

Kenyan Mau Mau seek compensation from British government

Jean Shaoul
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Veterans of the Mau Mau rebellion are demanding billions of Kenyan shillings in compensation from the British government for war crimes committed against them. The Mau Mau was a secret association that fought against British rule in Kenya in the 1950s for land and political freedom.

The veterans of the Mau Mau say that the British government should admit responsibility for the loss of life, property and the pain inflicted upon hundreds of thousands of Kenyans during what the colonialists dubbed the “Emergency” from 1952 to 1960. They added that, if necessary, they would sue the British government at the International Court of Justice if it did not admit liability.

The Mau Mau movement began in 1946-47 and precipitated possibly the gravest crisis in the history of Britain's African colonies. The Mau Mau was a rebellion of landless peasants and low-paid labourers in Nairobi, Kenya's capital. In many respects it was a civil war between the rich and poor.

Largely confined to the Kikuyu tribe, the Mau Mau rebels were poorly armed with no outside source of weapons and little financial support. Nevertheless, it took more than four years to put down the rebellion. This required the mobilisation of 21,000 paramilitary police, many thousands of armed “loyalist” Africans, plus the equivalent of a full division of British troops supported by the Royal Air Force with jets and bombers. The State of Emergency did not officially end until 1960.

There were several sources of discontent among the Kikuyu peoples. Impatient with the lack of progress being made by the Kenyan African Union led by Jomo Kenyatta, later to become Kenya's first prime minister, they sought land reform, social justice, the end of the colour bar, and freedom from British rule. They believed that armed struggle was the only solution.

The colonial government of Kenya refused to accept that the Mau Mau was a political movement. Instead, it claimed that it was a “crime wave”.

The Kenyan governor, Sir Evelyn Baring, a member of the wealthy Baring banking family and son of the first British ruler of Egypt, appealed to the British government and in October 1952, a State of Emergency was declared.

Nationalist leader Jomo Kenyatta was arrested as the “evil genius” behind the Mau Mau, along with 186 others thought to be Mau Mau leaders.

Kenyatta was convicted and sentenced to seven years hard labour after a blatantly rigged trial. As D.L. Pritt, the defending counsel, said, “This is the most childish weak case made against any man in any important trial in the history of the British Empire.”

Contrary to expectations, the arrests provoked greater opposition. About 30,000 Mau Mau took up arms and retreated into the forest in the mountainous area north of Nairobi. The movement grew. They won some surprising victories against the British army.

The rebels were portrayed at the time, and subsequently, as gangsters who indulged in primitive oath-taking ceremonies, cannibalism, witchcraft, devil worship and sexual orgies, terrorised white settlers and mutilated white women and children. The settlers described it as the most brutal, bloodthirsty, murderous uprising of black men against white in the history of mankind.

The best selling novel *Something of Value*, by Robert Ruark, reinforced this official version of “black savagery”. In 1957 it was made into a motion picture starring Rock Hudson and Sidney Poitier. Prime Minister Winston Churchill even narrated a prologue to the movie.

The reality was somewhat different. In all, the actual number of white civilians killed during the uprising was 32, while the number of African civilians killed by Mau Mau was officially put at 1,819.

The treatment of the Mau Mau and the Kikuyu during and after the “Emergency” was truly savage. It remains one of the most infamous episodes of British colonial history and fully vindicates historian C.L.R. James's famous statement: “The cruelties of property and privilege are always more ferocious than the revenges of poverty and oppression.”

The government encouraged the white settlers to take up arms against the Mau Mau. The settlers set up their own vigilante groups to protect their farms from the rebels. They often hired other Africans to do their killings for them and shot suspected Mau Mau with impunity.

The Home Guard organised a reign of terror against the Kikuyu. They took whatever they wanted from families who supported the Mau Mau. Others threatened to denounce loyal Kikuyu unless they were given bribes. Theft, intimidation,

torture, castration and rape were commonplace.

The British and Kenyan army units indulged in random shootings. They kept scorecards and there were £5 rewards for “kills”. The hands of their victims were cut off and brought back as proof. The Kenya Police and Kenya Regiment tortured and killed indiscriminately, while the Kenyan press kept silent.

Eventually, as the foreign press came to Nairobi, news of the atrocities committed by the security forces reached London where they were taken up by the Labour Party, then in opposition. A parliamentary delegation came to Kenya in February 1954 and found that “brutality and malpractices by the police have occurred on a scale which constitutes a threat to public confidence in the forces of law and order”. While there were 130 prosecutions for police brutality, there were only 73 convictions and the sentences handed down were usually only small fines.

Faced with this repression, and starved of arms and equipment, the uprising was largely over by mid-1954. In total, 11,000 were killed and more than 1,000 were hanged as criminals. Governor Baring used the Emergency to push through a series of farm consolidations, in which the land of many thousands of suspected Mau Mau sympathisers was confiscated.

In 1955, British Labour Party Member of Parliament Barbara Castle, who later became a cabinet minister, visited Kenya to investigate charges that white policemen had tortured and killed innocent Kikuyu with government approval. She concluded that the entire system of justice in Kenya had a “Nazi” attitude toward Africans. “In the heart of the British Empire there is a police state where the rule of law has broken down, where murders and tortures of Africans go unpunished and where the authorities pledged to enforce justice regularly connive at its violation.”

Castle accused the Kenyan government of covering up and condoning the police atrocities, and it had indeed suppressed a report harshly critical of police conduct. Despite the fact that off-duty policemen could be heard boasting about their kills, few were ever brought to trial.

Even before the “Emergency” the courts were overflowing with people charged with offences relating to the Mau Mau insurrection. But most cases were thrown out due to lack of evidence. Soon after the “Emergency” Governor Baring issued an order that allowed the government to detain whomever it liked in a concentration camp for an indefinite period. Evidence of wrongdoing was not required. All that was needed was an allegation that a man, woman or even a child had Mau Mau sympathies, or had taken the Mau Mau oath.

The white settlers and the security forces killed thousands of Mau Mau; many were tortured and then killed “while trying to escape”. More than 80,000 who survived were sent to these concentration camps where they were subjected to brutality and savagery so great that many of them died.

Their courage and devotion to their fight for political freedom

and justice under the terrible conditions of their detention was extraordinary. Many endured the years of privation without renouncing the Mau Mau or submitting to the demands of the government.

It was only in 1959, when the murder of 11 Mau Mau at a remote concentration camp at Hola was revealed, that the brutality of the system was finally exposed to the whole world. However, no one in Kenya was ever punished for this crime. An inquiry attributed the massacre to a few “bad officers” and whitewashed the regime in the camps.

British Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was forced to concede independence for Kenya in 1963. The Mau Mau men and women were not rewarded with land or positions in the government. Instead, those loyal to the colonial government kept their land and bought other properties vacated by the settlers, becoming Kenya's new financial elite. President Kenyatta and his family became so rich and overbearing that they were known as the “Royal Family”.

Joseph Ndecha, the Mau Mau chairman, told Kenyan television that the association had spent 15 years gathering evidence on behalf of the 87,000 Kenyans detained and the thousands more transferred to concentration camps and deprived of their land and property by the British. “There are people who lost their children, there are people who went to jail for nothing, just because they were suspected to be organising Mau Mau, and Mau Mau were fighting a noble cause, they were asking for their freedom”, Ndecha said.

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