

The Task Force on Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT)

Communities Reject NRT model and demand an Alternative Model of Conservation

The local communities allege that the Task Force on Northern Rangelands Trust, formed and commissioned by the Isiolo County Government in 2020, is a well-calculated plan by the NRT itself to appear relevant and entrench itself in the County amidst growing opposition.

The local communities and community organizations accuse NRT of gross human rights abuses including allegations of killings and disappearances, loss of prime grazing land and natural resources, loss of livestock and livelihoods, and for driving scores of deadly inter-community conflicts. The increasing trend and complexity of raids and killings of herders and their family members, strongly linked to the elite killer ranger squad 9/1 and 9/2, have irked the wrath of many. This culminated into mammoth waves of Anti-NRT demonstrations on May 2, 2019¹ that drew the attention of local, national and the international media to the predicament of the pastoralist communities in Northern Kenya.

The Borana Council of Elders presented their findings from the 2019 fact-finding mission in a petition to the Governor of Isiolo County and international donors in April 2020. The County Government has allegedly remained silent despite the fact that the human rights abuses by NRT remain unabated. Some donors expressed discomfort around allegations linking NRT to atrocities against local communities. This prompted NRT to roll out several strategies to save their image and reputation.

The local communities allege that the campaign started with the County Government targeting the Executive and the County Assembly by organizing excursions and meals at posh five-star hotels where they were lured into accepting and supporting their activities. They convinced the County Government to accept their model of Conservation and tried to fund and facilitate the effort for the County Assembly members to develop and enact the Conservation Bill. Local communities allege that NRT's ultimate target is to legalize their outfit and expand into the entire County, especially Isiolo South Constituency.²

The task force membership consisted of the County Government, National Government (Police Commandant and Intelligence), retired political figures, and a few handpicked people with vested interest in the matter. The heavy inclusion of the security personnel was purposeful and aimed at instilling fear into the local communities besides making it appear like a government project.³

The task force visited the communities for half a day on September 12 and 13, 2020 and the response from majority of the community members was almost similar. They stated all the problems that NRT has brought them and unequivocally rejected NRT in their location. They said they were ready to accept a Community Managed Conservation Model that was directly under and facilitated by the County.

Hadija Jillo Shande, with tears freely flowing her eyes, made this submission to the task force.⁴

" Samburu's have been stealing our livestock since the past but not like it is happening now. They used to steal one, two or three and disappear. The attacks that we experienced in the past and what we experience now are very different. Since NRT came they have been the force behind the increased attacks in terms of frequency and magnitude of damage. The number of livestock stolen and people killed have increased. This is open fact and it has happened on several occasions. We have seen video clips showing the use of NRT vehicles occupied by rangers and reenforced by Ian Craig's plane. They supported the

Samburu bandits with food ration, water, and even airlifted the Samburu bandits who died and those who were injured in the attack."

Communities allege that the task force deliberately ignored the key victims of the NRT atrocities and members of their families who continue to writhe in agony and destitution.

While the community organizations, including the Borana Council of Elders, Borana Professionals, and Human Rights Organizations strategize on the way forward, there are growing fears that the outcome of the findings of the task force report – as of yet not public – are predetermined and many believe this is an act of “too little, too late.”

¹ Anti NRT Demos Conducted to get NRT out of Isiolo. May 2, 2019.

² Direct communication with local communities. September 2020.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Direct testimony of Hadija Jillo Shande at the NRT fact finding meeting convened by County Government of Isiolo. September 13, 2020 at the task force meeting in Biliqo.