

WORKSHOP ON  
**THE DISARMAMENT OF PASTORALIST COMMUNITIES**

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The history of disarmament in Karamoja  
Why the Karimojong do had to keep guns?

This is a very complicated question to give a straight forward answer but the most common and obvious one is that the guns in Karamoja were kept for the purpose of keeping security. The Karimojong people were abandoned on their own by all successive regimes since Uganda's independence in the early 1960s. They suffered massive attacks from outside tribes like the Toposa, Turkana and Pokot. As a result, the Karimojong clans underwent displacement, resulting with the first Internal Displacement Camps which no single regime in Uganda has noticed and consequently resettled. The camps are evident everywhere in Karamoja and are in the form of massive and crowded settlements commonly known as villages (Ngireria). Nakapelimoru camp, which is in Jie County, Kotido District, is believed to be the biggest village found in Eastern Africa. During displacement, the Karimojong had to abandon lots of arable lands due to insecurity and had to squeeze their settlements together for security purposes. That's why we have more than ¾ of land in Karamoja not occupied. Lotisan Sub County in Matheniko County, Moroto district, was abandoned to date. The occupants of Lotisan are still squeezed in the stony areas of Rupa Sub county. There are many such abandoned places everywhere in Karamoja. The displacement in Karamoja has directly affected food production in the area as most of fertile land is not utilized. Animal pasture land has been greatly affected making the animals unproductive in terms of milk and other related products. This scenario of systematic food shortage in Karamoja has greatly impacted on the population of Karamoja, thus many have resorted to run away to take refuge in urban centres within and outside Karamoja.

It is therefore important for one to note that the huge villages that we see in Karamoja are not a normal way of settlement as many people think to be. As we talk of resettlement of the people of Northern Uganda, it is important for the government of Uganda to lobby for resources to resettle the people of Karamoja as well. They have continued to stay in the forgotten camps for so long. Are they not IDPs?

The helpless situation faced by the Karimojong dictated for a call for armament which to some extent was very justified. People had to look for guns from wherever they would find. Some local manufacturers made local guns whose barrels were made of legs of metallic pipes of school benches, (Ngamatidae). Other sources of guns, besides buying, included recovering from the enemy after being killed, government

abandoned armory like in the case of Moroto barracks, after the overthrow of President Idi Amin in 1979.

The reasons for the massive armament were given as stated below:

Self defence and protection against outside aggression and Government armed militia groups within Uganda along the borders with Karamoja. Many trading centres bordering the neighbours in the west were burnt by such government armed militia, for example – Angolebwal (Abim), Lokitelakebu, (Kotido), Iriiri and Kaangole (Moroto).

Used for raiding as an alternative source of livelihood.

## 2. Disarmament attempts in Karamoja

There have been numerous disarmament attempts to disarm the Karimojong by the Uganda government before and after independence in 1960s. The first disarmament attempts before independence were focused on the removal of local weapons used by the Karimojong before they acquired the modern weapons. The main weapons during the past disarmament were mainly the spears and arrows (mikuku/michale).

With increased spread of modern weapons, the raiding took another dimension as the Karimojong used modern rifles during raids. As competition for resources increased, the conflict in Karamoja diversified to include other elements like road ambushes and human abduction. All disarmament attempts have been done without attention to address the root causes of the problem; mainly the Karimojong insecurity and introduction of alternative livelihoods. It is important to note that all the disarmament attempts in Karamoja have been done by successive regimes since independence with the sole purpose of getting rid of the physical guns without putting in place any meaningful sustainable measures to ensure lasting peace in Karamoja.

Prior to the present forceful disarmament, the voluntary disarmament which was held between 2001- 2003, ended prematurely when the soldiers were withdrawn in Karamoja due to pressure from the LRA rebels in Northern Uganda. The disarmament had no plan but was mostly in terms of appeals by local leaders, spearheaded by the president who camped in Morulinga mini state lodge for over a month. The appeal worked and collected close to 10,000 guns in the whole of Karamoja. Hardly any single life was lost during the appeal process. In Kotido district KOPEIN worked in close collaboration with the members of the District Security Committee and conducted disarmament sensitisation meetings in the kraals in both Dodoth and Jie. The disarmament committee included all important stake holders; the elders, karacuna (young warriors), women, UPDF representatives, local councilors, kraal leaders, diviners and women. With the support of HRDP Danida, the committee held review/evaluation meetings with the purpose to ascertain on the progress of disarmament. The sudden withdrawal of UPDF in Karamoja during the disarmament sparked new sporadic violence among the Karimojong communities, leading to fresh armament by the Karimojong clans. The sudden withdrawal by the UPDF left the communities in a state of dilemma as the insecurity intensified. There were massive raids and rampant high way ambushes and robberies. The neighbouring communities, mainly Teso, Langi and Acholi came under renewed attacks from pockets of armed Karimojong raiders who roamed in bushes side by side with LRA rebels.

In Karamoja, the communities were abandoned on their own to face the music of insecurity caused by raiders. The assurances made to them by the UPDF on their security during disarmament appeals (sensitisations) became null and void. The members of the civil society, in particular KOPEIN, turned to be a target as the communities accused them for cheating the people with the army by appealing to them to return the guns during the sensitisation. It was a big lesson to learn by KOPEIN staff and it has made them to be more extra cautious in further similar undertakings.

### 3. On present disarmament in Karamoja

The present disarmament has been going on for over one year since it started at the beginning of May 2006. It is the forceful disarmament whose operational motto is “to condone and search”. The exercise was started simultaneously in all parts of Karamoja. The methodology of condone and search implies that the soldiers will go secretly and surround (condone) the suspected village/manyata/kraal or trading centre or cattle market and the occupants are sorted out accordingly. All the suspects are held for scrutiny and investigation. During the cordon, the soldiers search the place for any guns or ammunitions before sorting out the catch. Those who are found eligible of guns are taken to nearby army detachments for further questioning before they are finally released. During the cordon and search exercise anyone seen running out of the cordon with the intention to escape, whether armed or not, is ordered to be short dead.

In Kotido district, where KOPEIN is based, the disarmament faced many challenges one major such challenge being occasional resistance by the warriors. Such events resulted with high loses in terms of human lives and property.

Some of the problems faced during the disarmament included the following namely;

- high loses of human lives - both civilians and army personnel,
- destruction of property – in terms food, cattle, homesteads),
- rampant cattle rustling,
- increased high way ambushes
- prolonged detention of people suspected to be in possession of guns.

### 4. Some of the achievements made.

Although the present disarmament can be described as one of the most violent disarmaments ever conducted in the history of Karamoja, it is important to note down some of the achievements that have been realized so far and these include the following;

- guns are no longer seen in Karamoja as a public nuisance,
- cases of intimidation by warriors using the guns have ceased,
- massive raids have greatly reduced,
- Road ambushes/robberies have greatly reduced.

### 5. Challenges faced in the present disarmament.

The biggest challenges facing the current disarmament include the following;

- Persistent insecurity, raids are still going, though organized in small groups,
- Continuous flow of arms/ammunitions,
- Lack of active involvement of Karamoja communities in the whole process,
- Lack of similar disarmament efforts in the neighbouring communities in Kenya and Sudan,
- Lack of holistic approach to the disarmament.
- The questions of the sustainability to attain a gun free Karamoja.

#### 6. Recommendations:

Maintenance of law and order in Karamoja as the basis of any meaningful disarmament. No disarmament will ever succeed if this aspect is not taken care. It is the breakdown of law in Karamoja which encourages raids and it is the raids which make people not to cooperate to surrender the guns. Raiders must not be allowed to benefit from the guns they have refused to surrender.

Active involvement of the local communities of Karamoja in the disarmament exercise to guarantee sustainability of any progress scored. The government of Uganda should endeavour to include the Karimojong warriors as part and parcel of the Karamoja solution finding on insecurity problem.

Need to set up a community based security system with assistance of Karamoja elders. The issue of sustainability in deployment of regular security forces to guard communities and property in Karamoja poses a major challenge in search for sustainable peace in the area. The vigilante method was closer to a viable approach to tame the warriors and it had worked very well in the whole of Karamoja but the system failed due to poor management arising from financial mismanagement by some army officers. The method embraces taming warriors to be useful citizens and in the end result in attitudinal change. Many people are wondering why all communities bordering Karamoja are recruiting and training young men for community based security while no such effort is going on in Karamoja where it is most needed. The disarmament should not be rushed by any stake holder but instead it should be done with lots of patience and careful planning to avoid any massive loses in terms of lives and property.

Transparency by those carrying out the disarmament is very paramount as this will enhance trust and confidence. It is important to note that the warriors in Karamoja consider the army just like another raiding party against whom they should defend themselves. This argument is built and reinforced by glaring examples like the recent incident which took place in Lomukura (Kotido-Pader border), Jie County, Kotido district, in early November 2006. During the incident some soldiers (stationed in Kalongo in Pader district) took cattle at gun point (a raid) and drove them off to Kalongo via Paimol Muto. Not even the shepherd who was abducted during the raid has been recovered!

As a back up to the point of transparency already mentioned above, the army should minimize loses of cattle which have been impounded. In many occasions, impounding of cattle has been taken by some soldiers as an occasion to steal the cattle; a case in point is that of the incidence in Morulem, March, 2002 when some of the impounded cattle were sold and transported in dynas to the neighbouring districts. The most recent one was in Adilang, Pader District, on May 25th 2007.

Urgent need to bring cattle markets under tight control so as to counter their encouraging effects on cattle raiding. The police, together with community leaders should work out modalities to intercept and bar raided cattle from the markets. Both the sellers and buyers of such cattle should be sensitised or punished if they persist doing business on raided animals.

Need for deliberate provision of alternative livelihoods to Karamoja. There is need for some practical training to target the young herdsmen through the ABEK education programs.

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