

POLITICS | TANZANIA

Tanzania pushing out Maasai to attract rich tourists

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Tanzania's government is expanding its nature preserves, but in doing so, it is displacing Maasai herders from their ancestral lands. The plan is to attract more luxury tourism — and Berlin is a major backer.

Tanzania's Maasai concerned about encroachment of their traditional lands

Image: Hua Hongli/picture alliance

Life is becoming ever more difficult for Tanzania's **ethnic Maasai**, as a representative for the group's women told DW. She did not want her name to appear in print over concerns for her safety. Numerous representatives of the ethnic herding people have been arrested over the past several years whenever they have criticized the policies of the Tanzanian government.

"Two pregnant women recently died," said the representative. She reported that there had been heavy rain and roads were impassable. "Nearly every week there is a

pregnant woman dying in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area and in Loliondo," she said. Other DW sources have confirmed the statement. The Maasai say the government of [Tanzania](#) is to blame.

Medical flights that used to transport patients to hospital emergency rooms were shut down by the government a couple of years ago, for instance, purportedly over licensing problems. Still, there are suggestions that this is simply part of a larger plan to shutter all health and education services in areas populated by the Maasai in order to get them to leave the savannah in northern Tanzania for good.

A government spokesperson abruptly ended an interview with DW when confronted with the growing health services problem.

Expanding nature preserves but at what price?

President Samia Suluhu Hassan has big plans. She intends to expand the amount of Tanzanian lands under [conservation protection](#) from 30% to 50% of the country's total territory.

Yet her plan for Tanzania is having devastating consequences. Conservation laws stipulate that no people can inhabit such areas, nor can houses, schools or hospitals be built upon them. There is one exception though — for [tourism](#) infrastructure. Existing government infrastructure currently occupying the area will simply be allowed to crumble said Joseph Oleshangay, a Maasai chief in Ngorongoro and a lawyer who has represented the Maasai people in numerous legal battles.

"On April 12, 2021, the government issued a public statement declaring its intention to demolish nine government schools, six healthcare centers, nine villages and four churches," stated the complaint filed by Oleshangay. It was successful: A court ordered the government to halt its plans. But it was to no avail, said the lawyer. "Meanwhile, we have healthcare stations without a single paracetamol for any of our children," he said.

Other sources in the area confirmed the statement, but they, too, prefer to remain anonymous.

Luxury tourism displacing cattle herders

By expanding its preserved lands, Tanzania hopes to attract billions in foreign investment as well as more tourists. Last year, more than a million people visited Tanzania's protected nature parks.

China, for instance, invested more than \$9 million (€8.3 million) in a geopark in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, named after the Ngorongoro Crater. The area was fenced in to protect tourist camps, luxury hotels and picnic areas with panoramic viewing platforms. The Maasai, whose ancestors used to live on the land, are now denied entry.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) have also invested more than \$7 billion in Tanzania. Among their investments, a hunting ground in Loliondo. Luxury lodges and an airstrip for private planes are being built to welcome wealthy sheiks flying in to hunt big game. This area, too, is being fenced in, even though it is a traditional grazing area for Maasai cattle herds during the dry season.

Tanzania's parliament is currently debating another proposal, which DW has seen, for the creation of still more protected areas.

The plan will require the removal of at least 100 further Maasai villages. That would mean a total of more than 300,000 people would be displaced say non-governmental organizations (NGO) and the affected. "If the plans are carried out, the Maasai will lose 80-90% of their traditional lands," according to Roman Herre of the German NGO FIAN, which supports the rights of the Maasai. "This would essentially amount to the total destruction of their way of life."

A new settlement far from home

In order to make way for major investors, Tanzania's government has established a settlement for the Maasai further east, in Msomera, which is located in the Handeni district. The settlement, some 600 kilometers (373 miles) from where the Maasai currently live, will feature block houses for the semi-nomadic people to dwell.

Wilson Sakulo, the commissioner responsible for the project, emphasizes that the Maasai are "voluntarily" leaving their current homelands and says it is important that they not be dissuaded by "all of the misinformation" surrounding the program.

Luxury tourist resorts have been encroaching on ancestral Maasai lands

Image: watchtheworld/IMAGO

Hundreds of millions in funding frozen over human rights concerns

So far, numerous international partners have given support to Tanzania's protected areas expansion plans, including the German federal government in Berlin. For decades, Tanzania has been one of Germany's most important partners when it comes to nature conservation in Africa. In all, the German KfW Development Bank has invested nearly €30 million in Tanzanian conservation programs. A small portion of that, around €220,000, was frozen last year over concerns the Maasai could be displaced.

In April, the [World Bank](#) also suspended €150 million in tourism expansion funding to Tanzania over human rights concerns. And in June, the [European Commission](#) withdrew a project bid worth some €10 million.

Despite having reservations last year, the KfW committed another €9 million in German conservation investments in early 2024. The Development Bank clarified to DW that part of that money would go toward building a new healthcare station and schools in Maasai communities located near the protected area.

The nearby communities the bank was referring to are those into which Maasai not wanting to relocate to Msomera are being moved — meaning Berlin is indirectly financing the Tanzanian government's policy of displacing the Maasai in favor of luxury tourism and foreign investment.

This article was originally written in German.

