The Spears of August: Trouble in the North

The high plain north of Maralal is carpeted with verdant pasture, dotted with copses of cedar and podocarpus, and crowned with rolling fields of wheat. Here in Malaso, perched high on the eastern rim of the northern Rift Valley, one experiences Kenya’s most spectacular panorama. The escarpment plunges down a thousand meters to a plain of eroded caldera and winding watercourses. A wide ledge of savannah, dyed green by an out of season rain shower, juts out from the eastern wall of the scarp. Beyond this tableau to the north lie the craggy badlands of the Suguta valley, and beyond that the parched corridor of the Rift Valley’s floor.

We surveyed this geography of wealth and poverty as several Samburu herders briefed us on the recent raids by their Pokot neighbours. The rustlers left a half-dozen dead while making off with seven hundred head of cattle.

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The Samburu pointed out the precise position of the sequence of events on the tableau below that looked like a large-scale relief map when viewed from above: thirteen circular kraals emptied of their livestock; an abandoned site 2000 meters to the south where Pokot seeking refuge from the desiccated pastures of their Silali home had been allowed to settle; a distant hill where they ambushed the just promoted Chief of the Police Division who was returning with cattle taken in a second attack; and near the edge of the plain, the contours of a laaga now occupied by a platoon of 300 hundred heavily armed Pokot, who had returned to the scene of the crime.

The Pokot possess powerful new weapons the Samburu have never seen before as well as unusually powerful lights they use to move around at night. The interlopers, brazenly grazing herds augmented by the stolen cows in view of their Samburu owners, threaten to instigate a new cycle of violence after several years of calm.

The combat among the pastoral communities of the north Rift that intensified during the 1990s bore little resemblance to traditional raiding: the following peace did not come about by accident.

In 1996, for example, a large body of Samburu warriors, with newly acquired guns, led by some two hundred Pokot ‘veterans’, marched north to engage the Turkana. The ensuing battle at Lokorkorr left over a hundred men dead. Vultures, crazed by the orgy of blood and flesh, attacked the wounded as they fled. The Samburu District Commissioner and police commandant who went to investigate the scene died when Turkana riflemen hidden in a rocky outcrop shot down their helicopter. Endemic raiding shut down most of the trading centres in Baragoi division, and a number of schools are still closed.

To the south in Isiolo District, friction between Degodia Somali immigrants and their Borana hosts erupted into open hostilities. Several years of highway robberies, attacks on tourists, and tit-for-tat attacks sucked local Samburu and their Il Ngiri Turkana neighbours into the conflict. Borana and Somali combatants—both sides reinforced by mercenaries from afar—fought it out at Mulango Hill in September of 2000. The Somali were evicted from the district; the conflict spiralled into a Borana-Meru affair, and culminated with skirmishes between Christian and Muslim youth in Isiolo town. Seventy-five large and small businesses relocated to safer ground. When the dust settled, Isiolo’s economy was paralysed, the northern tourist circuit moribund.

Following these and other northern wars, an Oxfam-funded initiative established a network of peace committees at district, division-
al, and locational levels across the pastoralist region. The committees successfully restored peace between warring parties. They maintain the new status quo through monitoring, by flushing out bandits who blend into their local communities after attacks and by effectively managing local incidents of violence as they occur.

The raids on Malaso interrupted the moratorium, puncturing perceptions of the new government’s commitment to internal security, and unfortunately repudiated the Momai blood oath underpinning over five decades of peace between the Samburu and Pokot. Our informants said the Samburu of Malaso had embraced the Pokot as friends, allowed them to purchase supplies from their shops on credit and assisted them when they fell sick. But their goodwill was repaid in blood.

The press reported the paramilitary operation against the Pokot in East Baringo on August 9. Apparently many of the cattle were retrieved from Pokot homesteads not involved in the raids, while a yet more complicated story lay submerged within what from afar appeared to be pastoralist mischief as usual. Before the Malaso raid, a Pokot gun runner had entrusted a Samburu intermediary with firearms for sale to Rendille buyers in Marsabit. The deal went bad when the middleman failed to keep his end of the bargain. If this provoked the initial raid, the subsequent aggression recalled Pokot bellicosity of years past.

Elsewhere, pastoralist activism accompanying the expiration of the 100-year old Maasai land treaty in August camouflaged the more cynical gambit behind the invasion of several Laikipia ranches. The occupation by drought-stricken herders catalysed the destruction of farm infrastructure, the evacuation of tourists from an ecotourism lodge on a group ranch, and at least two deaths. The invaders selectively targeted ranches owned by Kenyan citizens, located outside the former northern Maasai reserve. This private land, on the western flank of Laikipia District, was exchanged for an expanded southern Maasai reserve by the 1911 pact. The case for compensation is legitimate; the invasion was not.

Back at Malaso, a security meeting was in progress. The Samburu do not want to go to war. They are aware of the costs of insecurity, the loss of tourism revenue, the hell of Lokorkorr. They will send elders, not warriors, to sort out the mess. But if that does not succeed? Community self-policing works up to a point—after which the cavalry must intervene.

Security forces found the going rough in previous operations against the Pokot. Like the Malaso Samburu, they are not exactly spoiling for a fight. The police clobbered Maasai protesters in Nai-
robi’s Uhuru Park, but dislodging the Laikipia invaders proved more difficult. It was nevertheless unfair and unrealistic to expect Police Commissioner Brigadier Ali Mohammed to sort out complicated conflicts that subsume unresolved legal and historical issues, political intrigue, environmental stress, and calculated opportunism.

August is Kenya’s dismal month, a season of disasters and spilt blood. The calamity of August 2004 was not the death of a long-serving Cabinet Minister, but events transpiring in the north. Bandits in the laaga, trespassers on the range, and weapons merchants crossing borders began putting state policy to the spear. For a while the prospect of constitutional reform had provided a safety valve for the region’s explosive mix of neglect, poverty, and injustice. But the NARC government of President Mwai Kibaki found itself hard-pressed to cope with the resurgence of pastoralist conflict after allowing the process to forge the new Constitutional dispensation go off the tracks.

CEWARN, inspired by the example of original Wajir Peace Committee launched by women who planned the initiative after meeting at a wedding party, was beginning to take form around the same time. As the elders in Malaso remarked, “sometimes its hard to fix these problems by ourselves.” A decade later, CEWARN’s regional approach to rangeland conflict is working better than governments acting on their own.

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