

Maasai herders' exodus to land of plenty

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One sees the spiralling column of ochre-coloured dust before seeing the endless queue of cattle trudging in one direction.

The location is about 40km inside Tanzania, across the Namanga border, where hundreds of Maasai herders from Kenya have been moving with their cattle in the past few weeks to flee drought in Kajiado District.

More than 5,000 cattle have been herded across the border through bush tracks that do not pass by the official border crossing points.

Every day for the past two weeks about 200 more cattle arrive from the Kenyan side where a severe drought is biting in Kajiado and parts of Loitokitok districts, says Namanga DO William Ngolicha Kakimoni.

The herds have found pasture consisting of coarse grass and watering holes on the slopes of Longisa Hills, which are visible from Namanga.

Grazing alternative

The area is a traditional grazing alternative for Maasai pastoralists during dry seasons. Maasai inhabit both sides of the border and have accommodated each other's livestock over the years. Other herdsmen have moved deeper into Tanzania through a local agreement made between Maasai elders and authorities on both sides of the border.

Mr Kakimoni says: "The administration on our side and that of our neighbours agreed to allow our people seek grass across the border. Traditionally, there are no problems with that. We only come in so that the Government is aware in case anything happens."

Mr Peter Sunkuli, who has moved 80 cows across the border, says the journey is long, tiring and dangerous because the route is infested with wild animals.

"It takes us about two weeks to move cows from Enobelbel (near Kajiado, about 100km from Namanga) to here. We have to be ready to fight hyenas along the way to protect the cows,"

"We move them by day and night but the pace is slow because they are weak and have to stop to graze on anything green as we progress," says Sunkuli.

Branded marks

Once in the succulent valley of Longisa Hills, all the herders congregate and mix all the cattle into one large herd, each identifying their animals by branded marks.

The herdsmen set up manyattas (traditional homesteads) at the plains where they graze and water their cattle.

In most villages across Kajiado that The Standard team surveyed, only women and

children have been left behind after the men moved with the cattle.

The women tend goats, which are not moved because they are drought resistant.

The latest World Bank funded monthly drought assessment report by Kajiado Arid Lands Management Project indicates that 65 per cent of local animals have been moved to Tanzania, Nairobi, Thika, Mlolongo, Voi, and Kyulu Hills.

In Narok, many rivers have dried up as drought persists and pastoralists have moved with their animals to seek pasture elsewhere.

Narok District Veterinary Officer John Mwangi says about 6,000 cattle have been moved to Tanzania so far.

The water level of Narok-Enkare River, which serves about 100,000 residents of Narok town, is low.

The dry spell has also fuelled human-wildlife conflict with more than 800 elephants from the Masai Mara roaming about into settlement areas.

Elephants and buffalos now competing for water with humans and livestock in most parts Narok.

"The conflict has increased in water points because of this competition. The situation is serious and if it does not rain soon things could get out of hand," warns Mr Tuqa Jirmo, Kenya Wildlife Service's senior warden in Narok.

The conflict is most pronounced in Siyapei, Olonkabobok, Eor-Ekule, Lemek, Ewaso Nyiro, Katakala and in places bordering Mara Game Reserve.

Frequent forest fires

Jirmo who is also the commander of the joint Mau Forest operation says the drought has also given rise to forest fires, threatening the survival of wild animals.

"The prolonged drought has led to frequent forest fires but we are managing it with partnership between the local communities and KWS," he says.

Narok North DC Njoroge Ndirangu says intervention measures to tame hunger have been put in place, adding the situation is not yet out of control.

"The situation will be worse if it does not rain in the next three months. The drought has already started taking its toll on cattle," says the DC.

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