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Tanzania's Maasai protest eviction in the name of conservation



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Tens of thousands of Maasai gather to protest against their eviction from the Ngorongoro Conservation Area in Tanzania, August 22, 2024. Julius Laitayok/Handout via Thomson Reuters Foundation

What's the context?

From Tanzania to Cambodia, green groups say Indigenous peoples must be part of conservation strategies

- Indigenous Maasai face eviction in northern Tanzania
- Global conservation pledges risk for local communities
- Frameworks to be established to protect Indigenous people

JOHANNESBURG - For a week, the green hills around Tanzania's famous Ngorongoro crater have been chequered with the blood red shuka cloths of tens of thousands of Maasai herdsman protesting their eviction from their land - all in the name of conservation.

It is not the first time the Maasai have been forced to move on so tourists can see the pristine wilderness teeming with wildlife promised in so many films and documentaries.

The British colonial government forced thousands of Maasai leave the Serengeti in the 1950s after it made the vast area a national park. The Maasai were told they could live in the nearby Ngorongoro Conservation Area, later named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the 1970s.

Successive conservation measures each added restrictions on the Maasai, but now the Tanzanian government wants to evict tens of thousands of them from Ngorongoro to make more space for conservation sites, lucrative luxury tourism and trophy hunting.

"We have been intimidated, assaulted, arrested, fined, beaten by military and conservation officers," Maasai lawyer Denis Oleshangay told Context from his office in the northern Tanzanian city of Arusha.

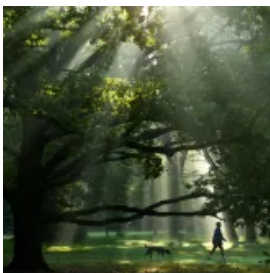
"It's a cultural genocide, a crime against humanity," said Oleshangay, recounting how his own family had previously been moved on from the Serengeti.

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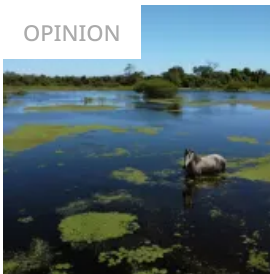
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Human rights groups have spotlighted the risk of global conservation strategies that pledge to protect the world's biodiversity, but run the risk of sidelining the Indigenous people who live within conservation sites.

Tanzania became one of 195 countries to adopt a global pact to protect nature at the 2022 U.N. COP15 nature summit in Montreal by pledging to conserve at least 30% of the planet's land and oceans by 2030, also known as 30x30.

But the 30x30 framework also states that Indigenous people need to be included in the protection of biodiversity.

The Tanzanian Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism did not respond to repeated requests for comment, but the government has previously said that relocation was voluntary and done to protect Ngorongoro from overpopulation and cattle grazing.

Oleshangay said luxury hotels, safari campsites and lodges in and around the conservation areas were more harmful to the environment than the Maasai who strive to protect it.

While some 70,000 Maasai were evicted in 2022 to make way for trophy hunting lodges in the Loliondo ancestral lands, Oleshangay said a further 100,000 in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area now face intimidation and abuse from authorities to relocate in the name of conservation.

"Conservation is a good thing, we are not against it. We are against ... discriminatory conservation, implemented in a militaristic way," Oleshangay said.



Members of the Maasai ethnic community in Kenya march during a protest against the eviction of their compatriots from their ancestral land in Tanzania in Nairobi, Kenya June 17, 2022.

REUTERS/Monicah Mwangi

Fortress conservation

Tens of thousands of Maasai took to the Ngorongoro-Serengeti highway this week with placards, blocking the road for tourists in a peaceful protest against the evictions from the 8,288 square km of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area.

The Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority said in a statement that the area was still safe and open to tourists, and said the protests were themselves evidence that there were no human rights violations in the area.

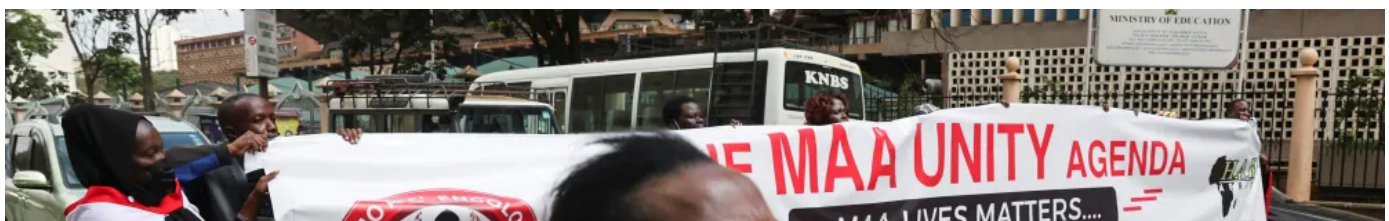
But rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have documented cases of what they say is coercion and violence, and restrictions on Maasai access to food, housing, healthcare and education.

"They are trying to make life so hard that no one will stay," said Oleshangay.

Tanzania is not the only country to prioritise what rights groups called "fortress conservation" - conservation that views local communities as obstacles to be removed in order to protect ecosystems.

From 1990 to 2014, more than 250,000 people in 15 countries were evicted to make way for protected areas, according to data compiled by the Rights and Resources Initiative, a group that works on forests and local development.

Evictions of forest dwellers in Thailand, Kenya and the Congo Basin as well as farmers in Cambodia in the name of carbon credits are other recent examples of green initiatives that frame Indigenous peoples as enemies of nature, rather than guardians of it.





Members of the Maasai ethnic community in Kenya march during a protest against the eviction of their compatriots from their ancestral land in Tanzania in Nairobi, Kenya, June 17, 2022.

REUTERS/Baz Ratner

Protecting indigenous groups

The 30x30 conservation pledge is lauded by green groups as "the biggest conservation commitment the world has ever seen".

Countries will meet again in late October this year at COP16 in Colombia, to assess progress on these goals.

But COP16 nature talks must strengthen its protections of Indigenous communities, said Jennifer Corpuz, managing director of Policy at Nia Tero, a non-profit working with Indigenous peoples and movements worldwide.

That means directing funding to Indigenous groups, adopting "indicators" that help monitor and protect Indigenous rights, such as ensuring land tenure and community involvement in conservation planning, and taking on community-based monitors of these indicators, said Corpuz.

Continuing to put a spotlight on human rights violations in the name of conservation can have an impact on where funding ends up, said Juliana Nnoko, senior researcher on land and women's rights at Human Rights Watch.

"We have seen some donors responding to these violations and ... withhold funding that was aimed at conservation programming across Tanzania," Nnoko said.

As the 30x30 framework is rolled out, Oleshangay said community leaders would continue to fight for Maasai voices to be part of conservation strategies.

"The 30x30 pledge is good on paper," he said. "But the implementation needs to be inclusive, not about removing the guardians of the land."

(Reporting by Kim Harrisberg; Editing by Jon Hemming.)

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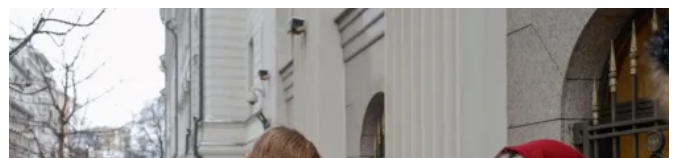
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