News
News
Social Justice



A group of Maasai people wait to be attended by nurses who are mostly religious at Endulen Hospital, located in the Ngorongoro conservation area in northern Tanzania. Religious leaders, including sisters, have remained in Ngorongoro to serve residents seeking medical care, water, food and education for their children despite the government cutting off vital services in the area. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)



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Wearing his traditional red shuka and holding a spear, Issac Loilet sat outside his Tanzanian mud hut to ponder his fate, as the government continued evicting his tribespeople from their northern ancestral land in the name of wildlife protection and tourism.

Like thousands of other Maasai community members here, Loilet constantly fears government intimidation, arbitrary arrests and detentions, ill-treatment, excessive use of force, and forced evictions.

"I want to tell the world we are enslaved people in our country," said the 49-year-old father of five, who requested his name be changed for fear of arrest. "The government has forcefully taken our land, killed some members, and detained anyone who protests."

For the last decade, the Tanzanian government has tried forcefully to evacuate the Maasai people from areas in northern Tanzania to make way for tourists, wildlife, and big game hunting. The Masaai mostly live in the Ngorongoro, Loliondo and Sale divisions of the Ngorongoro District in the northern part of the country, which they have long inhabited. Living among wildlife, the Maasai also live next to protected wildlife areas.



A Maasai village in the Ngorongoro conservation area where the Tanzanian government is evicting the Maasai from their ancestral land, making way for protected conservation areas and hunting reserves. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Dozens of religious leaders, including priests, nuns and catechists, have been arrested and detained by security forces for supporting the Maasai people and urging the government to follow due process by consulting the Masaai before the eviction, as required by Tanzanian law.

The government historically has allowed the Maasai people to live within some national parks, including the Ngorongoro conservation area, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, since 1959. But authorities now say that the exponential growth of the Maasai population and its herds is putting the Maasai in direct competition with wildlife for shrinking resources (such as grass and water) — thus the move to evict them.

In June last year, for example, the government announced that it would restrict 1,500 square kilometers (580 square miles) of Loliondo land as a game reserve. The

move meant that the Maasai residents had to leave the area and not even use it for grazing or access it to fetch water for household and agricultural use.

"Where does the government want us to go?" asked Loilet, echoing the questions that continue to linger among the Maasai. "We will not go anywhere. We will fight for our land until the end."



A group of Maasai elders walk together in the Ngorongoro conservation area in northern Tanzania July 8. The Maasai said that they fear meeting each other in groups because of the threats they face from the government, which is evicting the Maasai from their ancestral land in the name of wildlife protection and tourism. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

The Maasai protested the move by the government and removed the beacons the security forces had set up during demarcation. The report by Human Rights Watch shows that security officers shot and tear-gassed protesting members of the Maasai and destroyed their properties, including livestock and houses. Police detained some

members, while others fled their homes to hide in the wilderness for safety.

According to the United Nations, more than 150,000 tribespeople in Ngorongoro District will finally be moved out of their land if the government continues with the eviction.

"As a priest who has worked here for a very long time, I feel disappointed with how the government is handling things by treating people like they are unworthy," said Fr. Julius Malema, one of the priests working in Ngorongoro District who has been arrested many times for fighting for the rights of Maasai. (He requested Global Sisters Report not to use his real name for safety reasons.)

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"People here are angry, frustrated, broken and confused," he said. "The people feel like they are abandoned. No one is listening to them, and no one is caring for them."

Another priest based in the Arusha Archdiocese who has previously worked in Ngorongoro told GSR that the government had mistreated the Maasai people for many years at the expense of economic growth that comes with tourism and other projects in the conservation areas.

"These are human beings, not animals that can be moved from one place to another," he lamented, requesting anonymity. "What the government is doing is totally unacceptable; it goes against all humanity and human rights. We are serving a broken community. They have lost hope in the government, their leaders and even God."

One of the nuns running a school and hospital in Ngorongoro District said she is disturbed by how women and girls are severely beaten and raped during evictions. Some of their husbands have been arrested, while others have abandoned them.



A Maasai woman carrying her baby stands outside her hut in Ngorongoro conservation area in northern Tanzania. The Tanzanian government is evicting the Maasai from their ancestral land, a situation that is significantly affecting women and children. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

The Good Shepherd nun, who has worked in the region for five years to reduce maternal mortality among Maasai women, said, "The tension between the Maasai men and the government has increased domestic violence. Since men are stressed, they tend to vent it out on women."

'I would rather die than leave my land'

Although the Tanzania government has successfully moved some families out of the conservation areas under a program the authorities describe as "voluntary relocation," the majority of the residents in the region have vowed to fight for their land to death.

The Maasai argue that they have lived for generations in the conservation areas while protecting the land, preserving wildlife and biodiversity. They say the

government's move to evict them was a renewed effort to strip them of the right to occupy and use their ancestral lands.

> 'The government cannot just come and take our land just like that. We will fight to the end,' vows Maasai youth activist John Lenkanua.
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In September last year, the regional East African Court of Justice dismissed a case against the Tanzanian government by Maasai who sought recourse for violent evictions and burning of homes in their areas. These seminomadic herding people vowed to appeal a decision by the court, alleging that the authorities compromised the court so that they could continue with their impunity to trample on their rights.

"I was born here, and I have to be buried here," vowed John Lenkanua, a Maasai youth activist from Loliondo. "I would rather die than leave my land because the government cannot just come and take our land just like that. We will fight to the end."

The Catholic Church has been supporting the move by the Maasai people and urging the government to stop the ongoing forced evictions and human rights abuses. The church has called on the government first to consult the Maasai community, whose livelihoods depend on their ancestral land.



A group of Maasai people wait to be attended at Endulen Hospital, located in the Ngorongoro conservation area in northern Tanzania. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

"The government should engage the Maasai leaders and find a lasting solution to the problem," urged one of the catechists from Ngorongoro, a Maasai himself. "The authorities should help people and wildlife to coexist in ways that benefit both, instead of violating the rights of the Maasai."

The government offered to compensate each Masaai family with a house, two hectares of land, and 10 million shillings (US$4,300). However, the Maasai said the compensation was not enough since they practice polygamy and require a large piece of land for cattle grazing.

Government tactics to evict Maasai people

Within the villages of Ngorongoro District, dozens of police and soldiers with batons, tear gas canisters and guns stand guard to protect the land that has already been

demarcated and to arrest anyone straying into the demarcated land with their livestock.

Church leaders and local activists told GSR that the police and soldiers have killed dozens of Maasai. Some Maasai have been detained, and others are reported missing despite people witnessing their arrests.

> 'When the government suffocates you by denying you education, health services, water and electricity, then people have to go,' says a Good Shepherd nun from Ngorongoro District.
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Church leaders and activists say the media have also been banned from covering the story, noting that several journalists have been arrested in the area for interviewing Masaai people and their leaders. (Security officers also detained this reporter for hours for interviewing members of the Maasai and forced her to delete audio and photos as a condition to be released.)

The Tanzania government has also cut off vital services for Ngorongoro residents, such as health, education, water and electricity, as a weapon to force them out of their ancestral land.

"When the government suffocates you by denying you education, health services, water and electricity, then people have to go," said a Good Shepherd nun from Ngorongoro District, noting that the government has refused to issue permits for building or renovating any structure in Ngorongoro.

Since June last year, Endulen village's only hospital, which the Catholic Church has run since 1965, was downgraded to a clinic, with ambulance and emergency services suspended, she said.

"Residents cannot access health care in our facility because there are no medicines. There are also no doctors and nurses to attend to hundreds of patients flocking to the facility daily, forcing them to travel long distances to get those services."



A sick woman sleeps in a hospital bed with her son sitting beside her at Endulen Hospital, located in the Ngorongoro conservation area in northern Tanzania. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

During a recent visit to the region, GSR witnessed government employees — protected by security officers — demolish houses to prevent Maasai from moving in, plus dozens of schools, churches and other structures.

GSR contacted Gen. Venance Mabeyo, a retired Tanzanian military officer, to comment on the situation in Ngorongoro, but he declined. The general, who served as the eighth Defense Forces chief, is leading the eviction of indigenous Maasai people from their ancestral land.

However, one of his aides, who declined to be named, told GSR in an interview that the government had already decided to remove the Maasai from the conservation area.

"You cannot fight the government because you will never win," he said. "The Maasai people will finally have to leave the conservation area. We are planning to go to the region and complete the eviction process so that we can conserve the environment."

War within the church

Dozens of priests, nuns, catechists and other religious leaders working within the Ngorongoro conservation area have accused Arusha Archbishop Isaac Amani Massawe of siding with the government on the evictions.

"The relationship between the bishop and president leaves the people with questions on whose side the church is," said Mboyi Nasera, one of the Maasai elders and representatives. "The people's trust was broken entirely when the [arch]bishop invited Mabeyo to Rome, when the Maasai delegates had gone to Europe [last year] to seek their help to request the government to stop the evictions.

"The presence of Mabeyo destabilized their intentions. People felt betrayed."



Archbishop Isaac Amani Massawe of Arusha, Tanzania (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

One of the nuns from the Arusha Archdiocese, in northern Tanzania, speculated that the archbishop had been threatened and compromised by the authorities to support the eviction of the Maasai people.

But the archbishop told GSR he could not influence the government, and that because he has been fighting for the rights of the Maasai people for a very long time, it was unfair for people to blame him for the government's decision.

"People have accused me of conspiring with the government to force Maasai out of their land, but that's not true," he said. "I cannot fight against the people of God,

and neither can I fight the government. We are called to serve in truth and must live according to the church regulations. However, all of us are under the government."

Massawe clarified that the church planned his trip to Rome with Mabeyo. He said that the country's church leadership chose Mabeyo to accompany him to Rome because he was a layperson, and that his presence was unrelated to the evacuations.

"I ... neither talk to Mabeyo nor support the government eviction program," the archbishop said. "I have previously called on the authorities to listen to the people. But you know, government is government; when they have planned and decided on things, there is little we can do because we cannot fight against the government. But we can support the people."

Church campaign to save the Maasai land

Tanzania's church leaders have vowed to fight for the land rights of the Maasai people despite government threats. They have also asserted that they will continue to serve the residents by conducting Masses, running a few remaining schools and clinics, and fundraising for the Maasai so that they can afford basic needs and use the money to appeal for their court case.



A sign stands near Endulen Primary School in Ngorongoro conservation area in northern Tanzania. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

The religious sisters are offering emotional and psychosocial support for women and their children. They also seek to reconcile the Maasai people and the government and find a better solution to benefit both sides.

Malema said the church leaders meet with the Maasai twice weekly to train them on their land and property rights, and how "the government should consult them before

beginning a development project in their land, and they should be given control to manage such projects."

A priest from the Arusha Archdiocese said some church leaders have also been raising funds to help Maasai representatives travel and seek international support and intervention from several European countries.

"The international community has the power to stop funding for tourism and conservation projects that violate human rights," the priest said.

The Good Shepherd nun said religious sisters in the region are visiting distressed families daily to counsel and encourage them to maintain faith in God.

The sisters are also providing health services to all residents, despite lacking medicines and enough staff. The priests, sisters, catechists and other church leaders are visiting homes and villages daily to offer informal education to Maasai children affected by the demolition of schools.

"We are doing a lot of work as sisters," she said. "Most of the women suffer from stress, and they experience nightmares. Therefore, we are trying to help them recover from what they have gone through during eviction because they have lost everything, including their livelihoods."



Emmanuel Lekishon Shangai, a legislator representing the Ngorongoro area in Tanzania, addresses a group of Maasai gathered to raise their concerns about the ongoing eviction by the government to take their ancestral land in the name of wildlife protection and tourism. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Meanwhile, Emmanuel Lekishon Shangai, a legislator representing the Ngorongoro area, thanked the religious leaders for fighting for the rights of the Maasai people and vowed to continue fighting for the rights of his people in the National Assembly.

"I will not get tired of fighting for the Maasai rights and representing them in parliament," Shangai told GSR, noting that he will table the bill in parliament to stop the eviction.

"The Maasai were born here and have peacefully coexisted with the wildlife for centuries. Therefore, this sudden change in having people kicked out is not correct."