

Tanzania ditches plan to evict Masai for Serengeti 'wildlife corridor'

Activists claim victory as plan to annex 1,500 sq km bordering national park to benefit UAE-based luxury safari firm dropped

- [David Smith](#), [Africa](#) correspondent
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Migrating wildebeest in Serengeti, Tanzania. The plan would have evicted 40,000 Masai pastoralists to make way for a hunting reserve for Dubai's royal family. Photograph: Getty

Activists have claimed victory in a campaign to stop [Tanzania](#) evicting 40,000 Masai pastoralists from their ancestral land to make way for a [big game hunting reserve for Dubai's royal family](#).

Government officials had planned to annex 1,500 sq km bordering the Serengeti national park for a "wildlife corridor" that would benefit a luxury hunting and safari company based in the United Arab Emirates.

But campaigners said ministers dropped the scheme after visiting the Masai, who complained that their livestock would be cut off from vital grazing pasture, as well as [18 months of co-ordinated protests](#) that included a global petition signed by more than 1.7 million people.

Samwel Nangiria, co-ordinator of the local Ngonett civil society group, said Tanzanian prime minister Mizengo Pinda spent two and a half days with the Masai in Loliondo district late last month. "The Masai said we cannot lose this land at any cost – this land has been ours for centuries.

"The conclusion was that government has turned down the plan to evict tens of thousands of Masai. It's a big success story, not only for the Masai in Loliondo but also in Tanzania and east [Africa](#)."

The Masai will now try to renew their legal rights and end long-running disputes over the land with the assistance of the land minister, Nangiria added. He was not aware if alternative arrangements had been made for the Ortelo Business Corporation (OBC), a safari company set up by a UAE official [close to the royal family](#).

"The OBC called last week and wanted a meeting with us," he said. "They are feeling very threatened, for sure."

Nangiria paid tribute to a "very sophisticated, high level" campaign that was mounted in defence of the Masai with the help of methods old and new. It included a protest march, pressuring international donors to Tanzania, and adverts in the East African newspaper that warned that the Masai would reconsider their support for the government at the ballot box.

The international effort was led by the online activism site Avaaz.org, whose Stop the Serengeti Sell-off petition [attracted 1,775,320 signatures](#) and led to targeted email and Twitter protests. It argued that the Masai would be robbed of their livelihoods if their land was used for the commercial hunting of prize game such as leopards and lions by UAE royals.

Sam Barratt, a spokesman for Avaaz, said: "It's been amazing. The government did all it could to stop this becoming a national story but I think the confidence of the Masai has grown and grown. We helped get it out internationally and it was tremendously successful."

He added: "This is a nomadic tribe thousands of years old that lives by ancient traditions, but modern technology unlocked their cause to the world."

The Tanzanian government did not respond to requests for comment on Monday.