Alcohol deaths reflect desperate conditions in Kenya

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At least 137 people have died in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi after drinking an alcoholic brew laced with methanol. A further 500 people are in hospitals across the capital, with some in a serious condition, and there are reports that 20 people have gone blind.

Methanol is an industrial alcohol used in the manufacture of dyes and anti-freeze. It is added to the brew, known locally as chang'aa ("kill me quick") or kumi kumi (ten-ten), to increase its intoxicating effects. It is a highly poisonous substance and as little as 30 millilitres is enough to kill a person, with 10 millilitres being enough to cause blindness. Those who died suffered respiratory paralysis or liver failure.

There are numerous illegal drinking dens scattered around the slum areas of Nairobi, where the liquor can be bought at a fraction of the cost of highly taxed beers and spirits. Most of these dens are run by widows who rely on the revenue to live, and who compete with each other over who can offer the most powerful brew.

This latest incident is one of a growing number in Kenya. In August 1998, 85 people died after drinking methanol contaminated liquor and in 1999, 17 people died. Over the last two years 100 people have been blinded as a result of consuming the drink. There is growing anger at the indifference shown to the deaths by the government — led since 1978 by Daniel arap Moi— and police complicity in running the drinking dens.

Kenya is currently in the grip of the worst social and economic crisis in the country's history. For many from the most impoverished sections of the population, the deadly brew has become an escape from the daily misery they face.

The country is suffering the worst drought in 40 years. Conditions are so bad in the countryside that nomadic pastoralists have trekked into the cities to escape its devastating effects. Their cattle block the roads as they graze on whatever vegetation they can find.

But the more fundamental reason for Kenya's crisis is the policies of the IMF and World Bank. In 1993, under their direction, the Moi government implemented a structural adjustment programme that removed import, price and foreign exchange controls. These measures—together with years of corruption and the squandering of resources by the government—have led to a total breakdown of the economy and infrastructure.

It has become impossible to cope with the drought in the North and Eastern regions of the country. Electricity is rationed to two hours use per day. Water supplies are only available a few times a week. Over half the population of 30 million live below official poverty levels and unemployment is at 50 percent. This is set to rise as retrenchment takes place throughout the civil service—with up to 25,783 jobs to be axed as part of stipulations laid down in an IMF loan package.

A further 35,348 people are to lose their jobs in the public sector. Dr Richard Leakey, who was appointed as head of Kenya's civil service in response to the IMF's diktat, summed up the attitude of the western powers and Kenya's privileged elite towards the restructuring when he said, "it is a painful exercise but it has to go on".

Basic health care provision in Kenya is non-existent and one in seven of the population is HIV positive. Primary school enrolment is falling. A recent letter from the Kenyan finance minister to the IMF highlighted worsening poverty and a general deterioration in living standards. In drought hit regions 25 percent of children under five years of age are suffering from malnutrition.

Yet the world financial institutions want to tighten the screws even further. The *Economist* magazine described the conditions attached to a new $198 million loan package granted by the IMF in August this year as the "toughest ever imposed by the fund on any government".

The IMF loan package contains 60 separate elements demanding that the government draw up a daily balance sheet for inspection by IMF officials and calls for all public officials, except President Moi himself, to declare their assets. The loan will be paid in instalments if the IMF is satisfied that the government has met its terms. Any deviation from them will result in the loan being stopped. These measures, which even the *Economist* describe as "a virtual surrender of the country's national sovereignty", mean that the IMF will have a vice-like grip over the economy of Kenya.

The IMF is using Kenya as an example to other African governments to demonstrate how it now wants to conduct business. This is what lies behind the smokescreen of "transparency" and all talk of fighting against corruption.

See also:

Kenya's President Moi announces economic cutbacks in bid for IMF funding
[6 October 1999]

Questions mount in Kenya, Tanzania bombings
[13 August 1998]