

Land Wars: Ethiopia Accused of Massacring Civilians to Clear Way for Foreign Farms

By [Lara Whyte](#)

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WARNING: This article contains disturbing images

Ethiopia, one of the world's hungriest countries, is selling off vast chunks of its land to foreign investors who are growing food products for export — and those who get in the government's way are being killed or silenced, according to a new investigation.

Under the country's controversial "villagization" scheme, huge populations of farming communities are being moved out of their homes on land eyed for development and into new settlements built by the government. Residents not lured out by promises of better infrastructure and services are often forced to go against their will, and resistance often brings violence or intimidation into acquiescence or exile, US-based rights group [the Oakland Institute says in a report](#) due for release on Monday.

Now, for the first time, pictures obtained exclusively by VICE News appear to show evidence of the widespread atrocities and abuses being reported by farming communities and minority groups across the country.



An image of a Suri tribe member said to have been of the alleged February 2012 massacre

The pictures were sent to the Institute in April 2012, and are said to depict a massacre carried out by government officials and members of the ethnic Dizi group on behalf of the Ethiopian state against the Suri,

one of Ethiopia's many ethnic indigenous farming groups, in the market town of Maji in February that year.

Since 2010, it is estimated that the government's "growth and transformation plan" has relocated 1.5 million people into village settlements, rights groups say. The areas afflicted include the Gambella, Afar, Somali, Lower Omo, and Benishangul-Gumuz regions, where local tribes do not have formal land rights. At the same time, huge tracts of land are being sold to investors for development. So far, it is estimated that the government has sold off the rights to 26 percent of Ethiopia's farmland.

The Suri people own large amounts of cattle and travel through a rapidly shrinking area in southwestern Ethiopia grazing their animals. The land they traditionally use has been sold to investors operating the Koko plantation, a Malaysia-backed project that exports palm oil and other food and farming products. According to testimonies taken by the Oakland Institute, the dispute that led to the reported massacre stems from an incident when three government officials, policemen from the Dizi ethnic tribe, were killed as they attempted to mark areas within a Suri community into which the Koko plantation was expanding.

A few days later, in an apparent act of retaliation, between 30 and 50 Suri men and women were allegedly killed with machetes and stones at a Saturday market in the town of Maji. The bodies were then dumped in a nearby stream. The Oakland Institute said: "It has not been possible to confirm the precise numbers of dead since no police report was filed."

The pictures prompted an investigation that is detailed in a report by the Oakland Institute scheduled for publication at 9am PST (5pm GMT) on Monday. The investigators encountered many difficulties, they said, as it was "clear that the Suri fear retaliation for speaking out against the government."

The Institute said the alleged killings show how the state is exploiting complicated, historic ethnic tensions between the Dizi and Suri by employing men from Dizi communities as policemen and local

government officials, and tasking them with clearing the Suri communities off the land they have relied on for 300 years.



Maji market, site of the alleged massacre. Image via Katie Sharp

The interviewees are identified only by their initials as the fear of reprisals is great. Activists say the penalty for smuggling this type of

information out of Ethiopia can be death. Rights groups in the UK say their contacts inside the country have been arbitrarily arrested and held in torturous conditions for apparent crimes of "communications." The electronic war Ethiopia has waged against some of its citizens has been reported by [Felix Horn from Human Rights Watch](#).

Speaking to VICE News, Horn said the scale of intimidation is difficult to overestimate. Gaining access to the areas afflicted is almost impossible and telephone lines are problematically easy to trace.

"When you are permitted access to key areas, individuals are terrified to speak to foreign NGOs or journalists. And rightfully so — many Ethiopians are harassed or detained for doing exactly that. In addition, the CSO Law has decimated the ability of local groups to monitor rights abuses — all of which makes Ethiopia one of the most difficult countries in Africa to do meaningful human rights research."

[The use of the CSO Law](#) as a means of denying fundamental rights, tempering freedoms and jailing journalists has been documented. Reports of massacres, rape and forced relocations have been slowly emerging over the past few years, but pictorial evidence has not existed in a credible form.

Anuradha Mittal, the executive director of the Oakland Institute, said it was clear the government's villagization scheme was creating new tribal conflicts by exploiting old ones, as communities are being forced to compete for the remaining land and water across the country.

She told VICE News the facts were being ignored by the international community, which funds the Ethiopian regime to the tune of [\\$3.2 billion each year](#).



An image purporting to show a Suri victim of the alleged Maji massacre

"The donors are well aware of the situation on the ground and have chosen to turn a blind eye to gross human rights abuses by their closest ally in Africa."

Reports of abuses are widespread, having been documented by [Human Rights Watch](#), [Amnesty International](#), and, most comprehensively, by those behind Monday's report.

As a result of the growing catalogue of evidence, this year the US Senate included provisions to ensure American aid was diverted away from projects "associated with forced evictions." Though this admission has been welcomed by campaigners, it remains painfully unclear how this will actually be achieved. Those US and UK citizens who paid their taxes last year gave approximately \$600 million and £200 million to the Ethiopian government respectively. Almost [10 percent](#) of funding in Ethiopia comes from aid.



A site on Maji's outskirts where bodies were found following the alleged massacre. Image via Katie Sharp

There have been other accounts of similar instances of violence by the Ethiopian government against the Suri people. An unverified feature on [CNN's iReport](#), included pictures purported to be of an alleged December 2012 massacre which claimed the lives of 147 people. The

writer described the aftermath of a dispute over land that was said to have been sold to a gold mining company:

"The dead bodies are buried in mass graves deep inside Dibdib forest and some bodies were transported to gold mining holes not far from the Dibdib forest.

Some bodies were left out and eaten by vultures and predators. Most of the children were thrown into Akobo River.

After the massacre, the army sent warnings all around the area that if anyone reports about this, the army will do things to these people who report, and more, even worse, things to the Suri."

The CNN reported could not be verified by VICE News. The picture evidence does not appear to match the massacre described, according to researchers, and the claims have not been independently corroborated. The person who wrote the report is thought to be still inside the country.

Nyikaw Ochalla, a UK-based activist with [Anywaa Survival Organization](#) told VICE News it was important to see the alleged massacre in Maji as part of a wider assault. "I saw the pictures and I think it is the reality of what is taking place in Ethiopia right now. The pastoralists are being denied their livelihood and their land is being leased out to foreign investors without their knowledge or consent."



An image said to show corpses piled up following the alleged market massacre

He also stressed the risks associated with reporting atrocities, both to him and others outside the country, and, most gravely, to those inside. One of his contacts from Gambella is currently being detained in a prison hundreds of miles away in Addis Ababa. "He was not told why

he was detained, but (during his) torture it was revealed it was because he had been communicating with me."

Ochalla was just one interviewee for this report who said they were concerned their communications were being monitored.

The Ethiopian embassy did not respond to questions from VICE News on the Maji market massacre allegations. A UK government spokesman issued a statement saying they "regularly raise human rights with the relevant authorities, including at the highest level of the Ethiopian government." They also said they were limited in what they could comment on, as the UK Department for International Development (DFID), which handles aid distribution, is being taken to court by an Ethiopian man from another ethnic tribe who says that he was forced off his land and that his community endured atrocities similar to those depicted here.

The British High Court will hear the case of Mr O, now a refugee living in Kenya, early next year. His lawyer Rosa Curling told VICE News the case will challenge the government's "ongoing failure to properly assess whether UK aid money has been involved in Ethiopia's villagization program, a program which had a devastating effect on our client and his family."



Ngo Hole, a member of the Suri tribe killed in the alleged massacre, who previously appeared in a Spanish reality TV show. Image via Katie Sharp.

Mittal said the pictures show how Mr O's story is being replicated all over the country, and called on the international community to act in the face of mounting evidence. "It is time for the US government,

other donors, and international institutions to take a strong stand to ensure aid in the name of development is not contributing to the ongoing atrocities nor supporting the forced displacement of people. "She stressed the Suri are not the only ones being targeted: "Anuaks, Majang in Gambella, Mursi, Bodis, Nyongtham and several other groups in lower Omo and around the country are equally impacted."

The plantation whose operations prompted the alleged massacre is now reported to have closed down, earlier this year. It is unclear whether the Suri have been allowed back to their land to grow their food, in a country where almost half of the population is malnourished. The government of Ethiopia appears to have done a remarkable job in suppressing dissent, [jailing journalists](#) and preventing those with evidence of abuse from letting the donor community know what their taxes are funding.

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