

KENYA

Kenyan children bear brunt of ethnic clashes

Ten-year-old Titus and his family were left with no option but to flee when ethnic clashes broke out in Mount Elgon District in the western part of Kenya late last year.

“It was very dangerous at home. People were fighting over land and some said the *askaris* (security men) were torturing them. Now my family and I live with my uncle. It is better, but even here people are still fighting,” says the standard two pupil, who has since joined Kaptoboi Primary School near his new ‘home’.

Had they not fled, Titus and his family might have been killed in the violence that flared up in December last year, and which is continuing. The clashes, said to be caused by a land dispute, have so far claimed the lives of more than one hundred people, including children who have died as a result of appalling living conditions that have exposed them to disease and poverty.

UNICEF has condemned the violence and asked the Government to protect the lives of children in the affected areas. “Children are traumatized by these atrocities. They cannot learn properly at school. The damage can last a very long time unless the children receive specialist care and support,” said UNICEF in a statement released to the press.

Titus and his family were lucky to have an uncle in the neighbouring division. Those who were not as lucky took refuge in school and church compounds where they live in squalor, relying on donations of food and household items from well wishers. In total, about 66,000 people are reported to have fled their homes, with some 4,000 of them crossing the border into Uganda as refugees.

The clashes have also disrupted education, with 33 schools in the District being closed. Those that remain open are congested due to the influx of children who flee violence in their homes. The sanitation facilities in the schools are overstretched. Enrolment has dropped in some areas by as much as 60 per cent, as the displaced families move to safety. At the end of the first school term in April, 236 children had dropped out as a result of displacement and the tension in the area. Teachers’ huts, schoolbooks, uniforms and school bags were also burned.

The clashes have also interrupted immunization and brought a sharp drop in attendance at antenatal clinics and at the voluntary counselling and testing centres in Kopsiro and Cheptais. The loss of shelter, clothing and bednets, overcrowding and poor nutrition are all contributing to an increase in pneumonia, malaria, enteric fever and sexually transmitted infections.

UNICEF is working with the Ministries of Health, Education and the Children's Department as well as the Kenya Red Cross Society to help alleviate the suffering of families by providing drugs to health facilities, plastic sheeting, blankets, jerrycans and soap.

UNICEF has dispatched education kits and desks to the affected areas to be used by children who fled their homes and are now crowding schools in safer places. The agency is also helping the Children's Department to strengthen monitoring and reporting of abuse and supporting the Kenya Red Cross Society to improve family tracing and the dissemination of information on where families can go to seek help.

The Government has deployed security forces to the District to restore peace. However, due to the climate of intimidation that prevails, violated families and individuals cannot report their attackers for fear of further violence.

The Mount Elgon District clashes are believed to be caused by a long-standing land dispute that pits two communities against each other. UNICEF is concerned that the land crisis, which has persisted for more than 30 years, continues to cause violence and suffering today.

The Government recently announced the cancellation of a contentious allocation of the Chebyuk Land Settlement Scheme that was being blamed for the clashes. But the tension still prevails. Only with sustained efforts by UNICEF and its partners will children like Titus survive and reach their full potential.