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Disarmament exercises addressing Karamoja's insecurity needs peaceful tactics and local engagement

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The Ugandan government is proposing a new disarmament campaign in its Karamoja region to address rising insecurity and cattle theft. But the experience of the previous disarmament campaign highlights the need for community engagement and scrutiny over methods. Saum Naungiro discusses the recent history of Karamoja's violence and the challenges for a sustainable solution.

In north-eastern Uganda, Karamoja is home to about one million people from eight main population groups, a majority of which share a language and pastoralist culture. It is the poorest and **least developed region** of Uganda on almost all measures; rainfall is irregular, and a significant proportion of the population is typically food-insecure at any time.

Between 2006 and 2011 the government engaged in a disarmament exercise to attempt to end a culture of cattle raiding that had become increasingly destructive since automatic weapons became **available in the late 1970s**, both within and beyond Karamoja's borders. Due to constant aggravated deaths and raiding in Karamoja region, the Government of Uganda is opting to carry out yet another disarmament exercise.

From relative peace to increasing lawlessness

Karamoja region has experienced relative peace for a decade following a successful disarmament exercise that started in 2006, by force, which later became voluntary in conjunction with a range of stakeholders including local communities and civil society organisations. The negative impact of the presence of small and light weapons, and its contribution to the breakdown of the region's social fabric, was recognised as uncontrollable by the efforts of security agencies alone.

Towards the end of 2019, however, insecurity and lawlessness crept back into the region. The situation was exacerbated by the often unfruitful and slow recovery of increasing stolen livestock, which continued such that youth networks built formidably across the region, whose alliances became elusive and clandestine to the extent that elements of the security agencies were considered in cahoots with the business, creating a complex mesh of conflict entrepreneurs. As insecurity resurfaced, livestock theft grew as a key target, later expanding to include wanton killings of innocent persons and theft of household property.

More recently there has been an increase in raiding amongst Karamojong communities and the neighbouring regions of Acholi and Teso. In the most recent incident on 22 March 2021, in Kaboong District, Sidok Sub-county, it was announced over local radio that a UN vehicle with two occupants fell into a road ambush mounted by approximately 10 warriors carrying guns and clad in army uniform. The UN vehicle was moving behind a truck carrying cows heading to Kotido Market. The warriors fired three bullets and demanded money from the occupants of the vehicle, with 10,000 Ugandan shillings taken. The warriors offloaded the animals and vanished into the bush. While no death or injury was

reported, the incident has created tension amongst the raiding communities and people feel unsafe. In **Napak district alone**, more than 50 lives have been lost since the **insecurity started**, leading to a peaceful protest in the community rallying with the slogan '**Napak is bleeding**'.

A related incident, also announced over local radio, occurred on 19 March 2021 along Nakapiripirit-Bulambuli/Mbale road, where armed warriors shot a Uganda Prison car coming from Mbale. They missed the target and all the occupants escaped safely.

In the last year, the escalation of insecurity has grown as livestock thefts have advanced into the peri-urban and then urban areas of the region, leading to an increasing loss of lives and property in these areas.

These incidents started as a conflict between pastoral communities straddled along the Kenya-Uganda border, namely the Dodoth ethnic community of Kaabong and the Turkana of Kenya, but later advanced towards the Jie of Kotido before spreading into central Karamoja (Matheniko of Moroto and Bokora of Napak). The largely disgruntled Local Defense Units security outfit were deployed along ethnic lines, which together with a demotivated strata of peace committees made mitigation measures clumsy, worsening the situation further.

Addressing rising insecurity in Karamoja region

Efforts by civil society organisations to facilitate meetings between and among conflicting communities, involving both security and local government structures, created a window of opportunity to decelerate the situation. The national electioneering period in early 2021, however, curtailed well-meaning coordination at the grassroots level and among local leaders; contenders who were key rallying points kept a low profile lest they risked their electoral success, fearing communities would construe their active participation as an alliance of their electorates against perceived foes. COVID-19 restrictions also affected movement and large congregations.

The current spate of conflicts has left all stakeholders ill-prepared to mitigate commercial implications. Livestock thefts have become significantly harmful

because, unlike previously where tracking and recovering stolen goods was easier from known perpetrating communities, new criminal tactics involve non-regional businessmen who, by situating a lorry for stolen cattle close to the incident, make tracing goods near impossible. Coupled with the poorly equipped, understaffed and limited presence of law enforcement and state security agencies, the situation has quickly worsened. Moreover, the porousness of national borders has made easy the rearmament of local communities, including those – such as the Turkana of Kenya and the Toposa of Sudan – who had for a long duration been disarmed.

Enforcing sustainable disarmament resolutions

Numerous meetings have been organised both at community and national levels to examine action to produce sustainable disarmament and rid the region of guns. With the theft of livestock ongoing, coordination among stakeholders is surely lacking and resolutions agreed in dialogue meetings are not followed up. These resolutions include:

- Increased and strategic deployment of security forces to stem attacks while protecting lives and property of local communities
- Immediate resumption of disarmament while securing international borders where arms and light weapons are entering the country
- Improvement of security roads to facilitate the quick follow-up and tracking of animals
- Meaningful involvement of local communities in the disarmament exercise without victimisation of leaders
- Provision of alternative income generating activities for reformed sections of society
- Establishment and support for community-based security systems as sustainable mechanisms for dealing with conflict
- Coordination of interventions towards the transformation of local communities

- Rethinking the current Local Defense Unit deployment, which is based on ethnic lines

A primary concern of any new disarmament exercise should be to ensure it is conducted by the Government of Uganda peacefully, given our research findings that previous exercises were destructive and involved many inhumane acts. On the tactics used, it has **been written**:

‘An aim of emasculation was crudely manifested during the height of the disarmament programme: we were told that twisting the testicles between two sticks, as well as castration, were common ways the army would extract information about the location of hidden firearms or punish the recalcitrant, sometimes causing death.’

While supporting the proposed disarmament exercise to create a peaceful co-existence among Karamojong and its neighbouring districts of Acholi and Teso, it must crucially be handled with care and without excessive force.

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About the author



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Saum Nangiro is a Human Resource and Research Professional with 12 years of experience in Human Resource Management, Administration and Research. Saum has worked with several Developmental Agencies in the Karamoja Sub Region of Uganda, including alongside research at the LSE Centre for Public Authority and International development. She holds a Post Graduate Diploma in Public Administration and Public Management from Uganda Management Institute and a bachelor's degree in Human Resource Management from Makerere University Business School-Uganda.