

January 31, 2008

Dear Friends,

Let me begin by thanking each of you who have emailed or called me during this crisis and/or have said a prayer on behalf of all of us in Kenya. Rest assured, I am safe and would like to share my thoughts on the situation with you. (For those of you interested in further details, I have been writing daily reports on the situation. If you would like to receive them, please contact Dawn Rubber at dawn@aglionline.org).

As an election observer for the Quaker Peace Network-Africa, it was refreshing to see the large number of Kenyans who peacefully turned out to vote for the elections in Kenya. In some polling stations including mine, people patiently waited for hours in the hot sun to cast their vote. Unfortunately, the orderly voting quickly transformed into mayhem and violence a few days later when the “winner” was announced. Personally, the violence was dismaying yet not very surprising.

Unfortunately, it felt like déjà vu and the emotions of July 5, 1969 came flooding back to me. On that day, Tom Mboya, the powerful Minister of Economic Development from the Luo ethnic group was assassinated by a person in the employ of the Kikuyu ruling elite. At that time, I was Principal of the Mua Hills Secondary School in Eastern Province. People heard the news on the radio and rumors of all kinds through the grapevine. I remember holding my breath, wondering if the country would fall apart and the feeling that events that I could not control were overpowering me as an individual.

My opinion then is the same as it is now: A country is not stable if its politics is based on ethnicity, battling to have power in a winner-take-all, over-centralized government.

On December 27, 2007, I observed the polling station from 5:00 am to 9:00 pm. The polling was very well run and orderly, watched by eleven agents of the various political parties and two observers including me. People in the Western Province where I live predominately supported Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). The vote counting in my polling station, which was done with complete transparency, was 349 for Raila and 58 for the incumbent president, Mwai Kibaki, and 20 for the other seven candidates.

The next day, my wife, Gladys and I travelled to the southern part of Western Province to attend the memorial service for my mother-in-law, Emali Selina, to honor her one year after her passing. The night before, the tally of the votes showed Odinga leading by over 1,000,000 votes, but by the morning his lead was down to 300,000. People in Western Province were assuming that the voting was being rigged. Then for some reason, the announcement of the results stopped for most of day. While local radio reported all was well, Tom Paxson from St Louis Meeting emailed me to inform me that BBC was reporting violence. We soon found out that we could not travel to Kisumu, the third largest town which was only forty miles away, because of extensive violence there.

On Dec 30 the Electoral Commission of Kenya announced the result that President Mwai Kibaki had won the election. Within ten minutes of the announcement, we were hearing gun shots from tear gas fired by the police not far in the distance. We looked in the direction of the town of Mbale, about three miles away on the top of a ridge, and saw eight plumes of smoke. We wondered what was

burning. My sister-in-law, Eunice, texted a friend in Mbale who reported that the youth were burning the mini-buses which are mostly owned by people from the Kikuyu ethnic group.

This outbreak of violence was totally predictable. During the 1992 election, over 100 people were killed and approximately 100,000 were displaced in election violence. One of the reasons AGLI decided to locate its headquarters in Kenya was to further the preventive work needed after earlier conflicts. Even the magnitude of the violence did not surprise me and I was grateful that, unlike Rwanda and Burundi, the violence was directed at property damage rather than the killing of people. More than half of those who died in the violence were youth rioters killed by the police.

At no time did I feel unsafe. Once I heard drumming in the distance and wondered if the youth were recruiting for another round of violence. As it got closer, I saw it was three young boys beating on their cans as they went to the river to fetch water. My senses were hyper-aroused yet the actual violence remained in the distance.

In the last five years, the Kenyan economy – after decades of decline or stagnation – was finally showing significant growth. But this growth did not trickle down to the alienated youth in the cities and countryside who did most of the destruction. The violence after the election has cost the country at least \$1 billion and, if some kind of political accommodation is soon reached, it will take a year or more for the country to recover.

Our Lumakanda Friends Church has appointed a committee to help with assistance for the 2,406 internally displaced people who are now living in the same school where I did my election observing. They have delivered a small amount of assistance as a token of reconciliation and peace. Sixty-five people have sought refuge in Eldoret Friends Church and are being assisted by the congregation there. Kakamega Friends Church has dug latrines at another camp where sanitation was a concern. Friends for Peace and Community Development, AGLI's partner in western Kenya, is holding a listening session for the bicycle taxi drivers in Kakamega who were responsible for much of the destruction there. Many Friends here in Kenya have called for us to greatly expand our Alternative to Violence (AVP) program.

Needs at this time are tremendous. While the Red Cross is bringing basic foodstuffs to the thirty five thousand displaced people in Lugari District where I live, they are unable to cater to other simple needs, such as foods that small children can easily digest and sanitary napkins for women. Everyday items, like salt, remain sparse. As things calm down, we would like to work with the alienated youth who perpetrated the violence.

We ask for your continued prayers and emergency support in this time of crisis in Kenya. Please mark "Kenyan Relief and Reconciliation" on your check or, if you prefer, on your donation through our webpage at www.aglionline.org. I believe that Kenya, the country that I love, will recover and thrive. With your help, we can help with this recovery. Thank you for everything.

In Peace,

David Zarembka, Coordinator
African Great Lakes Initiative
Friends Peace Teams