

Karamojong and related groups

Profile

Karamojong pastoralists of north-east Uganda, numbering around 475,000 people, along with related groups, comprise the most significant marginalized minority in Uganda, isolated geographically, economically and politically, and widely despised by their compatriots as violent and underdeveloped. Other Ugandans commonly refer to them as warriors. Related groups, whose differentiation from Karamojong as separate ethnic or tribal groups is a result of often arbitrary external ethnographic categorization, include Tepeth, Labwor, Dodoth, Napore, Teuso and Pokot. The ecological crisis in north-east Uganda dates primarily from water development and disease control programmes begun in 1938, which quickly led to overstocking, overgrazing and environmental degradation, exacerbating periodic drought-induced famines. Cultivation in the central belt also suffers from drought, which often causes complete crop failure. In recent years, chronic drought has been linked to climate change.

Historical context

Since colonial times governments have treated Karamojong primarily as a security problem, based on the people's tradition of cattle rustling. Whereas Karamojong men traditionally conducted cattle raids on neighbouring tribes using spears and sticks, since the widespread introduction of automatic weapons in the early 1980s the region has been a virtual no-go area, save primarily for military expeditions to punish cattle-raiding and the intermittent efforts of relief agencies to supply food during the frequent periods of drought and famine.

The government of Uganda has attempted a demilitarizing of the Karamojong, who have been reluctant to lay down their weapons in part because they remain prone to cross-border cattle raids from Pokot and Turkana peoples in neighbouring Kenya and Sudan. An attempt at voluntary disarmament in December 2001 included a government pledge to protect the border and allowance of armed Karamojong border defence militias. The effort resulted in collection of 3,000 of an estimated 40,000 weapons. But it was accompanied by widespread allegations of abuses - including torture, extrajudicial killings, and destruction of property - by the Ugandan armed forces. Continued Karamojong cattle raids in subsequent years have led to many civilian deaths and spurred a heavy-handed Ugandan military response.

Current issues

The biggest crisis to hit Uganda in 2007 was flooding. Heavy rainfall - the worst in three decades - left large parts of the country inundated. The Karamoja region was one of the worst-affected places. In September it was reported that the area had been totally cut off from food supplies. Michael Kuskus of the Karamoja Agro-Pastoral Development Programme complained of sharp rises in food prices and hoarding by unscrupulous traders. This region is already the poorest and most underdeveloped in the

country, and, following the floods, there were fears of widespread hunger and the outbreak of epidemics.

The hardship endured by the Karamajong has intensified in recent years. Like other cattle-herders in the East African region, they have been at the sharp end of climate change. More frequent cycles of drought have led to greater competition for scarce resources; cattle-raiding has accelerated and this has been accompanied by an upsurge of violence. The ready availability of small arms in the region has led to deadly conflict, which has caused hundreds of deaths over the past few years.

In an attempt to curb the violence, the Ugandan government embarked upon a forced disarmament programme in Karamoja. But the way in which the policy has been carried out has attracted fierce criticism. In a stinging report issued in 2006, and followed up in April 2007, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documented grave human rights violations carried out by the national army, the Ugandan People's Defence Forces. These included extra-judicial killings of civilians, torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, the rape of a woman, and the widespread destruction of homesteads.

By November 2007, OHCHR noted that there had been a marked improvement in the security and human rights situation - following increased efforts to seek the cooperation of Karamajong communities, and better training of the military in human rights standards. But OHCHR continued to call for those who had been responsible for the abuses to be brought to account, and condemned the culture of impunity in the armed forces when extra-judicial killings and torture occur.