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Conservation's 'new breed of refugee' is all too familiar to Indian Country

Patches of white ash on parched earth are the latest markers of the Tanzanian government's efforts to evict Indigenous Maasai cattle-herders from their settlements in the name of conservation. In July more than a thousand Maasai took a hasty last look at smoldering homes as Tanzanian police forcibly removed them, making way for a safari camp controlled by a United Arab Emirates billionaire who jets in and jets out again when the urge to go big-game hunting strikes.

The conservation refugees from the traditional Maasai territory of Loliondo are the most recent Indigenous victims of a slightly more subtle invasion than the land-grabs, mining concessions, damming of waterways, over-fishing and buffalo kill-offs of the past, said Rebecca Adamson, founder and president of First Peoples Worldwide. But conservation eviction began in the United States, she emphasized, with the transition of Yosemite Valley in California to Yosemite National Park, and the attendant eviction of Mewoc, Paiute, and Ahwahneechee Indians. They did not get reservations; they became refugees, banned from the park and prohibited from gathering their traditional food, water and material resources there.

American Indian tribes will recognize their own experience in the Maasai evictions, Adamson said. "Our buffalo, our salmon and Appaloosa ponies, our corn seeds, our traditional ecological knowledge, our lands, were like their cattle. Our pride, our traditions faltered under the onslaught against our livelihood, like theirs. Our stewardship against global warming and environmental degradation, our sense of place, were besieged like theirs. Despite the many issues on Indian lands, tribes must try to stand up for the Maasai. They are Indigenous, like us, and their doom would be ours all over again."

The most recent doom of Maasai settlements came to pass when government police at the local and district levels, financed by Major General Mohamed Abdul Rahim Al Ali, the United Arab Emirates defense secretary, operating through Ortello Business Company, a subsidiary of the U.A.E. royal family, burned down eight of them in the process of evicting more than a thousand Maasai, according to Saning'ole Telele, the Member of Parliament for the Maasai constituency in northern Tanzania.

In 1992, Rahim Al Ali purchased a controversial hunting concession on a game reserve, now known as Loliondo Game Controlled Area, from the Tanzanian government. The game reserve was on the edge of renowned Serengeti National Park. The Serengeti, like such parks elsewhere, excludes human habitation; but trophy hunting and tourism proved too profitable to maintain an exclusion of elite social classes. But the original concession of Loliondo on the Serengeti border did limit the general's safari parties to three months of every year, July, August, and September, Telele said. The limit didn't hold, he added.

"The Loliondo Concession is as bad as it gets," said Peter Poole, a cartographer and consultant for First Peoples Worldwide who specializes in reinforcing the land tenure claims of indigenous communities. "From bribing the local hunting guides, to breaking 'take' quotas, to hunting within the [bordering] Serengeti, to using automatic weapons on the hunt, to bribing the officials who give out the concessions and the politicians to keep them from canceling the concessions ... It's top-to-bottom corruption."

The U.A.E. has bolstered the pro-economic development, anti-Maasai bias and policies of Tanzania, an East Africa coastal state, Telele added.

"It is this Arab who funded the whole operation," he said of the recent evictions. "Because he is the one who comes to Loliondo to hunt, whenever he can jet in from the United Arab Emirates. ... I want this to stop because that is prime area. ... Maasai can't get their cattle to grass or water without it."

The Maasai, who consider themselves the earth's first cattle-herders, have turned to cultivating farmlands to survive, sparking a spate of unfounded reports on their environmental destructiveness. Maasai insist their traditional land-use practices are the best protection their ancient environment has ever known.

The latest Maasai eviction victims add to "a new breed of refugee" identified by Charles C. Geisler, professor of rural sociology at Cornell University. Global numbers for conservation refugees are impossible to come by. "However the most recent and rapid expansion of protected area initiatives has occurred in Africa and Asia," reports investigative journalist Mark Dowie in "Conservation Refugees: The Hundred-Year Conflict Between Global Conservation and Native Peoples."

Land areas protected for conservation purposes, Dowie adds, have risen from 600 in 1950, to 1,000 in 1990, to 110,000 today.

Governments have found they can be profitable from tourism, trophy hunting and photography, while tax-exempt foundations have worked out complex ways to fulfill their pro-environmentalist missions and raise operational funding without too many questions asked.

In almost all cases of conservation eviction, Geisler states, the victimized indigenous inhabitants of protected areas become invisible refugees.

"We called them invisible citizens in America," Adamson said. "But by any name, through its treatment of Indians in the creation of its national parks, America established the model for export. The Serengeti took its specific bearings from Yosemite, and that meant excluding Indigenous inhabitants. In our environmentally conscious times, protected areas are the Manifest Destiny of the 21st century, so obvious in its assumed virtues to average citizens, so taken for granted by elite classes in their self-congratulating way, that no one thinks to consult the Indigenous peoples who know their land and its carrying capacity. That has got to change if we're going to save Indigenous peoples and our environment. Indian tribes and individuals, with their history, should be leading voices for change."