Troubles in the Delta

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Seed Magazine | April 27, 2009

by Maywa Montenegro

On the eastern coast of Kenya, controversy erupts over plans to turn a biodiversity hotspot into farmland for Qatar.

One hundred and twenty miles north of the Kenyan city of Mombasa, the Tana River delta is a medley of savannah, mangrove swamps, forest, and beaches?—?a complex ecological climate that is home to lions, reptiles, hippos, rare sharks, and more than 345 bird species. For centuries it has been both pasture land and fishing grounds for the local Orma and Pokomo people. And it is land that, loosely speaking, will soon be a farm in Qatar.

Last December, after Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki returned from a visit to the Gulf state, it was announced that the two nations had come to an agreement: The Qatari government would fund a $3.4 billion port off the coast of Kenya in exchange for a lease of 40,000 hectares of land on which Qatar would grow crops. The deal is but one recent example of wealthy countries?—?from the arid Middle East to meat-hungry China?—?looking beyond their borders for arable land.

Paul Matiku, director of Nature Kenya in Nairobi, has been working to stymie a controversial government plan to grow biofuels?—?sugarcane and jatropha?—?in the Tana River delta. He is alarmed at media reports of an imminent land deal with Qatar, because, he says, “details about the project have never been broached publicly.” According to Matiku, the Kenyan government doesn’t actually own a title to land in the Tana delta; it belongs to the local community. But because these pastoralists are largely illiterate and unaware of their legal rights, outsiders are now taking advantage of them. “It is unethical,” says Matiku. “If it comes to pass, it would be corruption of the highest order.” The Qatari government, he avers, should offer to help Kenya “without any strings attached,” instead of linking it to food production, and appropriating land on which Kenyans rely.

To date, says Matiku, no environmental impact assessments of the Qatari land deal are even being considered. Recently, however, Nature Kenya in conjunction with the Royal Society of London commissioned a cost-benefit analysis of the controversial sugar cane project. They calculated that revenue would amount to $15 million, but would cost $46 million in damage to economic livelihoods of people in the delta. And that $31 million loss didn’t even take into account the environmental costs. “The project scenario is a failure,” says Matiku. “Of course people must eat, but it has to be done within a plan that ensures that development and conservation do not fall in different directions.”

Matiku believes that such economic assessments could provide a persuasive argument against developing the Tana, but he’s unsure if it will change the government’s mind in the deal with Qatar. The fact that a $3.4 billion port is also part of the package, he says, will add enormous weight to the “plus” side of the calculus, while no one considers the costs of environmental pollution, or the lost bio-tourism dollars. Having just returned from two weeks in the field, where pastoralist reported frequent visitations by “people in business suits” offering to purchase their land, Matiku is unsure of what the future holds.

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