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Kenya church attacks are latest sign of tension between Christians & Muslims

By Alan Boswell

McClatchy Newspapers (19.09.2012) — On the Sunday morning after their church was attacked, forcing their pastor, his injured wife and their daughter to flee, a handful of the curious and devout shuffled through the ring of police outside, through the smoke-stained entrance and gingerly around shards of glass to take seats inside. Shock filled the hushed sanctuary.

The Salvation Army church had stood in Mombasa, Kenya's second largest city, since before the country was declared independent in 1963. Regulars said they'd always maintained neighborly relations with the impoverished Muslims who lived around them. Now that world of harmony was as shattered as the windows lying around their feet.

"It was as if there was a war here. Stones were flying," recalled Herbert Kaduki, an elder of the church. "They were specifically targeting us."

What now? "We still don't know," he replied despondently.

Kenya is no Nigeria, where Muslim-Christian antagonism dominates the nation's politics and roils its hinterlands in fatal clashes every year. Kenya, with a booming economy and a strengthening democracy, is predominantly Christian and the relationship between that majority and the sizable Muslim minority has been mostly friendly.

But that veneer of tolerance was ripped open last week. At least five churches, including the Salvation Army one in the poor Muslim district of Majengo, were attacked during heavy rioting, local religious leaders say. Other churches have been attacked with grenades in separate incidents over the past year.

Behind the violence appears to be an extremist Islamist ideology that's spreading among the disaffected Muslim communities on the coast and may be fueled by Kenya's war in neighboring Somalia against the al Qaida affiliate there, al Shabab.

The attack on the Salvation Army church occurred Aug. 27, hours after a radical ideologue and preacher, Sheikh Aboud Rogo, was gunned down on the streets in broad

daylight. Kenyan police say they don't know who the assassins were, an explanation that Muslims here openly deride.

"The police killed him, of course," said Muhsin Swale, who worships at the Musa Mosque, where Rogo preached, just down the street from the Salvation Army.

Even after the police regained control of the streets, and the protests halted, the tensions remained. Four days later, after Friday prayers, Rogo supporters filed out of the Musa Mosque, shouting "Allahu Akbar" – "God is great" – at news cameras waiting outside. Police in riot gear appeared at the end of the street, next to the damaged Salvation Army church, and began to march in, menacingly. At first, the crowd stood its ground, defiantly, before dispersing.

"We are not fighting because we don't have guns. Just imagine if we had guns," a stocky man with graying stubble said to a reporter before scurrying down an alleyway.

Kenyan authorities downplay the significance of the violence.

"It has nothing to do with religion. These are just thugs versus the law," said Samuel Kilele, the top official in Kenya's Coast province. Kilele said there was no evidence that any Muslim leader had ordered the churches attacked.

Others hope that the violent response to Rogo's death serves as a wake-up call for the government to take seriously what they say is a growing terrorism threat in Kenya.

Annual reports by a United Nations commission monitoring alleged support for al Shabab by the tiny nation of Eritrea repeatedly describe Rogo as "a known associate of members of al Qaida East Africa and an advocate of the violent overthrow of the government of Kenya."

The latest report, published in July, details how a Kenya group known to raise money, recruit fighters and plan terrorist attacks in Kenya, the Muslim Youth Center, has continued to operate with "relative freedom."

According to the report, Rogo was closely associated with the Muslim Youth Center, as well as with a similar al Shabab-linked group in Tanzania.

Kenyan police had arrested Rogo several times, but he'd been acquitted in the courts every time; embarrassingly, some say, because his activities were hardly concealed.

"Extremism is growing, not only in Kenya, but all over Africa," said Juma Ngao, a moderate cleric who chairs the Kenya Muslims National Advisory Council. In Kenya, radical ideology is spreading primarily from Somalia, he said. "It is very, very serious."

Ngao blames a host of factors: anti-Americanism, youth unemployment, "bad theology" and opportunists profiting from trafficking fighters into Somalia.

The whittling away at the old social order is also apparent in Kenya's politics, where a popular, confrontational brand of American-linked evangelical Christianity has inserted culture wars into the national debate, similar to how the Moral Majority group influenced the political conversation in the United States in the 1980s.

The Christian coalition campaigned against Kenya's new constitution – which eventually passed with 70 percent of the vote in a 2010 referendum – largely out of concern that it would open the door to legalized abortion, which it has not. It also campaigned to end

the use of Islamic law through what are known as Kadhi courts, even though its application was limited and used only in cases that involved Muslims. Kenya promised protection of the Kadhi courts when Britain joined the Muslim coastal strip to the rest of the Kenya colony before independence.

Adding to the turmoil here is growing support among Muslims for an outlawed secessionist movement, the Mombasa Republican Council.

Last week, when the riots began spinning out of control, Ngao and other Muslim leaders reached out to their Christian counterparts in an effort to halt the violence before it spread, he said, vowing that Kenya must not be allowed "to become like Nigeria."

But he admitted that some churches refused to participate. Some Muslim clerics shunned the dialogue, too.

"The mad ones," Ngao said, widening his eyes to appear crazed.

Kenyan Muslims, Christians vow to prevent violence

By Tom Odula

AP (03.07.2012) - Kenyan clerics across the religious divide vowed Tuesday to not allow sectarian violence to erupt following attacks on churches over the weekend that killed at least 15 people.

The Inter-Religious Council of Kenya said Muslims will form vigilante groups alongside Christians to guard churches in Kenya's North Eastern Province, where the latest attacks occurred.

Adan Wachu, secretary general of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims and the chairman of Inter-Religious Council, said the weekend attacks, which are being blamed on an al-Qaida-linked militant group from Somalia, are meant to trigger sectarian violence between Christians and Muslims.

Wachu said clerics will actively preach against retaliation to prevent violence from spreading in Kenya like it has in Nigeria, where attacks on churches by a Muslim sect has ignited a spiral of violence

"This is not a religious war and it has to be addressed from a different paradigm shift," he said.

Gunmen on Sunday killed two policemen guarding the African Inland Church, snatched their rifles and then opened fire on the congregation from inside and out, killing 15 people. A simultaneous attack took place on a Catholic church in the same area of the eastern Kenyan town of Garissa.

Areas of northern and eastern Kenya along the border with Somalia have suffered a series of gunfire and grenade attacks over the last year. Militants attacked a church in Garissa in December, killing two people.

Kenya sent troops into Somalia last October to hunt al-Shabab fighters. The militants, who are allied with al-Qaida, have threatened repeatedly to carry out revenge attacks for Kenya's push into Somalia. Sunday's attacks appear to be part of that trend.

Wachu said five people, two of them Muslim clerics, had been killed in northern Kenya since late last year for speaking out against al-Shabab.

Boniface Adoyo, a Christian cleric and an official of the council, complained of a series of attacks on Christian institutions that no one has been jailed for.

Religious leaders who incite their followers should be charged under the provision of laws against hate speech, which were designed to curtail instigation of violence by politicians following postelection violence in 2007-08, Adoyo said.

"Anybody inciting religious worshippers for evil actions, that is hate speech and it also covers whatever we do in our temples and in our mosques," he said.

Two Kenyan churches attacked; at least 17 dead

Worshippers gunned down as they flee church building

Compass Direct News (02.07.2012) — Attackers with guns and hand-grenades killed at least 17 people and wounded scores more during worship services at two churches Sunday in Kenya.

Three of those killed were children. Two were police officers standing guard over one of the churches.

Both attacks occurred in Garissa, a provincial capital about 120 miles west of the Somalia border. Suspicion for the attacks immediately fell upon al Shabaab, a Somalia-based militant group that western governments say has links to al-Qaida, but authorities have not officially named any suspects.

The first of the attacks began at about 10:15 a.m. at the Africa Inland Church, where Christian worshippers were attending Sunday services. Published news reports differ on the specifics, but between two and four men approached the church, and shot the two police officers. The attackers took the officers' guns, and two grenades were thrown into the church. Reports differ on whether either grenade detonated, but they agree that gunmen entered the church and began to fire.

Several of the victims may have been shot as they fled from the church. News accounts differ, but as many as two gunmen waited outside the church to shoot at people as they ran out of the simple wooden building.

Several of the 17 people killed died at the scene. Others died while receiving treatment at the scene or in hospitals. Of the 17 killed, eight were said to be women, and three were children. Two were the police officers, who were on guard as a precaution against militant Islamists, who have targeted Christian churches in several African regions.

The second attack occurred about two miles away, at a Catholic church. Hand-grenades were lobbed at the church from a moving vehicle, causing serious injuries to at least three people. No fatalities were reported in the second attack.

The Kenya Red Cross said at least 75 people were injured in the two attacks. The number of victims overwhelmed regional hospitals, and several of the most seriously injured were airlifted to hospitals in Nairobi, the Kenyan capital.

Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki said he intends to direct "a thorough investigation concerning this futile terror attack on churches."

The Sunday attacks drew condemnation from local, Kenyan and international authorities.

"I condemn the attackers with the strongest terms possible," said police commander Philip Ndolo.

"All places of worship must be respected," said Abdulghafur El-Busaidy, chairman of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims. "We want to send our condolences, and we are sad that no arrests have been made yet."

Visiting Garissa on Monday, Kenya Prime Minister Raila Odinga said militant Islamists are targeting churches as a ploy to bait Christians into anti-Muslim reprisal attacks and create a false context for Christian hatred of Muslims.

"We are more intelligent than that," Odinga told the Voice of America. "This is not a religious matter, this is a group of terrorists who are resorting to these kind of desperate measures because of the progress being made by our troops in Somalia." Kenyan forces have been battling al Shabaab in Somalia since October 2011.

In the United States, the White House press office said the attackers "have shown no respect for human life and dignity, and must be brought to justice for these heinous acts."

"At a time of transition, peace and stability are essential to Kenya's progress. We support those who recognize Kenya's ethnic and religious diversity as one of the country's greatest strengths."

Such assurances are of little practical comfort to Ibrahim Magunyi, pastor of the East Africa Pentecostal Church.

"The government has stepped up security in Garissa and posted policemen to guard the Church faithful," Magunyi said. "But these attackers have now come into open to attack the Churches in Garissa."

Kenya church attacks 'kill 15' in Garissa

BBC News (01.07.2012) - Fifteen people have been killed in attacks on churches in the Kenyan town of Garissa near Somalia, say the Kenyan Red Cross and a medical official.

Regional deputy police chief Philip Ndolo said balaclava-clad "goons" attacked the town's Catholic church and the African Inland Church (AIC).

A combination of grenades and gunfire was used, police said.

Kenya's border region has been tense since it sent troops into Somalia to pursue al-Shabab Islamic militants.

Kenya said the operations, launched last October, were designed to bring an end to kidnappings on Kenyan soil and other violence which it blamed on al-Shabab.

But since then, al-Shabab has been blamed for a further string of grenade and bomb blasts across Kenya - though it has never admitted to carrying out any such attack on Kenyan territory.

No group has yet said it carried out these latest attacks, but the finger of blame will once again undoubtedly be pointed at al-Shabab or sympathisers, says the BBC's Kevin Mwachiro in Nairobi.

"We condemn this act in the strongest terms possible," Mr Ndolo said.

The Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims also condemned Sunday's church attacks, saying that "all places of worship must be respected", reported the AFP news agency.

'Terrible scene'

Sunday's attacks took place during morning sermons at the churches in the garrison town.

The Provincial Medical Officer for North Eastern Province in Kenya, Mahamad Abey Shekh, said 15 people had been killed.

About 40 were thought to be wounded, several in serious condition.

The first and most serious attack took place at the AIC, police told our correspondent.

Gunmen shot two policemen outside one of the churches, and grenades were then thrown inside. As the panicked congregation rushed to escape, gunmen fired on them, police said. At least 10 people died.

In the second - apparently co-ordinated - attack at a Catholic church, two grenades were thrown inside the church. One failed to go off, but police say three people were injured by the other one.

Police said up to seven gunmen were involved in the attacks, but none had been apprehended.

Witnesses told AFP that bodies lay scattered in the blood-spattered churches as scores of wounded were rushed to hospital.

"It is a terrible scene, you can see bodies lying in the churches," regional police chief Leo Nyongesa told the agency.

"You can imagine for such a small town how the police and medical services have been stretched trying to deal with this," Mr Ndolo told Reuters news agency.

Garissa is the capital of North Eastern province, about 140km (90 miles) from the Somali border.

It is close to the Dadaab refugee camp, where gunmen kidnapped four aid workers and killed a driver on Friday in an attack Mr Ndolo said he suspected al-Shabab sympathisers of carrying out.

These two incidents have not painted a good picture of the efficacy of Kenyan security forces, our correspondent says.

Troops are supposed to have secured the Kenya-Somali border and frontier towns, but this does not seem to be happening, he adds.

Grenade attack on church kills one

Compass Direct News (30.04.2012) – A grenade explosion yesterday killed a 27-year-old university student at a church in Nairobi and injured 16 people, sources said. Kelvin Walumba was killed after a man pretending to be a worshipper at God's House of Miracles International Church in the Ngara area of Nairobi threw three grenades as the service was concluding; only one of the grenades exploded. A security guard said the assailant, who after running out into the street fired three pistol shots into the air, appeared to be of Somali origin. Islamic extremists from al Shabaab rebels in Somalia have embarked on a series of attacks in Kenya after the Kenyan military invaded Somali territory last fall in an attempt to quell al Shabaab violence at Kenyan tourist destinations. Speculation that the attack stemmed from a land dispute appeared to be untrue, as the dispute with the church was resolved in court last year, a church leader told Compass. Church leaders said four members of the church are in critical condition: Leonida Mbogo, Julia Mumbi, Ezekiel Muthini and Shalom Koronge. Mbogo sustained serious injuries to her leg, which was broken. A Sunday school teacher said one of her students, a boy identified only as Jessy, was receiving hospital treatment for injuries and is in stable condition. A choir member from the church today told Compass said she had just come back to the site to see the aftermath of the attack. "Last night I did not sleep," she said.

Explosion at Christian meeting kills boy, woman

Al Shabaab Islamic extremists suspected of throwing grenade into open-air evangelistic event

By Simba Tian

Compass Direct News (03.04.2012) – An 8-year-old boy died today from injuries after suspected Islamic extremists on Saturday (March 31) threw a grenade into a Christian revival meeting near Kenya's coastal town of Mombasa that instantly killed a woman and injured at least 30 people.

Kenyan Internal Security Minister George Saitoti said Islamic extremists from the rebel al Shabaab militia in Somalia were suspected of carrying out the deadly blast, although the group has not claimed responsibility. The government, which began military operations against al Shabaab in Somalia last October, today issued a warning of a possible attack by al Shabaab during Easter celebrations in Kenya this weekend.

The names of the boy and the woman who died after the suspected Islamic extremist threw a grenade into the open air meeting in Mtwapa have not been released.

Christians in coastal areas of Kenya were gripped with fear after the attack, which took place between 7 and 7:30 p.m., according to an eyewitness. The meeting, organized by the Mtwapa Pastors' Fellowship, brought together 500 Christians from 16 denominations

at the Kandara event site in Kilifi County, 16 kilometers (10 miles) from Mombasa. It began on Friday and would have continued through Sunday were it not for the attack.

"Someone inside a moving Nissan vehicle threw a hand grenade towards the podium where the preaching pastor, the Rev. Daniel Mwendwa of the Miracle in the Village Church, was ministering, and there was a group of singers close by," said eyewitness Harrison Tembo Chome, pastor of the Holy Jerusalem Church. "Everything came to a standstill. There was wailing and immediately the police, the army and ambulances arrived."

More than 30 people were seriously injured, mostly singers leading worship, he said.

Three people have been arrested in relation to the explosion, but it was not clear what relation they had with al Shabaab, if any.

"What we as the church are almost certain of at the moment is that the incident seemed to be a religious fight against Christians," said another pastor who asked to remain unnamed.

About 300 meters from the Christian evangelistic meeting, a Muslim gathering near Kipingo Pharmacy Road took place throughout the week and continued during and after the blast, Christian sources said.

"Why were only the Christians affected and not the Muslim gathering, which had been going on for a longer period of time?" said one Christian. "On Sunday we the Christians could not continue with our meeting, but the Muslims continued. Why did they continue when they knew that such a terrible incident had happened close to where they were holding their religious meeting?"

A police investigation is continuing.

The attack comes after attacks and kidnappings in the area and elsewhere last year prompted the Kenyan military to strike at al Shabaab targets in Somalia. At press time Kenyan soldiers were moving towards Kismayo, an al Shabaab stronghold not far from Mombasa.

With estimates of al Shabaab's size ranging from 3,000 to 7,000, the insurgents seek to impose a strict version of sharia (Islamic law) on Somalia, but the government in Mogadishu fighting to retain control of the country treats Christians little better than the al Shabaab extremists do. While proclaiming himself a moderate, President Sheikh Sharif Sheik Ahmed has embraced a version of sharia that mandates the death penalty for those who leave Islam.

Ethiopian convert from Islam dodges dangers in Kenya

Muslim extremists try to kill him; others threaten his life

By Simba Tian

Compass Direct News (01.02.2012) – A Christian convert from Islam who fled hostilities in his native Ethiopia has faced attempted murder and ongoing death threats in Kenya.

Somali Muslim extremists in Kenya kidnapped and tried to kill Barack Hussein Kadir in July 2010, and most recently Kenyan-born Islamic extremists in contact with their co-

religionists in Ethiopia sent a death threat to his cell phone on Dec. 3, the Christian told Compass. Since then, Hussein has reported the threatening text message to police, and his wife has fled the country with their two children.

"Although I have been experiencing all these countless problems, suffering persecution and merciless harassment both in my own country and outside of the country, I have never given up or lost my hope in serving the Lord," Hussein said. "Muslims have tried to murder me several times, even here in Kenya."

Born to Muslim community leaders in Arsi Negelle district in southern Ethiopia, Hussein had been a zealous Islamic youth coordinator who once harassed Christians before his conversion – a long process that led his father to shoot him in the leg for his commitment to Christ, he said.

Hussein had fled to Kenya in 2003 but secretly returned to his rural home in Ethiopia in June 2009 to help establish three new churches. When area Muslims discovered his work, they started looking for him with intent to kill him, forcing him to return to Kenya, he said.

Shortly after midnight on July 8, 2010, Muslim extremists in Nairobi slipped a CD under his door containing information on how they kill Christians and burn church buildings, along with a threatening letter in the Arabic and Somali languages, he said. The next evening at about 7:30 p.m., presumed Muslim extremists rammed their car into the driver's side door of the car he was driving and told him they would kill him.

On July 27, 2010, four Somalis, presumed Muslim extremists, forced him into a car at about 9:30 p.m. in Nairobi and, at gunpoint, made him take a detergent (Jik) mixed with powdered soap (Omo), and he fell unconscious and was pushed out of the car, he said. Passers-by took him to a hospital, where staff determined that he must have been thrown out of the car at high speed.

The Somalis, whom he did not know, objected to his preaching Christianity, he said.

Hussein converted to Christianity in 1995 after a series of life threatening episodes that began in 1990. Previously he had traveled to various regions teaching about Islam and developed hostility toward other religions; he harassed many Christians, stealing their food and trying to burn some church buildings, he said.

"While I was practicing and spreading Islamic faith in the country like wildfire, something amazing happened to me," Hussein said. "I converted to Christ in an unusual way, when Jesus revealed Himself to me through difficult circumstances in which I almost lost my life."

In 1990 he was mysteriously blinded, he said. After hospital treatment and the prayers of Muslim leaders were of no avail, he said he heard the voice of Jesus saying He loved him.

"In response I said, 'No, I do not need your help, go away,'" he said. "The voice then said to me, 'Do you need to get back your health?' I said, 'Yes, but I do not need you.'"

Hussein told Compass he later became hopeless and heard the voice again bidding him to ask to be healed, but that again he declined.

"That very evening I saw a white image, and there came the sign of the cross, and I rebuked it," he said. "The house shook like there was an earthquake. I then decided to cover myself inside the blanket. Everyone inside the house was frightened. Then came again the cross. This time I wanted to catch the cross. My eyes then got opened, though

I could not see well. It was very red. Then another voice came to me saying, 'I am Christ Jesus, follow Me. I am the one who made you blind. I now have healed you.'"

Still skeptical about the healing, he left for a predominantly Christian area to preach Islam, he said, but he lost all sight again and was also paralyzed for seven months.

"I was then taken to my rural village to die there," Hussein said. "I used to lie on the floor, helping myself [to food or drink] right where I was lying. The place became filthy and smelly. Death dominated my thoughts. I questioned Allah, why he does not want to heal. I then contemplated committing suicide. At that point my eyes got opened and a voice called me again, 'Barack, I love you. I caused you to be paralyzed. I love you. I am Jesus Christ. Follow Me.'"

The voice directed him to a location about 200 kilometers (124 miles) away in order to regain his health.

"I found this to be very difficult," he said. "People said I was going crazy. I was then put on a horse and traveled for one hour to reach the bus station. Before reaching the destination, in a vision, I saw a narrow road and a white sword in front, and fire. I got afraid thinking that it wanted to kill me. That time I was barefoot. Then I was woken up, for I had reached the destination. There a cross sign was handed over to me and the message came, 'Follow Me.' I got healed miraculously, then returned back with the cross."

When he arrived home with the cross sign, his father shot him in the leg, forcing him to try to take refuge in a church building – where he was initially rebuffed as an enemy of the faith.

"After a while I was accepted and was taken by the church to Jimma Bible College," Hussein said. "There I had the seal to preach the gospel within the Jimma vicinity. Soon things turned bad. With my miraculous healing, especially carrying the cross sign around, I faced persecution from my own family as well as the community. It would have been safer for me to either kill myself or recant the Christian faith, but I endured it all, and finally I fled to Kenya in 2003."

He was admitted to Pan Africa Christian University, and after earning his degree went on to obtain a Master of Leadership from the Nairobi International School of Theology. He is now pursuing another master's degree, this one in peace and international relations, at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa.

"God has called me to a precious life," he said. "I have no regrets, and I thank God for delivering me from Islam. I know I have to pay the price, since those who wish to live a godly life must be ready to face persecution."

Hussein submitted his application for asylum to a third country on July 19, 2010 to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Officials there interviewed him on Nov. 4, 2010, and also last year, but to date he has not received a determination. A letter to the UNCHR requests that he not be returned to a country where he faces threats on his life or freedom.

A decision is expected at a scheduled May 17 appointment.
