

'Land means life': Tanzania's Maasai fear their existence is under threat

Reports that homes belonging to Maasai people were torched have upped the stakes in their long-running land dispute with the Tanzanian government



'As pastoralists, we are being undermined': Lilian Looloitai. Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian

Karen McVeigh
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For Lilian Looloitai, a Maasai woman from east Africa, “land means life”. For her nomadic tribe, who have grazed cattle in north Tanzania’s highlands for centuries, a bitter dispute playing out on the edge of the Serengeti national park brings not just uncertainty, but threatens their very existence. It is the latest example of the growing tensions between wildlife conservation, which brings revenue to the country, and the rights of nomads, who need land to survive.

“How long will the government continue to expand the national parks? It is for wildlife, but we are human beings,” said Looloitai, the managing director of Cords Limited, a rights group based in Arusha. “As pastoralists, we are being undermined.”

The long-running border dispute between Maasai people in Loliondo and the authorities was reignited two months ago amid reports that, over a period of two days, hundreds of homes were burned down.

A study by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), a Danish NGO working with local communities in Tanzania, estimated that 185 homes were burned in an act of forced eviction, leaving thousands of people homeless and their livestock scattered.

It has happened at a time when pastoralists are struggling with a serious drought in the area, which has reduced the quality and quantity of their pasture.

On 21 September, residents from four villages in Loliondo – Ololosokwan, Olorien, Kirtalo and Arash – filed a case with the east African court of justice in an attempt to stop more evictions.

“We must speak out about the land issue. The government has not taken the proper measures to educate and communicate what their intentions are for the land,” said Looloitai.

“They are told, ‘You can’t cross this land, it belongs to the government, you can’t cross this land it belongs to investors’. We are not certain, we are not stable – as a community, as a society – and it is affecting our future.

“The way they are doing things is against human rights. We don’t expect people to be evicted.”

In Tanzania, all land belongs to the state, so evictions are not illegal if force is used, said Looloitai. However, she urged the government to find a peaceful solution: “The president has been given the power to oversee and control the use of the land, but without infringing human rights.”

Looloitai, who is from Monduli district, a neighbouring district to Ngorongoro, where Loliondo lies, said: “Land to me is life. It is a fundamental resource that keeps pastoralists living their traditional way of life.”

When claims emerged in 2012 that the Tanzanian government wanted to force Maasai pastoralists off their land to make way for game hunting, there was an international outcry. The plan, which would reportedly benefit Dubai-based company Otterlo Business Corporation, a luxury safari company set up by a UAE official close to the royal family, would have displaced about 30,000 people and caused problems for the Maasai, who depend on seasonal grasses to graze livestock.

The Tanzanian government, which had planned to create a “wildlife corridor” of 579 square miles, shelved the plans after the campaign, led by online activism site avaaz.org. The country’s then president, Jakaya Kikwete, promised, in a tweet in 2014, that evictions would not take place.

The latest reports are causing renewed concern, however. NGOs said the evictions were a surprise, because a commission had been working to find a solution to the land dispute.

The IWGIA described the disputed land in Liliondo as “legally registered village land”, and called for the evictions to stop.

Julie Koch, the organisation’s executive director, said: “As the crisis in Loliendo continues we urge the Tanzanian government to end the illegal evictions and the human rights violations. The government must respect the stop order from the Commission of Human Rights and Good Governance in Tanzania.”

The Guardian contacted the Tanzanian government for a response, but it did not respond in time for publication.