

Garbage dump landslide kills over 110 in Ethiopia

By Eddie Haywood
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In the early morning hours of March 11, a devastating landslide swept through the Koshe Garbage Landfill located on the outskirts of the capital city Addis Ababa, burying a number of makeshift homes under tons of refuse, claiming scores of lives and leaving many others injured.

On Thursday, emergency workers at the landfill told reporters that the death toll had reached 113 and was expected to climb. As many as 150 people are believed to have been at the site at the time of the landslide. Several days after the catastrophe, rescue efforts were still ongoing.

The landfill at Koshe has been the dumping ground for Addis Ababa for over five decades, and is home to some of the poorest residents of the city. Makeshift houses for these residents were constructed from cardboard and other debris found in the dump. On any given day, as many as 500 people make a living scavenging through the garbage dump.

The slums surrounding the massive garbage dump are home to the most economically marginalized and poorest Ethiopians.

Survivors of the landslide reported that the government was slow to organize a rescue operation. When rescue workers were finally dispatched to the landfill residents began to voice their outrage at the government's slow response, pushing and shoving rescue workers.

"Nobody is helping us. We are doing all the digging ourselves. It is shameful," Kaleab Tsegaye, a relative of one of the landslide victims, told Reuters.

Werknesh, a mother who had resided at the landfill for 30 years, told Voice of America that she had lost six family members to the landslide, including her pregnant daughter and three grandchildren.

"Our children are covered under the soil," she said.

"It sounded like an explosion, and then covered everyone with soil. There are bodies that have not been found until now." Werknesh criticized the government's slow response, saying, "The government didn't even order an excavator. I had to pay for an excavator out of my own pocket."

Excavation operations at the dump have recovered many of the dead. Tebeju Asres, a resident at the landfill observing a backhoe moving a mass of refuse, told the *New York Times*, "My house was right inside there. ... My mother and three of my sisters were there when the landslide happened. Now I don't know the fate of all of them."

The likely cause for the landslide appears to be the development of the site as a source for alternative energy. Construction of a biogas plant near the dump has involved the laying of pipe around and underneath the large landfill, causing massive destabilization underneath the location of many of the makeshift shanties where most of the landfill dwellers reside.

The city government is now moving to utilize the tragedy of the landslide to forcibly relocate the landfill's surviving residents. Decades-long squabbles between residents and the city have resulted in occasional violent clashes between the landfill dwellers and city officials, who have given the landfill over to wealthy interests wishing to develop the site as a source for the production of methane gas as an alternative fuel for electricity.

UK-based Cambridge Industries, the corporation that owns the biogas plant, is under a government contract to develop the site as a source of methane gas, making the claim that methane produced from the dump can give electrical power to as much as 25 percent of Addis Ababa's four million residents.

Cynically, the national government of Prime Minister

Hailemariam Desalegn declared a three-day nationwide mourning for the victims of the landslide. Desalegn, briefing members of the Ethiopian parliament, expressed his “deep condolences” to the victims of the landslide.

Koshe, which in local slang translates to “dirt,” perfectly encapsulates the government’s callous outlook toward the denizens of the landfill.

The deplorable economic conditions for the informal residents at Koshe are by no means isolated. The majority of Ethiopians live under conditions of extreme poverty, with some 78 percent of Ethiopians subsisting on \$2 a day or less. According to Oxford University, Ethiopia ranks number 10 out of the world’s 10 poorest countries.

According to the nonprofit organization the Borgen Project, life expectancy at birth in the country is at an extremely low 59 years. Only about 34 percent of Ethiopia’s rural population has access to improved water sources. Preventable diseases, including malaria, account for 60 percent of all health problems. Illiteracy grips two-thirds of Ethiopians, underscoring the lack of social spending on education for the masses.

At the other end of the scale, there has been an obscene accumulation of wealth for the richest Ethiopians. Just one man, Ethiopian businessman Mohammed Hussein al Amoudi, has amassed a personal wealth of over \$10 billion. Additionally, Ethiopia has one of Africa’s highest rates of GDP growth. According to the World Bank, national output grew by \$60 billion between 2004 and 2014. Ethiopia, like most of Africa, is rich in vast economic resources, but those resources are controlled by a handful of the wealthiest Ethiopians.

The Ethiopian elite have been faithful servants to Washington and its agenda for the Horn of Africa, deploying the country’s military forces to wage bloody wars in Somalia and South Sudan, two countries that are integral to Washington’s aim of isolating China’s growing economic influence on the continent, which is seen as a threat by the US elites.

The landslide tragedy at Koshe demonstrates that the capitalist government in Addis Ababa is unable to guarantee safe housing, let alone provide even the paltriest relief for the victims of the latest disaster. In a world driven by capitalism’s unquenchable appetite for profit, such disasters will remain a permanent feature of

everyday life for the world’s working class and poor.

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