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Karatu rejects a hunting bloc bid

By Zephania Ubwani, Karatu

Karatu district authorities have rejected a request by a foreign firm to acquire large tracts of land for hunting activities in Lake Eyasi basin after it failed to meet some conditions.

Instead UAE Safaris Company from Abu Dhabi is reported to have moved to neighbouring Mbulu District where it has bought 4,000 square kilometres of land amid stiff opposition from a section of the wananchi.

Karatu District council chairman Lazaro T. Maasay said councillors rejected the firm's application because they were suspicious of the nature of hunting it intended to carry out in the area. According to the chairman, UAE Safaris had in 2005 applied to carve three villages; Dumbachand, Matala and Laghanghareri lying on the shores of the alkaline lake into a hunting bloc.

“We gave them conditions which they failed to fulfil. Instead they went to the villages where they cheated the wananchi with countless promises,” the chairman claimed. He said the firm which later moved to Karatu after its application to carve out a hunting bloc in Longido district was turned down, did not specify if they intended to kill or harvest live animals. Mr Maasay, a councillor for the opposition Chadema party that has dominated Karatu district politics since 1995, cited other reasons why the Gulf hunters were rejected there.

He told a seminar on land, wildlife and forestry legislation organised for marginalised communities living in the Lake Eyasi basin, that the district leadership had no alternative place to resettle people living in villages earmarked for a hunting bloc. “Most importantly, we realised that the same area is occupied by the hunter-gatherer Hadzabe tribesmen who subsist on hunting wild animals and fruit gathering,” he explained, adding that their survival would be endangered if the land was leased to the Gulf firm.

The firm later moved to neighbouring Mbulu district and is reported to have been given the green light by the district authorities to acquire 4,000 square kilometres of land at Yaeda Chini plains for hunting. Recently, residents of the area, notably the Hadzabe hunter-gatherers and nomadic pastoralists, called on the government to stop “The Arab investor” from taking their land.

The controversial deal is said to have divided the Mbulu district leadership with some opposing the leasing of the semi-arid land to UAE Safaris with others openly blaming non-governmental organisations for “instigating” the villagers.

Researchers and human rights organisations have often warned that the Hadzabe, one of the last surviving hunter-gatherer tribes in Tanzania, may become extinct in the next few years because of pressure on their dwindling traditional habitat.

A just concluded study by Oxfam say the tiny tribe whose population does not exceed 3,000, is threatened by declined wildlife population that they depended on for food.

They are found in five districts bordering Lake Eyasi. These are Meatu in Shinyanga Region, Iramba (Singida), Mbulu (Manyara) and Karatu and Ngorongoro in Arusha Region.

Sources close to the district council told The Citizen at the weekend that leaders of at least six villages in Yaeda Chini area have signed memorandums of Understanding with the hunting firm to allow it to operate there.