

Tribal Rage Tears at Diverse Kenyan City

In a Flash, Neighbors Turn on One Another; At Least 110 Killed



Police battled thousands of opposition supporters across Kenya who charge President Mwai Kibaki stole his way to re-election. The violence started in the days following the election and Kibaki's defeated opposition challenger Raila Odinga accused Kibaki of tampering with the tallying process. The riots continue as hundreds are already reported dead. (

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ELDORET, Kenya, Jan. 2 -- One after another, bandaged men and women offered chilling details: that a swarming mob of machete-wielding men chained the front door of a mud-and-steel church, trapping about 100 people, mostly women and children, inside.

The mob shoved mattresses against the outside walls, doused them with gasoline and tossed a match.

Those inside who tried to escape through windows were hacked to death with machetes.

But for Joseph Njuguna, who rested in the sun outside a hospital Wednesday, his head and hands bandaged from fighting off a machete blade, there was one detail that disturbed him more than all the others: a familiar face in the screaming mob.

"Paul," said Njuguna, who is from the Kikuyu tribe, referring to a man from a different tribe. "He's my neighbor. He is my friend. I did not think that Paul could do something like that."

Since Sunday, when President [Mwai Kibaki](#) was declared winner of an election amid charges of vote-rigging, a massive wave of house burnings has overwhelmingly targeted members of his

ethnic group, the Kikuyus, who have been driven from their homes by the tens of thousands, according to victims, aid workers and local officials.

Perhaps nowhere have Kenyans been transformed so quickly from ethnically integrated neighbors into tribal warriors than in this western city, which has been the scene of previous bouts of ethnic fighting, but not on this scale.

The situation has quieted in [Nairobi](#) and elsewhere across the country, but here in [Eldoret](#), scores of houses were burned to the ground Wednesday.

Some of the attackers call themselves Raila's Army, for fiery opposition leader [Raila Odinga](#), who says the election, initially praised for its openness and high turnout, was stolen from him by a Kikuyu elite that refuses to relinquish power. Massive rallies are planned for Thursday, offering a chance for the venting of anger or creating a venue for larger confrontations between protesters and police.

In Eldoret, though some of the gangs are composed of Odinga's ethnic Luo community, the mobs are overwhelmingly made up of Kalenjin, who consider the land here historically theirs and appear to be waging a war against what they consider to be entrenched Kikuyu power.

For generations, Kikuyus have settled here among dozens of other ethnic groups, but they are now being distilled from the mix -- flushed out of their cosmopolitan neighborhoods into frightened huddles in schools, churches and police stations by bow-and-arrow-wielding mobs that roam the city.

Officials said that at least 110 people had been killed here since Monday, and because of the prevailing insecurity, at least 50 bodies still lay in the roads.

"They are saying, 'Go back,' " said Salome, a Kikuyu afraid to give her last name, who was waiting at the Eldoret airport on Wednesday with several hundred others trying to catch a flight out. "They are saying all the Kikuyus must go away -- back to their home province."

On one road leading out of Eldoret, perhaps 1,000 men armed with machetes manned a roadblock, preventing aid workers and police from entering while checking for Kikuyus on buses leaving the city, according to residents who tried to pass.

On Wednesday, three burned bodies were scattered there in the road.

An army truck transporting rifle-carrying soldiers attempted to evacuate about 30 people but was stopped by gangs demanding that Kikuyus get out of the vehicle. The driver tried to barrel through but turned around after two people inside were shot with arrows, according to occupants of the truck.

"I don't think right now there's a feeling of national identity, even among national leaders," said the Catholic bishop of Eldoret, Cornelius Kipng'eno Arap Korir, who noted that his church is hosting 10,000 people, mainly Kikuyus whose homes have been torched. "What comes first is your people."

In the green grass of the church courtyard, Jidraph Muiruri, a Kikuyu mason, was among scores of people camped out amid foam mattresses and heaps of belongings. He said Kalenjin gangs burned 50 homes in his neighborhood and then warned the remaining residents to leave.

"They said they'd burn all the houses -- and us -- if we didn't go by 9 a.m.," he said, adding that he recognized people with whom he had traded timber and milk for years. "They want us to go back to our motherland."

The fundamental problem, he said, was a flawed election that had polarized communities against Kikuyus, who have been demonized for what many perceive as government favoritism.

"They see us as Kikuyu, not Kenyan," Muiruri said.

On the edge of town, the remains of the Assemblies of God church still smoldered Wednesday, a day after the attack.

Strewn about were piles of corn, cooking pots, half-melted thermos bottles, a baby's shoe, a boot and a tangled pile of charred bicycles. Though accounts of the attack varied, many survivors said they had fled to the church after their homes were burned.

They were cooking beans, washing clothes and trying to go about their daily life when the fighters appeared in the distance, across a fallow field. The men were singing and looting farms of cows and goats along the way, witnesses said.

"They were burning houses," said Joseph Mugweru, 50, who was at the church and saw them coming.

Some of the men at the church prepared to defend themselves; women, the elderly and children huddled inside. And as the fighters approached, Mugweru said, he noticed several of his neighbors among them.

"Even some were calling us by name," he said. "They were murmuring in their own language. Then they came all at once."

The men at the church were overwhelmed. Some of the people fled into the field, but others were forced back into the church and trapped. Then the flames came, and, according to one survivor, "people started falling on one another at the door."

"The fire was too much," the woman said, speaking on condition of anonymity because she feared another attack.

She said two babies, 3 days and 8 months old, were among the dead.

[Red Cross](#) officials pulled 14 bodies from the rubble, fewer victims than originally feared, though the count might rise. Most of the bodies were burned so thoroughly that it was difficult to determine their sex.

Three bodies were found outside with gashes to the head.

At a hospital Wednesday, dozens of survivors, including elderly men and babies, rested in a courtyard with burns on their faces, arms and legs.

One man said that although he was bitter, reconciliation with his old neighbors was still possible.

In Nairobi, international diplomats have been pressuring Kibaki and Odinga to reach a political compromise, though it was unclear whether Odinga's most strident supporters would accept anything less than their leader becoming president.

Inside the hospital, hallways were filled with hundreds more people with machete and arrow wounds. The bandaged survivors described marauding fighters sweeping through their neighborhoods, burning houses and beating anyone who did not flee.

Omar Aly, deputy director of the hospital and a resident of Eldoret for 20 years, said the fighting was "the worst I've seen."

"The emotions that have been generated are so intense," he said, referring to the convictions among opposition supporters that the vote was rigged. "People have been living together, and all of a sudden they are turning against their neighbors."

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