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Tanzania

Tanzania: Masai evicted from their land on the altar of profit

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The Tanzanian government's policy, with the complicity of major Western NGOs, is to replace herders with tourists, who bring in more money. Joseph Oleshangay has embarked on a European tour to alert the authorities and NGOs to the situation of the Masai of Tanzania. A lawyer from this community of herders, he is committed, despite threats and pressure, to fighting the mass expulsions of the Masai from their ancestral lands, particularly in the Ngorongoro region.

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Harassment policy

For several years now, the Tanzanian authorities have been trying hard to dislodge these pastoralists from their land. They blame their cattle for destroying the rich ecosystem of the Ngorongoro region, where the volcano Ol Doinyo Lengai proudly stands. A region where you can find wild animals. The Masai's cows pose a danger to lions, hyenas, rhinoceroses, zebras and others.

Acting under Government Notice (GN 673), the government deregistered 11 constituencies, 25 villages and nearly 96 hamlets, removing them from the electoral register and depriving community members of their right to vote. It also closed education services and medical clinics. As a result, measles is making a comeback due to a lack of vaccinations. At the same time, forest rangers requisitioned livestock, plunging many families into poverty. The aim is to evict 110,000 Masai from their land.

Profit versus ecology

This is not a question of 'punitive ecology' on the part of the Tanzanian government; its aim is profit by developing tourism in this region: luxury tourism and in particular the highly lucrative niche of trophy hunting. To this end, the Tanzanian government has granted the royal family of the United Arab Emirates the Loliondo lands for hunting wild animals. The Masai living on these lands have been expelled and some who have tried to return have been killed by the security forces. The government's target for 2025 is five million visitors and six billion dollars in revenue, which should go straight into the pockets of the country's select group of businessmen and politicians.

On the other hand, this policy is really endangering the ecological balance of the region by building the infrastructure needed to accommodate hundreds of thousands of people. As Joseph Oleshangay pointed out: 'In 1976, there was one road right inside the crater. Today, there are 29! Cars drive around there all day and that stresses out the wild animals.'

Green colonialism

Unfortunately, this policy is not unique to Tanzania. It is shared by many African countries and enjoys the support and guidance of major NGOs such as the WWF, the Nature Conservancy and even UNESCO. For Ngorongoro, for example, in 2019 the WWF was promoting the reduction of the number of Masai and cattle to 'an acceptable minimum', while UNESCO was advocating the transformation of Ngorongoro into a nature reserve with no population except for the maintenance of a few *bomas* (community enclosures for cattle)... for cultural tourism.

This policy of promoting nature reserves stems directly from colonial policies. At the time, the aim was to preserve virgin nature, reified as a kind of terrestrial Eden. Nothing has really changed, except that we now talk about bio-diversity. But the means remain the same: discrediting and even criminalising the agro-pastoral activities of the people who have lived there for centuries, with the aim of evicting them using the expertise supposedly possessed by the big Western NGOs.

The Masai have mobilised. They have blocked the flow of tourist vehicles, taken legal action and organised a massive demonstration attended by over 40,000 people. They point out that they are the guarantors of nature protection and not the Tanzanian government, which has authorised TotalEnergies to drill 419 wells in the Murchison Falls natural park.

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