

Kenya: 15 killed in slum clashes

David Rowan
14 December 2001

Violent clashes broke out on December 4 between the people of the Nubian and Luo tribal groupings in Kibera, one of Kenya's largest slums. Reports put the number of people killed at 15, with hundreds injured.

Thousands more people from both communities fled the violence as rival gangs set fire to homes and attacked people with machetes and wooden clubs. Kibera, with a population of up to one million people, covers about four square kilometres and is situated a few miles from the downtown area of Kenya's capital, Nairobi. It is estimated that half of Nairobi's three million population live in slums.

Accusations of brutality were also made against the paramilitary General Service Unit (GSU) that was called into Kibera by the government to quell the violence. The chairman of the standing committee on human rights in Kenya, Onesmus Mutungi, said, "Claims of use of brute force, extortion, assault, rape and destruction of property have been made against the very people mandated to protect and uphold the rights of citizens." It is reported that the GSU also fired live ammunition and tear gas.

Tensions have been high in Kibera since October 31, when Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi visited the area and announced that residents were paying too much rent to Nubian landlords and called for them to be lowered. Following this Energy Minister Raila Odinga, whose constituency includes Kibera, called on the population to stop paying rent until it had been reduced by 50 percent.

Odinga, who belongs to the Luo, Kenya's second largest tribal group that makes up the vast majority of people in Kibera, told a meeting of angry residents, "The government is the true landlord, the landlords are the tenants and the tenants are the subtenants... the government will tell the landlords to lower the rent."

The speeches by Moi and Odinga were followed by a rent strike. Fighting then broke out when the Nubian landlords came to collect the rent and residents refused to pay. Both Moi and Odinga used the genuine grievances and concerns of those living in dire poverty in Kibera to mount a provocative political stunt aimed at winning

votes from the Luo in the elections due next year. It was also a crude attempt to distract attention from the responsibility of the "true landlord"—the government itself—for the inhuman conditions that exist in Kibera and other slums.

Odinga is a noted demagogue, who as leader of the National Development Party stood against Moi in the last elections in Kenya in 1997. After Moi's Kenya African National Union was re-elected, he dropped all criticisms and accepted the post of energy minister.

The Nubians, who originate from the Sudan, are predominantly Muslims. The British allowed them to settle on the land in the 1920s, after they had fought for the colonial power in World War One as part of the Kings African Rifles. Viewed as outsiders by the authorities in Kenya, they have difficulty in finding work because they do not have Kenyan identification papers. The government owns the deeds to the Kibera land and the Nubians, who live in the slum themselves, rent out the ramshackle corrugated iron dwellings and mud huts.

The inhabitants of Kibera are mainly rural poor from drought-ravaged villages who have travelled to Nairobi in search of work and a more secure life. Kibera is notorious for being one of the worst slums in Africa. It has no running water, electricity or sanitation. The one million residents have to share 600 toilets, forcing most people to use plastic bags, which are then simply thrown away. Local charities, with the backing of sports celebrities, have organised a campaign to "stop flying toilets", raising money to build latrines.

Kibera is one of a number of slums that have sprung up around Nairobi over the last thirty years. Reports state that 86 percent of the dwellings in Nairobi are made up of corrugated iron, mud, discarded cartons and polythene sheeting. Government investment in housing is minimal, with one report stating that allocation for housing fell 37 percent in 1998/99 alone.

The conflict in Kibera was deliberately fomented as Kenya's economy has moved into sharp decline. The Kenyan Central Bank reports that the economy has

contracted for the first time since independence in 1963, with GDP falling by 0.3 percent in the 12 months to November this year. Unemployment currently stands at 50 percent, with most people attempting to live on less than \$1 a day. Over two million of Kenya's 30 million inhabitants have HIV/AIDS and 600,000 children have been orphaned due to the epidemic. Reports state that 500 to 700 people die each day from AIDS in Kenya. Life expectancy for men and women is less than 50 years.

An International Monetary Fund delegation was in Kenya as the violence was taking place. They reported that the government's commitment to reforms was "commendable", but that it had not gone far enough. The IMF is continuing to withhold the vast bulk of the \$250 million it agreed to give the Kenyan government in August 2000, until its demands on the restructuring and privatisation of sections of the economy are speeded up.

Meanwhile the government is continuing to arrest people said to be on a list compiled by the American FBI, accused of having links to international terrorist organisations. Over the last week, there have been at least 20 more arrests, mainly in the Mombassa region. One of the arrests resulted in violent protests in the town of Mandera in the north east of the country, during which a church and a polytechnic were destroyed. The police said the man arrested was Sheilk Ahmed Salim Swedan, whose name appeared on the FBI list in connection with the bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. However, protesters said the police had arrested the wrong man, who is in fact a respected preacher named Ahmed Hassan Mursal. Opposition politicians have accused the government of "harassing Muslims in return for development aid from Washington."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact