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USIPeace Briefing

Moving Beyond Relief: The Challenges of Settling Kenya's Internally Displaced

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Synopsis

Kenya's post-election violence has displaced more than 600,000 persons within the country since December 2007. Although violence-induced displacement is not a new phenomenon in Kenya, the magnitude, speed and intensity of this displacement were unprecedented. Clashes in the 1990s, also around general elections, displaced hundreds of thousands of Kenyans, many of whom remain displaced today. The new coalition government has made the resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) a top priority, launching "Operation Return Home" in May.

On June 17, 2008, USIP held a panel discussion on this subject. Panelist Dr. Jacqueline Klopp of Columbia University placed the current displacement within the larger context of recurrent violence and displacement in Kenya. Warigia Bowman, from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, highlighted the needs of IDPs, particularly vulnerable populations, as they pertain to relief and justice. [Dorina Bekoe](#), Senior Research Associate at USIP's [Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention](#), moderated. This USIPeace Briefing integrates the discussions at the meeting into a larger analysis of the Kenyan government's approach to resettling IDPs.

Political Competition: Proximate Cause of Displacement

A pattern of violence and associated displacement around Kenyan elections began to form with the advent of multiparty politics. The Kenyan Human Rights Commission reported that from 1991 to 1996, more than 1,500 people died and almost 300,000 were displaced in the Rift Valley, Nyanza, and Western provinces as a result of politically motivated clashes.¹ As the 1997 general elections approached, violence broke out again, this time in the Coast province, against those suspected to support the opposition party. Estimates place the number of deaths from those clashes at more than 100, with more than 100,000 displaced. According to the U.N. Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, at the end of 2007 there were still 380,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the 1990s clashes.

The amended constitution that reinstated multiparty general elections in Kenya requires a successful presidential candidate to not only obtain a plurality of the presidential votes but also win a minimum of 25 percent of the presidential votes cast in at least five of the eight provinces. This provision has been the underlying motivation for the violence, particularly in communities that had long benefited from the patron-client relationship with the ruling KANU party. Over time, ethnic groups suspected of supporting the opposition have been systematically displaced and disenfranchised.²



Map of Kenya (University of Texas Libraries)

Forced evictions and displacement were also crucial in releasing land for relocation to consolidate political support. This process has been facilitated by inadequate laws and a weak judicial system which allowed land to be used as a patronage resource.³ Following the clashes of the 1990s, the government slowly consolidated and legitimized land and property improperly acquired as a result of the "ethnic" violence. Those that had been pushed out of their land and property could not seek redress through the legal system, since the authorities were unlikely to enforce the law in their favor. As a result, the "madoadoa" (a derogatory term in Swahili meaning "spots,"—denoting "outsiders" not belonging to the Rift Valley) were temporarily evicted from various parts of the valley.⁴

The violence associated with the 2007 elections came as no surprise to those who recalled the clashes in the previous decade. However, few anticipated the magnitude of violence or the level of animosity witnessed in many parts of Kenya. By the end of February 2008, it was estimated that over 1,000 people had died and about 600,000 people were internally displaced from six out of the eight provinces.

In response to the massive displacement, the Kenyan Red Cross Society (KRCS) and other relief organizations established about 200 camps to provide shelter, food and social services for approximately half of the IDPs. The other half sought refuge in the homes of friends and family members. Although there were some gaps, many note that the KRCS and other relief organizations in Kenya largely responded efficiently and met many of the IDPs' initial needs.

Beyond Humanitarian Relief

With the establishment of a coalition government on April 14, 2008, there was a need to transition from humanitarian relief to more permanent solutions for the IDPs. Their return from camps to their previous homes has significant political and economic implications for the new government. The government's National Reconciliation and Emergency Social and Economic Recovery Strategy (released in April) prioritizes quick resettlement, citing: promoting development (particularly in the agricultural sector); improving the national image abroad; preventing IDP camps from becoming fertile grounds for recruitment into militias and criminal gangs; and enhancing human rights of those displaced.⁵ The continued existence of IDP camps was also a constant reminder of the fragile peace in a country that had long set itself as an oasis of stability in a troubled region. As Klopp noted, "it was really no surprise that the first camp to face closure was at the Nairobi Show grounds."

From the onset, the president's office indicated its preference for the return—rather than relocation—of IDPs. Relocation (the option of resettlement to other regions) posed many challenges to the fragile peace. The government had to assure its actions did not sanction and reify the intentions of those who perpetrated the violence. Furthermore, the potential that resettlement would further balkanize an already highly fractured society was genuine.⁶ Facilitating the return of IDPs to their previous homes, while challenging, appeared to be the better option.

While the government pushed for the return of IDPs, parliamentarians representing the affected regions criticized what they viewed as a rushed plan. They argued that the resettlement was driven primarily by political expediency without a full appreciation of the underlying causes of the conflict or conditions necessary to ensure success. They explained the difficulties in guaranteeing the security of returning IDPs. Many local politicians have expressed their reluctance to fully support resettlement; explaining that doing so would constitute political suicide in an environment in which hostilities are still rife. Nonetheless, a tour of camps in the Rift Valley by a high-level government delegation in April 2008 marked the beginning of an expedited resettlement operation.⁷

Operation "Return Home"

The discussion on resettlement entered a new phase when the Ministry of Special Programmes, Internal Security and Provincial Administration launched "Operation Rudi Nyumbani" (Operation "Return Home" in Kiswahili), targeting IDPs in camps, on May 5, 2008. The operation promised IDPs incentives like free transportation, food aid. The government pledged to construct 70,000 housing units and 34 police stations in the most volatile areas and provide compensation packages.⁸

Government sources have offered conflicting views of initial progress. While some of them point to successes (citing the return of some 214,000 IDPs and the construction of 30 new police stations), others, like National Planning Minister Wycliffe Oparanya have admitted that the government lacks funds to erect the pledged homes or provide adequate compensation. Instead, the government plans to offer the paltry sum of 10,000 shillings to 4,000 households.^{9 10}



Displaced women at the Jamhuri Park show ground, where hundreds of families had taken refuge after the violence, in January 2008. (AP Photo)

Many observers are concerned that this exercise has not been carried out voluntarily or with sufficient consultation from IDPs and engaged civil society. Moreover, the active engagement of the military, the closure of camps, the placement of conditions on assistance and the decision to proceed with the return of IDPs without assurance of security have led some to question the voluntary nature of this process.

Furthermore, there is a sense that IDPs are not being consulted. As Klopp noted, "It is interesting—the way in which we think about IDPs. They become people who should be managed, although they were active citizens prior to the displacement. We should think of IDPs as a resourceful people with skills and rights. Without that approach, the government is making many avoidable mistakes." As Bowman pointed out, involving IDPs in the resettlement process forestalls placing the instigators of violence against IDPs into powerful positions within an operation that requires the rebuilding of trust for a traumatized people. This step also assures that vulnerable populations such as orphans, abandoned children, the elderly victims of sexual assault and the terminally ill will be protected. While civil society has been highly engaged in resettling the IDPs, the government has hardly included these efforts in the general strategy.

Tension and localized violence in some areas continue to prevent the large-scale reintegration or return of the displaced into communities. Those who attempted to return have faced attacks in various areas despite the existence of newly built police camps.¹¹ On July 17, 200 persons who had attempted to return to Ngirimoli, Kunyak and Kipkelion districts in the Rift Valley were displaced once more to Nakuru district. This group cited continued insecurity, and lack of food and shelter.¹² It is clear that the security of the IDPs is intrinsically linked to local reconciliation efforts. Although the government and other actors have initiated reconciliation efforts, much more needs to be done.

Inadequate funding has hampered the delivery of basic services and adequate compensation to IDPs. Government efforts to secure additional support from the international community have met with very little success. Out of the 30 billion shillings earmarked for the entire resettlement exercise, less than one billion has been raised. For IDPs who have lost significant amounts of wealth and property in the violence, the 10,000 shillings offered is insufficient to rebuild their lives. They remain in camps hoping for more support.¹³

Reality on the ground sharply contrasts the success stories lauded by the government. Rather than return to their homes, IDPs leaving the campsites have established more than 134 transit camps near their previous residences, particularly in the farming areas of Uasin Gishu, Trans Nzoia, Kwanza and Molo districts within the Rift Valley province. IDPs farm and work during the day but spend the night at transit camps, fearful of their hostile neighbors.¹⁴ In Molo District for instance, some observers believe that the vast majority of the 60,000 IDPs who are estimated to have left the government-sponsored camps now live in transit camps.¹⁵ The continued existence of these camps reflects the degree of unresolved hostility and the inability of the government to assure its citizens' safety.

The Pervasive Nature of Displacement

As the government continues to announce the hundreds of thousands of IDPs who have returned—or perhaps more accurately moved to transit camps—there is the temptation to declare the resettlement process a *fait accompli* rather than make preparations for long-term engagement to address a rather complex problem. In Kenya's National Reconciliation and Emergency Social and Economic Recovery Strategy, there was a proposal to establish the Government Resettlement and Reintegration Committee (GRRC) to study the causes of displacement and propose legislation, policy and other

mechanisms to mitigate future occurrences. While the formation of the GRRC is a sign that the government is willing to engage the IDP issue, its limited mandate undermines its potential effectiveness.¹⁶

The government intends to prioritize resettlement and then pursue attendant issues such as constitutional review and land disputes. However, for those who have been displaced repeatedly since the clashes of 1990s, more concrete assurances are needed that action now will prevent violence at the next general elections. Thus far, there is no sense that the present strategy recognizes the interrelation between resettling IDPs and broader institutional reforms.

To address perceived historical land grievances, there is a growing push to enact the first National Land Policy, drafted by the Kenya Land Alliance, a non-profit, non-partisan network. Klopp sees this policy as a first step in creating a systematic treatment of land and property in Kenya to reduce the likelihood of illegal land seizures. In order to buttress this effort, there needs to be ongoing dialogue to ensure that it envisions and facilitates the changing relationship between land, alternative sources of wealth and opportunities for livelihood for many Kenyans.¹⁷ As Klopp noted, "There needs to be a serious public discussion in Kenya about the land grievances, the nature of violence and the extent to which they are linked or not linked. We must be careful not to divert from the real sources of conflict."

Due to the strong political undertones of displacement in Kenya, IDPs have become a very sensitive issue. As a result, displaced persons tend to "disappear" from consciousness and are re-imagined as the poor, without appreciation for their peculiar circumstances.¹⁸ As the IDPs move out of sight, the causes of violence and displacement move out of mind, leaving the underlying conflict unresolved. In turn, this increases the probability for even more election-related violence in the future.

Conclusion

There is an urgent need for the Kenyan government to develop and implement effective solutions for the IDPs. Considering the increasing intensity and magnitude of violence and displacement, Kenya can no longer afford to ignore or neglect the issue. Thus, the resettlement of IDPs is a key component of assuring Kenya's long-term stability. The government should provide the means and assure the conditions necessary for the displaced to voluntarily and safely return to their homes, relocate, and reintegrate into the host communities. In particular, the government must address security issues—beyond building police posts—to promote and facilitate community level reconciliation. Although keeping IDPs high on the national agenda is a key first step, the government must not beguile itself into believing that once IDPs have largely moved out of the main camps the task is over. Towards this end, the government must adopt a comprehensive approach that signals a clear break with the past.

Notes

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