



The Tanzania-Kenya border. *Photographer: Adriane Ohanesian for Bloomberg Businessweek*

Businessweek | Feature

Maasai Are Getting Pushed Off Their Land So Dubai Royalty Can Shoot Lions

Tanzania's government wants big tourism money. Herders don't want to lose their livelihoods.

By Paul Tullis

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The village of Ololosokwan sits in the Great Rift Valley adjacent to Tanzania's Serengeti National Park, surrounded by thousands of square miles of savanna grasslands spilling across low hills dotted with mimosa, jacaranda and umbrella-shaped acacia trees. The settlement consists of a few unpaved streets where sheep, goats, chickens and emaciated cows wander untended. A

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200 police, military and park rangers faced off against perhaps 500 locals. As the officials tried to push through the crowd, K. says, shots rang out. Local men pulled wooden bows from their backs and unleashed a volley of arrows, with one hitting a police officer in the eye and killing him. The government men responded by firing into the crowd. “They were spraying bullets,” says K who like other eyewitnesses asked that his name be withheld for fear of reprisal from the government. Suddenly he fell, wounded by a gunshot. Someone carried him into the forest, where he passed out.

K. is a Maasai, the herders known for their beaded jewelry and the plaid shawls—dyed a sunset’s spectrum of reds and oranges—they drape over their shoulders and wrap around their waists. They’ve lived in the area around Serengeti National Park and Kenya’s Maasai Mara National Reserve for generations, driving cattle across the plains and moving frequently to find fresh grass. Many have settled in villages such as Ololosokwan, initially pushed off traditional homelands by colonial rulers cordoning off areas for tourists, then drawn by schools and health-care facilities established by Tanzania’s new leaders after independence in 1961.

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Market day just across the border in Kenya. *Photographer: Adriane Ohanesian for Bloomberg Businessweek*

The incident last year, with its echoes of the colonial past, was sparked by a tourism ministry decision to convert 1,500 square kilometers (579 square miles) around Ololosokwan from a “game-controlled area,” where residents are permitted to live, farm and graze livestock, to a “game reserve” devoted exclusively to wildlife habitat, safari tourism and, with the right license, hunting.

The violence was the latest, and most severe, eruption in a long-simmering conflict involving Maasai, the Tanzanian government and a company called Otterlo Business Corp. (OBC), which the UN says operates hunting trips in the area for royals from the Emirates. For more than a decade, Tanzanian authorities have been driving Maasai from their homes and burning bomas in and around Ololosokwan, with cattle seizures, arbitrary arrests, torture and beatings, according to eyewitnesses, the United Nations Human Rights Council and the European Parliament.

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Tourists watching lions in a nearby game reserve. *Photographer: Adriane Ohanesian for Bloomberg Businessweek*

SERENGETI NATIONAL PARK, WITH ITS ABUNDANT BIODIVERSITY, IS A UNESCO World Heritage Site visited by hundreds of thousands of travelers a year. The annual “great migration”—in which more than 1 million antelopes and zebras, pursued by eager predators, move en masse in search of food and water—passes through the region, freely crossing in and out of wildlife reserves in Tanzania and Kenya.

In 1959 the British colonial administration extended the park’s boundaries to the Kenyan border, barring Maasai from building bomas or grazing their herd

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images. It was established as a village in 1978, and in 2006 the national government affirmed locals' right to manage the land it now claims as a game reserve. With that authority, residents have for years leased portions of it to safari camps.

In 1992 the district council of Ngorongoro signed an agreement with a man named Mohammed Abdulrahim Al Ali, granting him a 10-year hunting permit in an area that included Ololosokwan and five other villages—but with no input from them. The contract refers to Al Ali as “brigadier,” and in 2019 the press service of the United Arab Emirates did identify someone with that name as a lieutenant general in the country’s armed forces. Today a Mohammed Abdulrahim Al Ali is chairman and owner of the Al Ali Group, a major proper developer in the UAE.

At the time the contract was signed, Tanzanian law forbade hunting concessions for individuals, so the country’s tourism minister, after apparent getting word of the district’s contract, directed Al Ali to set up a company to manage the concession, according to a letter *Bloomberg Businessweek* reviewed. (The ministry didn’t respond to requests for confirmation of its authenticity.) Four years later, a Tanzanian presidential commission identified Otterlo and Al Ali as beneficiaries of corrupt hunting deals with “top government leaders.” A Tanzanian investigative reporter, whose arrest on various charges in 2019 drew condemnation from the US and UK embassies, Amnesty International and the Committee to Protect Journalists, would later report seeing documents from around that time indicating millions of dollars in donations to Tanzania’s ruling party from Dubai’s royal family.

The UAE government says it’s “committed to preserving the rights of

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Maasai herders have lived in the area around Serengeti National Park for generations. *Photographer: Adriane Ohanesian for Bloomberg Businessweek*

In 1996, Otterlo built an opulent safari camp with a large landing strip a few miles northwest of Ololosokwan, where UAE military cargo planes land frequently, according to the nonprofit Maasai Environmental Resource Coalition in Washington. Locals say big-game trophy heads adorn the walls, and one member of Ololosokwan's village council says he saw men who appeared to be from the camp shoot a lion as it lay on its haunches stripping flesh from a wildebeest.

Ololosokwan's residents and Otterlo nonetheless coexisted more or less peacefully for years, with villagers taking jobs at the camp and wildlife thriving. "There were very few threats from the pastoralist communities, which had been there for many years," says Dennis Rentsch, who lived in the region for almost a decade and today serves as deputy director of the Africa

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it was overrun with livestock. In March of that year, an eviction plan was put forward for the 1,500 square kilometers near Ololosokwan, ostensibly to protect wildlife. That July, seven Loliondo-area villages were burned, with reports of rapes and beatings—an apparent attempt to terrorize people into leaving, according to UN human-rights officials and various NGOs.

As word spread, international pressure grew, and the government said the plan would be scrapped. But that didn't stop the expulsions. Tanzanian media reported hundreds of homesteads destroyed and livestock confiscated in 2014, prompting the European Parliament to issue a resolution condemning the violence. In 2017, the UN says, Otterlo staff collaborated with Tanzanian government officials to drive 20,000 Maasai from their land.

Later that year, though, a new tourism minister took office, and OBC's fortune turned. According to the UN, Otterlo's hunting license was canceled on the advice of the national anticorruption bureau, and the company's local director was jailed on corruption charges. The new minister said an Otterlo official had attempted to buy off a former colleague with a \$200,000 bribe.

After President John Magufuli died in 2021, Vice President Samia Suluhu Hassan, who preaches a doctrine of tourism as key to development, took charge. In her first public speech three weeks later, she said the rising population in Ngorongoro threatened conservation efforts. Hassan has repeatedly maligned the Maasai, characterizing the eviction plans as “voluntary” relocations and suggesting at one point that they are “endangering our world heritage.” Some parliamentarians have even said the Maasai are such a grave threat to the land that military action is warranted against them. In February 2022, Hassan visited Dubai, where her team signed 36 provisions

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The medical clinic where the first victims of the June 10 violence were treated after the attack. *Photographer: Adriane Ohanesian for Bloomberg Businessweek*

FOUR MONTHS AFTER THE DUBAI VISIT, THE TOURISM MINISTRY ANNOUNCED the new game reserve occupying part of Ololosokwan, and the regional leadership soon said it would delineate the boundaries. The arrival of government vehicles on June 9, though, was the first the people of Ololosokwan had heard of it. When villagers saw the convoy of SUVs crossing the scrubby plains, they walked out to ask what was happening. The officials said they were acting on orders of Tanzania's president. After the officials left the locals ripped out the markers and guarded the spot overnight.

That same day, the Ngorongoro Council had called officials of several wards to a meeting, where they were immediately arrested. Their lawyer says those people and others who were rounded up—a total of 27—were later charged with the murder of the police officer in Ololosokwan on June 10, the day *after* their arrest. The government held them in prison for more than five months, until November, when the state prosecutor dropped the charges and they were released.

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create the game reserve. This is village land. we were born here, our parent and grandparents were born here,” J., a council member, told the men. He showed the police papers indicating the council’s title to the land. They were unmoved.

A group of about 100 women, seeking to show they didn’t want any violence, collected leaves and grass, symbols of peace in their community, and walked toward the police officers. N., a grandmother, says the security forces responded with tear gas, something she’d never seen or even heard of. “The smoke affected my whole body,” she says. N. tried to flee, but a gas canister struck her in the leg. “I couldn’t walk. There was a lot of blood.” Two women carried her away. Nine unarmed women were shot, according to the Ngorongoro NGO Network, a group of advocacy organizations in the region.

After the women dispersed, a group of men approached the police, their hands in the air. “The police said, ‘Let’s talk’ and told us to go sit under a tree,” says P., a 36-year-old herder. He and about 100 others were sitting on the ground when the police returned. One walked up and shot a tear gas canister directly at him, P. says, breaking two bones and searing his flesh.

Juma Sampuerrap, a doctor across the border in Kenya, corroborated P.’s account, saying he removed rough-edged pieces of plastic that could have been part of a tear gas canister. Sampuerrap says he treated 139 people from Ololosokwan for gunshot wounds, tear gas exposure, beatings and injuries from animal attacks suffered while escaping through wildlands. All told, some 2,000 people have fled Tanzania since June 10, according to the Ngorongoro NGO Network.

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Sampuerrap at his clinic in Kenya. *Photographer: Adriane Ohanesian for Bloomberg Businessweek*

THE MAASAI ARGUE THAT THEY’VE COEXISTED WITH WILD ANIMALS FOR centuries and that they don’t hunt them or eat their meat. In the 19th century and through most of the 20th, wildlife remained abundant even as the Maasa followed their traditional nomadic ways. With improved health care since independence, the Maasai population grew from less than 10,000 in 1959 to 93,000 in 2017. And researchers say the significant decline in wildlife number over the past 50 years can be traced in part to habitat loss from the increasing human population.

But those trends “have been totally misinterpreted,” says Pablo Manzano, an ecologist at the Basque Centre for Climate Change in Spain, who studies the effects of grazing and pastoralist cultures on ecosystems. Official data show that sheep and goats account for almost the entire increase in the livestock population in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area and that the aggregate weight of the animals—and their consumption of grass—hasn’t changed much; scientists say they’ve seen a similar increase in Loliondo. But sheep and goats

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prospects. Michiel Verduyn, a professor at Leiden University in the Netherlands who studies the Serengeti-Mara ecosystem, says the reason there are still wild animals there at all is because of the Maasai's way of life, which involves minimal farming and almost no urban development. The people in Loliondo "actually did the best job of all groups living around the ecosystem" at conserving it for wildlife, he says. "Coexistence is definitely possible, but it all depends on livestock densities."

"What the government is trying to do is force relocation

Instead of managing or planning for coexistence, though, Tanzania has sought to drive Maasai out of areas it believes it can milk for tourism dollars, according to conservationists and Indigenous-rights groups. The government they say, is happy to corral some Maasai into bomas near the park entrances where tourists can buy bracelets and blankets, but it doesn't want them herding cattle where safari-goers expect to see giraffes and elephants. Human Rights Watch says Tanzania is now confiscating any cattle found in areas around Ololosokwan. And last March, the president's office sent letters to schools in Ngorongoro demanding they return money that had been provided for new classrooms. A month later, the managers of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area wrote to local wards ordering the demolition of structures including veterinary clinics, village offices, churches, mosques, police station schools and health-care dispensaries, alleging they'd been built without proper permits—even though many are government buildings. Then Flying Medical Service, an NGO providing emergency health care in remote regions for more than half a century, was stripped of the regulatory exemptions that had enabled it to operate. "We were all like, 'How is this possible?'" says Joseph Oleshangay, a Maasai lawyer who represented those arrested in connection

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that the corruption uncovered in 1998 and 2017 persists. No proof has emerged, though, and the government points to its ranking by Transparency International, a global government integrity watchdog, as second in East Africa on anticorruption measures. UN human-rights commissioners say a better policy would be to alleviate poverty among the Maasai rather than sending them to be poor elsewhere. In a 2022 letter to President Hassan, UN officials wrote that “the resettlement plan ... fails to take into account that [pastoralist] poverty is the result of the restrictions imposed on their livelihoods and the loss of their traditional lands, which has in turn negative effects on the environment.”

Lucas Yamat, a Tanzanian Maasai, highlights the benefits of education. He lived nomadically into his teens, then earned a bachelor’s degree in economics. After graduate studies at the University of Dar es Salaam, he began working in Manzano’s lab. His fluency in the traditional Maa language places him in immediate good standing with elder leadership when he conducts fieldwork in Tanzania. And Manzano says sending girls to school can be even more effective than encouraging boys to study. Uneducated Maasai women have few options beyond marriage, and in polygamist societies, that often means as a second or third wife. Since women in such situations compete for status by having more children, “if you want to depopulate this area, just educate every Maasai girl to university level,” he says. “It’ll be solved in 15 years.”

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Critics have argued that the Tanzanian government doesn't want Maasai herding cattle where safari-goers expect to see giraffes and elephants. *Photographer: Adriane Ohanesian for Bloomberg Businessweek*

ON THE DAY OF THE ATTACKS IN OLOLOSOKWAN, J., THE COUNCIL MEMBER, watched the violence unfold from a small hill on the edge of the village. As the soldiers began firing, he set out on foot into the countryside where lions and buffaloes were prowling.

In the forest outside town, K. recovered consciousness and found himself among about two dozen wounded men and women. “I felt like I had died,” he recalled months later in Kenya. The people helping him didn’t trust the local clinic, because all doctors in Tanzania are government employees, and patients must fill out a form detailing how they came by their injuries. Writing “shot by police” might have endangered him further, so he was driven north into Kenya.

At a clinic just across the border, K. was told his injuries were too severe to be treated locally. So his friend drove him, still bleeding, to Narok, a larger town

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— concession. why do they force us to leave our homes for this? — He occasionally sneaks back into Tanzania under cover of darkness to see his family, but he doesn't feel safe. "When I go home, at night when I hear a motorcycle, I get worried," he says. His children suffer from nightmares, "sometimes dreaming about me," he says. "They cry on the phone with me and say they are afraid the men with guns will come back. It's my prayer that when they finish school they can find a job in Kenya to help themselves." — *With Abeer Abu Omar*
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