

Torture and extortion in forced confession for illegal guns leaves lasting scars among Karimojongs

For a first time visitor, the endless stretch of roadblocks manned by armed soldiers is enough to signal the brittleness that Karamoja sub region is going through. Despite its beautiful scenery at the heart of tourists making it to the region for holidays, tales of a bleeding Karamoja makes the anterior an irony to comprehend, **Simon Peter Emwamu** writes.

Throughout the decades, the people of Karamoja sub region have eked a living through keeping livestock, often supplementing it with subsidiary farming. However, cattle keeping has come under immense threats of raids, disease, bad weather which often exposes the region to famine.

Albeit all these, the people in the region have always stood resolute in maintaining mobile livestock keeping even in the worst of times, yet often vilified and misunderstood as a bunch of 'criminals', a stereotype that this region has struggled to fade off because of a few criminal elements recently returned the region to armed rustling.

In their resoluteness to make ends meet, often in the worst of situations, lives the heinous tales of torture, arbitrary detentions and extortion. In a new disarmament exercise, these violations allegedly perpetuated by officers of the Uganda People Defence Force (UPDF) continue to be committed with impunity, going unchecked, and largely under the radar.

Eyewitnesses recount accounts of torture inflicted on many across the region but they are frightened as there is nowhere to report to. Local leaders feel targeted when they raise the plight of people and the use of excessive force.

As a result of torture, many cases of people forced to state of disability or even death have remained unreported.

Like political leaders, human rights activists remain a target in

this disarmament process seemingly drenched in a horror of human rights abuses.

At Atedeoi, village, Mogoth parish, Lotisan sub county in Moroto District, the events of May 16, 2022 are still fresh in the minds of the locals.

On this day, Ngorok Lokeny recalls seeing over 20 armed UPDF soldiers cordoning off the entire village and later frog marching every man in their sight to the nearby army detach at Atedeoi. Here, they were screened and those who did not pass the test were subjected to torture.

While at Atedeoi, Ngorok says, their captors questioned them for five days and for every answer they did not like or wish to hear, they would hit them with the butts of guns and with a series of stretchable wires indiscriminately.

The 56-year-old says they spent the nights in the cold, and in the scorching heat during the day, without food or water most times. And by default, anyone who asked for food, or water to quench the unbearable thirst was punished.

Ngorok, who is a father of six says he witnessed his village mate, one Akol Apakabir collapse to death following injuries inflicted for failing to confess that he holds a gun.

"That night's horror is still fresh in me. Apakabir's body was lat-

er handed to the local leaders. He leaves behind a widow and children," Ngorok says.

Not far from Atedeoi, in another little village of Kidepo in Rupa sub-county, Moroto District, lies the grave of Apatookit Mutyaa.

Like Apakabir, Mutyaa was accused of having a gun, severely tortured by the UPDF at Loputuk army barracks, left with deep wounds and sent back home to die. The deceased immediate family has since crossed to Kenya in search of safety.

Attempts to access Loputuk army barracks remained futile as the officer in charge referred the investigator of these atrocities to the Third Division Headquarters spokesperson.

Mr. Lokilia Napok, 60 years, who was discharged from the missionary-run hospital of Matany on June 13, 2022 in Napak district, recalls his last moments at Loputuk barracks as hellish, and unbearable.

At his home in Kadilakeny village, Rupa Sub-county on June 18, 2022, the father of 20, speaks with pain, frequently spitting out blood as result of the internal bleeding that almost claimed his life two weeks prior.

Napok, who can barely sit upright, says that on realising that he was at the verge of death, his captors put him in a military van, and dropped him home 'perhaps to let

me see my family members for the last time before I die.'

"In all my pain and while passing blood from my private parts and through the mouth, my family members stretched me to Matany hospital," he says.

Other Districts not spared

These acts of torture, arbitrary detention, and extortion, are not merely restricted in Moroto District. Equally in the vast and hilly Nakapiripirit District, are the tales of communities wasting away in fear of torture by officers enforcing the disarmament process.

In Nabulenger village, Loreng Sub-county, overlooking the famous Namalu government prisons, lives 28-year-pregnant Martha Namer, who was on May 16 2022 flogged into a coma. Her only crime being refusing to confess that her husband has a gun.

The mother of three who remains in excruciating pain says a team of army officers carrying AK47 guns, cordoned off their Manyatta at 5:00pm.

"After failing to find my husband inside our communal settlement, they zeroed on me. They stripped me half naked before my children. A tall brown guy I believe was their boss, ordered me to lay down. They repeatedly hit my back until the skin peeled off," she says.

As she sobbed in pain, Namer says another cohort of soldiers advanced and inflicted another round of torture on her, until she lay down unconscious.

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150
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Martha Namer, 28, was tortured in front of her children in Nabulenger village, Loreng Sub-county, Nakapiripirit District. PHOTO/SIMON PETER EMWAMU

cy because of God's grace. Otherwise, I could have already had a miscarriage, but I still have total pain all over my body," she says.

Ms Namer, says everyone is a candidate for torture.

For the six years she has been married to Paul Longole, she has not seen him any single day hold a gun.

"I cannot walk. I can no longer dig. My husband who was a breadwinner was apprehended, tortured to coma, and later taken. I do not know his whereabouts, whether he is dead or still alive," she says.

"I am starving. My children are starving too. Longole would toil in Namalu town council for a day's kilogram of maize flour and beans but that food is hard to find now."

Three kilometers west of Nabulenger village, in Kobenyon village, are two breastfeeding mothers who despite the fragility, attracted no sympathy from the officers enforcing disarmament.

Sophia Angella, 32 and her co-wife Martha Angella, 36 were accused by the force that had stormed their communal home for concealing the whereabouts of their husband, Mark Adyaka who according to security was reportedly keeping an AK47.

Terrified, Adyaka, a husband to 27 wives, and a father to 120 children, fled his home to the mountains bordering Amudat as he negotiated ways of regaining his freedom through proxies because he found himself innocent.

"I had to part with Shs1.5million to regain my freedom. They accused me of keeping a gun, but the guns I once had I returned to the army during the 2001-2006 disarmament," he says staring at his granaries destroyed by the army officers in search of guns.

He accuses state-recruited informers of betraying their villagemates for a mere bottle of liquor. And because of that, about 500 youth in Loreng, Lokoona and Tokora areas in Nakapiripirit are being held in arbitrary detention since April 2022.

Those with money part with as much as Shs 2million to regain their freedom.

Though free, Adyaka's 21-year-old son is still being held in detention, allegedly in Namalu government prison for two months now on suspicion of possessing a gun.

Local leaders not spared

Jacob Apalia, the LC1 Lokoona village, Loregae sub county, Nakapiripirit district, had his four children sent to detention in Kotido district as they returned from Lolachat cattle market in Nabilatuk district.

In his narrative, Apalia states that his sons were beaten beyond recognition. About two weeks ago, tired of waiting for forced confession, some army officers approached him promising to help him release his sons.

As a desperate father in need of freedom for his children, he parted with Shs 4.5M to set his children free.

A human rights defendant in Nakapiripirit, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal, says in the village of Lomorimori, Lomorimori parish, Kawach Sub County, a total of 81 youth arrested during cordon and search operations in early May, remain unaccounted for. Similarly the human rights activist states that another 150 remain unaccounted for in villages of Loreng Sub County.

For Logit Marko, LC3 chairperson for Loreng Sub County, who was held in arbitrary detention at Moruita Brigade in Nakapiripirit for four days, equally testifies about the heinous torture currently ongoing in the hands of the army.





The grave of Apatookit Mutyaa who was severely tortured allegedly by men in UPDF uniform at Loputuk army barracks and sent back home to die.

“I speak with pain. I was falsely accused for having a gun after I stood against the inhumane manner the army was using to handle suspects, they tortured me at Moruita for four days, kept me handcuffed for much of the time I was there,” the Loreng LC3 chairperson states.

The LC5 chairperson for Nabilatuk, Paul Lokol, says the torture and detention without trial have already left scars on hundreds of helpless Karimojong.

“To this day, as the LC5 chairperson, I have come under threats for standing with the people who entrusted me to lead them, but amidst that I tell my God, if I get frightened then who will stand for your people,” Lokol says.



“Paying for freedom. I had to part with Shs1.5million to regain my freedom. They accused me of keeping a gun, but the guns I once had I returned to the army during the 200-2005 disarmament,” says Mark Adyaka

In villages of Natapararegan, Alemukere, Loyaraboth, Lolachat, Lokol says close to 900 youth and men remain uncounted for close to two months.

Mr. Lokol adds that such arbitrary detention beyond 48 mandatory hours are being used as an avenue for extorting money from families already nursing scars of torture and death.

“Our children are being arrested, and arbitrarily taken to detention camps far away from their home districts, those arrested from southern Karamoja are taken as far as Kotido, Kaabong, Karenga in Northern Karamoja. Likewise those arrested from North end up in South-

ern Karamoja,” he reveals, adding that all these ugly occurrences are happening at a time when the people in Karamoja can’t afford two meals a day.

“The people are food stressed following the crop failure of last year which was heavily orchestrated by drought and fall of the armyworm. People need government intervention for food rations, but it is not forthcoming.”

Army responds

When the number of findings on human rights abuse were brought to the attention of the Third Division Army spokesperson, Maj. Isaac Oware, last week admitted rumours about the extortion at play among some officers but no formal complaint was brought to them.

Maj Oware says the UPDF has over time grown to become an army that observes human rights, and protects the people in all its undertakings.

“Normally if such cases are recorded and brought to our attention, such officers are legally dealt with using our court martial system. We need people to formally state to us - who are these officers who have violated human rights, who are these officers engaged in extortion of money. For now all we have are rumours,” Maj. Oware spelt out the army position on the matter of torture in Karamoja.

Often when cases of torture, human rights violation come to play with evidence, we conduct a joint human rights investigation with a diverse team of human rights defendants. Here in Moroto we have the Uganda Human Rights Commission, and the UN human rights body is also present here.

The third division spokesperson, says always when cordon and search operations are conducted, not every persons gathered are taken, we screen for suspects, who with our sister force the Uganda police force are charged and arraigned in courts of law.

“Honestly the prisons where these suspects are taken don’t have such space to keep all those people,” Maj. Oware mentions.

As UPDF we always welcome the citizens with grievances against some officers to report, and that has been our norm as a force.

Insecurity in Karamoja is only a symptom of historical marginalisation - KDF Exec. Director

Simon Peter Longoli, the Executive Director, Karamoja Development Forum spoke to Daily Monitor about insecurity in Karamoja and where it all went wrong. David S. Mukooza transcribed the interview

What do you think are the reasons fueling instability in Karamoja?

When it comes to Karamoja, background is important because nothing is happening in Karamoja that is happening on its own. Everything is steeped in history and this history goes as far back as 120 years ago. A lot of this has to do with the interaction of our society with outsiders. Most of the tragedy in Karamoja is not up to the Karimojong. If they were a society without interactions with others, maybe we’d have fewer issues. The problems related to poverty, underdevelopment, insecurity, and food shortages, all these have a historical dimension.

To specifically look at insecurity which is our main concern, there was massive land alienation, exploitation during the colonial government which postcolonial governments have continued to superintend over. There was also economic marginalisation that happened many years ago, deliberate exploitation because of the livestock and the wildlife economy. During the colonial times, there was a deliberate curtain put between Uganda and Karamoja, when you look at the way this insecurity is being handled today, that curtain – behaving like a firewall, continues to exist. This conflict has taken many years for Ugandans to know and fully understand the root causes. It took some recent specific incidents to bring this discussion to the national level. The issue of insecurity is only a symptom of historical marginalisation as food insecurity a long standing symptom of economic exploitation, whereas high levels of illiteracy is a symptom of the deliberate firewalling of Karamoja from the country of Uganda. Our history with the government is a funny one.

About 10 years ago there was successful disarmament leading to a period referred to ‘relative peace’. To me, this was false because there was no peace. We had some sense of security manned by UPDF characterized by many detachments created along the roads. When the government withdrew its forces in 2017, the security deteriorated bringing the period of that “relative peace” to an end.

In 2010, during the last lap of disarmament, the government made a promise of safety and protection to Karimojong and their properties, mainly from Kenyans (Turkana) and South Sudanese (Toposa), who do not exercise a similar policy of disarmament as Uganda. This promise was not honored.

However, all this could be avoided if the government did its job rightly. The community, local leaders and people like us sent out reminders to the government through different channels for three years and it was only until August 2021 that the state started to notice. So around August, we had the First Lady visiting, the President, Gen. (David) Muhoozi, Gen. Muhoozi Kainerugaba and Gen. Salim Saleh also came through, which was a manifestation of state interest.

It is only in Karamoja that you can lose more than 3,000 people and livestock worth billions, and it does not make news. So I am of the persuasion that our social contract with the Ugandan state has different clauses from other regions. That is the sad reality that the people of Karamoja live with.

Many Karimojong have died and are still dying. A lot of taxpayers’ money (Shs112b) with UPDF taking the largest share is now committed to the security situation. This



waste of tax payers’ money would have been avoided if the government had reasonably acted three years ago. It would be invested into infrastructure, education, health care for all Ugandans. Of course, there are individuals who have taken advantage of this mess, they are highly placed are highly profiting from it.

What are the missing gaps in addressing insecurity in this region?

Well, the insecurity in Karamoja stems from its geopolitical position. Secondly the structure of the population and the structure of our economy which is based on the commune. The third is the structure of government where institutions of government are not in sync with the community or rather appear nonexistent.

The practice of Karamoja and to be specific the Karimojong, is they have very low trust for the government while the trust for traditional institutions is very high. Everyone knows the government is not tailored to make traditional institutions functional.

There is a lot of incompatibility between the formal state structure and Karimojong governance system, and this incompatibility creates a lot of friction thus endless challenges faced the Karimojong. For example in 2013 our people created a system to manage livestock theft and it was a traditionally-based system, where ‘if I am a child of my parents I’m also a child of the community’ and to a larger extent, my community is responsible for me even when I make mistakes. This was called the “Nabilatuk/Moruitit Resolution” which was meant to work as a community’s punitive system. So if you stole one cow, you would pay two cows plus one which would be for elders. This system greatly dealt with livestock thefts and raids. The state killed this system around mid-2019 and look where we are. The state system is not protecting both lives and property, and practically, we have a vacuum within which thugs are thriving.

How is the instability affecting the development path that Karamoja had taken?

After 2010, Ms Janet Museveni marketed Karamoja as a top destination for investment. So securing Karamoja had its purpose – to pull investments into Karamoja. A lot of adverts portrayed Karamoja as Uganda’s haven for investment. I can tell you that investments in the extractive industry are not benefiting Karimojong directly. There is one agreement a community we supported hit with a Chinese company. Influence from Kampala made sure the community did not negotiate well enough and could not have the time to negotiate.

The community got Shs1.8 billion deal, handing the Chinese company 22 year access, and on a path to make an annual turnover of \$31 million. So you can imagine who benefits from the sector. As things stand in Karamoja now, the best deal is the one

which keeps minerals in the ground.

The strategy seems to be to make Ngikarimojong vulnerable and desperate that they cannot get money worth the value and the community continues to stay in destitution. So for me, mining will not be the magic bullet, rather more direct investments in people’s health, education and livestock farming.

We have seen many operations, which have resulted in killings, arrests, and recoveries of cattle and guns conducted by different security agencies. What more do you think needs to be done to restore peace in Karamoja?

Well, we have always been clear and direct about what needs to be done. Last year, we published six points in an advert on what needs to be done to restore peace and security in Karamoja. Security work is not the only thing to be done, not even the removal of weapons.

In the context of disarmament, the number one remedy is to establish civil-military cooperation. Many leaders are being killed in Karamoja. That is because the military runs a non-existent intelligence system. There is no cooperation with civilian leaders at all and a lot of human rights violations are being committed as a result. Secondly, the issue of recovery and return of stolen livestock. People are joining these illegal groups because they have lost their livelihoods and loved ones in cold blood. There is a huge economic and human loss communities are dealing with. In just three years, some communities have lost nearly 100 percent of their prime economic assets – Livestock. Further, A proper and appropriate security and peace infrastructure has to be set up and this has to be inclusive of the civilians – political and traditional leaders. Surprisingly this has happened before.

Lastly, there has to be fair and peaceful disarmament, not forceful. That is what we are seeing now. Most importantly, invest in a structured dialogue process. When we had ‘relative peace’ it seems we forgot how to speak to ourselves. Nearly all dialogue processes taking place in the region are supported by nongovernmental actors. The government does not understand Karamoja’s dialogue mechanism. The Office of the Prime Minister seems to focus strategy on buying easy to procure goats or iron sheets for disarmament operations which are not important at this point. This will be counterproductive. I believe a well-organized dialogue process will contribute 80 percent to solving Karamoja’s security crisis.

During a recent meeting with security chiefs, President Museveni tasked security to intensify the hunt for guns to disarm rustlers. To what extent can this help to bring sanity to the region?

This is something that should have been done a long time ago. It’s too little, too late. It happens on the back of deaths of so many innocent citizens. Why did the President not react three years ago? Why should it be up to the President to make things work? We thought the government and the state have independent structures that should not solely depend on the President to function effectively. However charismatic the president is, our livelihood and security need to lie in the functioning of all the arms of government. Of its processes and the capability of its systems. The people of Karamoja are not interested in state power. All they want is to secure their livelihood and lives. Uganda owes them that!

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