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Tanzania wants to evict Maasai for wildlife – but they're fighting back

Community members are on a campaign to get international donors to defund their government and stop rights violations.



Members of the Maasai community in Kenya protest against the eviction of their compatriots from their ancestral land in neighbouring Tanzania [File: Baz Ratner/Reuters]

By **Shola Lawal**

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The 36-year-old human rights lawyer and member of the Indigenous Maasai group is one of several at the forefront of a long-running fight to stop the government in the political capital, Dodoma, from forcefully evicting Maasai from areas around national parks.

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Officials say the evictions are to protect wildlife, but Maasai members have accused park rangers and security forces of intimidation and rights abuses, including killings, sexual assaults and livestock seizures.

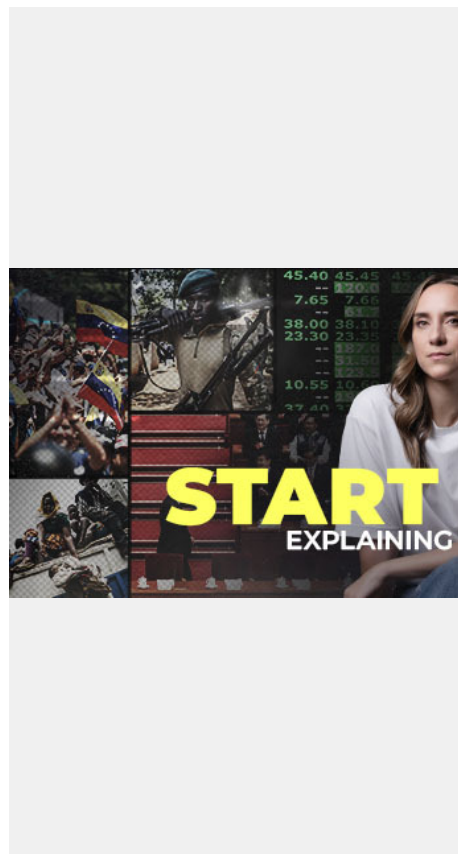
Because the courts have not always ruled in favour of aggrieved Maasai, community members like Oleshangay have taken their complaints to the government's big funders, from Germany to the European Union, urging them to withhold crucial funding and pressure the government to halt alleged violence.

"We go to the courts, we go to the media because we have few alternatives," said Oleshangay, who works with Tanzania's Legal and Human Rights Centre (LHRC). "But we also go to the people we think have a say. We tell them – we don't have a problem with conservation, but when you give the government more money, it means you are financing the displacement of all these people. It has nothing to do with nature, it is all business."

Lately, the activists have been on a hot streak.

In late April, the World Bank yielded to petitions of rights violations in a massive park in the country's south and suspended new disbursements from a \$150m grant, saying it was "deeply concerned" about rights abuse allegations related to the project.

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Then, in June, the EU crossed Tanzania off another 18 million euro (\$20m) conservation grant initially meant for the country and neighbouring Kenya. Ana Pisonero Hernandez, an EU spokeswoman, told Al Jazeera that Tanzania was removed after an internal review process.

"The decision to amend the call was made to ensure the project's objectives in terms of human rights protection and environmental concerns are achieved given recent tensions in the region," she said.

The lost funds are a result of the government's standoff with minorities in the country as it attempts to expand tourism. That the Maasai instigated some of those actions also reflects the deepening bitterness between

Dodoma and the group's members in particular, who say they have long suffered displacement from their ancestral lands, and are now being targeted with unprecedented force.

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“We cannot sit with the government because it is clear to us that they are not ready to listen,” said Oleshangay, who is based in the northern city of Arusha. His father, however, is one of many facing permanent displacement from areas around the iconic Serengeti to unfamiliar territory hundreds of kilometres away. “We know they will want to attack those behind it, but we don’t have the option of staying silent, because they don’t see us as human beings,” he said.

Al Jazeera reached out to the Tanzanian government to ask about these allegations but did not receive a response.



Lawyer Joseph Oleshangay in traditional Maasai clothing in Ngorongoro, Tanzania [Courtesy of Joseph Oleshangay]

Government officials have long claimed the Maasai's expanding populations mean they are encroaching on wildlife territory, affecting access to resources for animals, and contributing to human-wildlife conflict.

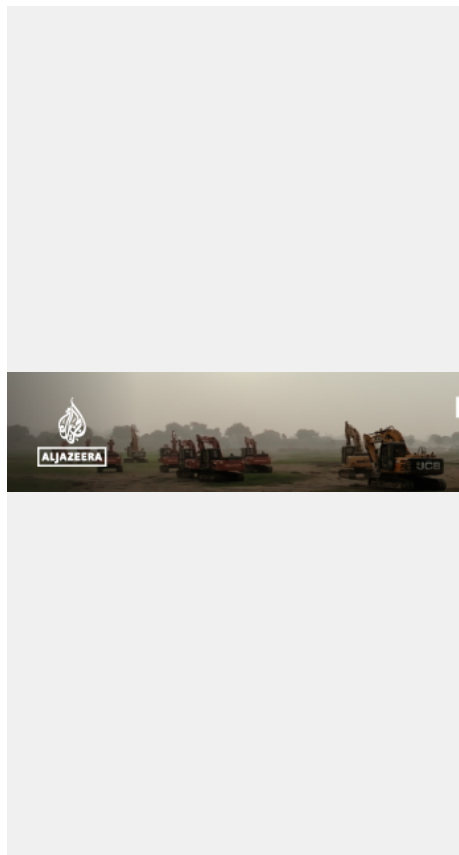
Tourism is one of Tanzania's most important sources of foreign exchange, with safaris and game hunting contributing a fifth of gross domestic product (GDP) and employing close to a million people. The country is home to the Ngorongoro Crater, Mount Kilimanjaro, and swaths of savannahs replete with elephants, lions and iconic baobabs.

In off-season May, this year, the country's mainland international airports filled up as a fraction of two million yearly visitors jetted in. The sector's success has fed the government's desire to expand its offerings but that's now being affected by its constant clashes with the Maasai.

'We lost the Serengeti'

Evicting the Maasai – seminomadic pastoralists spread across Kenya and Tanzania – is a well-known song in the East African Rift.

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In colonial times, Maasai lived across the vast northern plains of the Siringet – loosely translated from Maa into “the land that never ends”.

But first German, and then British, colonialists determined that the Serengeti ecosystem, with its dense wildlife population and spectacular wildebeest migration, was being pressured by growing numbers of the Maasai, and that they had to leave. Critics say this approach is fortress conservation – a controversial idea that wildlife is best protected when they're entirely free from human disturbance, discarding the needs of Indigenous dwellers.

As a result of colonial policies, thousands in 1959 were forced to move to the newly created multiuse Ngorongoro Conservation Area at the southern tip of the plains, as well as to neighbouring Loliondo. In Ngorongoro, Maasai could graze their cattle alongside zebras and also have tourists visit. The government promised they would never be displaced again, Maasai members say.

Now, the thousands of Maasai in Ngorongoro and Loliondo are again facing eviction.

“Our stay was never forever because they never really decolonised the whole thing,” said Oleshangay, whose 70-year-old father experienced the relocation in 1959.

“We lost the Serengeti. My father still remembers what happened like it was yesterday and I don't want me or my children to experience the same thing.”

Smoke curls up from the Ol Doinyo Lengai volcano above the Ngorongoro Conservation Area in northern Tanzania. The volcano's name translates to 'Mountain of God' and is a sacred location, Maasai who face eviction say [Joseph Eid/AFP]

Land in Tanzania belongs to the government, meaning officials can legally relocate people but with their prior consent. Over the years, however, attempts to evict Maasai have become common – without dialogue or agreements, members say.

In 2017, the government issued eviction notices for villages in Loliondo, saying it wanted to protect 1,500sq km (580sq miles) from human activity. Park rangers stormed Loliondo in August that year and razed 185 huts which they said breached the boundaries of the Serengeti National Park. More than 6,000 people were left [homeless](#), according to rights groups.

Although Maasai members took the matter to the Arusha-based East African Court of Justice, the case was [dismissed](#), as judges ruled that those evicted could not prove they were outside the park's boundaries. Maasai lawyers, including Oleshangay, have appealed the ruling.

As officials began demarcating the contested 1,500sq km parcel of land in June 2022, security forces [clashed violently](#) with angry locals who believe the land was for a private game reserve. One policeman was killed by an arrow from the Maasai side, officials said. Many Maasai were wounded, and hundreds were forced into neighbouring Kenya. Some 150 people marked as protest leaders, and others who shared photos online, were arrested. Gerson Msigwa, then chief government spokesman, said authorities would take legal action against those who tried to "interrupt" the demarcation and who were "inciting" the Maasai against security forces.

In Ngorongoro, there haven't been violent clashes, but there are problems too, Maasai say. At numerous points in the past decade, officials in Dodoma said wildlife there is being pressured by Maasai and their cattle. The population, they said, makes it hard to maintain Ngorongoro's pristine nature and safeguard its UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

Ngorongoro's population went from 8,000 to 110,000, Tanzania's Justice Minister Damas Ndumbaro told reporters last June, noting that livestock numbers also shot up, although the government appears not to have revealed any direct cause-effects of that population increase on wildlife. Officials also say they are responding to Maasai's requests for modernisation by moving them out and expanding social amenities.

Officials announced plans to relocate people from Ngorongoro in April 2021 and asked residents to sign up for the "voluntary" move. They also published a long list of buildings marked for demolition, although that plan is

on hold due to huge public outcry from Maasai communities and international rights groups.

There are no official consequences for those who don't sign up, but since 2022, Maasai leaders say funding to the district has been cut, and all aspects of life are restricted: movement, structural development, even repair work. Government staff have been withdrawn from health centres and dispensaries are empty, locals say.

Tanzanian rights group, Human Rights Defenders said in a [report \(page xiii\)](#) that in 2022, government officials transferred more than 3 million shillings (\$1,100) allocated to Ngorongoro to other districts.

In a [July report](#), Human Rights Watch accused Dodoma of "forceful evictions" and documented at least 13 cases of park rangers directly assaulting Maasai in Ngorongoro.

Al Jazeera reached out to the Tanzanian government for comments on these claims, but they did not respond.

Maasai men attend a livestock auction at the Msomera village in Handeni, Tanzania [File: AFP]

Meanwhile, those who registered to leave have been relocated to districts hundreds of miles away.

Emmanuel Kituni is one of them.

On a recent weekday in May, the 39-year-old stood outside his three-room cement home in Msomera, a village nine hours from Ngorongoro. Behind him, rows of identical homes splayed out, all for the fresh relocatees. A military barracks ringing the community teemed with camouflage-wearing soldiers – a subtle way of instilling fear and controlling narratives around the relocation, critics say.

"We feared to leave our ancestor's lands. I was born there and lived there all my life, so it was difficult for me to leave," Kituni said. "I was disturbed for months because everything was new here and I knew no one."

He has adapted, however, Kituni also points out. He can now farm, whereas UNESCO restrictions banned cultivating in Ngorongoro. In addition to the flat for his young family, he also received five hectares of farmland and 10 million shillings (\$3,700) in compensation.

"We were under so many restrictions in Ngorongoro. If you put up even a wooden fence they will ask you for your permit. I feel free here," he said.

While people like Kituni have adapted, not everyone can, Oleshangay said. Maasai religious rites, he added, are more important to some, and can only be performed in ancestral sites like the Ol Doinyo Lengai, or the Mountain of God, an active volcano which lies in the Ngorongoro Highlands.

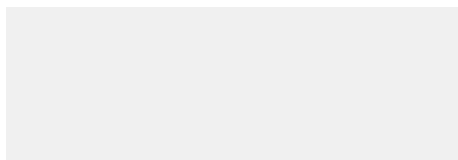
"We are not saying everyone wants to stay, who we are defending are those who don't want to go. It's not just the land, it's the culture, it's the religion, it's everything that makes a society what it is. You ask me to leave, but you are giving me a piece of land that has no value to me," Oleshangay said.

Emmanuel Kituni stands outside the building provided to him by the government after he was relocated. The Tanzanian government plans to build more than 5,000 units to house displaced Maasai from Ngorongoro [Shola Lawal/Al Jazeera]

'Complicit' institutions?

In April 2023, two anonymous members of Maasai communities south of the country wrote to the World Bank, detailing cases of abuse meted out by park rangers.

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Like in the north, Indigenous groups who have lived adjacent to the massive Ruaha National Park (RUNAPA), located south of Tanzania, were asked to leave the area as Dodoma seeks to substantially expand the 20,000sq km (7,700sq miles) conservation area and make it as attractive as hotspots like the Serengeti. Officials in 2022 listed five villages and several sub-villages that would be demolished, affecting 21,000 people from Maasai, Sukuma and Datoga minorities.

In petitions to the World Bank, the Maasai members said officials of the Tanzania National Parks (TANAPA) had committed “extrajudicial killings” and “forced disappearances” of community members, while also seizing thousands of cattle in attempts at mass intimidation. Those abuses, the petitioners wrote, went against the bank’s policies on ensuring proper resettlement in case of displacements. Continuing to fund the government, they said, amounted to complicity in rights abuses.

The World Bank first granted Tanzania a \$150m loan for its Resilient Natural Resource Management for Tourism and Growth (REGROW) project in 2017. The project, which will last till 2025, aims to upgrade four protected areas, including Ruaha, by expanding them, developing new tourism “products” such as visitor centres and airstrips, and strengthening monitoring operations. It’s also meant to improve the livelihoods of locals, by training thousands to become safari guides, for example.

In late 2023, an independent panel of the bank in a preliminary assessment concluded that the Maasai’s case merited investigation. Six months later, this April, the bank formally suspended the funding, citing “recent information” it received.

“The World Bank is deeply concerned about the allegations of abuse and injustice related to the ... project in Tanzania,” a spokesperson said in a statement. “We have therefore decided to suspend further disbursement of funds with immediate effect.”

An investigation is still ongoing. Chief government spokesman Mobhara Matinyi told reporters the same day the allegations were “unfounded”. “[Tanzania] does not violate human rights in any development project. We are seriously concerned about people’s rights and dignity,” he said.

The annual migration of wildebeest from the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania to the Maasai Mara National Reserve in Kenya [File: Joe Mwihi/AP]

Despite its action, critics say the bank was too sluggish.

“Last year we informed the bank and it didn’t do anything for a year,” Anuradha Mittal, executive director of the Oakland Institute, a think tank based in California, which filed the petitions with the bank on behalf of the

community members, told Al Jazeera. The bank, Mittal added, was complicit, because it delayed the investigation, and did not visit the community since the project started in 2017.

“You could not even imagine in Washington starting a project like that without seeking free, prior, and informed consent. We continue to think that we can go to places like Tanzania and just remove the people and make deals with governments. We are talking about alleged killings, sexual violence, and other egregious abuses, and the bank looked the other way.”

Already, the bank has disbursed about two-thirds of the grant – some of that after the first complaint was submitted in 2023, according to the Oakland Institute. Mittal said communities plan to push for “reparations”.

The World Bank and TANAPA did not respond to Al Jazeera’s requests for comments.

Oleshangay, the lawyer from Ngorongoro, has no plans to let up on funders. Aside from fighting the government in some 14 separate court cases, Oleshangay said the work of pressuring big players will continue. He has eyes on Germany, which has bankrolled Tanzania for decades through its Frankfurt Zoological Society and KfW Development Bank. In 2022, Germany [committed](#) 87 million euros (\$95m) in funding to Dodoma, primarily to “conserve nature”.

“It’ll never be an option to keep quiet,” Oleshangay said. His work has earned him international accolades, like the German Human Rights Award of the City of Weimar, but there’s more work to be done, he said.

“Of course, I don’t want to leave my kids alone but I cannot stop talking,” he added, referring to the death threats he says he’s been receiving. “We won’t leave our homes until they bring guns to take us out.”

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