
Tanzania: preservation results in human rights abuses

The preservationist approach to forest protection tends to consider people as a threat to nature protection and frequently results in the violation of the human rights of rural communities and indigenous peoples living in the forests. This view not only supports the unrealistic idea of a nature void of people, but also ignores the benefits that the traditional management of natural resources brings to nature conservation itself. Over the last few years, conflicts related to this issue have arisen in several places and the following case is yet another sad result of such approach.

In October 1998 riot police and forest officers entered the village of Nzasa at the Kazizumbwi Forest Reserve, 45 kilometres from Dar es Salaam. They beat them, burned their crops and houses. Hundreds of structures, mainly thatched residential houses and granaries, were pulled down and burned during the operation. At least 700 people -including women and children- were left homeless, evicted out of the area and with no other place to go to.

The Forest Department, heavily criticized by human rights groups, justified the violent operation arguing that the villagers had encroached upon the forest reserve and are not entitled to compensation. After the operation, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism told the press that the government would not extend any assistance to the victims, as the area was not recognized as a village, and made the villagers responsible for the destruction of 54% of the forest reserve. Said Abdallah, one of the victims, told the press that members of his lineage had been living in the area since the beginning of the century. "Yet government agents say we have invaded the reserve" he added. The villagers say authorities had brought the forest boundary inland by at least "three hours walk". Investigations carried out by members of the press revealed that indeed every landmark in the area is new.

The victims of the abuse recently reacted suing the authorities for this violent action. The villagers argue that the so called "Okoa Kazimzumbwi Operation" was criminal, because the government agents entered their homes unlawfully, harmed and assaulted them, and burned their crops. The villagers also argue that authorities changed the reserve boundaries after the assault in order to accuse them of having invaded it. The case is now before the High Court.

Source: "Violent Eviction From Tanzanian Forest Ends in Court" by Nicodemus Odhiambo, 29/6/99; comments by WRM International Secretariat.