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Karamoja: Is Peace Possible?

Anders Närman

After more than two decades of turmoil and retarded development it seems as if Uganda is once more heading towards a brighter future. Nevertheless, some people and regions are, so far, still excluded from these positive trends. Poverty and armed conflicts are very much a part of every day life for many Ugandans. In western Uganda, for example, the ADF (Allied Democratic Forces) carry out atrocities against the civilian population adjoining the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). For many years, the most seriously affected region of Uganda has been the north. At present, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) is attacking civilians seemingly at random with new force, at a time when the national army, through Operation Iron Fist, has eliminated most of the guerrilla bases in southern Sudan and claims to have gained the upper hand on Ugandan soil as well. Civilians were recently asked to leave their homes and move closer to occupied army barracks, or risk being massacred by the increasingly desperate rebels.

In this Briefing, attention will focus on Karamoja in the north-east, which is undergoing a state-led disarmament exercise. At the same time, there has been a clear escalation of violence in Karamoja. It is important to make one distinction from the very beginning. It is often assumed that all groups living in Karamoja belong to the Karimojong, and are potential cattle rustlers. However, we can see that the Karimojong (people living in Karamoja) are a rather diverse group ethnically; some, indeed, are cultivators. The Karimojong are the main pastoralist group in the region; they are feared for raids into neighbouring areas, but are also a constant threat to other ethnic groups in Karamoja. Among the pastoralists are the Jie, Dodoth, Tepeth (So) and Pokot groups. Among cultivator groups in Karamoja are the Ethur, Nyangia, Ik (Teuso) and Mening. Some of the Karamojong groups are related to other Ugandan groups, mainly the Luos, but some are ethnically closer to the Kenyan Kalenjin, such as the Pokot. This analysis will take the relationships between poverty, security and mutual distrust as a central theme, following a short historical overview.

Historical Overview

Before the entry into East Africa of people practising cultivation some 1500-2000 years ago, the region was populated by nomadic groups, for whom cattle played not only an economic role, but also had major social significance. With the colonial expansion of cash crop production, a conflict over land between the cattle population and agriculturists emerged. In the mid-1800s the Uganda Karimojong adopted a settled form of pastoralism, with families staying in a certain place with only animals and their herders moving in search of water and pastures. A struggle for grazing land and water led to confrontations (Ocan, 1992).

When Uganda was declared a British protectorate (1894), the new international boundaries severely limited mobility. At the same time, district boundaries were instrumental in making ethnic (clan) differences more distinct, resulting in intra-
Karimojong conflicts (Ocan, 1992). Early colonial days were a period of hunting for ivory in Karamoja in exchange for traders selling arms to the Karimojong. The area became a supply route for the entire northern part of the country (Mamdani, 1992). It can be observed that ivory from Karamoja was one of the most essential items exported from East Africa at the time.

For the people in Karamoja, colonialism was a period of strong state repression and serious human rights abuses, as the British army were commissioned to pacify the people. Entry into the region was strictly controlled, and Karamoja was turned into something of a resort for British colonial officers coming to the game reserves. Mobility for the local pastoralists was further restricted, leading to an accelerating ecological deterioration. In addition to that, the livestock was exposed to diseases that reduced the number of cattle.

Even if British colonisers treated the Karimojong harshly, independence did not bring a substantial change for the better. Consecutive governments tended to neglect Karamoja, reflected in a statement by the first Prime Minister, Milton Obote, who is supposed to have claimed that ‘Uganda cannot wait for Karamoja to develop.’ What is obvious is that all development activities in Karamoja are, at least partly, hampered directly or indirectly by the prevailing insecurity. At the same time, it is clear that insecurity is accentuated by rampant poverty. In addition the treatment of the Karimojong has built up a serious distrust in central government, both colonial and independent.

**Poverty**

Karamoja comprises three districts of Kotido, Moroto and Nakapiripirit (recently carved out of Moroto) with a total area close to 30,000 km² and, in 1998, a population of some 500,000. Population growth in Karamoja is rather low compared with other regions of Uganda. Life expectancy at birth is much lower than the national average; coupled to high infant and child mortality rates reflecting the population’s poor health. This might be related to a number of factors, such as the general insecurity, poor medical facilities and the overall conditions of hardship. Medical staff are seldom properly trained and health centres are not well equipped. Due to the general insecurity, thefts of drugs and other medical equipment are common. A specific dilemma following the war are the many displaced and orphaned children, many of whom have been found to have serious mental problems because of their specific backgrounds. There is also a pronounced gender imbalance, with the number of women substantially exceeding that of men, partly as a result of the war.

In 1962, at the time of independence, it was estimated that 1% of the Karamoja population had accepted the Christian religion. As the churches were the main educators at the time, this meant that few Karimojong had ever been to school. At independence some 4,000 children were enrolled in primary school, giving a rate of 3% (Mirzeler & Young, 2000). The level of education today is still very low, particularly among girls. Schooling is of low standard, with few qualified teachers and poor school buildings. Enrolment figures for primary school in the late 1990s were just above 25%, even if recently introduced UPE (Universal Primary Education) has boosted the numbers temporarily. As a general rule, drop out rates are very high in the region and very few will reach and complete Grade 7. Secondary education is very limited and in most cases sub-standard. Considering the low level of performance in the primary-leaving examination, the demand for secondary education is not very high anyway.

Almost all of the Karamoja population are still rural, with almost 90% living...
from subsistence agriculture and/or livestock production. Due to insecurity and land use by the nomads, only a small amount of potentially arable land is actually under cultivation. Serious land degradation affects both cattle-rearing and cultivation negatively. In this debate, the issue of destocking has featured prominently for ecological reasons. However, among the Karimojong, cattle is an expression of wealth and therefore, there is now a clear line of confrontation between modern and traditional lifestyles.

Karamoja is to a large extent dependent on foreign food aid and has been classified as a chronically food deficient area. According to a report in The Monitor (27 May 2000), the World Food Programme will give Karamoja US$5.8 million in an emergency food aid package but also suggested that this was a marginalised region that requires more than just food aid. For instance, for substantial change to take place in Karamoja there is an urgent need for infrastructure development. For the water sector the situation is precarious, with rivers that dry up easily with strong evaporation; water is also in many cases contaminated due to both human beings and animals using the same water source. Roads are badly in need of improvement, but attempts are thwarted by both insecurity and contracts that have been corruptly awarded to substandard companies. The most common source of energy is firewood, while some charcoal is used in the urban areas. Electricity from the national grid is not available in Karamoja, but there are some generators for business enterprises and institutions.

It is clear that Karamoja is a region far removed from national development trends. It was neglected during the colonial and early independence periods, but even now not much seems to benefit the Karamojong. For the future, national policy is placing heavy reliance on private sector development, but with the picture painted above it is difficult to see how this will take place.

Insecurity & Arms Trafficking

The pattern of insecurity in Karamoja is rather complicated. Cattle raids have been a common feature of life in the region. Today the element of guns has aggravated the situation uncontrollably. It has been said that when the former Amin soldiers ran away, armouries were laid open for the Karimojong warriors. With the defeat of the short-lived Okello regime, no disarmament was undertaken, as the Karimojong was seen as a counter-force towards rebellions in the Teso areas adjoining Karamoja. During this period the Karimojong almost totally depleted the Teso people of their cattle. This is a source of deep resentment between the two neighbouring regions, something that we will focus on below.

Arms trafficking is an important economic activity in the Karamoja region, involving Sudan, Kenya Ethiopia and Somalia as well as Uganda. Guns and ammunition are transported on certain routes and sold openly in specific markets. They can be purchased for self-protection, but also to carry out raids. As this is an international issue, it is essential to find a solution between the different countries involved. At the same time, these areas are very difficult to monitor. One further complication is said to be that one of the main sources of guns in Karamoja is the national army itself: selling arms for non-payment of salaries. An important actor in all this could be the NGO/CBO community, which has organised research and seminars to find out the facts related to arms trafficking.

According to some government estimates, there could be some 30-40,000 AK47 guns in Karamoja. If accurate, the Karimojong are in possession of more guns than are held by the national army in the region. However, the actual number of guns held by the Karimojong might be double or
three times this figure. In an attempt at disarmament in 1987, the national army lost some 300 soldiers. In the late 1990s some 400 Karimojong were killed by the army as operations against the warriors escalated (Mirzeler & Young, 2000). When disarmament begun again in 2001, the government was able to recover some 10,000 guns.

The present disarmament exercise has been taking place in two phases. The first was a voluntary surrender of illegal guns to the authorities. Thereafter, this turned into a phase of recovery by force, which resulted in constant clashes between the national army and the Karimojong warriors. Thus, the security situation deteriorated substantially during the first part of 2002. In one recent clash in Panyanagara sub-county, more than 130 people are said to have been killed, with a considerable loss not only of soldiers and warriors, but also of women and children.

Numerous reports from the region give accounts of how travellers are attacked and robbed by both the Karimojong and the army. For example, a Catholic priest and a former district (LCV) Chairman have been killed. Furthermore, the warriors are now carrying out raids in what used to be rather peaceful areas – such as Labwor county – mainly populated by cultivators.

Inter-clan rivalries are common in Karamoja. We hear stories of how one sub-group of the Karimojong attack the next one, followed by a revenge raid. Sometimes some clans go together against a third one, and so on. It has also been the case in August/September 2002, that Karamoja has been attacked by the LRA cutting across from Kitgum and Pader districts in the north. This is partly a new dimension to the conflict, connected to the spread of the desperate rebels from their original home areas. In some cases, this has interrupted schooling as the LRA has a notorious habit of abducting children.

On one occasion in 2001, more than 200 cattle were stolen from Katakwi district by the warriors. This was followed by army attacks, using helicopters, also killing innocent people. From such instances a relationship of further mutual suspicion is created between the Karamoja population and the authorities.

**Mutual Distrust**

During recent field research in Soroti and Katakwi districts, people often claimed to despise their neighbours deeply, coupled to fear of new raids. In Katakwi this fear is well motivated, as a majority of the district’s population live in camps for displaced people that are occasionally raided by Karimojong warriors. During these raids the young warriors not only take away cattle, but also whatever goods that are available. In one refugee camp, people claimed that they are not able to cook, as all the utensils and cutlery had been taken. Other people explained how the Karimojong, contrary to their normal habits, had struck during the day and invaded a camp, killing eleven people – mostly inside the houses.

One issue that has, so far, complicated matters as far as disarmament goes, is the risk of being attacked by neighbours from across the border, not least the Turkana and Pokot in Kenya. Measures to address the problem must be enacted and implemented on both sides of the border between Uganda and both Kenya and the Sudan.

Even with all these raids on neighbouring groups, it seems that other Karamojong people are being hit even more seriously by the warriors. Cultivators within Karamoja have often been attacked, especially during the time of the recent disarmament. Their situation is also problematic in as much as they are often not distinguished from the warriors by outsiders, even though they are among the victims.
With so much hostility, there have been attempts to project a very negative image of the people of Karamoja. It has been claimed by many local administrators from the region that their attempts to discuss the situation with neighbours have been dismissed, as they have not been trusted. A general picture was painted by the British colonialists of a primitive and brutal people. The same is still going on today in the press, both domestic and international, in the way that all the Karamojong are described.

Traditional leaders have lost their influence due to the power of the gun. In attempts to find ways out of the present quagmire, local leaders have often expressed a positive view on this. However, the warriors have always been able to find other leaders who are willing to support their raids, especially if there is something to gain. The educated elite among the Karamojong are also met with suspicion, as they are no longer identified as really forming part of the community.

**Concluding Analysis**

This purpose of this Briefing has been to illustrate how the conflict in Karamoja has resulted from a number of interrelated factors, such as poverty, insecurity and mutual distrust. It is therefore impossible to find a single solution to the complex problems. Poverty cannot be overcome by simple identification of what is lacking in terms of material welfare; instead, the meaning of the concept must be understood from a local perspective. Attempts to reduce insecurity are often geared towards the obvious symptoms of the problem, without addressing the deeper underlying causes. Finally, due to mutual distrust built up over generations, traditional forms and institutions of social organisation have been disrupted to such an extent that it might be difficult to find a clear way out of the crisis.

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**References**

