

Violent attacks on striking Kenyan teachers

Terry Cook
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President Daniel Arap Moi's government in Kenya has unleashed a wave of state violence against a national strike called by the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT). Up to 240,000 teachers struck this week, in the midst of the national examination period, following the government's refusal to honor a wages agreement it signed with the KNUT at the end of 1996.

Hundreds of riot police armed with tear gas, whips and rungs (clubs) have occupied and surrounded union offices throughout the country to stop KNUT officials and teachers from entering or gathering in demonstrations outside. In towns and villages striking teachers are being set upon and beaten by riot police and vigilante groups organised and armed by the government.

Police in full combat gear used tear gas against hundreds of teachers in Nairobi who were trying to assemble outside the unions headquarters. Baton-wielding police officers chased teachers through the streets, beating and arresting scores of them. In Mombassa the police violently dispersed hundreds of strikers who were attempting to converge on the city's treasury building.

In the town of Milindi riot police attacked 400 teachers and threw them out of public transport vehicles when they tried to enter the town for a rally. A demonstration by 2,000 strikers in Vihiga was broken up by tear gas and baton attacks. Many strikers, parents and students were badly injured in baton charges in Isiolo. Those attacked included one blind teacher.

Similar brutality was meted out against striking teachers in the towns of Kajiado, Taveta, Kerico, Kitui and Kilifi and Thika, when they gathered to hear union officials report on the progress of the strike.

In Kilifi running battles between the police and the strikers brought the entire business district to a halt. In Nyeri, media reporters covering the dispute were badly beaten by police and their cameras were smashed.

Union officials in Kuria were forced to flee their homes after being attacked by vigilantes who threatened to lynch them if the strike went ahead.

A union spokesman said: 'The teachers are not armed and neither are they violent. It beats reason to have fully armed officers running after teachers who are just chanting for their rights.'

The government has organised a scab force of school principals and education officials in an attempt to keep schools open and supervise examinations. The government refuses to pay the second instalment of a 150 to 200 percent wage increase, set to be paid in stages over five years. Teachers are paid as little as 2,700 shillings (\$45) per month.

The wage rise was granted, along with other public service pay increases, prior to national elections in December 1996 which returned the Moi regime to power for a fifth term. Once in office the government claimed it faced severe budgetary problems and only conceded the first wage instalment after teachers went on strike for 11 days last October.

Early this year the administration introduced legislation to nullify the agreement after the International Monetary Fund suspended a key loan to Kenya on the grounds of poor governance and official corruption. The government backed away from the legislation only after teachers went on a two-day national strike in June.

Last month Education Minister Kalonza Musyoka said the pay agreement was the 'single most important challenge to the government's plans to reform the economy' in line with the requirements laid down by the IMF and World Bank.

World Bank Representative Harold Wackham issued a tough statement demanding that the government implement cuts to public expenditure and privatise the Kenya Posts and Telecommunications Corporation. Kenya owes \$8 billion to major overseas banks and

financial institutions.



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