
Kenya: Forest destruction for the benefit of government cronies

Kenya's ecosystems are on the edge, unable to continue providing water, plant materials and other basic human needs to its burgeoning population. Forests remain on less than two percent of Kenya's land, under protected status as a national resource. In a country plagued by drought, the forests are critical for water conservation. They are also home to indigenous peoples that live by hunting game and gathering food plants, herbs, and honey within the forests.

In a bid for votes, the Kenyan government has rescinded protected status from 4 percent of the remaining forests, claiming that the territory is needed to open settlements for the country's many landless people. However, facts tell quite another thing.

In Kitale, hundreds of squatters vainly wait for the promised 7,234 acres of land hived off Kitalale, Kapolet and Sikhendu forests. In official documents, the squatters are already resettled, having benefited from a process sanctioned by President Moi in a public directive in 1999. But instead of hundreds of huts, magnificent residential homes and well-tended plots dot the once public resource. Among beneficiaries are the chief of a paramilitary unit, a Cabinet minister, several MPs and members of an Ugandan repatriated clique.

The story is replicated in Nandi District. Chepkumia, in South Nandi Forest, is a massive component of Kenya's biodiversity, once part of the Mau Forest. About 2,891 hectares were hived off to resettle 200 families that were forced to move from the neighbouring Koibem forest, by an excision sanctioned in 1999. But instead of resettling them on the entire area, the displaced were distributed on small parcels while the rest of the land was grabbed by well-connected individuals. A coalition of environmental organisations called the Kenya Forests Working Group warns that degradation of the Mau Forest will significantly reduce the ability of the forest ecosystem to cope with drought and will have a devastating impact on water quality and level in Ramsar protected Lake Nakuru, home to the world's largest concentration of flamingoes and Kenya's second most visited tourist site.

Also the survival of the Ogiek people depends on their continued access to the mountainous Mau Forests, where they have lived as hunters and gatherers from time immemorial, managing the forest sustainably, despite attempts from several governments to evict them from the forest. The pastoral Maasai, who graze their animals in the Mau Forest during the dry seasons, will also be affected.

Kaptagat Forest, in Keiyo, has been irreversibly destroyed. The canopy of trees that is seen to dot the Eldama Ravine Road is a mere facade. Sawmillers have located their illegal operations along major roads and operate in broad daylight. "Most of the land meant for squatters went to powerful people. The landless, who initially supported the excision, have now realised they were cheated," says Mr Nixon Sifuna, an environmental lawyer who went to court last year to stop alienation of 67,000 hectares of forests and teaches environmental law at Moi University, Eldoret.

Investigations reveal that well-connected grabbers, loggers and charcoal burners have reduced key forests --among them Kaptagat and Kapsaret-- to mere patches of trees. Two former Environment Ministers are extensively named as owners of sawmills located deep inside Kapsaret Forest, a few

kilometres from Eldoret town.

"It is carpet-cutting of trees," says Mr Daniel Simotwo, an environmental activist who also went to court to stop the excisions. "The destruction (of Kapsaret) is massive; done by loggers." The loggers use Mafia-like operations to terrorise critics. A person was reportedly killed a few months ago during an operation by police to arrest a well-known sawmillier.

Kenyan environmental organisations, the indigenous Ogiek and Global Response, have raised an international outcry against the logging and colonisation scheme, inviting to send letters to urge the Kenyan government to revoke the forest excisions announced on October 19, 2001. (See action alert at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/alerts/february02.html>).