

## **ACTIONAID'S WORK IN KENYA** April 2008

Kenya was very close to civil war in the recent election crisis. Roger Yates, Acting Director of Actionaid in Kenya, gave a very gripping report which is summarised here by popular request.

**Actionaid** spends £7M p.a. in Kenya, has about 5 regional offices organising work locally, employs about 300 staff, all Kenyans, and supports 300 organisations (referred to as partners).

### AIMS

- to mobilise civil society to pressurise the government to be transparent
- to tackle HIV/AIDS and Women's Rights. These 2 are closely linked and more women are affected by AIDS than men.

### Political Background

Tribal inequalities are great, e.g. the Kikuyu tribe in the centre of the country are dominant in politics, but the Luo in the west are often excluded. Roger referred to "filthy, despicable politics" with a lot of corruption. However, entrepreneurial spirit is very strong. He told 2 stories to illustrate this: A road was flooded, but a man started carrying people across for a fee; then another sold welly boots; then another made a makeshift bridge and charged tolls. A man was proclaimed "Man of the Year" for forgiving a thief, but he said he only did it to retrieve his possessions.

5 years ago Kibaki and his PNU (Party of National Unity) came to power promising to fight corruption, but it has got even worse! The Orange Democratic Movement, led by Odinga, mainly represents the Luo and stands for youth and change. These 2 parties were neck and neck before the recent election. The henchmen of former president Arap Moi have been against the government because they had lost their positions. Kibaki himself appointed the election commission and high court judges – cronies! Even the churches became politicised before the election, but have since apologised. Voting on tribal lines is reinforced by the fact that it takes place in the Christmas holidays, when many have returned to their tribal roots and this is where they vote. 60% politicians lost their seats, but Odinga won on the first day. By the third day it was clear that Kibaki was stealing the election. He got himself sworn in very fast. This meant that legally he became the president and only another expensive election could unseat him. Places went up in flames half an hour after the announcement.

Roger was frightened that he would not be able to get his children home safely, but whites were largely unmolested in this tribal competition. Immediately the country split along ethnic lines. The situation was exploited by the poor who looted as well as by those who had not been able to get land and now started ethnic cleansing to obtain it. It was no longer safe to travel; there was panic buying and people could not get telephone credit, so were cut off. The banks shut and the police were extremely violent. Militias were formed and they were on the brink of civil war. 600,000 people were displaced, with 250,000 fleeing to camps. Most are still displaced, fearing to return home.

It was impossible to work out the truth of the situation. Text messages were targeting tribes. Neighbouring countries, e.g. Uganda, were seriously affected, because their links to the coast via Kenya were disrupted and so fuel prices shot up.

Mediation was forced on the leaders by the U.S. and other African leaders. Kofi Annan was excellent, laying out the order of steps to take in his "road map".

1. stop the violence
2. humanitarian help
3. achieve a political settlement
4. deal with the underlying issues

When no. 3 failed, he sent everyone away, except the leaders. He persuaded them to ignore the election and share power. Then he tied them down to an agreement that, if the coalition failed, then there must be a new election, which no one wants because of the expense.

### ACTIONAID's response to the crisis

Immediate: Track down staff and transmit phone credit from Nairobi. Actually no staff were seriously injured. Join with other groups to press for a political settlement BUT everyone had become political and partisan, based on tribal allegiance. This includes the media, churches, musicians and ex-military people, so staff could not do an assessment or travel. Then the Red Cross allowed **Actionaid** to use the Red Cross logo on their vehicles so that they could distribute essentials such as blankets and food, and give grants to churches to provide shelter, medicines and latrines.

### Action for the Long Term

They are doing interviews with the media in Kenya and internationally, especially about violence against women and that the poor suffered the worst and need help.

Conflict considerations: Causes, e.g. inequality and injustice  
How to stop conflict becoming violent  
How to protect people if violence occurs  
Essential to be politically aware & involve the locals: what do they want?

Get food production going again: Unfortunately much planting was not done in time because of the conflict.

Establish Protection Circles and help them to become Peace Circles, preventing the re-emergence of conflict.

Restarting education: for example, **Actionaid** has paid for children to sit public exams that they missed during the unrest.

Action to improve government: consider land reform and the constitution, with a view to reducing the powers of the president.

**Actionaid** has published advice for local councils on effective spending of money received from central government, especially spreading it across the tribes of the area.

## QUESTION TIME

1. Roger hopes that lessons learnt in Kenya will help Zimbabwe.
2. Although Kisumu's town centre was destroyed, the work concerning HIV/AIDS is still going on.
3. Nairobi is relatively free of problems, but there is 18% inflation. However, tourists are coming back.
4. It is difficult to know what to do in the face of an injustice. The dilemma is that, if you go to court, the case is likely to take 5 years and meanwhile there is silence because the case is sub judice, but, if you call people out onto the streets to demonstrate, you risk violence.  
It was wonderful that when the army faced 5,000 youths demonstration in Nakuru, it did not split along tribal lines, but held together.
5. According to the constitution elections cannot be nullified.
6. Roger is fairly optimistic, but displaced people may be forced home to hostile receptions. A new constitution will come, but it probably will not deal with the land issue adequately. Useful pressure is coming from Uganda and Tanzania, which has a very good president. American pressure will count most.
7. Land Problems: The population has doubled in the last 16 years. This, combined with climate change and tribal competition for land, is hitting food production. The cost of fertilisers is rising and the government's agricultural policy supports commercial farming, including flowers for export, rather than subsistence farming.
8. **Actionaid** used to insist that the director of their work in a particular country was a foreigner, so that he was seen to be separate from the politics. However, they have changed this policy because of the need to challenge governments, who take more notice of their own nationals. Roger stepped in as Acting director for 6 months in Kenya and has now been replaced by a Kenyan.