

Five Years On, Kenya's Rift Valley Still Tense

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Despite public claims of reconciliation, divisions still run deep between communities.

Members of communities that were worst hit by the 2007-08 post-election violence in Kenya have told IWPR that they still live in fear of attack. Although some have returned to their homes after years living as refugees, many of them say they are too scared to remain there.

The concerns raised by these victims of bloodshed contradict what the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, ICC, was told on a recent visit – that communities in Kenya's Rift Valley had reconciled and were now living in peace with one another.

When Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda toured the valley on October 25-26, she visited a camp for displaced people in the main town, Nakuru, where she spoke to residents about the justice process for dealing with those accused of perpetrating the violence.

This region was at the epicentre of the brutal violence that erupted after a disputed presidential election in December 2007. Fierce fighting along ethnic lines left more than 1,100 dead in Kenya as a whole and 650,000 displaced, thousands of whom are still living in camps like the one Bensouda visited at Nakuru.

The ICC has charged four individuals, representing the two opposing sides in the conflict, with orchestrating the violence. Deputy Prime Minister Uhuru Kenyatta, member of parliament William Ruto, former civil service chief Francis Muthaura and radio journalist Joshua Arap Sang are set to go on trial in The Hague in April 2013.

Despite facing charges in The Hague, Ruto and Kenyatta are leading contenders in a presidential election scheduled for March, a month before the trials.

When residents met Bensouda during her tour of the region, they assured her that the various ethnic groups, particularly the Kikuyu and Kalenjin who make up the majority in the Rift Valley, were now living together peacefully and had resolved their differences.

"All displaced people have gone back to their homes. We have reconciled and we are living in peace," Anglican minister Philip Chumo from Uasin Gishu county, outside the town of Eldoret, said.

One of the people living in a camp at Nakuru told Bensouda that peace had been restored and the government was resettling people back in their home areas.

He insisted people were now moving on from the divisions created by the violence of 2007-08, and argued that the ICC process was just making things worse.

"We are living in peace," he said. "We have reconciled and our wounds have healed. They should not be reopened – we should be left alone [to] now get ready for elections."

Away from the public meeting, though, IWPR interviews with victims of the violence, particularly in Eldoret, suggested that intercommunal relations in the region remain fragile.

Wanjiru, who belongs to the Kikuyu ethnic group, fled from her farm in 2008 after her husband and two sons were killed during the post-election conflict. She came to a meeting held as part of Bensouda's tour in the Rurigi area of Burnt Forest in the Eldoret East region, but rather than join the crowd, she watched from behind a tree about 100 metres away.

She told IWPR how hard it had been to overcome the trauma, fear and anger she harboured for those who killed her family.

"I came back to my farm two months ago. But I want to go and look for somewhere else to settle next week. I cannot stay here in Burnt Forest," Wanjiru said, quickly scanning the surroundings to make sure no one could see her talking to a journalist.

With memories of the violence still fresh in her mind, she is too afraid to stay living in an area where she saw her own loved ones die and her neighbours killed and their houses burnt to the ground.

"If they see me, they will come for me, they may chase me away or even hurt me. But for sure, this is not a place to live," she said, with tears streaming down her face.

Living on her farm, she said, she was not free to move around or interact with members of other ethnic

groups.

“My life has changed; I live like a prisoner,” she said. “The government would [do better to] take me to live at the Kamiti Maximum Prison than me living here. You see, in the prison I know I will not be killed. The police warden will guard me.”

Many other interviews said in private that there had been no reconciliation between the Kikuyu and Kalenjin communities. They said they were forced to talk about peace and reconciliation in public, or risk exposing themselves to attack.

“If you stand there and start saying that we still have differences, you can be attacked even today,” another woman in Burnt Forest told IWPR. “Let no one say we are in peace.”

A man called Keino, who lost his entire family when the Kiambaa church in Eldoret was burnt to the ground in January 2008, told IWPR of his continuing fears.

The church grounds are now a memorial, with the graves of 36 people killed while seeking sanctuary, standing as mute testimony to the atrocity. Some of them have never been identified.

“I am not sure if any of my family members were buried here. I lost my entire family, my wife and our two sons,” Keino said, struggling to hold back tears.

Keino is among those who returned to Kiambaa recently after being uprooted for more than four years. But he is unwilling to remain and rebuild his life there.

While Bensouda listened to a local resident talking about the Kiambaa graveyard, Keino stood outside the perimeter wall that now surrounds it.

“I will not stay here. I am scared for my life,” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t think these people will ever accept us back. It will be hard for us to live together like before. I feel I don’t belong here.”

The 2007-08 unrest was not limited to the Eldoret region or to the Kikuyu and Kalenjin communities. Ethnic violence erupted in other parts of the country including Nairobi’s Kibera and Mathare slums, and the towns of Naivasha and Nakuru. In these areas, members of the Luo, Luhya and Kalenjin groups suffered in attacks.

The government has launched several programmes designed to resettle those uprooted by the violence. However, it has been criticised for failing to address the underlying tensions and ethnic differences that contributed to the violence.

Recent efforts by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission, NCIC, to build peace in the Rift Valley have run into trouble, as it has been hard to get politicians and local leaders to engage in meaningful dialogue.

Most of those displaced by the bloodshed still live in around 20 camps in Nakuru and Naivasha. Those who have tried to go back home have often found their homes and land occupied. Some say they have been threatened by those who attacked them during the conflict.

In the Burnt Forest area, some of the scattered houses are occupied, while others remain empty. Chebet, living in one of the small houses says intimidation has prevented all but a handful of her neighbours from returning.

“You see that home over there? The people living there are not the real owners,” she said, pointing at a farm in the distance. “I knew them [the real owners]. They were my neighbours, but they are now living in a camp in Nakuru.”

Many of those still displaced want Kenya’s government to do more to help them reclaim their land.

“The government should know that we don’t want free things,” one man told IWPR. “We want what belonged to us – our property.”

“If the government is serious, it should come to us,” another victim in Rurigi suggested. “We can give our title deeds and go with officials and security to show them our land. Once they validate our ownership, then they should buy the land and give us the money to start our lives.”

Victims say they want a platform where they can share their experiences and identify who their attackers were.

Kenya’s Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission, TJRC is about to release a report on the work it has done over the last two years to investigate human rights violations that occurred between 1963 and 2008. This very broad mandate means, however, that many of the crimes committed in 2007-08 have not been discussed.

The TJRC had a delayed start because of a controversy over the choice of its chairman.

The lack of political will to set up a special court to try cases, coupled with weak investigations, has meant that prosecutions have not taken place.

In February 2012, the Director of Public Prosecutions formed a 20-member task force to review nearly 6,000 criminal files. However, an interim report released in August revealed that hundreds of these cases would not go forward to trial because of lack of evidence.

Five years on, victims say that in order to move on from the violence, they need some measure of public acknowledgement of what happened to them.

“We suffered,” said one victim. “We don’t know how to start our lives. We need to say what happened to us, who we lost, who killed our people, who burnt our houses, or who we don’t want to stay with. If I cry it is ok; let me cry but [the pain] will come out of me,” he said.

The names of victims interviewed have been changed for reasons of security.

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