

**Pastoralist Conflict in East Africa**  
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## **I) Introduction**

Some 500-600 million people live in the arid and semi-arid (ASAL) parts of the world and 30–40 million of them depend entirely on animals for their livelihoods. Of these 30–40 million people, 50–60 percent of them are found in Africa. The ASAL areas of the Horn of Africa it makes up to 70% of the total land area contain the largest grouping of pastoralists in the world. According to statistics 70 percent of cash income is generated from livestock alone<sup>1</sup> (Mkutu, 2003)

Cattle ownership forms the bulk of social interaction in these communities. The pressures over access to grassland and water sources have made crossing into other pastoral territories risky.

Cattle rustling form the basis of pastoralist culture. Pastoralist lives are ordered in relation to livestock and the land around which they live. All the ethnic groups in the region own large herds of cattle as their most treasured possessions and do not hesitate to defend their stock. There is high social prestige and prominence attached to cattle possession. No wonder cattle raiding takes place to serve various purposes, including "restocking after drought or disease, obtaining cattle for bride wealth, demonstrating the bravery of new warriors, and initiating boys into manhood. The new weaponry (SALW), as opposed to the traditional spear and arrow, has led to increasing conflicts and made raiding an attractive commercial venture. Cattle rustling now draw on small arms readily available to the pastoralists. The inability to control the influx of small arms continues to create security concerns. ( Mkutu, 2003)

### **Key Questions:**

- a. How does the proliferation of arms contribute to violence among the pastoralist communities of East Africa?
- b. Why are previously law-abiding citizens' resorts to arms in settling disputes?

This paper explores how conflicts in the region has contributed to the proliferation of weapons in East Africa and how insecurity has led to the emergence of vigilante groups and autonomous security forces, further plunging pastoralists into anarchy. Small arms have become a "necessity for ensuring access to resources and human security in the absence of state authority.

## **II) Pastoralist & Conflicts in Eastern Africa**

Pastoralist's areas of Easter Africa experience some of the most intense conflicts between and among communities.

### **Threats to Pastoralism**

Pastoralism is under threat in East Africa due to a range of factors including:

- a. Weak governance

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'pastoralist' is used to describe a person for whom the herding of domestic animals on open bushland is the dominant economic activity (Bolvin, Mette & Manger Leif, 1990)

- b. Inadequate land and resource management policies;
- c. Political and economic marginalization of pastoral groups; and
- d. Increasing insecurity, resulting from cattle raiding fueled by growing access by all sides to small arms and light weapons.

### **Current patterns of conflict**

Conflict has occurred in recent years at three distinct but inter-connected levels:

- a. Those within or between pastoral communities at local level; (Example Pokot, Turkana, Karamojong, and between Marakwet or Somali clans)
- b. Those between pastoral communities and non-pastoral communities at local level (e.g. in Laikipia Samburu and Kikuyu )
- c. Those that have taken on a wider regional dimension e.g. conflict in Karamoja area Turkana, Dodoth (Kenya-Uganda and Ethiopia communities)

Some of the factors that contribute to growing conflict between the pastoralists communities<sup>2</sup>include;

- a. The vicious circle of cattle raid/counter-raid that has led to dangerously low levels of livestock.
- b. Drought which has increased (and has been acute since 1999), steadily reducing the amount of pasture and water available. This has provoked greater need for movement and made clashes more likely.
- c. Vigilante groups of armed youth have proliferated and the border area has in recent years seen the emergence of local businessmen/warlords, whose economic activities span cattle raiding, small arms sales and drugs and who are at the center of incipient regional criminal networks linked in turn to wider international networks.
- d. Official government structures are often conspicuous by their absence. Where interventions have taken place they have been poorly coordinated and executed, too often taking a narrow definition of security that has focused on more-or-less coercive disarmament without focusing sufficiently on providing viable economic alternatives to those whose livelihoods have become dependent on the gun. This has been demonstrated once again during the forcible disarmament campaign being waged in the Karamoja region by the Ugandan People's Defense Force since February 2002 which has actually led to increased resentment, insecurity and violence and the further weaponisation of communities.
- e. Finally, traditional structures of authority within the communities have been gravely weakened – as have some of the cultural restraints upon violence that operated in the past.

### **III) The Role of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)**

The relative ease of acquisition and low cost of small arms has enabled the pastoral communities to guarantee a sustained market. Some sources estimate that in 2003 there were as many as 150,000–200,000 firearms in the Karamoja region of Uganda alone. While the exact number of

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<sup>2</sup> Impact of small arms and light weapons on conflict, security and human development (Module 3), International crisis group.

small arms in the hands of pastoral communities is difficult to assess, it is clear that the threat posed by them is enormous (Mkutu, 2003)

### *Why pastoralists are arming themselves*

Pastoral communities seem to have been arming themselves for several reasons.

- a. They need to protect themselves against being plundered by hostile groups.
- b. The weapons are used to defend their animals against other armed pastoral communities.
- c. Arms are used forcefully to steal stock from other pastoral communities, often for revenge: guns are an economic investment. In Karamoja region in 1998, a bullet could be used as bus fare or to buy a glass of beer. In the past, it appears as if bullets were used to pay for goods in shops, although these days are now gone. The arms issue is a cross-border problem and arms acquisition is now both a cause and consequence of insecurity and conflict in the Kenya-Uganda border area.

### *Factors exacerbating conflicts in pastoral areas*

According to Mkutu (2003) the following factors exacerbate conflicts in pastoral areas;

- a. Commercialization of cattle raiding: The transformation of cattle raiding into a commercial and entrepreneurial activity has increased the intensity of that raiding and is leading to major changes in economic, social and political structures in the border area. It is creating a black market for commercial cattle trading that straddles the localities, urban areas and the wider region. Access to small arms has become essential to successful commercial cattle raiding.
- b. Disarmament: Authorities have often used force against pastoral communities, sometimes in the context of efforts at disarmament. Since 1979, there have been 12 operations by the Kenyan army to try and retrieve unlicensed arms from the Pokot. According to local community representatives, these operations have often targeted innocent people. Disarmament efforts regularly prompt resistance and things can spiral out of control.
- c. Insecurity and increased arming of communities: Insecurity has triggered further arming of communities, sometimes with official support or complicity. This has given rise to vigilante groups. While such vigilantes often had initial success in reducing levels of insecurity, thereby garnering some community support, in the longer-run they have proven a force for further insecurity as they have resorted to banditry and other illegal activities. Many have been organized into the Kenya Police Reserve (KPR) supplied with arms and ammunition by the authorities.
- d. The lack of a coherent and consistent strategy to address issues of insecurity: Disarmament initiatives have also failed to properly take into account the fact that they threaten livelihoods, however problematic these may be for peace and security in pastoralist's areas. Similarly, periodic demobilization programs such as that in Uganda between 1992–95 have thrown more young men into semi-destitution. Many have rapidly gravitated towards armed cattle raiding and armed rebellion such as that being pursued in northern Uganda by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).
- e. The arming of one community, has inevitably lead to others demanding arms for protection, resulting in further proliferation of small arms across the region. In turn, poorly conceptualized and coordinated disarmament has often simply meant that small arms circulate to those areas where it is not taking place.

#### **IV) Diversion**

Weapons and ammunitions intended for the military often being diverted from the source ending up in the hands of criminals of non-military personnel. Cattle raiders get the weapons that are diverted and trafficked from buyers whom they have social ties and from prohibited gun possessors who provide guns to such persons through secondhand sales, and other arrangements. Many obtain their firearms from local sources. There is also evidence that crime guns recovered from someone other than the first purchaser have a shorter time to crime if the purchaser was less than 25 years of age, had made a prior purchase(s) of a gun(s) recovered by police, lived in an area with higher levels of gun crime, was a family member or known associate of the final gun possessor, or lived near the possessor or one of the possessor's associates

#### **V) Human and environmental impact of small arms**

According to Mkutu (2003) the widespread availability of SALW is a threat to human security because

- a. Their presence encourages violent rather than peaceful ways of resolving problems, and negate confidence- and security-building measures. Incidents of banditry, armed highway attacks and vicious cycle of revenge attacks has been found to be escalate arms races between rival communities.
- b. The unregulated circulation of SALW to a wide range of unaccountable and untrained actors also contributes to violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.
- c. Even after a conflict has officially ended, SALW often remain in the conflict zone in the hands of ex-combatants, civilians and criminals, making it easy for fighting to restart. Even when further combat is avoided, small arms become tools of other forms of violence, such as criminal activity, ethnic and political rivalries, and interference with efforts to deliver food, medicine, and supplies to people in dire need of relief.
- d. Refugees are often afraid to return to their homes because of the large number of weapons that remain in the hands of ex-combatants who have not been demobilized or have become affiliated with local gangs, warlords, or militias.
- e. While some people may feel that they and/or their families are made more secure by owning a weapon, particularly in situations where governments cannot protect their citizens, this arming of civilians can create a feeling of insecurity among other members of the community.
- f. More deaths, injuries and accidental wounding are likely during quarrels and disagreements if a weapon is available in households.
- g. Psychological consequences such as trauma may also result.
- h. Meanwhile, the proliferation of criminal, domestic and anti-state violence can lead governments to commit resources to security rather than development.
- i. The highest percentage of both perpetrators and victims of SALW violence are men who see weapons as symbols of 'courage', 'masculinity' or 'honor'. A man without a gun in zones of conflict is often not considered "a real man". For women it increases the threat of intimidation and abuse. Sexual and gender-based violence is also often committed against men and boys.

## **Ongoing Local initiative to mitigate conflicts in pastoralists' areas:**

Community-based initiatives:

### **POKATUSA (Pokot, Karamoja, Turkana and Sebei)**

POKATUSA was a peace-building cross-border project originally established in June 1997, whose name is an acronym of the first two letters of Pokot, Karimojong, Turkana and Sebei. It operated in four districts in Kenya and two in Uganda. It was coordinated by World Vision (WV) and funded by DIFD. However, it layed relatively dormant until March 2001 and was a relatively new actor on the scene. POKATUSA had two structures that deal with peace and security issues: the District Peace and Reconciliation Committee (DPRC) and the Location Peace and Reconciliation Committee (LPRC). Membership of the DPRC comprised of local MPs, District Commissioners, teachers, senior fighters, LDUs, traditional healers, women and church leaders. The LPRC comprised of the same membership less the MPs and District Commissioners. The DPRCs and LRPCs acted as an early warning system when cattle raids were imminent and sought to recover raided cattle.

POKATUSA later established a Joint Venture Committee (IJVC) that included representatives of national governments, MPs and religious leaders from Kenya and Uganda. The main objective of this committee was to influence policies through lobbying and advocacy. They were also mandated to supervise POKATUSA projects on the ground. Members of the committee participated in a number of international conferences and peace meetings and are lobbying for follow-up funding, given that the project ended in September 2004. There appeared to be growing doubts as to the effectiveness of the project and mutual recriminations over who is to blame for the problems that arose.

Others are:

- Catholic Justice and Peace (CJPC)
- National Council of Churches of Kenya
- District Peace Committees

## **Bibliography**

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