving and living on international food handouts. It is about making 'land deals of the century' without accountability, transparency, public debate, discussion and, above all, the consent of the people who will be permanently displaced from their ancestral lands. It is about how a whole country became the personal investment property of one man and his syndicate.

CRY FOR THE BELOVED COUNTRY

When hundreds of Anuaks were massacred in Gambella in 2003, the international human rights organisations stepped forward to let the world know what happened. In 2011, the Guardian newspaper told the world about the imminent danger facing the indigenous people of Gambella. [Over the years](#) [10], I have tried to offer my voice of support to the cause of [Anuak human rights](#) [11] and condemned the [giveaway of the ancestral lands](#) [12]. I shall cry for all the people of Gambella. I shall cry for the Anuak because I fear, as does [UNICEF](#) [4], that they are undergoing a slow genocide by cultural annihilation and dispossession of ancestral lands. The indigenous people of Gambella will forever lose their pastoral way of life, and the new generation of young Gambellans will never know the traditional ways of their forefathers. I shall cry for the precious wild life that will never return because their habitat has been permanently destroyed, and for the bountiful forests that are burned to ashes for commercial farmland and the rivers and fish that will be poisoned with pesticide and herbicide to grow rice and cotton for export. I shall cry out to the heavens for Ethiopia, for she has become the personal investment property of Meles Zenawi, just like the Congo was the personal investment property of King Leopold II of Belgium in the late 1800s.

But this is no time to despair and submit to the arrogance of power and the power of arrogance. The trials and tribulations of the indigenous people of Gambella and their 80 million compatriots shall come to pass soon. The bright sun that is lifting the darkness over North Africa and the Middle East is dawning just over the horizon. Let them all stand up, hold hands, march together and cast away their fears into the fiercely blowing winds of change.

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<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alemayehu-g-mariam/> [13]

* Please send comments to editor@pambazuka.org [14] or comment online at [Pambazuka News](#) [15].

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(function(d, s, id) { var js, fjs = d.getElementsByTagName(s)[0]; if (d.getElementById(id)) return; js = d.createElement(s); js.id = id; js.src =
"//connect.facebook.net/en_US/sdk.js#xfbml=1&appId=1465091963738031&version=v2.0";
fjs.parentNode.insertBefore(js, fjs); }(document, 'script', 'facebook-jssdk'));
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Article-Summary:

An international company has benefitted from a massive handout of land in the Gambella region of Ethiopia. Alemayehu G. Mariam shows what the devastating consequences of the deal will be for local people.

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[2] http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/21/ethiopia-centre-global-farmland-rush?CMP=tw_t_gu

[3] <http://www.karuturi.com/>

[4] <http://bit.ly/gpitSi>

[5] <http://addisvoice.com/2010/12/the-anuaks-forgotten-genocide-al-mariam/>

[6] <http://www.genocidewatch.org/Today%20is%20the%20Day%20of%20Killing%20Anuaks.htm>

- [7] <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/11812/section/1>
- [8] <http://www.anuakjustice.org/genocide.htm>
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