

## More trouble in paradise

By Susan Richards,  
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The Kenyan coastline is many people's idea of paradise. It is a landscape of pale, palm-lined beaches, wafting sea breezes, forests full of rare birds and butterflies, a landscape whose painful history has left behind picturesque scars – Mombasa's narrow streets overlooked by Arab wood balconies, crumbling forts, lateen-rigged dhows, temples and spires among the mosques. It is a land, which has been coveted by people from many cultures.

The Portuguese fought for it in the 16th century; two centuries later the Arabs wrested control from them, and were succeeded by the British. More recently, the global market has spotted Mombasa's "real estate" potential. Foreign investors (like the Israeli owners of the Paradise Hotel), as well as Kenyans who have done well out of the present corrupt regime, have enclosed the land local Kenyans lived off. Lacking title deeds, the indigenous population has had no weapons with which to deter the men in suits who came armed with legal documents and no talk of compensation. That is the first layer of the problem, as seen from a local perspective.

The region's trouble has its ethnic dimension too. As a result of the civil war raging to the north, in Somalia, the mainly Christian community has been swamped by ethnic Somali refugees, people who are destitute, armed – and Muslim. Ethnic tension between these groups was behind the frenzy of violence which broke out in the coastal districts just to the north in August 1997. By the time it subsided three months later, the economy was destroyed and thousands had been killed, maimed or left homeless.

The toll of 15 dead and 35 injured in the recent bombing of the Mombasa Paradise Hotel did nothing like the damage of al-Qaida's attack on the US embassy in Nairobi in the summer of 1998. But to the local community it was the last straw. Take Ngoloko, the village closest to the hotel. Except for the villagers who were actually employed by the hotel, no one in this beautiful place had paid work. The community is plagued by poverty, drug addiction, violent crime and religious strife.

Villagers had been tackling these problems head on. They were building a cultural centre, hoping that this would offer employment to them and entertainment to visiting tourists. The community had been giving their work for free, and the Paradise Hotel was sponsoring the venture by donating building materials. The village's first cultural project to come to fruition had been the formation of a dance troupe, led by the charismatic Mzee Safari. All five of its members lost their lives in the blast.

One of the moving forces behind this plan to lift the community out of poverty was a local Kenyan peace-worker called Elizabeth. Following the bombing she has had to flee the district

and go into hiding, after being targeted for a brutal attack, and having seen her family's home ransacked.



With Mzee Safari dead, and Elizabeth traumatised, what happens next to this shattered community? Emails from Elizabeth's colleague Dekha to her global network of supporters have been reaching openDemocracy: 'A team of eleven of us went to visit the five families. Mzee Safari was a father of eight children, the eldest of whom is sixteen. His wife is pregnant with their ninth child. The tragedy has brought the families together. The surrounding hotels and community have helped them to bury the dead. This, at least, allows them a start with the healing process.'

'We are using the momentum of the crisis as a way of strengthening the community's capacity for building peace. We are particularly grateful to Margaret Adams from Northern Ireland, who came to Kenya this summer and shared her experience and her skills in stress management with us. This is coming in handy. Elizabeth and the surrounding villages are still in a state of shock. But the Mombasa community, as well as the larger Kenyan community, have responded well to the crisis. If only this support had been given to us earlier. Giving us support when we are literally on our knees in emotional and economic trauma is not very comforting...'

Elizabeth has also been in email contact from her place of hiding:

'As I speak, I have no income, no home and nothing of my own. One may look at the blast and see it as having left 15 people dead and 35 injured. But the repercussions are going to be much worse than that. Since the beginning of the year we had anyway been feeling the effects of the fall-off of tourism. We felt it in the spate of robberies with violence, the beatings and the rapes. These have left residents reeling in shock. The boldness, brutality and repetition of attacks have been stupefying.'

'Now our district is facing the same violence that happened in Kwale District...'. Elizabeth is referring to the epidemic of ethnic violence that broke out nearby in 1997. 'It does not take a very educated person to see that we in Kilifi need to pack our bags and move out – we will not be able to live in our houses after this. With more people losing their jobs and incomes, with some hotels closing down, with suppliers not having paid their debts and having nowhere to take their produce, with farmers not being able to sell their supplies, with small internet and phone businesses which depend on tourism grinding to a halt, exactly where will residents be in the coming year?'

'We need to address the effects of the violence, and the impending violence. For a country like Kenya, reeling from its maladies, developing strategies for preventative action may be the only way to stabilize it.'

*Elizabeth works with Kikambala Community Development Initiatives. She and Dekha are both part of [COPA](#) [1] and both are supported by the global peace network [ACTION for Conflict Transformation](#) [2]*

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