

Global development

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'It's becoming a war zone': Tanzania's Maasai speak out on 'forced' removals

Communities in Ngorongoro say government is shutting down vital services to remove them from ancestral lands to expand lucrative game reserves



📷 Maasai women and children from Ngorongoro hold a prayer meeting on Tanzania's border with Kenya, to which thousands have fled. Photograph: Daniel Irungu/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

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Jess Craig in Ngorongoro conservation area

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Late last year, William Ole Seki, a Maasai elder, ascended to the top of a dry, grassy Tanzanian hillside where about a dozen Maasai had gathered. From there, Ngorongoro conservation area's 2m acres (809,000 hectares) of woodland and plains expand to the horizon in every direction. Cattle and zebras graze on dry tufts of grass, near to small clusters of bomas (traditional Maasai houses).

To the south, a road sweeps Toyota Land Cruisers carrying tourists to the gates of the Serengeti national park. In the distance looms the Ol Doinyo Lengai, the Mountain of God, a sacred place of worship for the Maasai, a semi-nomadic pastoralist ethnic group who live in Tanzania and Kenya.

Ole Seki points out where the construction of new school bathrooms has been halted since the government banned imports of building materials into the area. Just beyond that, he can point to the region's only hospital, which is under threat of closure. Further to the north, Ole Seki says, are two villages that have been without water for weeks.

"This is really becoming a war zone," he says.

For decades, Maasai communities adjacent to the park in northern Tanzania have faced eviction attempts to make way for a game reserve and, the government says, help protect the environment.

In 2017, in Loliondo, about 100 miles (160km) north of Ngorongoro conservation area, government security forces burned 185 Maasai houses along the park border in what rights groups called [a forced act of eviction](#). The government said the houses were built inside the park, [a claim upheld](#) by the east African court of justice. Similar eviction attempts were made in 2003 and 2007, according to Joseph Oleshangay, a lawyer with the Legal and Human Rights Centre, Tanzania's human rights advocacy organisation. Last year, [Maasai communities in Loliondo protested](#) when police began demarcating 580 square miles (1,500 sq km) of their land for a game reserve. According to witnesses, police opened fire, stole cattle, and destroyed property. One police officer died, more than 30 Maasai were injured, and thousands fled into Kenya.

In Ngorongoro, a type of protected area created in 1959 that allows tourism and grants Maasai communities and their cattle permanent residence, the approach has been less confrontational.



📷 Maasai elder William Ole Seki in Ngorongoro.
Photograph: Jess Craig

Human rights lawyers and Maasai leaders allege that the government is using a quieter, more tactful approach to force about 70,000 people out of their homelands by cutting off access to water, healthcare and education. Meanwhile, the government is offering a troubled relocation scheme to move Maasai “volunteers” to resettlement sites in Msomera, in Handeni district, and Kitwai, in Simanjiro district, both several hundred miles away.

“The government is trying to suffocate the communities and make the situation uncomfortable for them,” says Denis Moses Oleshangai, a human rights lawyer at the Ramat and Jad Law Point law firm. “This is a war on the Maasai.”

In April 2021, the Ngorongoro [Conservation](#) Area Authority, which manages the land, released a 30-day eviction notice to 45 people living in the area. The authority identified an additional 166 “immigrants” illegally living there who would later be targeted for eviction, according to the Oakland Institute, a US thinktank. The agency called for more than 100 homes, churches, schools, medical dispensaries and administrative offices, including a police station, to be destroyed within 30 days of the order because they were built without permits, the agency claimed, even though some of the buildings were decades old, according to locals. After protests from the Maasai communities, the authority suspended the evictions and demolitions.

■ ■ Shutting down vital services basically creates a scenario where people would be better to pick up and leave

In March 2022, Ngorongoro district council sent two notices, seen by the Guardian, to six public schools ordering them to transfer nearly 200m Tanzanian shillings (£70,000) in Covid relief funds to the Handeni resettlement site. Government funds to build or renovate schools and improve water supply have been halted.

Since September 2022, two wards - Ngorongoro and Misigiyo - have had no access to water, according to a government official who spoke on condition of anonymity. Farmers claim that about 100 cattle had died as a result.

In October, the Ngorongoro health officials convened staff at Endulen hospital - largely financed by the Catholic church and the only hospital providing comprehensive medical services to Maasai living in the conservation area - and ordered them to reduce staffing from approximately 60 to 17 and downgrade their status from health centre to clinic, permitting provision of basic primary care and pharmacy services only, according to hospital staff who attended the meeting. Although staff numbers have been cut, the hospital continues to provide all regular medical services.

Human rights activists say the government's actions represent obvious efforts to make the conservation area uninhabitable. "Shutting down vital services such as a hospital, severe restrictions on livelihoods ... [this] basically creates a scenario where people would be better to pick up and leave," says Anuradha Mittal, the Oakland Institute's executive director.

A representative from the Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority's public relations unit denied accusations that basic public services were being withheld.

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📷 Maasai pastoralists are being relocated from Ngorongoro to Handeni, hundreds of miles away, a resettlement officials claim is 'strictly voluntary'. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

“Under no circumstance can any government create such kind of tension or commotion. All services are still fully available to all the people. That would be so inhumane,” said the representative. “Any move in terms of resettlement of anybody is strictly voluntary. Nobody has been forced out of Ngorongoro. For those who are not willing to leave nobody has evacuated or evicted them.”

Ole Seki shakes his head at this response. “How are people willing to move out if actually you’ve simply taken away life support systems that make these people [move] who are already so impoverished? The government is going to the international community saying they are not coercing us and indeed they do, but then we don’t have a way to counter what the government is doing because our word cannot get out. Their lies are so bad. We just cannot continue to take it.”

While reducing public services in the conservation area, the government is building about 100 new homes and more than 15 classrooms in Handeni. But there are problems with the resettlement plan. For one, although the government agreed not to relocate any Maasai until construction was complete and water and electricity services were available, an estimated 250 people have already relocated to Handeni. Maasai leaders say there is not sufficient water or land for livestock as much of the land is covered in trees and non-edible foliage.

The resettlement sites are already inhabited by communities who were not approached by the government before relocation activities began, the Oakland Institute reported. Clashes between existing tenants and new arrivals have already begun, says Mittal, and are expected to worsen as resources for livestock become scarcer.

“I don’t know who they are trying to hoodwink,” says Mittal. “Sitting in the capital of Tanzania they can convince donor countries and ambassadors that everything is fine, but the communities have been rising up and speaking out and sending letters. It is nothing else but just government lies to fool people and fool the outsiders.”

The government claims the Maasai and their herds are expanding and now represent a threat to conservation in Ngorongoro and the wider Serengeti ecosystem, home to a high concentration of endangered species including the black rhinoceros, elephant, wild dog and cheetah.

But the Maasai insist they have always lived in harmony with nature. Scientists and conservation experts agree. Last year, more than 275 researchers from around the world signed an [open letter](#) calling for a halt to eviction efforts.

Ole Seki and others suspect the government’s goal is to make way for game reserves, as they are working to do in Loliondo, and expand the lucrative tourism sector.

“It’s all about money. Dirty money,” Ole Seki says.

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