

The Current Situation in the Omo River Area
December 2009 - January 2010
Translation and summary by Will Hurd

Statement of Biomuyne a Mursi woman, 12/27/09:

“We Mursi have a big problem. We are hit by hunger. Over all of Mursiland we have a big problem. People are just staying with the cows; they aren’t planting. A few of us said we’ll die of hunger let’s try even though there were no flood waters. We cleared small gardens and we are hoping there will be enough rain. The highlanders cut off the water. Go tell them to give us our water back, so we can plant our sorghum and eat it.

“If big floods come we are far away. We lose some boats, but there is a big ripening of sorghum. We are very happy to have big floods.”

Statement of Bibala a Mursi man, 12/27/09, at Golati:

“That time (2006) the land was very full. We had a lot of flood water in the Omo River and we were very happy. Now the water is gone and we are all hungry. Later it will be death. In the time of the big flood the Omo had many, many people. Many people were in Ma Karo. Now there are only two families. If the Omo river flood becomes big again we will be full and satisfied. Now all our oxen are gone. We sold them off to buy grain in the market. A few of us were afraid of the hunger and came to plant. Tell the government to give us back the water. At the Omo there is almost no sorghum being planted. There are very few people at the river. We are hungry. Go tell the government to give us back the water.”

Statement of Ari way kurio a Mursi man, 12/27/09:

“If the flood waters come back I will become strong again. I can put grain by in storage and go to the cows and eat that grain. Now I have to sell off all my oxen to buy grain. If the flood water come back, I could build back my herd. Before the rains would fall in the Oiyoyo rainy season, but now, for 3 years, they have failed. Did the rains just go by themselves or did somebody cut off the rains? We don’t know. Did the rains just go back in their house? Show this news to the white people and maybe they can figure it out. Maybe they know why, they can read and write.”

Statement of Linasi, 12/28/09, a Mursi man:

“We are hungry. Mursi, Kwegu, Bodi, we are people that eat from the Omo. Now that the floods are gone we have a big problem. We are afraid of death. Some people have cows, but some people have none. Those without cows will have a big problem. The Omo River floods have been cut off. Now, we don’t know what to do. Some people will die of hunger. We are praying to God for an answer. Before the flood waters would come and we would have big cultivation sites. Now, all the cultivation sites, all the way to Kurum, have gotten no water.

“We are like deaf people. We live in the forest. Our words don’t go outside, we just talk among ourselves. That flood time (four years ago) was very good. The flood waters covered our cultivation sites. We are waiting for a time like that again. Do whatever you can to make it like that again. Bring back the waters.

“The rainy season hasn’t come for three years. Why haven’t the rains been working all this time? Did the sky not sign his work papers? Did he forget to work? Before the rains would fall like they were supposed to. We would cut the bush, and the sorghum would grow well and we could eat. We would put grain into storage, then go to the Omo River, plant and put grain into our storage areas again. The land was good. There is no singing and dancing all along the Omo River now. The people are too hungry. The kids are quiet. We adults go into the shelter and sleep silently. We don’t chat. We are too hungry. If a person comes, we say, “Where did you come from?” “I came from Miso.” Then they go. That’s all. The big rains have been gone for three years and now, then we come to the Omo and there is no water.”

Statement of Oligolonyi Choli a Northern Kwegu man, 1/20/10:

“We will be hungry, we will die. Open the dam and let the water flow. If we only eat leaves will we survive? We won’t survive. We will have diarrhea and die. If we only eat meat we get sick. When we hunt buffalo they spear us with their horns. If we can eat sorghum and corn (grown on the Omo River) we can stay in our village. We can sing and dance and chat in the village. Go and give this news to your elders, we Kwegu people are hungry.

“Other tribes have cattle they can drink milk and blood. We don’t have cattle; we eat from the Omo River. We depend on the fish, they are like our cattle. If the Omo floods are gone we will die. Mursi, Karo, Nyangatom, Bodi, all will die off. If you later come to visit us you will find no people. People are hungry, some have already died.

“Now the stomachs of our kids are distended from hunger. Some sorghum has just ripened, they eat it but their stomachs haven’t become normal again. They have diarrhea. Will they become well or will they die? We don’t know.

“That flood time (four years ago when the flood was very large) the sorghum ripened, it was very good. If the Omo flood is large, it is very good. We didn’t know hunger, there was much dancing and singing. If the flood is big we will be full.

“Our land has become bad. They closed the water off tight and we know hunger.”

Statement of Bigidanga a Northern Kwegu man, 1/20/10:

“What are we going to eat? Are we going to eat only leaves? We are hungry. If the flood is big we cultivate and put grain into storage.

“That time of the big flood (2006) was good, our sorghum ripened. We are people who eat meat, we eat honey, we eat fish. Now we are hungry and forced to eat roots.”

Summary

The lack of rain for the last three years has left the people of the Omo River, Ethiopia, hungry with little or no grain left in their storage areas. The Kwegu, Bodi, Nyangatom, Karo, Mursi, Dassanech and other tribes, depend on the Omo River floods to grow maize and sorghum. This problem of lack of rain has been compounded by the successive decreasing of the annual Omo River flood. In November and December, 2009, the flood of the Omo River never came. Now, hungry people have no prospect of a harvest. In many places they have stopped planting all together. Cattle are a source of milk, blood and meat for cattle-herding tribes, such as the Nyangatom, Bodi and Mursi. These tribes have been relying almost solely on their cattle, in the past months, selling off the oxen to buy grain in the local markets. Now, that the dry season has begun, the grass has turned brown and the milk is drying up. Many oxen have already been sold, and few remain. The people are thin already and the situation will get much worse.

The Northern Kwegu are a small tribe that depends almost entirely on the Omo River. They live on the Omo all year round. They have no cattle, just a few goats, and rely mostly on Omo River flood cultivation. They also fish on the Omo, hunt in the surrounding plains and eat roots and other things gathered from the forest. With the lack of rains and diminishing floods, the Kwegu harvests have been poor. In November, 2009 four adult males and two children died of hunger. Currently, many Kwegu children have distended stomachs from hunger. With no flood this year, the Kwegu have little prospect of remedying the situation.

Reports from the area are similar for the Bodi. They are suffering from hunger and downriver the Nyangatom are worse off. Some children's hair has turned red, from its usual black, from lack of nutrition.

It is possible that the diminishing floods of the past years could partly be due to the completion of the Gigel Gibe 1 dam in the area of Jimma, Ethiopia. The Gibe River flows into the Omo River. The recent completion of a 50 meter coffer dam for the Gigel Gibe 3 dam on the Omo River, in the area of Wolaita-Sodo, may be the reason for the complete lack of flood on the Omo River.

The Government of Ethiopia has repeatedly said they are protecting the people of the Omo River with the construction of the dam. They say by damming the river, they will stop a situation like that of 2006, where a big flood washed away people and cattle. The local people don't agree at all. They say cutting off the flood will mean death, as they won't be able to grow crops on the Omo River. The government has promised irrigation equipment to compensate for the flood being cut off by the Gibe dams. But the flood is gone, the people are starving, and no irrigation equipment has been delivered to the Northern Kwegu, Mursi and Bodi and may be to none of the other tribes.