

KENYA'S POST ELECTION VIOLENCE AND THE PLIGHT OF ITS INTERNALLY DISPLACED

By Donatella Lorch

In Kenya, presidential elections are always periods of conflict when ethnic violence erupts and tens of thousands of people are displaced. There were ethnic clashes during the presidential elections in 1992, 1997, 2002 and in 2005 during the referendum. In the post December 2007 election period, however, violence was unprecedented. In less than a few weeks an estimated 664,000 Kenyans were displaced of which 350,000 found shelter in 118 temporary tented camps. More than 78,000 houses were burned and the government estimated that about 1,300 people were killed. PeaceNet a respected Kenyan civil rights organization, believes that with the exception of police killings, 90 percent of those who died were killed by ethnic gangs. The post election violence was a huge blow to the country's overall security, economy and democratic gains.

While two waves of violence followed in close succession, in some areas, the violence erupted almost instantaneously on December 29th, 2007 when the chairman of the electoral commission of Kenya declared the incumbent president Mwai Kibaki the winner. The results were widely doubted by the media, the Commonwealth, the African Union and local and international observers. Though triggered by accusations of electoral fraud, the causes of the clashes were rooted in deep historical injustices; a strong belief held by many ethnic groups that there were massive inequalities in resources and government appointments between regions and ethnicities. At the heart was the issue of land distribution. Since independence, the successive governments have glossed over the growing conflict as well as aggravated it by distributing land to their supporters. Into that mix was a serious lack of trust with the judiciary, deepening poverty and a rapidly growing population of unemployed youth that easily turned to gang violence. Vernacular radio incited both hatred and fear while cell phones, a recent phenomenon that has revolutionized communication in Kenya, facilitated the spread of violence.

In the first weeks of 2008, violence erupted in four of Kenya's eight provinces as well as in Nairobi, the multi-ethnic capital. A survey by PeaceNet shows that the Rift Valley Province bore the largest numbers of displaced people as 49% of IDPs (internally displaced people) came from the areas between Naivasha and Eldoret. In the Rift most of the ethnic groups were displaced either in the first wave of violence or the revenge attacks that followed. Kalenjin gangs viciously attacked Kikuyu farmers around Eldoret. Kikuyu gangs retaliated. Luos and Luhyas working in the huge flower farms near Naivasha were evicted, beaten and killed by Kikuyu gangs while Kikuyus and other groups just near Nakuru were attacked by Kalenjin youth.

The international emergency response was quick and coordinated with the government. Camps were set up, psycho social workers tried to heal the scars of violence, peace committees were created, food aid was distributed and the government of Kenya began a process of supplying money to displaced families to assist them in rebuilding their homes.

Officially, there are no now longer any internally displaced people. As of January 2010, there were 25 camps, now called "transit sites." IDPs have been relocated, reintegrated, resettled. I visited the Rift recently to see whether the government had made progress in resettlement and how well the issues that had ignited the violence had been addressed. From the resettled Kenyans to United Nations, international and local NGOs, the responses were equally somber and pervaded by a deep sense of worry that peace was yet to be achieved and violence, in such a fragile environment, could easily erupt at any moment and especially during the next presidential elections in 2012.

“It wasn’t just their going back to their homes that means all is stabilized,” explained Mary Grace Chilunda, of UNOCHA, Kenya, who worked in the hardest hit areas in 2008. “It is in a recovery faze but it is not going back to normal. You can’t heal a country in a vacuum.” It is not enough to rebuild homes, relief workers and civil society organizations insist. You need security. You need justice. You need to address the overwhelming unemployment. Local peace committees cannot do this alone. So far not a single person as been brought to justice for crimes connected to post election violence.

I met Robert Opiyo, 45, a Luo pastor, living with 729 other families, mostly Luo, Luhya and Kalenjin, on four acres of land near the town of Nakuru, the Rift Valley provincial capital. The lucky ones had old army tents as homes but most people lived in quilted pieces of canvas and plastic held up by sticks that offered little protection from the searing sun or from the imminent rainy season. Robert, who had lived in these conditions now for two years, had no job other than that of a member of a local peace committee. The government had long ago stopped distributing food aid to their group, he said. Less than a kilometer away was a resettled Kikuyu community that had arrived months after Opiyo’s group. They already had mud and wattle houses, corrugated iron roofs and so far had refused to meet with Opiyo’s peace committee.

Before the violence, Mr. Opiyo had lived in Nakuru. In a whisper he told me how youths from the Mungiki, a powerful Kikuyu gang, followed him down a street, assaulted him, stripped him naked, beat him unconscious and forcibly circumcised him. He does not dare return. “They asked me for an ID card. What tribe are you, they said.”

“I am not safe in Nakuru,” he concluded. “I am not safe here in these tents.”

Kenya’s Rift Valley Province cuts a huge swath across the country from its southern border with Tanzania, sliding up past Uganda all the way up North to Sudan. This is Kenya’s largest province, ethnically mixed, its bread basket, its swing state, an essential win to any presidential candidate or as a Kenyan described it to me recently: “For the 24 years that Daniel arap Moi was President, the Rift was my country’s largest political prison,” a place where different ethnic groups were manipulated by politicians with the help of hired gangs, persecuted, displaced, kept in abject poverty and also killed.

One of the most beautiful sights in Kenya is the drive from Nairobi up the escarpment where suddenly the world drops down vertically into a wide valley. The Rift Valley spreads out below breath-taking and magical, breathing history. Extinct volcanic domes, large swaths of pasture land, twinkling lakes and on the other edge the looming slopes of the Aberdare range and the climb up into the quasi alpine region bordered by The Mau forest, once sub Saharan Africa’s second largest forest.

Yet driving down through Naivasha, Nakuru all the way up the Mau escarpment past Molo and Eldoret, the scars of the violence are still visible. With the help of the United Nations and foreign governments an estimated 26,000 houses have been rebuilt, their corrugated iron roofs glint silver in the sunlight. But again the issue of land ownerships looms large. No foreign aid can go to rebuild unless there is proof of ownership of land and big chunks of property are sitting in limbo because of court petitions. Land is also the currency of politics in Kenya. Wealthy politicians in search of votes have sold their own land to the government for resettlement to members of their ethnic group. In the dozen places we visited there was a marked disparity in services depending on the ethnic group. Almost all the groups who had mud houses with iron roofs were Kikuyu (the tribe of the president and the deputy prime minister, the two most powerful and wealthy families in Kenya), though even among the Kikuyu there are disparities such as in the tented city called Pipeline where 18,000 people live crammed together with not enough land to farm. This is officially called an integrated community. Many of them lived and worked in Sisal plantations and were attacked by Kalenjin gangs and attribute their present state to the lack of strong political connections with the ruling Kikuyu elite.

“The camps further reinforce the tribal divisions,” explained Ms. Chilunda of UNOCHA. “The system doesn’t work well for social reintegration of communities.”

In Nakuru, Kangethe Thuku, the district commissioner whose office is in charge of resettlement

and services to the displaced assured me the peace committees were very successful and that there was growing trust between different ethnic groups. “Basically, so far so good, we are trying,” he said, stressing that much rested on the success of the local peace committees. But he avoided questions on why no arrests had been made of violence perpetrators and about the role of ethnic gangs.

Everywhere I visited outside of Mr. Thuku’s office, the mood was pessimistic. Mr. Opuyu was not afraid to voice his concerns and echoed most everyone else we talked to. “No, no, no, we do not trust our government,” he insisted. In Nairobi, Mutuku Nguli, the chief executive of PeaceNet, was even more open. “Sometimes, I feel like I live in a very unfortunate country,” he explained. “Are our leaders interested in peace in this country? Peace committees cannot sort out structural issues. They cannot work in isolation of other factors.”

Suspicion, fear, distrust, anger, abject poverty and disillusionment seem pervasive among the Rift Valley’s dispossessed. The ethnic gangs, Mr. Nguli said, remain powerful and are heavily backed by certain politicians capable of rapidly sending them out on violent rampages. There is a Swahili saying, Mr. Nguli says that best describes the present situation. “Kenya has its owners: the people that with impunity get away with anything.”