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In Tanzania, the Maasai fight eviction over state conservation plot

To the Maasai, the land is an ancestral asset fundamental to their pastoralist lifestyle but the state has other plans.



Maasai girl and goats in Tanzania [Peter Greste/Al Jazeera]



By Al Jazeera Staff

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Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania – Tensions are rising between the Tanzanian government and Indigenous Maasai pastoralists following a June 10 confrontation between police officers and residents at Ololosokwani village in Ngorongoro district on the eastern edge of the Serengeti National Park.

According to some government sources, the fighting erupted after locals mobilised and attempted to stop game wardens who arrived at the village with police officers to demarcate a plot of about 1,500 square kilometres (580 square miles) – the bone of contention.

In a video clip, recorded by a human rights activist from the area, a number of elderly villagers said they were attacked by police with sharp objects and others were shot at with live bullets. They showed wounds on their limbs and heads. Activists say at least 31 people were severely injured and that hundreds have been displaced.

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“They found us in a meeting and they started shooting at us like wild animals,” said one of the elders injured in the incident. “We had gone to graze our cows when we met police officers on our way who started attacking us with live bullets,” said another elderly villager.

The latest confrontation has stirred fresh concerns over ongoing government plans to evict at least 150,000 Maasai people living within the Ngorongoro conservation area to

other parts of the country.

Authorities claim the land is crucial for wildebeest reproduction, migration into Serengeti and a key source of water for the national park. To the government, Ngorongoro, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where wildlife and semi-nomadic Maasai pastoralists uniquely coexist, is overpopulated by humans and their livestock, leading to environmental degradation.

While the country has historically allowed nomads to live within the parks, their population has greatly increased in recent decades – as has their livestock.

Meanwhile, locals and activists say the government wants to ensure the land is exclusively used for trophy hunting by a luxury hunting and safari company. The Otterlo Business Corporation (OBC) organises hunting trips for the royal family of the United Arab Emirates and their guests who fly into a custom-built landing strip in Ngorongoro.

To the Maasai, the land is an ancestral asset fundamental to their pastoralist lifestyle and has a huge cultural significance. Their eviction comes even as a case is pending before the East African Court of Justice in Arusha, northern Tanzania.

“The dispute between the government and the Maasai entails a blatant disrespect of law and order,” Joseph Oleshangay, a Maasai lawyer and human rights activist, told Al Jazeera. “The government is not concerned with the conservation. It’s only using conservation as a pretext to displace societies.”

‘False reports’

According to local media reports, the Tanzanian government first gave a concession to parts of Maasai land to OBC in 1993. In exchange, the state reportedly got millions of dollars in funding for security agencies.

Residents say tensions have been bubbling under the surface since then.

Eight years ago, then-President Jakaya Kikwete [tweeted](#) to deny any plans to evict the Maasai people from their ancestral land. This followed a global outcry that garnered more than two million signatures on a petition to protest the eviction.

But in 2017, more than 180 homesteads were burned down by authorities as they attempted to evacuate Indigenous people from the area.

This June, at least 20 people have been reportedly arrested and held incommunicado while hundreds of other villagers and community leaders are reported to have fled their homes into neighbouring villages or across the border to Kenya for fear of being arrested by police.

Al Jazeera could not independently verify information from the area as the government has been censoring media reports and threatening to punish those it describes as distorting events happening on the ground.

But while authorities insist that there are not any wounded people, activists and Ngorongoro legislator Emmanuel Ole Shangai have told the media that victims are either being treated in a hospital across the border in Kenya or at home, afraid to go to local hospitals for fear of being arrested.

On June 10, Prime Minister Kassim Majaliwa told parliament that there was no confrontation in the area. He said his government was monitoring false reports shared on social media about the violence and promised that it would take action against those who are misleading the public.

“Some people started making videos with those who didn’t like seeing game wardens in their village,” Majaliwa said. “In truth, there wasn’t any group, either of police or villagers who wanted to harm the other group. They were just villagers staging a mock attack.”

Parliament Speaker Tulia Ackson asked the government to act against those who “mislead” the public, by starting with the person who recorded and circulated the video that showed the confrontation between police and villagers.

‘Deeply alarmed’

The rising tensions have led to frustration among the Maasai.

In March, a letter believed to come from the local government was circulated on social media. It relayed an order to Ngorongoro officials to repurpose more than \$80,000 of COVID-19 relief funds, initially marked for public schools within the area, to one of the relocation sites, Handeni, a district 600km (370 miles) south of Ngorongoro.

But the Maasai are reluctant to move to the 162,000 hectares (400,000 acres) of land for relocated members of the community – in Handeni – as Ngorongoro is the only home they have ever known.

Activists and civil society groups say the government's actions need to take into consideration the displacement of the Maasai, in its plans for the plot of land.

Already, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights has strongly [condemned](#) the incident, urging the government to halt the continuing eviction and to open an independent investigation.

On June 15, the United Nations Special Rapporteurs [expressed](#) concerns over the use of excessive force in evicting the Maasai people from their ancestral land.

"We are deeply alarmed at reports of use of live ammunition and tear gas by Tanzanian security forces on 10 June," the report read.

As the pastoralists resist the eviction, local activists say the government has been trying to make it difficult for them to live in the area. They claim the growing of crops has been restricted as well as access to other basic needs such as water and electricity, denied.

In April, thousands of the Maasai from the Ngorongoro area wrote to the British and US governments as well as the European Union urging them to intervene.

“Over 70 percent of our homelands has been taken for conservation and investment reasons,” the letter read. “We are appealing to human rights organisations, media and other citizens who value Indigenous human rights to share our plight and put pressure on the government of Tanzania to respect the rights of its citizens and particularly Indigenous people.

“We are capable of conserving and taking care of our environment more than anyone, and we have demonstrated that for so long,” it added.

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