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# RI BULLETIN

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## **Ethiopia: Local People Burned Out of Homes to Make Way for National Park**

On November 25, 2004, 463 houses of the Guji-Oromo people in Nechasar National Park in southern Ethiopia were burned down by police and park authorities on November 25, 2004. Reportedly present also were representatives of the provincial government of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR).

The burning of the Guji-Oromo houses is the latest move in the effort to remove the Guji and Kore people from within the boundaries of the National Park so that it can be developed and managed by the Netherlands-based African Parks Foundation as a wildlife viewing park for well-heeled tourists. It is a condition of the African Parks Foundation contract that no people be present in the Park. Included in the development plans is a fence around part of the Park to keep local people out and wildlife in. (See the Refugees International bulletin "The Human Cost of Tourist Dollars" at <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/4724>)

Nechasar National Park features lush grasslands amidst rugged mountains and lakes. The Park has an area of 514 square kilometers (about 200 square miles) and was established in 1962. Prior to 2004, the park and its environs were inhabited or utilized by thousands of Kore/Amaro and Guji-Oromo households. The Kore are farmers who grew maize, sorghum, and teff in the eastern part of the Park. In 2004, 1,020 families were "voluntarily" relocated from their lands bordering the Park to a place about 15 kilometers south. The Kore were promised land, a clinic, schools, wells, and food and about \$17 per person in compensation for moving. However, the distribution of food and the provision of social services has fallen far short of that promised.

The Guji-Oromo are pastoralists who claim a legitimate presence in the area that dates back generations. They were previously expelled by the government from the Park in the 1980s but came back and re-established themselves in five villages. Facing expulsion again, the Guji-Oromo filed six appeals to the Federal and Regional governments to allow them to remain in the Park. However, the regional government then ordered the Guji-Oromo to visit and choose one of two resettlement sites.

It was during the visit of their leaders to the second site when their houses were burned without warning on November 25, 2004. Some of the houses were occupied at the time; others were temporarily abandoned as the Guji-Oromo typically migrate with their herds and return to their houses during the rainy season. Following this incident some of the Guji-Oromo were resettled near the Kore, but two groups of more than 5,000 people have relocated to two corners of the Park. No compensation has been paid for the property destroyed in the house burning. The government of

Ethiopia's official position seems to be that the Guji-Oromo were illegal settlers in the Park and thus have no rights to compensation unless they submit to resettlement. An electric fence to enclose much of the Park is proposed for construction after the remaining Guji-Oromo are expelled. The fence might also impact fisherman who depend upon access to two large lakes within the Park for their livelihoods.

The eviction and resettlement of Kore and Guji-Oromo families puts them in extreme danger. Ethiopia is one of the poorest, most densely populated, and food-insecure countries in the world. Already poor and struggling, the 10,000 or more Kore and Guji-Oromo who depended upon the resources in the Park for their livelihoods are now threatened. In Ethiopia, there is little margin for error in the precarious struggle for survival.

Moreover, the precedent of inadequate consultation with residents and users of Park lands, semi-voluntary or involuntary resettlement, and sudden destruction of homes and expulsion established in Nechasar may also be followed in nearby Mago and Omo National Parks, also proposed to be developed under the management of the African Parks Foundation. The African Parks Foundation claims that the development of the Nechasar and other parks will provide hundreds of jobs to local people and that grants will be provided to help local communities. However, those benefits are still on the horizon, perhaps the distant horizon.

Nechasar has the potential to be a magnificent park. The African Parks Foundation and the Ethiopian Federal and Regional Governments, however, should re-think their approach and ensure that the people of this region are consulted fully and that their present and future welfare is taken into consideration.

**Refugees International, therefore, recommends that:**

- The government immediately halt forced expulsion of people from Nechasar Park, compensate those who have been expelled, provide timely humanitarian and economic assistance to people resettled or still living in the Park, initiate new consultations with local residents, and permit limited grazing and agriculture within the Park by local people to continue for the time being.
- The African Parks Foundation and the Ethiopian government acknowledge that the removal and resettlement of people living within or adjacent to Nechasar National Park was poorly conceived and managed. Planners for the park seems to have regarded local people as a barrier to be overcome and shunted aside in favor of wildlife, but a planning approach which stresses the total ecosystem, including people, is probably more appropriate for Ethiopia and likely to generate more local support.
- The African Parks Foundation and the Ethiopian government work with international organizations to develop and implement policies for managing protected areas, including national parks, in Ethiopia. Given the desire of the Foundation and the government to develop additional national parks, there is a clear need to get it right the first time, taking into consideration both the people and the ecology of the area to be protected.

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*Larry Thompson visited Nechasar Park in November 2004.*