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Kenya's new geography

Posted by Kenneth Kaplan March 5, 2008 12:52 PM

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Post-election violence in Kenya has scarred the country.



People from the Luo tribe, who returned to their ancestral homeland after post-election violence, waited for food in Kisumu's Nyalande slum, Feb. 27, 2008. (Reuters)

Martha Thompson, a resident of Jamaica Plain, is Rights in Humanitarian Crises program manager for the Cambridge-based Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Accompanied by UUSC program director Atema Eclai, she is visiting Nairobi and Kenya's Western and Nyanza provinces, touring internally displaced persons sites and assessing the humanitarian situation for the UUSC.

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ELDORET, Kenya -- The two months of post-election violence that has plagued Kenya has created a new geography.

Francis, our driver, points it out to us as we drive through Kisumu in Western Kenya.

"Here is where they burned houses and shops," he points to burned out brick hulls. "Here is where the fighting was really bad. Here is where the police shot a man as he walked out of that house."

On the road to Eldoret, he points out burned stores, the stones and burned remains of tires where there were roadblocks. "That one, that was a bad roadblock."

The post election violence has left an overlay of physical scars on the country. It has changed the way people remember places.

We are travelling to Kisumu, Kakamega, and Eldoret in Western Kenya to look at who is getting left behind after the violence. We are looking to talk to people displaced by the violence and the groups that work to support them in order to get an idea of both the needs and the gaps.

We find plenty of gaps.

Thousands of Luos and Luhayas have been driven out their homes in Naivasha and Nakuru. For their own safety, they were bused east to their ethnic groups' "Ancestral homes." Churches and local groups in Kisumu organized hastily to welcome them in 3 transit centers.

Grace, a local leader, takes us to the Anglican transit center in Kisumu, which has recieved 10,000 people to date. It's all run by volunteers, on days that 800 people arrived at once, women from the town cooked around the clock, stirring huge pots on outside fires.

Tents and mosquito nets are strung along pillars of a half-built cathedral. Women carry water through what will be the nave, and children play in what will be the choir.

"Our cathedral is blessed by the displaced before it is built," says one of the volunteers as he shows us around.

Thousands of people have come, been fed and given shelter, and then sent on to their places of origin.

At the Catholic shelter in Kisumu, a group of school kids sit around a table under a tree with a seminarian who is holding an informal class. First- and second-graders clamber over each other to show their compositions and drawings accompanied by English words -- "Look at mine."

"See what I can draw," they say gleefully in Luo. One short boy with a smile that almost closes his eyes shows me his English composition, "School is better than eating ugali (cornmeal mush)."

Their resilience is remarkable. Their parents' sadness and fear shows in their eyes, but these children can find joy in the reassuring familiarity of school lessons.

Over 500,000 people are estimated to be displaced in Kenya. Half of them were in internally displaced persons camps, half with families and friends. The IDP camps were often separated by ethnic group, Kikuyu were in some camps, and Kalenjin, Luo and Luhaya in others. People from different sides of the violence were put in different camps for safety.

A large relocation of the population is now under way, as people are being transported from their home provinces to those province that were their "ancestral home," or ethnic homeland. But this solution to ethnic violence only appears simple.

Thousands and thousands of Luos were put on buses and sent to the transit camps mentioned above in Kisumu. From there, after two or three days, they were then transported to their home villages. Or as the Bishop said to us gently, "It's diplomatic to say they are at home, but for many of them there is no home, no land."

On paper, they are no longer displaced. Many will be welcomed and looked after, but for many, this is no longer home. Relatives are dead, their families moved away decades ago. Many are dropped off into villages they barely know. Urban store owners are not ready to take up life as farmers. High school kids are afraid their schooling will be interrupted. For these people, their problems are not solved, life is not yet back to normal.

Here in Elodoret, we are staying in a hotel where the parking lot is filled by jeeps of aid organizations. Eldoret has many thousands of displaced still in camps. The people who are staying in the camps are receiving aid and they are receiving attention because they are highly visible, but the people who are being resettled are receiving almost nothing, and as they disperse to the country side they become invisible to the outside world.

A grandmother talked to us this afternoon, her voice trembling as she explained she had lived in Naivasha for thirty years as a flowerseller. Now she looks after the children of her four dead daughters. She was driven from her home and forced to flee to Kisumu.

She has been brought to her "ancestral home." She has lost all her belongings and her goods. She looks at us and wonders, "How do I feed and clothe these grandchildren now?"

If resettlement is to be a building block of peace, and not a stumbling block, these people need support and they need it quickly.

For more information on the UUSC and its activities, please visit its website at www.uusc.org. For information on how you can contribute to the Passport blog, please contact the Globe's assistant foreign editor, Kenneth Kaplan, at K_Kaplan@globe.com.