

FIRST PEOPLES WORLDWIDE

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Maasai women overcome torments to deliver a political message

LOLIONDO VILLAGE, Tanzania -- Maasai women made a persecuted stand against Indigenous dispossession in April, turning in the identification cards necessary to vote for the ruling political party in the October elections.

Saning'o ole Telele, a Member of Parliament for the Maasai constituency in northern Tanzania, went to a village where government forces intercepted some of the women on the night of April 6 and spoke out on their behalf. Telele confirmed the events recounted by Swedish blogger Susanna Nordlund at <http://termitemoundview.blogspot.com/>. A second demonstration by Maasai women occurred later in April, Telele added, when many more voting cards were lost to Chama Cha Mapinduzi or CCM, the ruling party.

"They want the government to know they are not being treated well," Telele said, a reference to the campaigns of eviction and intimidation carried out against the cattle-herding Maasai by government and big-game safari interests in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area of northern Tanzania, near renowned Serengeti National Park and its tourist-magnet wildlife.

As reported from London to America and the northern Tanzanian capitol of Arusha in recent years, severe provocations preceded the mobilization. The government's tourism development plans leave no room for the pastoral traditions of the Indigenous Maasai. Maasai *boma* homes have been burned down, villagers evicted, cattle confiscated and herders fined.

Reports have surfaced of Maasai women, desperate for their families, who seldom emerge from extremes of distress. Accounts of rape and miscarriage among evicted Maasai women have been confirmed by both Maasai and independent sources. In *Pastoralist Voices*, a bulletin put out by Africa Union and the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Udamishani Gidadeli described the plight of women like her during recent years of drought that have intensified the pressures on the Maasai: "'The men leave the community and walk away for months to look for grazing pasture and water for the livestock. Sometimes they do not return and it is the women that are left stranded with no water, medical help or food. We are desperate here.'"

Telele said another factor in the persecution of the Maasai is that the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) allege that Ngorongoro Conservation Area ecology is in decline.

"They are the ones who are pushing the government of Tanzania to create a national park" or protected area that would displace the Maasai, Telele said. He himself has been displaced as a Ngorongoro Conservation Area board member after three years of service, he said. "Now because I am protesting, I don't want my people moved ... they have removed me from that board. I am no longer on that board. ... They are trying to silence the Member of Parliament" for the Maasai in northern Tanzania.

Mary Simat, a Maasai woman and board member of First Peoples Worldwide in Fredericksburg, Va., could not discuss specific incidents in Tanzania from her residence in neighboring Kenya (the vast ancestral grasslands of the Maasai are found on both sides of the border shared by the two East Africa nations). "But I can confirm the government has been a problem and that is why these women are doing this."

After years of it, the harassment and intimidation continued April 6. According to Nordlund, police threatened more than 400 Maasai women with gunfire if they continued a march toward Loliondo village, commercial center of the Loliondo administrative division. These women were trucked back to the Maasai village of Ololosokwan; a smaller group was placed under arrest and interrogated; a third group of 500 overnights in the bush and made it to Loliondo village, where they handed in their party cards at the CCM office.