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Tunnel Collapse Closes Ethiopia's New Hydropower Project 'Gilgel Gibe II'

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Peter Heinlein | Addis Ababa

Ethiopia's newest and biggest hydroelectric power station has been shut down due to a tunnel collapse weeks after its official opening. The hydropower project has been surrounded by controversy since its inception. Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi pushed a button last month symbolically opening the Gilgel Gibe Two hydropower station. The 420 megawatt project, southwest of Addis Ababa, would increase Ethiopia's electricity generation capacity by 38 percent.

The opening ceremony was broadcast live on Ethiopian television, and Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini was there. Italy helped finance the \$600 million project, which was constructed by the Italian hydropower firm Salini.

But 10 days after the inauguration, Italian public television reported Gilgel Gibe Two had been forced to shut down. It said the closure was due to a collapse in a 26 kilometer long tunnel that shoots water to the station's four massive turbines from a dam on the Omo River far above.



Gilgel Gibe II hydropower project

Officials of Salini and the Ethiopia Electric Power Corporation refused to comment. But a statement posted on the Salini website refers to "an unforeseen geological event" that provoked a cave-in and a huge rock fall involving about 15 meters of the tunnel.

The statement notes Gilgel Gibe was built in Africa's Great Rift Valley, and refers to the tunnel as an "outstanding engineering achievement" because it cuts through "complex geological formations."

The statement says Gilgel Gibe will be out of operation for two months.

Critics such as Caterina Amicucci of the watchdog group Campaign for Reform of the World Bank says Gilgel Gibe has been surrounded by controversy since Salini was awarded a no-bid contract in 2004. In a telephone interview from Rome, Amicucci alleged the contract violates both Italian and Ethiopian laws, and was awarded without adequate feasibility studies or required environmental permits.

"All the area is a seismic area," said Caterina Amicucci. "It's a fault. The whole Rift Valley is a huge fault. So the tunnel crosses 26 different fault points, and it seems that this is one of the main problems. All of these elements, they were not highlighted in the environmental impact assessment studies."

Amicucci says contracts for hydropower projects usually assign responsibility for failures to the construction firm. In this case, however, she says an exception was made because of the geological risk, leaving Ethiopia's government responsible for the cost of repairs.

Amicucci says more investigation is needed to determine whether the collapse was due to an 'unforeseen geologic event', as the company says, or something else.

"They are saying this is a geological problem, but this is not sure. It's not clear exactly what is the cause," she said. "What is the reason behind this collapse of the tunnel? If it's a problem of the quality of the infrastructure, or if there is an external problem due to the geological configuration of the area."

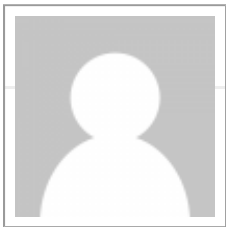
The tunnel collapse has at least temporarily halted Ethiopia's plans to solve its chronic power shortage and become an exporter of electricity to other power hungry countries in East Africa.

Salini is already working on Gilgel Gibe Three, a 240-meter-high dam with more than four times the generating capacity of Gilgel Gibe Two. The company says Gilgel Gibe Three is about one-third complete.

Critics, however, are urging a closer look at its environmental impact, and urging international financial institutions not to fund its completion.

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