

# PULLING BACK THE CURTAIN

## HOW THE US DRIVES TANZANIA'S WAR ON THE INDIGENOUS



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The tourism sector is booming in Tanzania amidst the government's efforts to attract five million tourists and bring in US\$6 billion from the sector annually by 2025.<sup>1</sup> To achieve this goal, the Tanzanian state is expanding “protected” areas to bolster the operations of safari and trophy hunting corporations. Indigenous and local communities are bearing the cost of this expansion as they face serious human rights abuses and livelihood restrictions aimed at forcing them to leave their ancestral lands. In January 2024, the government announced it will change the legal status of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA) and no longer permit any human settlement.<sup>2</sup> This drastic move will forcibly remove approximately 100,000 people – primarily Maasai pastoralists – and send them to critically flawed relocation sites hundreds of miles away.<sup>3</sup>

While the government has faced widespread condemnation<sup>4</sup> for these abuses, the role of the United States (US) as a driving force behind the implementation of Tanzania's so-called conservation plans has received far less attention. The US sends the highest number of tourists to Tanzania for safaris and trophy hunting. Over 100,000 Americans travel there every year<sup>5</sup> through dozens of US tour operators and private firms, including Boston-based Thomson Safaris. The US is also Tanzania's largest bilateral donor, with US\$560 million of aid provided in 2024 as well as significant funding channeled through international institutions such as the World Bank.<sup>6</sup> This assistance plays a key role both in the design and the financing of Tanzania's aggressive strategy of expanding its tourism sector – responsible for the evictions and the suffering inflicted on the Maasai and other local communities across the country.

## USAID-SPONSORED DEVASTATION FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

USAID's Development Strategy for Tanzania warns the country's natural resources are at risk from the presence of local communities and details the action needed to address the issue.<sup>7</sup> Between 2017 and 2023, USAID disbursed nearly US\$100 million across several environmental projects in Tanzania.<sup>8</sup> Influencing policy is an explicit goal of many of these projects that shape ongoing efforts by the government to boost tourism while supposedly protecting the environment. USAID boasts that its efforts “have been directly responsible for major policy developments” that have put an additional nine million hectares of land under “improved management” for conservation over the past 15 years.<sup>9</sup>

USAID claims it was instrumental in passing the Wildlife Conservation Act – a law that provides the legal foundation for the government's January 2024 plan to expand Game Reserves across Tanzania.<sup>10</sup> According to the plan, over one million hectares of Maasai land across four districts is under

threat of being seized. As Game Reserves do not permit any human settlement or livelihood activities such as grazing cattle or farming<sup>11</sup> – this will result in massive evictions and devastate tens of thousands of livelihoods. The forced evictions and violence that occurred in Loliondo to create the Pololeti Game Reserve in June 2022<sup>12</sup> could be replicated in the dozens of villages that are located within the target area.

USAID has also prepared the development plan for Ruaha National Park (RUNAPA) – currently being implemented by the World Bank – that will result in the eviction of tens of thousands of people (see below).<sup>13</sup> Several USAID projects are directly connected to ongoing government efforts to expand protected areas and reduce village and grazing lands of Indigenous communities. The agency still lacks an independent accountability mechanism where impacted villagers can file complaints, leaving them with no option for recourse.<sup>14</sup>



US Ambassador to Tanzania Michael Battle meeting with Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan in February 2023. Source: US Embassy in Tanzania



## Promoting Tanzania’s Environment, Conservation, and Tourism (PROTECT) project

Completed in 2020, the US\$19 million project partnered with the private sector to put nearly “400,000 hectares of biologically significant land under improved management.”<sup>15</sup> The project also supported the Tanzania Association of Tour Operators’ successful efforts to “create a better tax environment” for its 400 members and industry investors.<sup>16</sup>

In 2019, PROTECT project staff provided technical and financial support to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism to “develop a vision, objectives, and criteria for prioritizing conservation of Tanzania’s wildlife corridors.”<sup>17</sup> In response, the government announced a concerted effort to “unblock” the corridors by removing people from surrounding areas.<sup>18</sup> In January 2024, 43,000 Maasai received notices banning them from construction or growing crops on their land near Mount Kilimanjaro to allow for a wildlife corridor.<sup>19</sup>

### Private Sector Engagement: A Key Partner for Conservation in Tanzania

USAID PROTECT engaged the private sector, including partners like the Tanzania Private Sector Foundation (TPSF), to leverage funding and resources to support wildlife conservation. These partnerships raised \$2.5 million in assets for nature-based enterprises and placed nearly 400,000 hectares of biologically significant land under improved management.

PROTECT project document

## Tuhifadhi Maliasili “Preserve Natural Resources” activity

The ongoing US\$30.5 million project focuses on strengthening the government’s conservation efforts and making the sector more attractive to private interests.<sup>20</sup> Similar to the PROTECT project, the Tuhifadhi Maliasili activity supports several wildlife corridors, including one in the Tarangire-Simanjiro Plains where the government has escalated livelihood restrictions and violence against pastoralists. In January 2024, Tanzania National Parks Authority (TANAPA) paramilitary rangers opened fire and shot several Maasai herders in Kimotorok village in Simanjiro District, outside of Tarangire National Park.<sup>21</sup> Eight people were arrested and over 800 livestock seized. These incidents happened just a year after over 3,000 cattle were seized outside of the park and sold at an auction.<sup>22</sup>

Another component of the project supports the Journalists Environmental Association of Tanzania to train media on covering conservation issues. Press freedom in Tanzania is currently extremely limited, with the government tightly controlling the narrative around conservation.<sup>23</sup> Attempts by Tanzanian journalists to report on the situation within the NCA have led to them being arbitrarily detained.<sup>24</sup> USAID is thus funding the spread of unchallenged government claims regarding the need to expand protected areas while ignoring or justifying the abuses inflicted on Indigenous communities.

## Tumaini Kupitia Vitendo “Hope Through Action” project

In 2023, USAID announced the US\$29.5 million Tumaini Kupitia Vitendo project, which aims to conserve 2.5 million hectares in Western Tanzania over the next five years to protect chimpanzee populations.<sup>25</sup> This project is a continuation of the US\$19.9 million project known as Landscape Conservation in Western Tanzania, funded in part by the US State Department.<sup>26</sup> Project documents blame “rapidly growing human populations in Western Tanzania” for “depleting natural resources and expanding unsustainable land use practices.”<sup>27</sup> This discourse puts local communities at risk of losing land vital to their livelihoods as a result of the project.

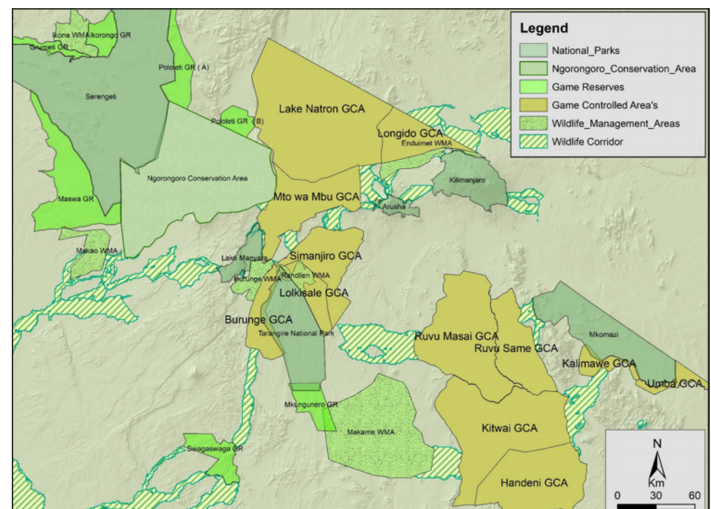


Figure 1. Map of current land under “protected” status in Northern Tanzania. Source: The United Republic of Tanzania



# ENABLING EVICTIONS AND ABUSIVE PARAMILITARY RANGERS THROUGH THE WORLD BANK

The United States is the largest shareholder of the World Bank Group and has a substantial role in influencing its priorities and projects. As of August 2023, the total World Bank-financed portfolio in Tanzania totaled US\$8.3 billion.<sup>28</sup> Two World Bank projects are currently directly impacting local and Indigenous communities living near protected areas.

## Resilient Natural Resources Management for Tourism and Growth (REGROW) project

Operating since 2017, the US\$150 million REGROW project's stated objective is to improve management of natural resources and tourism assets in priority areas of Southern Tanzania – including RUNAPA.<sup>29</sup> Instead, it has led to widespread human rights abuses and evictions of villagers living near the park as the government intends to double its size from one to over two million hectares.<sup>30</sup> TANAPA acts as one of the project's lead implementing agencies and its paramilitary rangers are implicated in murder, torture, and rape in addition to illegal cattle seizures that have decimated livelihoods of the impacted villagers. REGROW funding directly supports the capacity of these rangers.<sup>31</sup>

The government's eviction plans closely align with the recommendations of a 2015 strategy document produced by USAID for the Tanzanian government to develop tourism in the Southern Circuit. The report advised promoting RUNAPA as an “uncrowded and unspoiled safari experience” and implementing policies to better “protect” the environment to bring in millions more in revenues annually.<sup>32</sup>



The image shows the USAID logo with the text "FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE" and the title "A Strategy for Tourism Development in Southern Tanzania". Below the title, it states "USAID funded strategy to develop tourism in Tanzania being implemented by the World Bank".

In October 2023, the government officially declared<sup>33</sup> it was modifying the existing boundaries of RUNAPA to encompass at least 23 legally registered villages – forcing the eviction of over 21,000 people. Stringent livelihood restrictions are already being enforced in the impacted villages. An investigation by the World Bank Inspection Panel into the harms caused to communities by the project was launched in July 2023.<sup>34</sup>

## Land Tenure Improvement project

The US\$150 million project's goal is to register 1.5 million land certificates towards “improving” the country's land administration system by 2027.<sup>35</sup> Indigenous Maasai communities in Longido District have vocally resisted the project that they warn will convert vast tracts of village and grazing land into protected areas.<sup>36</sup>



## US TURNS A BLIND EYE TO RAMPANT RIGHTS ABUSES

The 2022 US State Department Human Rights Report acknowledged that Tanzania “does not recognize the rights of Indigenous Peoples...[who] may face forcible evictions from traditionally Indigenous lands for conservation or development efforts.”<sup>37</sup> In response to advocacy letters sent by the Oakland Institute, the US Embassy in Tanzania claimed it “shares concerns regarding the human rights of Maasai pastoralists,” and continues to “engage with civil society and the government to seek an inclusive, peaceful solution” to ongoing land disputes.<sup>38</sup>

Yet, just after making these claims, the US Secretary of State officially celebrated Tanzania as a “democratic bright spot,” called on private and philanthropic sectors to increase their financing to the country, and announced additional aid to reward the government for its democratic reforms.<sup>39</sup> This blatantly contradicted the reassuring statements made by the US Embassy and clearly undermines the credibility of the US as a human rights advocate for Tanzania’s marginalized and oppressed communities.

The above facts make it clear that the US government is actually a critical driving force behind Tanzania’s war on Indigenous communities living near protected areas. Land defenders across Tanzania have launched desperate calls around the role played by the US in ongoing efforts to dispossess them from their lands.<sup>40</sup> So far, their demand for justice and accountability remain unanswered.



Tanzanian security forces opening fire during June 2022 land demarcation in Loliondo © The Oakland Institute



Security forces in Loliondo, June 2022 © The Oakland Institute



## ENDNOTES

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Man injured by Tanzanian security forces in Loliondo in June 2022 © The Oakland Institute

Maasai women protesting eviction plans from the NCA in March 2022 © The Oakland Institute

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