

**Joshua Klemm, International Rivers**  
**Testimony to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

Good afternoon. My name is Josh Klemm and I work with International Rivers, an organization that works to protect rivers worldwide and the rights of the communities that depend on them. I would like to thank the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for holding this briefing on the issue of human rights and civil and political liberties in Ethiopia.

Given that Ethiopia is one of the largest recipients of US development aid, this is an issue that deserves more meaningful scrutiny in Congress. This issue is particularly pressing at a time when the government of Ethiopia is pursuing risky dams and leasing vast tracts of land to investors. This is resulting in the displacement of thousands of people from their traditional lands, with a corresponding increase in food insecurity, conflict, poverty and environmental devastation.

Ethiopia's government is in the midst of a multi-billion-dollar hydropower boom unlike anything the continent has ever seen. One especially troubling project is the Gibe III hydroelectric dam, now under construction on Ethiopia's Omo River. This is one of the most environmentally and socially destructive projects being built in Africa today. The dam, combined with major commercial plantations under development downstream, will drastically reduce the flow of the Omo River. This will affect over half a million people in Kenya and Ethiopia who rely on the river for their livelihoods and the preservation of their indigenous cultures.

One of the areas most at risk from the Gibe III Dam is Lake Turkana, which faces ecological collapse. Lake Turkana in Kenya is a World Heritage Site, and home to some of the world's oldest agro-pastoral indigenous communities. Lake Turkana is fed almost entirely by the Omo River, yet the river's yearly flow is expected to drop 70% over the next 3 years while the dam's reservoir is filled.

This will be compounded by large-scale irrigation schemes that will increasingly siphon the flow of the Omo to cultivate sugar, cotton, and other commodities, largely for export. Already the Ethiopian government has allocated 1700 sq mi for water-intensive commercial agricultural developments in the Omo Valley, in areas where pastoralists have been forcibly removed. That is not the end of the Lake's troubles, however. A recent study published by the University of Oxford reveals that the lake level could drop over 70 feet – compared to an average depth of 98 feet - if all of the planned irrigation schemes are developed.

Almost 100,000 people live on the immediate lakeshore, and an estimated 300,000 people are dependent in some way on the lake's resources for survival – through fishing, pasture, and for drinking water. These resources are already scarce, and their potential loss will cause the collapse of subsistence activities and increase conflict.

Overall, the enormous disruption and displacement of people resulting from land and water insecurity threatens to further destabilize a region already vulnerable to ethnic tensions and land disputes. As people lose access to water, their lands and livelihoods, the potential for local conflicts to turn into regional ones escalates enormously.

These so-called development projects are being carried out in contravention of domestic and international human rights laws. Ethiopia's politicized approach to large-dam development and land leases is underpinned by forced resettlement and repression, and carried out without external review by either journalists or civil society, as both have been essentially banned.

These repressive tactics are known to the US government, as evident in the State's Department Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 2013, which recognized the seriousness of human rights abuses occurring in Ethiopia. Yet despite acknowledging the Ethiopian government's increasingly repressive tactics against its own citizens, the US has consistently failed to take decisive action towards holding the government of Ethiopia accountable.

This failure provides a striking example of how development assistance without adequate human, social and political safeguards can enable government repression and the violation of human rights.

We understand that the United States considers Ethiopia an important ally in an unstable region. We also recognize the moral arguments that compel donors to support the development goals of countries such as Ethiopia. Yet, when such developments come at the expense of civil, political and human rights, we believe that the US Government should speak up and take action. Current US support to the Ethiopian government – financial, political and moral – is in danger of producing the opposite result from which it is intended. It is enabling an authoritarian regime to violate the rights and ignore the interests of its own citizens, which is a recipe for violence and instability.

I'd like to end with a quote from a woman whose life has already been changed by the dam and land grabs in the Lower Omo. It sums up the devastation now beginning to affect so many indigenous peoples in Ethiopia's dam-building regions. She says:

“People of our village and other villages, we don't want to lose this river, to lose our land, our forests. This is our original place. What would you think if someone came to your home and said, ‘You go, I want to take your home and land for my own project?’ Would you like that if someone came and just moved you from your home, from your land? That is what is waiting us. What we know is we just have to wait and see what is going to happen with this river. If the government comes, they should just kill us, here, next to our river.”