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Kenya battles its first war, drought, hunger

Chris Herlinger | Nov. 21, 2011

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Fr. Pius Kyule, a Catholic priest in a rural area southeast of Nairobi. (Chris Herlinger/NCR)

NAIROBI, Kenya -- By now, Americans are inured to seeing war portrayed as televised theater, replete with accompanying cable news theme music, television banners and the like.

Not so for Kenyans, who are experiencing what they call "Kenya's first war" -- the first cross-border military incursion since Kenya's 1963 independence into border areas of Somalia.

The purpose? Rout out al-Shabaab, the radical Islamist group that rules much of Somali territory and is blamed for terrorist strikes within Kenya.

"It's a very unsettled time for us as Kenyans. You don't know who is al-Shabaab," a Kenyan Catholic Relief Services worker told me during a visit to Kenya and Ethiopia to report on the drought and other humanitarian problems affecting both countries. "We've never been to war. It's a very new thing for Kenyans."

While an *external* war may be something novel, crises *within* Kenya are hardly unusual -- Kenyans still talk about the lasting effects of a political crisis that erupted in late 2007 and early 2008 and resulted in massive violence throughout the country.

Kenya does not seem on the verge of another catastrophic event like that -- though during my visit, strikes over pay and compensation erupted at a number of Kenyan hospitals and universities. And everyone I spoke to (and I mean *everyone* -- in urban and rural areas, professionals and poor alike) is worried about rising food prices. Distrust of the government and politicians is also hard to miss.

Still, it is remarkable how the mantle of war can sit so easily in a country without a history of external military action. In some ways, that is understandable. The worries about al-Shabaab are causing real jitters in image-conscious Kenya, a country dependent on tourism and that takes pride (now growing into impatience) in being a place of refugee for the hundreds of thousands of Somalis who have fled drought, famine and political unrest in their country and who now reside at a massive set of cross-border refugee camps in Dadaab, Kenya.

There are now about 500,000 refugees in Dadaab, the world's largest complex of refugee camps, and in recent weeks, cholera has broken out in the five sprawling camps. Before that, two Spanish humanitarian workers from the humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) were kidnapped in Dadaab.

Meanwhile, several foreign tourists have either been killed or kidnapped in coastal vacation spots, and just before I arrived in Nairobi earlier this month, the jittery capital was rocked by a series of grenade attacks.

Given those recent events, there seems to be nearly unanimous support, even by religious figures, for the

government's military actions, at least for now. But how long that can last is anyone's guess, particularly if there are no clear military victories. Already, some Kenyans are expressing worries about getting mired in Somalia as the United States did briefly in the early 1990s.

Moreover, Kenya has a lot to worry about besides al-Shabaab -- though external and internal factors are all part of a piece. The punishing drought affecting Somalia, forcing Somalis to flee their country, is also hurting Kenya and Ethiopia and is one of several reasons food prices are on the rise everywhere in the Horn of Africa.

Indeed, getting food on the table was the predominant talk of Kenya and Kenyans. Fr. Pius Kyule, a Catholic priest in the Machakos district, a rural area southeast of Nairobi, told me people come to him every day, asking for something to eat. Sometimes he has food; sometimes he does not.

"It becomes very awkward when you have nothing to give them," Kyule said.

Personnel at a feeding clinic in the Nairobi slum area of Mathare said in recent months there has been a substantial increase in the number of malnourished children requiring emergency food supplements.

Several people who are also living with HIV said their situation has gotten much tougher physically. In order to be effective, their anti-viral drugs have to taken on full stomachs. But given the rise in food prices, those taking the drugs now have to worry about spreading food out over a day's (or several days') time so they do not feel sick when they take the medicine.

Also striking is how the current situation has "privatized" peoples' lives. Several Nairobi residents said there is a lack of trust and a rise of fear among neighbors in areas like Mathare. An act as simple as visiting a neighbor is now tinged with problems or suspicions. People ask: Is this person coming to see me because she needs food or money or a loan?

And when there is no food, neighbors start to snoop.

"It becomes so demoralizing when women ask, 'Why aren't you cooking today?" said Mathare resident Rosalyn Akinyi Ouma.

Sammy Matua, a Church World Service colleague who is based in Nairobi and is helping coordinate the CWS response to the Kenyan drought, said the agonizing problems stem from the lack of "social capital" (the accumulation of deep-rooted relationships and trust) in urban slum areas like Mathare.

"In a village, you can fall back on a social network, but here you lose your social capital," he said. "A person's social capital comes from the village and the relations there; but in coming to the city, people lose that."

The result, Matua said, is people "look inward. 'What is mine is mine alone,' becomes the operating principle. There is no mutual trust."

Not everything is problematic. On the way to an assignment two hours outside of Nairobi, the driver of a CRS vehicle played a Dolly Parton recording. As we drove past the Nairobi suburbs (which look little different from the subdivisions of, say, Denver), Parton crooned "How Great Thou Art." I was a bit surprised to hear Dolly Parton. I didn't know American country music was such a hit in Kenya.

A CRS representative later told me country music is popular among Kenyans "because it tells a story."

Unfortunately, Kenya's story right now is both a mixture of the uncertain and unfamiliar (an external war) and the all-too-familiar (strikes, food problems). Together, they suggest tough and tricky times ahead for Kenya.

[Chris Herlinger, a writer for the humanitarian agency Church World Service, is a New York-based freelance journalist who reports frequently on humanitarian issues for *NCR*. He has been on assignment in Kenya and Ethiopia for *NCR*. His book, *Rubble Nation: Haiti's Pain, Haiti's Promise*, was just published by Seabury Books.]

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