



PRESS RELEASE

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Fenced Out of History:

The Indigenous Struggle for Land in Kenya's Lake Jipe Region

WEDNESDAY, JULY 9, 2025, MKOCHENI VILLAGE, LAKE JIPE REGION, KENYA – A humanitarian and ecological crisis is rapidly unfolding in the southeast lowlands of Kenya, beneath the looming shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro. This morning bulldozers continue clearing homes in Mkocheni village. Fencing poles were erected around entire settlements starting on July 2nd, 2025, cutting off vital routes used for centuries by Indigenous communities, livestock, and wildlife. ***More than 200 Indigenous families face eviction from ancestral lands they have inhabited for generations.*** These lands are not just homesteads; they are sacred, historical, and essential to both cultural survival and biodiversity conservation.

Mkocheni lies at the heart of the Lake Jipe ecosystem, [The Community That Lives With Elephants](#), a rare and fragile wetland that sustains elephants, hippos, hyenas, and migratory species. The area also supports Maasai herders, artisanal fishers, and Maasai pastoralists whose lives are closely intertwined with nature.

"What we are witnessing is not only an erosion of human rights but a dismantling of co-existence, ecosystem health, and conservation ethics. Fencing this land fractures ancient wildlife corridors, denies Indigenous people access to water, and violates the foundational principles of ecological justice." - Zacharia Mutinda, founder of the Eco-Jipe Program.

Residents allege political complicity in the land seizure, naming the president, Hon. William Ruto in community testimonies. Relief items, blankets, food, and a cash payout of approximately \$780 USD have been offered in exchange for relocation, which locals decry as coercion under duress. This crisis echoes patterns of neo-colonial land grabs and calls for immediate intervention from human rights institutions, environmental defenders, and policymakers. **If**

action is not taken now, we risk losing not only a people's home but also one of East Africa's most important natural heritage sites.

Call to Action: Restore Land Justice

The ecological and human rights violations in Mkocheni are unfolding with complicity within the highest levels of power. According to community suspicion, the president is directly implicated in this land-grab scheme, utilising state machinery to displace Indigenous families and open land for private investors. This is a crisis of conservation, a crisis of community, and a crisis of conscience.

Lake Jipe is more than a body of water. It is a living testimony to ecological and cultural resilience. Its corridors serve elephants, hippos, and Maasai herders alike. To fence this land is to erase a heritage. The people of Mkocheni are not asking for favors. **They are demanding justice, recognition, and restitution. History has spoken. It is time the law listened.**

History & Background

Precolonial Era: Land Before the Lake

According to Mzee Mwivo, a village elder who arrived in Jipe in 1955, the Taveta region was once an expansive rangeland. People lived in what is now Toloha, and there was no lake, only the Lumi River meandering southeast of Vilima Viwili Hills. Wildlife thrived here in vast numbers. Rhinos were as common as goats, elephants were rare visitors, and herds of hartebeests, zebras, and impalas came to the area for mineral licks. Lake Jipe, as it exists today, is an oxbow lake formed by natural sedimentation and deposition over decades.

Colonial Era: Grogan's Ranching Empire

Colonial transformation came under Colonel Ewart Scott Grogan, an influential settler who controlled Taveta under a 99-year lease dating back to the 18th century. Grogan built a massive ranch empire with expansive maize plantations, livestock farms, and fishponds. Africans laboured under strict and often brutal conditions. Grogan, known for his cruelty, once struck African men with a spade as they attempted to help his Land Rover out of mud.

The area was subdivided: Mkocheni had over thirty fishing stations known as "matuta," Kachero had about ten, while maize estates were managed by a settler named Peter (nicknamed "Tumbo Tumbo") and grasslands by another called Peter the Baron. Kilometa Saba later emerged as a significant fishing and livestock camp.

1955–1963: Collapse and Relocation

When Grogan's ranch collapsed in 1959, Mzee Mwivo's father was reassigned to supervise a water canal draining into Lake Jipe. Mwivo briefly relocated to Dingiria-Taveta, selling game meat to Tanzanian residents. After Kenya gained independence in 1963, Mwivo moved to Matutani (now Kilometa Saba). Sacred sites such as the baobab tree (2km from the lake) and Delonix elata trees (1km from the shore) were centres for spiritual rituals.

1965–1968: Patel's Sisal Enterprise

An Indian businessman, Patel, leased the land for sisal farming, but his attempts to relocate local settlers failed. He left in 1968. That same year, President Jomo Kenyatta acquired large tracts of Taveta land, gifting the Jipe area to his ally, a Greek national named Criticos. Four years after Kenyatta's death, Criticos was deported from Uganda. His son, Basil Criticos, has managed the land since the 1980s and later assimilated into the local Mzirai clan.

Land Ownership from Kenyatta to Criticos

Land passed from Kenyatta to his wife Mama Ngina, her stepson Muhoho, and eventually to Basil. In 1995, Mama Ngina inquired about the fate of Jipe settlers. It was agreed that they would be resettled in the Jipe Settlement Scheme. Unfortunately, only eight residents received titles, with the rest allocated to political elites.

1997: The 2,500-Acre Squatter Allocation

Displaced residents were settled on 2,500 acres demarcated near Lake Jipe. Mkocheni villagers moved in under this informal agreement and have remained since. Yet, no legal ownership followed. Today, Mzee Mwivo has buried his father and five children on this land.

Post-Colonial Shifts and New Pressures

After independence, immigrants settled in Jipe to develop fisheries. However, this population expansion was not met with legal protections, leaving residents vulnerable.

2020–2025: Modern-Day Evictions and Ecological Disruption

In 2020, evictions began in Lesesia, followed by Riata in 2022. By June 30, 2025, over two hundred Mkocheni families will be removed. Earthmovers are clearing homesteads. Fencing poles surround villages. Relief food, iron sheets, mattresses, and \$780 are being used as incentives to vacate. Locals call this coercion.

Lawsuits have been filed. Witnesses fear for their lives. Wildlife corridors are being fenced off. On June 27, elephant dung, hyena spoors, and hippo trails were recorded crossing the now-grabbed land.

The Maasai in Orkung'u, previously fenced off from their water sources, now crawl under electrified wire to fetch water or walk 5km for a 20-liter barrel. Wildlife and livestock are increasingly cut off from essential watering and mineral access zones.

Community Quotes

"This is abuse of power."

"Neo-colonialism today is worse than that of the white man."

"When we tried to follow up on this land from our local Lands Registrar, we were told the file is in Nairobi. When he called the Nairobi office, he was warned: leave it or disappear."

"Whoever allowed Criticos the power to own this land made a grave mistake. Issuing land based on ethnicity is creating ethnic strife."

"Our current MP and former MP have betrayed us."

"Four Maasai families are now seeking asylum in Tanzania. Many have fled with livestock. Children's education has been disrupted."

"Mbona akafunga njia ya wanyama, watapita wapi?" (Translates to: "Why fence animal paths? Where will they go?")

"How can a village of 200+ get just 51 plots?"

"We found beacons on our doorsteps."

"Our chief issued fake land titles for Kachero. We do not live in Kachero."

"He is cursed. I raised that boy since 1977. Now he evicts us."

"We're being treated like refugees. No floods or disasters have occurred, only political greed."

"We want the gazette notice. We were once in darkness, but our children now see the light."

"This inhumanity is finishing the future of our generations."

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References & Further Reading Materials:

[An overview of the current status of Lake Jipe and its biodiversity dilemma - Orina - 2024 - Lakes & Reservoirs: Science, Policy and Management for Sustainable Use - Wiley Online Library](#)

[Co-managing Complex Social-Ecological Systems in Tanzania: The Case of Lake Jipe Wetland - ProQuest](#)

[Impact of land use changes on hydrology of Mt. Kilimanjaro. The case of Lake Jipe catchment - ADS](#)

[Local attitudes and perceived threats of human-elephant conflict: a case study at Lake Jipe, Kenya - ORA - Oxford University Research Archive](#)

[Aquatica_Vol_7_No_1.pdf](#)

[Towards long-term coexistence of humans and wildlife: peace and harmony in Lake Jipe - WILD Foundation](#)

[Zacharia Mutinda Muteti - Fostering Coexistence: Integrating Citizen Science, Sustainable Fishing Practices, and Climate-Adaptive Agriculture for Human-Elephant Harmony in Lake Jipe - The Rufford Foundation](#)