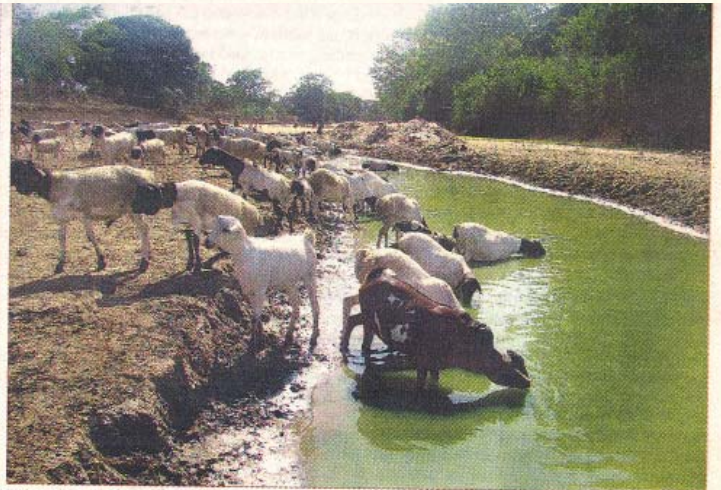
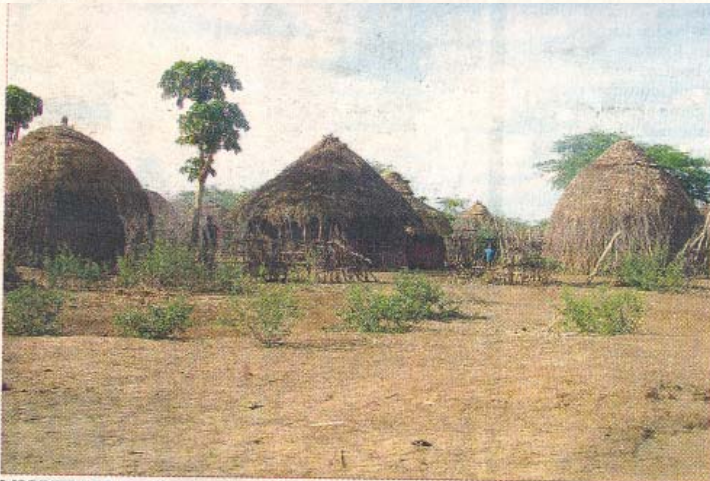


PHOTOS/COURTESY OF NATURE KENYA



TROUBLE SIMMERS IN TANA DELTA



WORRIED LOT: Top, Tana residents at a recent conservation meeting. Above left, a village in the Tana Delta and right, livestock at a canal in the delta.

BY JOHN MUCHANGI

Her voice quivered as she fought back tears and struggled to answer our questions on the phone. "So when are they coming?" she coughed out.

The 57-year-old mother of five was referring to five firms set to evict villagers from the vast Tana Delta anytime after winning a court case last year.

Asha Gule nowadays frets anytime she picks up calls on her old phone or meets strangers around Gamba Manyatta, her village in the Tana Delta District at the Coast.

She is among the more than 25,000 people who will be evicted from their ancestral land and probably reduced to beggars if the commercial firms share out the Tana River Delta district for farming and mining.

The villagers have vowed to "rather die than leave". Although the developers have said their operations will pump billions of shillings into the economy, concerned environmentalists are preparing for another round of showdown with them, saying the country will lose a unique ecosystem worth billions more.

Thousands of local communities set to be evicted vow not to move an inch as their land is leased out to foreign companies

The Gamba village has already received verbal eviction notices, mostly coming as intimidating threats from people they claim are from the Tana and Athi River Development Authority (TARDA), a regional body which will jointly get 20,000 hectares.

If the developers move in, 130,000 hectares of Kenya's most precious piece of Coastal wilderness will be gone and along with it Sh3.17 billion every year. "We are tired of these threats," said Gule, who was introduced to us as one of the few villagers who could speak a smattering of English because she once taught a primary school.

At least five firms already have put forward formal proposals to convert the delta – a large expanse of remote land where Tana River branches out and pours into the Indian Ocean – into a farmland.

Environmental groups who have been fighting to conserve the delta now say these planned developments must be stopped. They say apart from evictions, one of Africa's most unique environments will be destroyed.

At 130,000 hectares, the land is twice the size of Nairobi province. It is generally inhabited by pastoralists but is considered very rich in biodiversity – meaning that apart from humans, a wide range of animals, rare birds, plants, insects and other unique organisms call it home.

The five parties in the fray include a sugar company known as Mat International, who have been promised more than 30,000 hectares to produce ethanol. They will also get 90,000 hectares in adjacent districts.

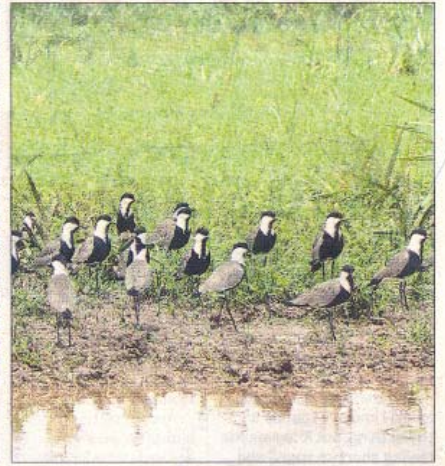
Mumias Sugar Company and Tarda will

jointly get 20,000 hectares for a Sh24 billion sugarcane project. Mat has not carried out any environmental and social impact assessment while Mumias carried out one and was approved. Mat's project co-ordinator Moses Changwony said they will invest \$2 billion (Sh150 billion) and carry out the project through partnership with local communities in Tana River and Lamu districts.

"This project is designed such that 13 villages in Tana River District and 14 in Lamu District will actively participate in sugarcane production as outgrowers," he recently said.

Qatar was also promised 40,000 hectares of land to grow fruits and vegetables in return for funding a new £2.4 billion (Sh184.4bn) port in Lamu. It's however unclear if this deal is still on as the Chinese have expressed interest in financing the port. About 16,200 hectares of the 'Qatar land' lies in the Tana River Delta. The Middle East nation will most likely use a government-owned company to farm.

The fourth party, Bedford Bio Fuels Inc, a private multinational company based in Canada, is in the process of acquiring 90,000 hectares of land through 45-year lease agreements. It plans to convert the



UNDER SIEGE: L-R, Children play near a canal. White-faced Whistling Duck, which is now threatened. The Spurwing Plovers, a rare bird species at the delta.

land into bio fuel farms, mainly growing *Jatropha curcas*.
The fifth, Tiomin Kenya Ltd, a company incorporated in Canada, wants to mine titanium in the Delta and is in discussions with the local government authorities.

Groups like Nature Kenya, who have commissioned several studies on the area, insist on a proper management plan for the delta before any of these developments take place.

For instance, a study commissioned by Nature Kenya in 2008 found out the Mumiata-Tarda project would be a loss maker.

"Nema and Mumiata have defied basic business principles," says Paul Matiku of Nature Kenya, a local conservation group affiliated to UK's BirdLife International.

"The cost-benefit study by experts says that the current and future environmental and social benefits stand at Sh3.7 billion compared to Sh1.2 billion that the project promises to generate," says Matiku.

The study was carried out by three dons from local public universities.

Nema, however, says it only licensed phase one of this project on a 500-hectare site that used to be a rice field and that phases two and three will only be approved if phase one succeeds. A court case calling for a proper environmental and social impact audit before developments in the delta was in June last year dismissed by the High Court in Malindi on a technicality. The plaintiff's sworn statement was found to be faulty because it failed to state all evidential facts.

More than 25,000 people living in 30 villages now stand to be evicted from their ancestral land once Tarda moves in. More people will lose their homes when other firms come.

Says Nature Kenya's advocacy officer Serah Munguti: "We spoke with pastoralists, farmers, fishermen and conservation groups who are very concerned and are ready to take new measures to block the developments." She added: "Farmers in Wema and pastoralists in Dida Waride affirmed that they would die first before moving out of their land."

Environmentalists say evictions are just a tip of the problem and that the country as a whole stands to lose more.

Tana River Delta is one of the most important wetlands in Africa. It supports more than 350 species of birds, including globally threatened birds such as the Basra reed warbler, for which the delta is a critical wintering site, and two threatened primates found nowhere else in the world - Tana red colobus and Tana River mangabey.

More than 1,000 hippos and crocodiles are estimated to live in the Tana River and associated lakes. Others are herds of buffalo, topi, zebra and other wildlife in the palm woodland.

"It is a rich mix of habitats supporting not only thousands of wetland birds, but also hippos, lions, elephants, buffaloes and many breeding fish and amphibians," says Paul Buckley of the Royal Society for the

Protection of Birds, a UK charity which has helped protect the delta.

The Kenya Wildlife Service is thus pushing for the delta to be made a Ramsar wetland of international importance.

The Ramsar (a town in Iran) Treaty lists important wetlands that should be protected.

"We are not against the proposed developments. What we insist is that no development should take place on the delta itself," KWS director Julius Kipng'etich told the Star.

Kipng'etich says precaution should always be applied before developments in environmentally sensitive areas.

"The delta is very important for bird life, sea life and if we damage it we will damage sea life. It will lead to destruction of coral leaves where fish breed and this may kill our fishing industry," he said.

He is supported by Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai. "A proper environmental impact assessment should be carried out before any developments in the Tana Delta," she told the Star recently. "We cannot just start messing around with the wetland because we need bio fuel and sugar."

According to Matiku, the planned developments will further fuel conflicts because

the area is the only dry season grazing refuge for the nearby pastoralist communities.

The pastoralists come from Tana River, Lamu, Ijaara, Malindi and other districts.

According to figures by Nature Kenya, 335,000 cattle, 260,000 sheep, 360,000 goats, 57,000 camels, 19,000 donkeys and 105,000 chickens among others graze here during dry seasons.

The Kenya Wetland Forum, a key network of local conservation groups, says that the developments will consume more than one-third of Tana water.

"It won't be enough for the projects and downstream users," they told Nema in their submission last year.

Late last year, the Gamba Manyatta community wrote to the Minister for Lands, James Orengo, but have not received a reply.

The village hosts 800 families and when the push comes, Gamba Primary School with an enrolment of 300 pupils will also be torn down.

"We the residents are very much disappointed and dissatisfied with the intimidating verbal eviction notices forcing us out of our residential homes of the last 20 years and more," they told Orengo in their December 1 letter.

They claim efforts to seek audience with

the provincial administration were unsuccessful and in fact resulted in the shooting of a villager.

"It resulted in police firing live bullets at innocent citizens that left one Mr Farah Ibrahim with a broken leg," they said.

The shot villager was Gule's neighbour. "Where do they want us to go?" she asked the Star. "We are tired of these threats."



ADAMANT: Serah Munguti

BATTLING A JINXED HISTORY AND A UN CAMPAIGN

BY JOHN MUCHANGI

IF the planned projects on Tana River Delta take off, the challenge will be how to break a 400-year jinx.

The National Irrigation Board (NIB) confirms there are enough historical records to show that irrigation in Kenya has existed for four centuries along the lower reaches of River Tana.

However, all major irrigation projects along the river have had a surprisingly high mortality rate and the only one surviving is a wobbly 1,000-hectare scheme in Bura.

While this was blamed on poor planning, the current investors whose projects lie on the 130,000-ha delta will be battling a dogged group of activists including the United Nations.

The UN has already declared 2010 the International Year of Biodiversity to highlight the continued devastation on the world's species.

"A wide variety of environmental goods and services that we take for granted are under threat, with profound and damaging consequences for ecosystems, economies and livelihoods," said UN boss Ban Ki Moon while kicking off the campaign early this year.

Controlled irrigation in Kenya began in 1946, with the formation of the African Land Development Unit (ALDEV) and in 1966 its successor, the NIB. This began an era of government-backed irrigation projects at the Coast, some collapsing just after take off.

As if jinxed from the start, one of Kenya's best known irrigation schemes at Hola was founded in 1943 by colonialists as a holding camp for detainees. It is here that 13 prisoners were bludgeoned to death in the infamous Hola massacre in March 1959.

Although 4,800 hectares of land were set aside for irrigation, only 900 hectares have been put to use.

"Agricultural activities stopped way back in 1989 when River Tana changed its course at the Laini water intake point, leaving the scheme without water for irrigation," says the NIB.

Most of the farming families have gone back to their original homes. Only 700 families settled in six nearby villages.

The Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa however wants to resuscitate the project by injecting Sh500 million.

Then came Bura irrigation scheme, still at the coast. It was started in 1978 to settle squatters who would work on 35,000 acres of irrigated land growing cotton and maize.

About 8,000 people were initially settled there with a plan to boost the number to 65,000 within five years, says the board.

The project was funded by the World Bank, ODA, EEC, UNDP, Finnish Government, the Netherlands and the Government of Kenya. But Bura started to collapse from the word go. The project was immediately reduced to 2,500 hectares.

It functioned fairly well between 1982 and 1990 but for the next 15 years, there was little or no crop harvest due to lack of adequate irrigation water, this being attributed to either frequent breakdowns of the Nanighi Pumping Station or lack of adequate funds to operate the pumping units.

Most of the 8,000 squatters felt frustrated and took their belongings and left. The project currently irrigates only 1,000 hectares and has a population of 2,245 impoverished tenants.

The government however secured a loan from Kuwait and is rehabilitating the scheme.

Other projects that bit the dust include the Tana Delta rice project, which started in early 1990s with funding from Japan. It was washed away by El Nino rains in 1997.

The government later leased more than 13,000 hectares of lower Tana to Coastal Aquaculture Ltd for shrimp farming. The project was a stillbirth after the government withdrew the lease citing environmental concerns.

All the recently proposed projects on Tana Delta have full government backing. President Kibaki memorably said this during the official opening of the 2005 Mombasa ASK international show.

"The implementation of the Tana Delta Sugar project will be a great milestone towards ensuring our self-sufficiency in sugar," he said. "It will also create more employment opportunities for the people of this region. This is a project that we should all support."

President Kibaki said coastal communities would benefit from roads, banking and credit facilities among other economic gains that come with industrialization. Well, locals have heard this story since Hola.