

Kenyan cattle herders defend invading ranches

KEVA
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Close by a narrow, rickety bridge in Kenya's central Laikipia highlands two herders sit on blistering hot rock next to the muddy trickle of the Ewaso Nyiro river to explain why they routinely break the law, invading private land to graze their cattle.

"The reason we go there is not to grab the land, we go for pasture, nothing else," says Lemerigi Letimalo, a 28-year-old Samburu herder in a Manchester United T-shirt with a mobile phone hanging in a pouch around his neck.

"The white settlers are the ones who call the police forces to attack us," he adds.

Violence has spiked in Laikipia this year, with smallholder farms and huge ranches alike invaded by armed herders, leaving dozens dead and uprooting hundreds more.

A government-ordered security operation has so far failed to quell the unrest, which some blame on drought and others on politics. Accounts of the attacks are widely divergent.

Drought, law, violence

The March murder of British rancher and former soldier Tristan Voorspuy and the April shooting of Italian author and conservationist Kuki Gallmann are among the most high-profile acts of violence.

But the young Samburu "morans"—the warrior age set that ends with marriage—sitting by the river at Crocodile Jaw Bridge on a recent Wednesday consider that they are the victims: of weather, of greed and selfishness and of state violence.

They say poor rains have forced them to cut fences in search of grazing land, accusing ranchers,



A Samburu man grazing cattle in the wilds of the Laikipia county, where vast privately run conservation areas like Loisaba conservancy have suffered unauthorised incursions by cattle herders, including from the Pokot community

BETWEEN THE LINES:

Local MP Mathew Lempurkel, a Samburu, has been charged with incitement over the murder of British rancher Tristan Voorspuy.

farmers and conservationists of protecting their own livelihoods at the pastoralists' expense. They also accuse security forces of unfairly targeting them.

"When we go grazing in there we get attacked by the police. We do not go in there for war or planning to stay, we just go in to graze until there are rains back at home," Letimalo tells AFP, offering a rare insight into the Samburu herders' side of the story.

He admits to illegally grazing the 50 cows and 200 goats that he is responsible for on other people's

lands and says police have shot dead two of his cows.

But Letimalo recognises neither the term "illegal herding" nor the law itself, which he describes as "for the landowners".

"When there is drought, a fence means nothing to me," he says, speaking in the local Samburu language. "We blame the whites for bringing the police who attack our cattle and kill our people."

No option

Fellow herder, 30-year-old Lokimaniki Lekaal, agrees: "Despite the law, we have no option. We cannot sit around and watch our animals die of hunger." A glance at an aerial view of Laikipia shows the stark difference between the green of well-managed, fenced-off private land and the dust bowl free-for-all of the over-grazed rangelands.

The two men insist that drought is the reason they herd livestock onto private land and deny any suggestion their actions are politically motivated as Kenya heads towards a general election on August 8.

Nevertheless, local MP Mathew Lempurkel, a Samburu, has been charged with incitement over the murder of Voorspuy, while a politician in neighbouring Baringo county was similarly charged over arson attacks on Gallmann's estate before his own murder in May.

Some invaders in Laikipia have been photographed wearing Lempurkel campaign T-shirts. The MP himself, facing a tight election, has both denied the charges against him and used them to burnish his credentials as the champion of pastoralist interests.

AFP



Cameroon soldiers accused of torturing suspects

Cameroon's security forces were yesterday accused of torturing hundreds of Boko Haram suspects, leading to dozens of deaths, in what Amnesty International said was a war crime. The global human rights monitor said US and French military were also seen at one site where the abuses allegedly took place and urged Washington and Paris to investigate. Boko Haram's Islamist insurgency has devastated northeast Nigeria since it began in 2009, and the violence has spread to neighbouring countries, including northern Cameroon. Cameroonian troops are part of a regional military force that has been successful in forcing them out of captured territory in northeast Nigeria since early 2015. Amnesty's regional director for West and Central Africa, Alioune Tine, said Boko Haram had committed atrocities and war crimes in Cameroon. "But nothing could justify the callous practice of torture committed by the security forces against ordinary Cameroonians, who are often arrested without any evidence and forced to endure unimaginable pain," he said.

Private memorial held for fallen Chinese activist

Under the shadow of heavy police surveillance, around 20 close friends of China's late Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo have held a defiant private memorial in Beijing. Since the prominent democracy activist died of liver cancer in custody last week, his Chinese supporters say they have been barred from leaving their homes or organising commemorative events, while censors have blocked online tributes. But on the seventh day following Liu's death — an important milestone for the deceased in traditional Chinese culture — the group gathered Wednesday evening for a two-and-a-half-hour ceremony in which they shared memories of the man.