

So Many Hungers: The Starving IDPs in Uthamaki's Backyard

Seeing is believing. And first-hand witnessing clears all falsehoods and half-truths, and separates facts from fiction.

I had to travel more than 200 km north-west of Nairobi through Laikipia and Nyandarua counties to see for myself how hunger has been stalking the Kikuyu people in their own land of plenty. As difficult as it is to believe, a section of the Kikuyu people - who are considered the most prosperous, the most exposed, and the most resilient of all the 42 ethnic communities in Kenya - are playing dice with starvation and have been abandoned and left alone to fend for themselves in whichever way they know how.

The mainstream Kenyan media have peddled the narrative that famine and food shortages can only be found among (backward) pastoralist people (who do not know how to cultivate land), and not among the agrarian, sedentary Kikuyus, whose land of milk and honey is endowed with rich soils that can practically grow any crop this side of the planet. It has been a false narrative that masks the true state of affairs.

As famine threatens to devastate vast regions of the country (largely because of delayed or failed rains) the stories and pictures that the Kenyan media has been relaying - and has always relayed - are those of the Turkana people, emaciated old men and women and dying children. If not the Turkana people, it has been the Akamba people, who like the pastoralist Turkana, happen to come from some of the harshest semi-arid regions of the country. Their starvation is always implicitly blamed on their topography, which according to geography is susceptible to drought - a natural calamity that human beings have little control over.

But what about the Kikuyus who happen to occupy some of best arable land you can find anywhere in the country? Why would they be threatened with food shortages? As fate would have it, there has been a silent hunger going on in the Uthamaki kingdom, not just in the semi-arid plateau or less arable lands, but also in some of the most fertile lands in the country.

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I arrived at Makutano, a camp for internally displaced people (IDPs) that looks like a United Nations refugee camp with its blue iron sheet roofs scattered over the 4,600 acres of land in Ngobit, in Laikipia County, 20 km from Ndaragwa town, which is in Nyandarua District. I had gone to the settlement area to see for myself how starvation was threatening to emaciate the people as they fought to keep biting hunger at bay by receiving tiny rations of foodstuffs from well-wishers.

It was about 1.00 pm, when we found Lucia Wanjiru Njoroge in her makeshift dwelling. She was lying on the floor on her “bed” made of a reed mat and a worn-out blanket. “My tooth has really been aching, so I’ve just been lying down the whole morning because I cannot do anything,” explained Wanjiru, as she ushered in me and my minder. We sat on the black cotton soil floor. (There were no chairs or stools or anything that could be sat on.) “This toothache (it was the lower molar tooth that was aching) is driving me crazy: it has given me a terrible headache and incapacitated my movements.”

Wanjiru, who is in her mid- to late-60s, told us that she could not remember her exact date of birth, “but I can remember very well when we got independence in 1963, because I was already a young girl and could understand what was going on.” It was evident that she had shrunk in size and she looked much older than her actual age. Times were hard; times had always been hard, since she left Rongai, in Nakuru County, a dozen years ago.

‘They survive on one meal a day’

It was lunchtime and Wanjiru had no food to eat: she lived with three of her grandchildren, two girls and a boy, but recently her fourth-born son had come visiting. Word had reached him in Nakuru that his mother was down with fever. Outside, a black pot rested on a three-stone hearth, the fire embers having died out. “I’ve been boiling dry maize for the children to eat – that’s all we have to eat,” said Wanjiru. She told us the kids had last eaten the same food 24 hours earlier. “They survive on one meal a day. That’s what I can provide. It helped

when the school provided the kids with some meals, but since January, there hasn't been any food in the school either."

The teachers told me that the children who brought some semblance of food to school were so few that it was creating a commotion at lunchtime. "The hungry kids without food will hover around those with food and demand to be given some. Hunger knows no bounds," observed teacher Salome.

It was a Friday when I visited Wanjiru. The schools had reopened for the second term, but I found her grandchildren at home doing odd jobs around their house. "The head teacher had asked them not to go back to school until they paid examination fees," said their granny. By examination fees, she meant the opening continuous assessment test (CAT) that is done at the beginning of the school term. "How much was the examination fee?" I asked her. "Thirty shillings for each. I can't raise a hundred shillings because I haven't worked for some time. It's the tooth, but also work has been hard to come by these last couple of weeks. I wish the head teacher would understand. But this term, he said he was going to be very strict."

Her grandchildren attend Shalom Primary School located in the camp. There I found teachers Jackie and Salome. "The situation in the school is dire. The school can no longer provide food for the pupils because it does not have any money to spare," explained Jackie. "So parents have been asked to supplement the food ration by giving their children something to carry to school, but how many parents can afford any extra food. As it is, they don't have any more food at home."

The teachers told me that the children who brought some semblance of food to school were so few that it was creating a commotion at lunchtime. "The hungry kids without food will hover around those with food and demand to be given some. Hunger knows no bounds," observed teacher Salome. "So what we teachers have been doing is to beg for food on behalf of the pupils who don't have any food. We ask the children who have carried food whether they are willing to share. Then we put them into groups." To be on the safe side, the teachers said they normally ask the pupils with food not to report to their parents that they shared their food. "The food's already too little, and we don't want parents who have provided their children with morsels of food to storm the school and accuse the teachers of forcing their children to share their meagre rations."

Before heading to Makutano, I had stopped at Ndaragwa Primary School. Built in 1944, it is one of the oldest primary schools in the country. The original wooden class is still intact. “We’re struggling to feed the children here,” a board member said to me. “Parents whose children learn here are so poor, they can’t afford to give their children daily rations for their lunch.”

The board member narrated to me how one teacher had asked his class to record in their exercise books (as a form of homework) what types of food they had for lunch on different days. “Going through the exercise books, the teacher noticed that one of the pupils had not filled his book on several days for several weeks. ‘Why haven’t you filled in some days, did you forget?’ asked the teacher. ‘No, it’s because I didn’t eat on those days,’ replied the pupil. Many pupils are going hungry because they have nothing to eat,” said the board member.

‘It was hunger that was driving him nuts’

Wanjiru, a victim of post-election violence (PEV) of 2007/2008 came to Makutano in Ngobit in 2012. “One day during the controversial presidential election, we returned home to find everything razed to the ground. The house with everything had been torched...we escaped with our lives,” recalled Wanjiru. She had been a casual labourer on a white man’s sisal plantation in Athenai in Rongai division. “We were taken to the Nakuru showground, after which we were transported to Mawingo area in Nyandarua County.”

In March, 2012, after each family was given Sh10,000, they were settled at Makutano, 40 km from Nyahururu town on the Nyeri-Nyahururu highway. “To give Sh10,000 to each family was an insult. What were you supposed to do with the paltry sum, especially after staying in a camp for three years?” asked a solemn Wanjiru. The land the IDPs were settled on belonged to the family of Zachary Gakunju, the late Kiambu coffee plantation magnate.

The IDPs who came to Makutano were mostly from Burnt Forest, Eldoret, Kaptembwa, Kericho, Kipkelion and Molo. They were each given a quarter of an acre to put up a house and two acres for farming.

“The government bought the land known as Giani Farm from Gakunju. It has rich soils, but where’s the seed capital to engage in farming?” Wanjiru said many of the camp’s IDPs have been reduced to casual labourers, working in the

neighbouring big and small farms for Sh200 (\$2) a day, tilling land. Wanjiru's husband was killed during the ethnic mayhem, making her the sole breadwinner of her family comprising her children and now some of her grandchildren.

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If Wanjiru can at least have the energy to fend for herself and her grandchildren, *Cucu* Alice Wambui is too old to even move around. I found her sunbasking outside her house. Her two male grandchildren were repairing the rickety reed fence. The boys, pupils at Shalom Primary School, like Wanjiru's grandchildren, had missed school. Reason? "*Cucu* (grandma) does not have the Sh60 for exam fees."

Wambui told me she was born in 1933. Because of going through long spells without eating anything, she had become emaciated and weak. "I'm too weak to do anything, so I depend on well-wishers to support me and my two grandchildren," said Wambui, who correctly noted her age and said she was now 86 years old, and facing the sunset of her life. Next to where she was seated was a small bowl of dry githeri (a mixture of boiled maize and beans). "I can't chew the maize, I've no teeth left," said Wambui as she opened her mouth for me to see her gaping gums. When she eats, she cherry-picks the softer beans, which she crushes with her gums.

"I don't have long to live, but I would like to see my (grand) children continue with schooling," said Wambui. The boys are in class four and five respectively, and they hang around their grandmother because she is the only parent they have ever known. "I took them in when they were very young...very young," recalled *Cucu*. "That younger one would even try and suckle my sagging empty breasts," she said laughing but with a touch of sadness.

One of the well-wishers that has been taking care of *Cucu Wambui* with her two grandchildren is Love in Action Mission (LIAM), a community-based organisation in Ngobit. “It has been challenging and heart wrenching,” said Pastor Isaac Kinyua Wairangu, who is charged with the daily operations of the LIAM. “We don’t know who to distribute the little foodstuff we have to, and who to skip. The camp people are all really badly off, but for *Cucu Wambui*, it is a self-evident case.” In any case, Wairangu said that the community-based organisation did not have enough food to distribute to everyone. LIAM also relies on well-wishers to give it foodstuffs to distribute around in Makutano camp.

“I’ve been receiving five packets of 2 kg of flour, 1 kg for porridge and a bar of soap every fortnight,” Wambui told me. “That’s what has been keeping us alive.” Wairangu said that his organisation evaluated which family to help on a need-to-need basis. “We can only distribute so much. Recently we decided to put Wanjiru in our programme. Her intermittent sickness was pulling her down and she was unable to work as a farmhand. She’s also really not that young and with her three grandchildren, all young, she needed help.”

Thirty-four year-old John Thiong’o, Wanjiru’s son who had come visiting from Nakuru, told me that tilling the land for a woman of his mother’s age was a daunting task. A labourer is supposed to dig an area measuring 15 by 15 piece of land. “This work is done with a hoe and spade, requires someone strong and who’s feeding well. With not enough food going around here...you can only expect so much from an old lady like my mother.”

Thiong’o himself is a labourer in Nakuru. He said that wage labour everywhere had been going down lately - the drought had seriously affected and disrupted the harvesting and sowing periods. “That’s when there’s work in the farms. Since late last year, there hasn’t been work. It is that bad.”

Pastor Wairangu told me that another person they had incorporated into their programme was *Guka* (granddad), an octogenarian, who lived alone and whose family was killed in the 2007/2008 ethnic upheavals. “*Guka* would go for long periods of starvation, recoiled in his hovel, where oftentimes he would weep on his own,” said Wairangu. “Then he started behaving like he had been possessed, talking to himself, like he was performing a soliloquy...when he was given food, he calmed down. It was hunger that was driving him nuts.”

‘This government has never done anything for IDPs’

Right in the middle of the highlands, with the Mt. Kenya and Aberdare Ranges close by, Makutano camp can be very cold and windy at night. When Esther Kwamboka Ambuya gave birth to her fraternal twins, her “house” was a hovel. The only thing it had was the blue iron sheets. The empty spaces were filled with cartons and hanging rags and sacks. But when I visited her, the house had been built with iron sheets all round and partitioned with plywood.

“LIAM one time came visiting. They found the twins very sick. They asked me what the problem was. I told them it was the windy chilly nights through the gaping holes, which exacerbated their sickness,” said a smiling Kwamboka to me.

“But the babies had also been underfed,” added Wairangu. “We elected to re-do her house and put her on a feeding programme to boost her milk production for the babies.”

Kwamboka, 28, could now afford a smile and for a good reason: The house was now shielded from the chilly winds and the floor had been spruced up by a thick black polythene sheet to help trap heat. This kept the babies warm.

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Kwamboka, today a single mother, was in Form III when PEV happened. She lived in Soko Mjinga in Kaptembwa in Nakuru. When her family escaped to the showground, the family separated as they were being taken to the different IDP camps. When the twins were born, she could not continue working as a casual labourer. “Her hands were full and she was all alone with the twins. They almost starved, but we helped salvage the situation,” said Wairangu.

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The IDPs in Makutano were settled during President Mwai Kibaki’s tenure, explained the 38-year-old Kariuki. “The iron sheets for roofing were acquired during Kibaki’s time. We fought hard to coax the Sh10,000 from the government. By the time people were being settled at Makutano, Kibaki’s term was coming to end.”

Kariuki said that the IDPs had hoped the incoming government of President Uhuru Kenyatta and Deputy President William Ruto would be sympathetic to their plight. After all, who could understand the predicament of IDPs better than these two comrades-in-arms? “But all they were interested in was canvassing for votes from poor and vulnerable people. They lied to them how once they got into power, the government would alleviate their miserable lot,” said Kariuki. “It’s really mindboggling how a government can ride on the susceptibility of its people tormented by the wicked political actions brought to bear on them by the very same politicians.”

Recently, said Kariuki, the government - out of guilt or shame, or both - brought 50 bags of dry maize as its contribution to the famine that is going on at Makutano camp. “Is this a joke of a government or how would you describe this insult?” posed Kariuki. “Makutano has a population of 9,600 people or around 1,600 families. How was that maize supposed to be distributed? Who was it supposed to feed? This is a shameless government devoid any feelings.”

Kariuki told me a dark cloud of a silent hunger was threatening the people of Makutano camp, menacingly circling around them, as a government obsessed with lofty ideals of constructing houses for the pretenders to middle class watched unperturbed. Kariuki is himself an IDP from Eldoret. “The IDPs who came to Makutano were poor, yes, but not desperate. They could afford their own food. They had their own animals and used to till their land until they were visited by the 2007/2008 political calamities.”

It is the government that has impoverished them, he added. “These people have

been turned into serfs, exploited for their blood and labour. The Uhuru government, said Kairuki, was busy splitting hairs and blowing hot air over its duties and obligations to the citizenry. "What the people of Makutano have always wanted was the government to, at the very least, provide water for them. Rain-fed agriculture has over the years become intermittent and unpredictable." The IDP chairman said that the underground water could not be used because it was saline - "it can't be used for growing crops."

The black cotton soil is fertile, he said, and it could be used to grow a variety of crops - from carrots to cabbages, potatoes to tomatoes, maize and beans. "Yet, look at all that land lying fallow because of lack of water and capital."

I left Laikipia and Nyandarua counties persuaded that food shortages, hunger and food insecurity were less about drought and famine, but more to do with having the capacity to afford food and to secure food security.