



In Kenya Thousands Face Eviction as Bid to Save Forest Intensifies

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NAROK, KENYA — Forty-two-year-old Josephat Langat rummages through the remains of what was once his business in Sierra Leone, a town in Kenya's Mau forest. He says a truckload of police arrived one early morning and forced residents to tear down their homes and businesses. He says the land they occupied was legally bought.

"We came, we bought. Most of us we came from Kericho, Nakuru, all over the country, reaching here we have been cultivating until 2005. They came and told us that we are living here illegally. Then we wondered, how can we be living here illegally yet we have documents? Langat asked."

Tens of thousands of people like Langat face evictions as Kenya's government intensifies efforts to reclaim the Mau, East Africa's largest indigenous mountain forest and an important source of water for the region.

The evictions are an effort to save the Mau ecosystem, which authorities say is threatened by increased deforestation and encroaching settlements.

Kenya began evicting people from the forest last year to protect its fragile ecosystem. In August, the government announced plans to evict another 60,000 people from the forest.

Rights groups like Human Rights Watch say authorities should provide residents with adequate notice and compensation, and ensure that police officials do not use unlawful force in removing settlements.

Otsieno Namwaya, the Senior Africa Researcher at Human Rights Watch, says the process needs to be fair.

"Human Rights Watch is not saying that conservation should not happen. We actually hold the view that conservation is very important and the environment needs to be conserved. However, we are saying, government can still do conservation legally and in a manner that respects human rights," Namwaya said.

In a recent report, rights groups documented nine deaths that took place during the July 2018 eviction process.

The block where the current evictions are taking place is Maasai Mau, managed by the county government of Narok and the government-run Kenya Forest Service.

Appearing before a parliamentary committee probing the evictions, Kenya's cabinet secretary for the environment, Keriako Tobiko, defended the government's move to protect the forest.

"Even if for argument's sake Maasai Mau was still trust land under the county government of Narok, if there are processes and activities that destroy the environment, the ecological value of that asset, the government has the responsibility to come in and eliminate processes and activities that are likely to endanger the environment," Tobiko said.

Encroachments into the forest are affecting livelihoods further away. Rainfall patterns have become unpredictable and the Mara river, whose source is in the Mau, has become polluted and receded significantly, says environmental lawyer Kitipa Naikumi.

"In the process of keeping the people in the Mau, we are probably wiping a whole generation out downstream within the Mara ecosystem. It's about (the) right of a humane process of leaving the Mau and right of the people who live downstream," Naikumi said.

As for Josephat Langat and other evictees, they say they hope that they will get justice from a government they say betrayed them.

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