



In Kenya, national politics of Mau Forests Complex trickle down to Ogiek



Tatsabei of Ngongogeri in Mau Forests Complex looks over the ruined roof of her demolished home

Photo by Kiplangat Cheruyot

East Africa's largest continuous forest, the Mau in Kenya, is home to about 16,000 Ogiek, the Indigenous Peoples of the forest – as well as to a similar number of settler families and a handful of absentee politicians who gained their land holdings illegally, according to the March 2009 "Report of the Prime Minister's Task Force on the Conservation of the Mau Forests Complex."

Some of these same politicians, powerful figures in Kenya, have recruited police and local accomplices to tear down Ogiek dwellings, said Kiplangat Cheruyot of Ogiek Peoples' Development Program. The illicit "land grabbers" plant wheat on the traditional lands of the Ogiek, he added, and Ogiek houses are in the way.

"They evict Ogiek and take the land ... As soon as they tear down, Ogiek rebuild, but they come again and tear down and arrest or evict."

Their public excuse is always that the Ogiek presence is a threat to the forest ecosystem. But the Ogiek have always been stewards of the forest; the threat comes from settlers and their demand for resources, from commercial crop planters, and from timber companies. Even so, the acknowledged degradation of Mau Forest resources has exposed the Ogiek to greater scrutiny, if only as scapegoats.

Forty Ogiek families have been disrupted, Cheruyot said. Some have broken up, some have moved in with other families, and the schooling of all children involved has been set back. Among some families that have been separated from clean water in the forest, malaria has occurred. And aerial crop spraying has killed off some of the bee populations from which the Ogiek collect honey.

Government investigators have confirmed the illegal allocation of Mau Forest lands dating back to 2001 (in 2002, voters ousted the party that had ruled Kenya since independence in 1963). Prime Minister Raila Odinga has publicized the names of the main offenders among politicians who received illegal land allocations within the forest. A United Nations commissioner has collected testimony from the Ogiek and visited the sites of the latest attacks, in April.



Ogiek woman of Ngongogeri in Mau Forests Complex confronts the land grabbers' accomplices

Photo by Kiplangat Cheruyot

But while the government acknowledges the illegal presence of settlers in the forest, its interest in evicting them is conservationist and economic. The Mau is at risk from environmental degradation, but the government's 2009 task force findings consistently account for forest resources in economic terms, depicting timber, hydropower, agriculture and tourism as "underlying requirements for economic development in accordance with Vision 2030" – the national blueprint for Kenya as a "newly industrialized middle-income nation."



Ogiek community members at Ngongogeri listen to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' Africa Coordinator, Ms. Olatokunbo Ige (not shown)
Photo by Kiplangat Cheruyot

Meanwhile, no government has ever spelled out explicit land title rights of the Ogiek. The current government has not unambiguously distinguished the Ogiek from illegal settlers in the Mau, and it has entered a foot-dragging phase on settler evictions after a much-publicized start.

"The government has not put in writing how they are going to protect the Ogiek," Cheruyot said. "It means now we are living in fear. ... Now they should proceed to target settlers and not Ogiek."

Until the 1950s, the Ogiek subsisted in the Mau Forest from time immemorial through hunting game and gathering plants, honey, berries and water. But encroachments on the forest and the familiar spread of Western-styled cash economies have led them to semi-agrarian adaptations. Their first allegiance remains to the Mau and the culture evolved from it, however. Conserving it is a goal they

share with the government. "They therefore will support any move by the government of Kenya to protect and conserve this great national resource *but only* in partnership with the Ogiek people and in a manner consistent with the provisions of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples," states an April 19 letter from Ogiek Peoples' Development Program to the UN Division of Social Policy and Development.

The letter protests, among other things, the UN Environmental Programme's high-profile role in Mau conservation, which has helped to legitimize an environmental agenda that the Ogiek believe has little room for them. The 2009 task force findings cite discussions with 12 major donors, "all of whom were very interested in supporting conservation of the Mau Forests Complex, particularly as government-driven interventions."

The Ogiek continue to organize their community for resistance to eviction and dispossession, Cheruyot said. In addition, the Ogiek are taking part in the push for a new national constitution in Kenya, one that would recognize Indigenous Peoples. Cheruyot added that the regular harassment of the Ogiek is also in part a subterfuge for derailing the highly politicized constitutional approval process.



Julius Muchemi of Environmental Research, Mapping and Information Systems in Africa, at center, displays one product of a workshop for Ogiek community members on the mapping of traditional Ogiek territories in Kenya

Photo by Peter Poole