

UN secretary-general arrives in Kenya in attempt to restart talks

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UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has flown to Kenya in an attempt to restart talks between President Mwai Kibaki and opposition leader Raila Odinga. Talks broke down after a second opposition MP was shot dead on Thursday.

Former UN General Secretary Kofi Annan is already in Kenya with a group of eminent African leaders. Ban Ki-moon's presence indicates the seriousness with which the deteriorating situation is regarded internationally.

"Violence continues, threatening to escalate to catastrophic levels," Ban Ki-moon said.

More than 850 people are known to have been killed in a month of violent clashes that followed the disputed elections in December. A quarter of a million people have been displaced, and a half a million are in need of humanitarian aid. Factories, schools and offices are closed in many areas. Main highways and railway lines are blocked.

British Foreign Office Minister Lord Malloch-Brown warned earlier this week that Kenya was in danger of "falling over the edge." He continued, "This country is hurting. Its economy is way down."

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner has called on the UN Security Council to act. "In the name of its duty to protect, it must urgently come to the aid of Kenya's population," Kouchner said.

"Barbaric acts are being committed, civilian populations are being killed in atrocious ways, with women and children raped. We fear that this drift could plunge Kenya into a deadly ethnic conflict."

African Union (AU) commission chairman Alpha Oumar Konare told African leaders meeting for the AU summit in Addis Ababa, "We cannot sit here with our hands folded. If Kenya burns, there will be nothing for tomorrow."

Konare expressed the anxiety of both African leaders and Western governments: "Kenya is a country that was a hope for the continent. Today, if you look at Kenya you see violence on the streets. We are even talking about ethnic cleansing. We are even talking about genocide."

Last year, Kenya enjoyed record levels of economic growth and was held up as a model for the rest of the

continent. It has become the transport hub for trade with the rest of East Africa and areas of Central Africa. Aid agencies use it as a base for their operations because it has been so stable.

There is a growing recognition that if Kenya can descend into communal violence and fragment along tribal lines, the same can happen in any country. Politicians in Ghana have had to deny suggestions that their country could meet the same fate as Kenya after the upcoming elections.

The mere fact that the question is being discussed at all points to the high level of anxiety that the chaos in Kenya has engendered among the African political elite. It is a recognition that colonialism left all the countries of Africa with a bitter legacy of tribal divisions that were fomented by a century of divide-and-rule policies.

Independence has done nothing to eradicate that legacy and has often confirmed the privileges of the former colonial elite while other groups have been excluded from economic and political power. The nationalist elite who came to power when the colonial rulers left have proved incapable of resolving any of the economic, social or political questions that they inherited.

What we see in Kenya is the unraveling of the post-colonial settlement. If this can happen in Kenya—which has been one of the most stable and economically successful of African countries—it can happen anywhere.

The MP who was killed, David Kimutai Too, was gunned down by a policeman in the town of Eldoret in the Rift Valley. Eunice Chepkwony, a policewoman who was with Too at the time, was also killed in the incident. The police have claimed that it was a non-political killing that was connected to a love affair.

Whatever the circumstances of Too's killing, the fact that another opposition MP was killed on Tuesday gave credence to the suspicion that this was a political murder.

Melitus Mugabe Were was shot dead outside his home in Nairobi. He was not robbed, and relatives claim that the killing was carried out like a professional assassination. Raila Odinga said, "The purpose of this killing is to reduce

the ODM majority.”

On Wednesday, police were officially given shoot-to-kill orders. Paramilitary police were drafted into Eldoret immediately after Too’s killing.

The intervention of Ban Ki-moon coincided with a shift in American policy. Previously, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Fraser has insisted on an internal solution to the crisis. She has now accepted that this may not be possible and that international intervention is necessary. Earlier this week, she called the inter-tribal violence “ethnic cleansing,” but refused to go so far as to identify it as genocide.

Opinions at the State Department seem to differ. Spokesman Sean McCormack refused to endorse Fraser’s statement. McCormack said that Fraser “was reflecting back to the press corps her first-hand view of the situation in the Rift Valley based on her travel there.”

“Very often,” he cautioned, “the case with these kind of circumstances is that you don’t have a full understanding, a complete picture of what happened, until the situation is over and things have calmed down.”

This is not the first contradictory statement from the US administration. Initially, the State Department congratulated Kibaki on his victory and endorsed his claim that he had won the election. It later withdrew this statement when it became clear that election observers would not accept the result as valid.

There are also differences between the administration and the Senate. US Ambassador Michael Ranneberger has called for a power-sharing administration that includes the opposition. He dismissed calls for a recount or a re-run of the election. The House of Representatives, by contrast, has called for an international audit of the election result. It is due to hold a hearing on Kenya next week.

The public differences in Washington reflect the fact that the crisis in Kenya has taken the US political elite unawares. Kenya has been the linchpin of US policy in the region for many years. It is a base for intelligence and military operations in the strategically vital Horn of Africa, and Kibaki has been regarded as a reliable ally in the war on terror. The descent into chaos over the past month is a serious setback for US foreign policy.

Such is the extent of the crisis that there is now open discussion of the possibility of a military coup. President Paul Kagame of Rwanda said, “It might not be fashionable and right for the armies to get involved in such a political situation. But in situations where institutions have lost control, I wouldn’t mind such a solution.”

Kagame is one of only seven leaders that have recognised the results of the December election. The situation in Kenya places particular pressure on Rwanda because the landlocked

country is dependent on its neighbour for road and rail connections to the sea.

It is possible that, like Ambassador Ranneberger, he is now rethinking his attitude to Kibaki. “I tend to suggest that maybe whatever in terms of leadership that is there should be swept aside and space be created for people to go back on the drawing board and settle their grievances,” Kagame said.

He added, “In the wake of such senseless killings with no immediate solution, if anybody suggested that [military] option to me, I would say I agree with it.”

Kenyan army helicopters were used briefly to fire on protesters in the tourist town of Naivasha, and soldiers have been patrolling the streets of the town after violence spread to this area. But there has been no general mobilisation.

Senior officers are said to be reluctant to deploy the army because they fear that it may split along tribal lines. The army is made up of all the Kenyan tribes. In the past, the government has preferred to rely on the paramilitary police.

Kenya is one of the few African countries never to have experienced a military coup. But that record is clearly coming under strain.

For their own reasons, both the government and the opposition are reluctant to deploy the army. A senior government official told the *Financial Times* that deploying the army was “out of the question.” The opposition fears that it may prove impossible to return the army to its barracks.

If the situation continues to deteriorate, and there is every reason to suppose that it will, it may be that foreign troops will be deployed in Kenya. There have already been rumours that Ugandan troops have been seen inside Kenya, and Kagame’s statement indicates that he may be willing to act. Such a move would depend on the US administration giving Kenya’s neighbours the green light to intervene.



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