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Kenya evicts squatters from vital Mau Forest

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By [Daniel Wallis](#)

MAU FOREST, Kenya (Reuters) - Trudging out of the woods in a heavy downpour with a large sack roped to his back and two black chickens cradled in his arms, Eric arap Tuwei joins his wife and six children in a flimsy grass shelter.

The 40-year-old and hundreds of other families now camped at Kapkembu on the edge of Kenya's most important forest are at the center of a political and environmental battle that could define the fate of east Africa's biggest economy.

The fall-out from the controversy could affect the result of the next election in 2012, and could even trigger more of the ethnic bloodletting that shocked the world after the last poll.

"I'm still in shock because I don't know what to do. I just want the government to step in and sort this out," he said as thunder boomed overhead. "I was born in the forest. Everything I own is in there ... 40 years of my hard work is still in there."

Kenya's coalition government says it is vital to relocate 20,000 families that it says are doing irreversible damage to the Mau Forest Complex, the country's biggest closed-canopy forest and a vital water catchment region.

The area of southwestern Kenya is a water tower for 10 million Kenyans. But illegal settlement and deforestation have destroyed 24 percent, or 107,000 hectares (264,000 acres), of its trees over 20 years.

What happens to the Mau, which feeds Lake Victoria and the White Nile, has big implications for a region where 23 million people are afflicted by a fifth year of drought.

The forest settlers, many of whom were sold false title deeds, reject the government's position that they have no right to the land and many are fearful about where they will live now.

The controversy has split Kenya's already fragile coalition, formed last year to end post-election violence that killed at least 1,300 people and drove another 300,000 from their homes.

Opposition-leader-turned Prime Minister Raila Odinga is at the forefront of efforts to reverse the Mau destruction, which U.N. scientists say could cost Kenya's crucial tourism, tea and energy sectors alone at least \$300 million.

But his stance that any land given out illegally must be returned to the government has put the veteran Luo leader on a collision course with powerful ethnic Kalenjin politicians -- including his former right-hand man, Agriculture Minister William Ruto.

EYES ON THE PRESIDENCY

Both men have their eye on the presidency, and all of this has big implications for Kenya's next election in 2012.

Kalenjins are most affected by the Mau evictions, and Ruto led a group of lawmakers from the area to the forest outskirts last weekend to sympathize with the displaced families.

"If Raila is seeking international recognition by subjecting innocent Kenyans to inhumane conditions, he should forget support from Rift Valley in the next

polls," Ruto told them, suggesting that the prime minister was trying to burnish his "green" credentials on the world stage at their expense.

In 2007, Kalenjins voted en masse for Odinga's opposition Orange Democratic Party. Without their support, he would need another major alliance to stand any chance of winning.

But the biggest immediate fear is that politicians and elders will use the evictions to stir up ethnic hatred like last year, when the Rift Valley was engulfed by violence.

Kalenjin militia were blamed for some of the worst atrocities then, and the International Criminal Court in The Hague is investigating senior individuals from that community.

Notwithstanding the political pitfalls, the government has hailed its efforts to revitalize the Mau ahead of next month's environmental summit in Copenhagen, where protecting important ecosystems will be high on the agenda.

Forty years ago, forests covered 12 percent of Kenya, but now it is just 1.7 percent. Odinga blames the degradation on unbridled greed, irresponsibility and mismanagement of public resources.

Sitting in a makeshift shack in Kapkembu, Norah Rono hugs her three-week-old daughter Valentine as water drips through the roof. She doesn't care about the political posturing.

"I blame the government for all this. I don't have shelter for my child," she told Reuters Television. "I can't even keep myself warm here."

(Additional reporting by [Ben Makori](#); Writing by Daniel Wallis; Editing by [David Clarke](#) and [Giles Elgood](#))

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