

FBI send agents to Kenya

Barry Mason
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The FBI has handed the Kenyan government a list of 200 suspects in connection with the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. It has sent agents to Kenya to track them down, with their investigations being concentrated in Mombassa, where the majority of Kenya's Muslim population live.

For its part, the Kenyan government has used the terrorist attacks in the US as a pretext to push through tougher controls against Kenyans of Arab and Asian origin. The immigration office in Mombassa directed that applications for birth certificates or passports must include the national documents of the applicant's grandparents. The government claims only this will show if they are bona fide Kenyan citizens.

Nairobi claimed the directive was not aimed at Arab and Asian Muslims, but applied to all "non-indigenous" Kenyans. Many of those of Arab and Asian descent are concentrated in the coastal region, especially Mombassa, the major Kenyan port. Previous attempts to introduce this directive had collapsed in the face of widespread opposition demonstrations.

In addition to having many long-standing citizens of Asian origin, Kenya is also home to refugees from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. They have become a particular target for the FBI and the Kenyan security forces, who are scrutinising bank transactions and carrying out searches.

Dr Moustafa Hassouna, a senior lecturer in international security and strategic studies at Nairobi Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies, recently referred to "grey area refugees". Sounding an ominous note, he said, "Grey area refugees... may have a political agenda that may hurt the countries that host them. There are chances that as America widens its crackdown, these refugees will be feeling the planned US attacks. No one knows how they will react. We need intelligence..."

Asians have often been the subject of government

repression in East Africa in past periods of political and economic turmoil. In the 1970s, Idi Amin expelled 80,000 Ugandans of Asian origin. In 1980, the Tanzanian government nationalised Asian property and whipped up anti-Asian chauvinism. In 1982, during an attempted military coup, Asians were subjected to attacks on their homes and businesses.

Kenya is an important strategic asset for the United States. The US embassy in Nairobi is a key part of its monitoring of the Sudan, the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa. In the late 1970s, America and Kenya signed an access agreement and Washington has frequently used air and sea bases in Kenya, such as when American forces invaded Somalia in 1992. Facilities in Kenya would play an important role in any operations in the Gulf or against Afghanistan. US naval vessels frequently use the port facilities in Mombassa.

Salih Booker, director of the Washington-based Africa Action lobby organization, recently spoke of Kenya's importance to the US: "Kenya is significant to the US not just as a staging area but as a component in its overall military planning for the entire region. The country's significance to Washington will increase as the US intensifies its military presence in the Gulf region."

A small anti-war demonstration took place in Mombassa on September 28, when about 100 men marched to the district commissioner's office after Friday prayers and handed in a petition asking that FBI agents should be withdrawn from the town. The Mombassa Council of Imams opposed the peaceful and low-key demonstration. They have asked that Kenyan officials accompany FBI agents when they make searches, fearing that the investigations could spark off protests like those that followed FBI operations in the city after the 1998 bombing of the American embassy in Nairobi.



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