



How to Shield Education from Al-Shabaab in Kenya's North East

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What's new? Jihadists have repeatedly attacked schools in north-eastern Kenya in the last eighteen months. In response, the government has shuttered many schools and pulled most teachers out of a long-neglected region that is one of Al-Shabaab's main recruiting centres outside Somalia.

Why does it matter? The education crisis adds to an already existing sense of marginalisation in north-eastern Kenya. Thousands of out-of-school youngsters could constitute an attractive pool of recruits for Al-Shabaab, which is engaged in a long-term campaign to deepen its foothold in the region.

What should be done? The Kenyan government should afford the north east's residents, including police reservists, a greater role in tackling militancy and revive community-centred efforts that to some degree succeeded in rolling back Al-Shabaab in the past. It should also restore learning by providing stopgap funding so local administrations can hire replacement teachers.

I. Overview

Kenya's 2011 deployment of troops to fight Al-Shabaab's insurgency in Somalia has, over the years, eroded security at home. In 2013 and 2019, Al-Shabaab attacked Nairobi, respectively hitting a shopping mall and a luxury hotel, and exposing the vulnerability of the capital's soft targets. But the group's activities in the long-neglected north east are of greatest concern to Kenyan officials today. In January 2020, Al-Shabaab staged a major assault on a joint U.S.-Kenyan military base near the Somali border, exhibiting its operational prowess in the area. It has also pursued a campaign of killing teachers, in effect stripping the north east's children of the chance to get a modern education. In response, the authorities have evacuated all non-native teachers from the north east. While understandable, given the peril these teachers faced, the policy has brought the school system to a halt and may play into Al-Shabaab's hands by further alienating an already disaffected population. The government should work with local residents to restore security and take steps to preserve education for young people in the north east.

II. Al-Shabaab Attacks and an Education Crisis

North-eastern Kenya has proven fertile ground for Al-Shabaab, which has vowed revenge against the government ever since Nairobi sent troops to Somalia in 2011.¹ The group's leaders have long eyed the area, one of the country's poorest and where the ethnic Somali population has for years complained of mistreatment by the state, as a target for infiltration.² Security sources in Kenya say the militants have built a loyal intelligence network in the region, which shares a 700km largely unmanned border with southern Somalia, itself under partial Al-Shabaab control.³

As Al-Shabaab has stepped up its activities in Kenya, it has often been with the idea of fomenting sectarian strife. In 2014, gunmen belonging to the group killed more than 50 civilians in the mainly Christian town of Mpeketoni. After the incident, an Al-Shabaab spokesman, Sheikh Mohammed Dulyadeyn, himself a Kenyan national, said "Kenya might also be divided along Christian and Muslim lines".⁴ In 2015, the jihadists took credit for killing 148 more people on a college campus in Garissa, the biggest town in the north east. Attackers spared Muslim students, training their sights on Christians.

After a lull, the last eighteen months have seen an uptick in Al-Shabaab violence. Militants have combined complex, headline-grabbing attacks with a grinding war of attrition on lower-profile targets, including police stations and communications masts. In 2019, according to a local research firm's tally, Al-Shabaab conducted 34 attacks in Kenya with over half of them concentrated in the three north-eastern counties: Mandera, Wajir and Garissa.⁵ At least 83 people were killed in these assaults. In January 2020, militants stormed the Manda Bay base in Lamu, killing a U.S. soldier and two U.S. military contractors, in what was the first Al-Shabaab attack on a military facility outside Somalia. The assault's spectacular nature, including the destruction of a U.S. surveillance plane as it was taking off, drew considerable attention. Attacks have not let up since then, not even after the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in March.⁶

The insecurity has hit the education sector hard since 2018, when Al-Shabaab began attacking schools and killing teachers, many of whom started fleeing the region that year.⁷ Most teachers hail from elsewhere in Kenya. They also are often Christians.

¹ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°102, *Kenya: Al-Shabaab – Closer to Home*, 25 September 2014. See also Crisis Group Africa Report N°265, *Al-Shabaab Five Years after Westgate: Still a Menace in East Africa*, 21 September 2018.

² Abdullahi Abdille, "The Hidden Cost of Al-Shabaab's Campaign in North-eastern Kenya", Crisis Group Commentary, 4 April 2019.

³ Crisis Group interview, security official, Garissa, 28 February 2020.

⁴ Crisis Group Briefing, *Kenya: Al-Shabaab – Closer to Home*, op. cit. According to the most recent data, some 84.5 per cent of Kenya's population is Christian, whereas Muslims, concentrated along the coast and in the north east, represent approximately 10.8 per cent. See "2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census, Volume IV: Distribution of Population by Socio-Economic Characteristics", Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, December 2019.

⁵ "Trends of Violent Extremist Attacks and Arrests in Kenya, January 2019-December 2019", Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies, January 2020.

⁶ See "Civilians in Kenya's northeast targeted by both jihadists and the state", *The New Humanitarian*, 16 June 2020.

⁷ Abdille, "The Hidden Cost of Al-Shabaab's Campaign in North-eastern Kenya", op. cit.

Al-Shabaab, which seeks to force all non-Muslims out of the north east, thus considers them outsiders. Teachers are also easy targets as they live in the places where schools are located, unlike other non-local officials and businesspeople who reside in better secured towns. Al-Shabaab has killed many public servants besides teachers, including engineers and security personnel, and in 2015 it launched a string of attacks on non-local casual labourers at construction sites, forcing many of them to flee.⁸

A pair of legal suits lodged in response to the crisis in the education sector illustrate the problem authorities face in fashioning a response. Soon after these attacks started, the Kenya National Union of Teachers and the Kenya Human Rights Commission initiated court proceedings to stop the state from posting non-local teachers to the north east until it could restore security.⁹ With the court case under way, Nairobi nonetheless decided in January to officially order all non-native tutors out of the region in response to increasing attacks. In turn, civil society organisations brought legal action against the authorities for removing the teachers, citing the harm it could do to the region's children. George Kegoro, head of the human rights commission, emphasised the dilemma: "We are left to choose between the lives of teachers and the education of children. As long as security issues in the north east are not resolved, we cannot force teachers to go there and die".¹⁰ Both cases are still in the courts.

The immediate crisis triggered by the decision to transfer thousands of teachers was compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the decision's aftermath, hundreds of schools across the north closed. In the few that stayed open, children of all ages crowded into the same classrooms. Final-year students were left to prepare for national exams without instruction. As COVID-19 arrived in Kenya, the authorities went further by closing all remaining schools, although by then the damage to the education system was done. On 7 July, the authorities announced that the rest of the school year would be cancelled, and national exams pushed to 2021.¹¹ Tens of thousands of students in north-eastern Kenya now face a bleak future, exposed to the region's security, economic and social problems with few ways out. Even if the authorities bring the coronavirus under control by 2021, they will face a real challenge in improving security and persuading teachers to return.

III. Violence and Underdevelopment

The north-eastern counties of Kenya are among the most marginalised parts of the country.¹² The area's high levels of poverty, unemployment and insecurity today are partly rooted in policies developed under colonial rule and perpetuated by successive post-independence governments. After establishing Kenya as a protectorate in 1920, the British colonial authorities concentrated development in the well-watered high-

⁸ Ibid. See also "Kenyan quarry workers targeted in deadly attack", France 24, 7 July 2015.

⁹ "Petition 104 of 2018" filed with the Kenyan Employment and Labour Relations Court of Nairobi, 15 October 2018.

¹⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, George Kegoro, executive director of the Kenya Human Rights Commission, 12 June 2020.

¹¹ "CS Magoha cancels KCPE, KCSE exams as COVID-19 crisis bites", *Daily Nation*, 7 July 2020.

¹² "Unmasking Ethnic Minorities and Marginalised Communities in Kenya", National Gender and Equality Commission, 2018.

lands, populated largely by Christian farmers, while neglecting the semi-arid north, inhabited by Muslim, ethnic Somali pastoralists. Just before independence, the British granted residents of north-eastern Kenya the right to decide via referendum whether to remain part of Kenya or to join Somalia. Residents overwhelmingly chose the latter, but Kenyan nationalist leaders at the time flatly rejected the vote's outcome and subsequently waged a long, brutal war against an irredentist movement that emerged in the north, creating enduring mutual mistrust.¹³

Subsequent neglect by Nairobi has deepened inequalities between the north east and other regions. Infrastructure development in the north east lags far behind the central highlands, for example.¹⁴ The north east falls below the rest of the country on indices of public health, education and employment. Only 1 per cent of north-eastern households have direct access to potable water, compared to 33 per cent in Nairobi.¹⁵ Almost all eligible children in central Kenya are registered in primary school, but that proportion drops to 18 per cent in the north east. The region's secondary school enrolment figures are even lower. North-eastern Kenya also registers the worst joblessness in the country, with 35 per cent of the population out of work.¹⁶

The situation is compounded by police and army misconduct toward the population. Many police officers and soldiers detest being deployed in the north east, where they face a greater danger of attack than in other parts of the country. "Kenyan police officers in the north east are generally poorly equipped, poorly paid and poorly commanded", according to Andrew Franklin, a security consultant and former U.S. marine.¹⁷

An overhaul of Kenya's constitution in 2010, devolving power and resources from Nairobi to counties across the country, has opened the way for authorities to redress at least some entrenched inequalities.¹⁸ Under the law, Kenya's 47 counties each elect their own governors and regional assemblies. These bodies then receive a defined proportion of the national budget annually. The new order has breathed fresh economic life into the north east, since county authorities now have greater autonomy in developing their areas and providing local services, including construction of health care facilities.¹⁹

¹³ "How Northern Frontier District was carved out", *Business Daily*, 27 September 2018. The Kenyan authorities succeeded in crushing the irredentist movement and it petered out in the late 1980s, although human rights groups say security forces engaged in widespread abuses while fighting the insurgents. "Summary: Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission Report", Kenya Transitional Justice Network, May 2013.

¹⁴ "Boosting Prosperity, Improving Equity in North and North Eastern Kenya", The World Bank, 8 May 2018.

¹⁵ "Pulling Apart Facts and Figures on Inequality in Kenya", Society for International Development, 2014.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, 21 February 2020. "State must equip officers to stop IED killings", *The Standard*, 14 October 2019. "Give military special wage consideration", *Daily Nation*, 18 March 2020.

¹⁸ "Kenya's Devolution", The World Bank, 26 November 2019.

¹⁹ As an example of progress, Mandera county reportedly carried out its first caesarean section in 2014, following the election of the first crop of governors the preceding year. Previously, physicians could not perform operations of such complexity in the region's dilapidated hospitals. The influx of

Devolution has not, however, translated into greater safety in the north east. If anything, Al-Shabaab, often facing little resistance from demoralised security services, has stepped up its campaign in the region, where it already controls important recruitment and cross-border smuggling networks.²⁰ Between 2014 and 2017, Kenyan security officials say, the group conducted at least five assassination attempts against Mandera's governor, Ali Roba.²¹ The group's frequent night-time strikes on communications masts regularly cut off telephone service and disrupt commerce in an area where, as in the rest of Kenya, mobile money is a key driver of trade.²² By attacking civil servants and businessmen from outside the region, who are overwhelmingly Christian, Al-Shabaab also appears to seek to drive a wedge between Christians and Muslims across Kenya. The more militants can rend the north east's socio-economic fabric, the more likely it is that they can tap grievances and poverty in the north to recruit young Kenyans.

In this light, the government's January decision to withdraw all non-local teachers, while an understandable step to protect them, has played into Al-Shabaab's hands. First, it has created widespread anger in northern Kenya, since residents took it as a further signal that Nairobi does not consider them fully Kenyan. "On one hand, Al-Shabaab accuses locals of being too Kenyan; on the other hand, the government sees them as Somali", said Abdimalik Hajir, a local commentator.²³ Secondly, evacuating teaching staff from the north east risks consigning the region's youth to penury or worse. Several residents, teachers and pupils who spoke to Crisis Group in Garissa expressed concern that an entire generation of students is missing out on an education, with dire consequences likely to follow. A headmaster at one high school warned that students whose time in school was cut short prematurely would constitute an attractive pool of recruits for Al-Shabaab.²⁴

IV. Stemming the Crisis

As Crisis Group has noted in the past, affording locals a greater role in tackling insecurity is a critical first step to rolling back Al-Shabaab's efforts to cleave the north east from the rest of the country.²⁵ It has worked before. Al-Shabaab activity dropped substantially when Nairobi appointed veteran local administrator Mohamud Saleh to lead the region's security forces between 2015 and 2018.²⁶ His approach – centred on community intelligence gathering – gave locals the confidence they needed to go

devolved funds allowed local authorities to improve the facilities. "Where is the most dangerous place in the world to give birth?", *The Guardian*, 17 December 2015.

²⁰ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°88, *Kenyan Somali Islamist Radicalisation*, 25 January 2012. Also "How smuggling at Kenya-Somalia border fuels terror", *The Standard*, 7 January 2020.

²¹ "Al Shabaab claims responsibility for attack on Governor Roba's convoy", *The Star*, 24 May 2017.

²² "M-Pesa has completely changed Kenyans' access to financial services: this is how ...", CNBC Africa, 3 April 2019.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, civil society actor, local county administrator and local commentator, Garissa, 27 February 2020.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, local headmaster, Garissa, 27 February 2020.

²⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Al-Shabaab Five Years after Westgate: Still a Menace in East Africa*, op. cit.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

to the police with information about what Al-Shabaab was saying and doing. Authorities should reprise this strategy, which they seem to have abandoned after transferring Saleh to another post in the capital. Due to scant trust between citizens and security forces, officials deployed from Nairobi to the region since then have struggled to gather intelligence on Al-Shabaab.

The authorities should also consider ramping up the involvement of police reservists drawn from the north east. In rural Kenya, members of the Kenya Police Reserve, a local force armed by the central government, play an important role in maintaining security in areas where the state has limited sway. Reservists in the north east, many of whom are locally born, are often more willing to combat Al-Shabaab, including by responding to militants' night-time assaults, something that non-local security forces with lower stakes in the community rarely do. But reservists' families are frequently targeted for retaliation by militants and are poorly paid and lightly equipped.²⁷ The authorities should fold them into the regular security forces and give them better training, pay and equipment. They should also redouble efforts to rein in security sector abuses and halt extrajudicial killings by the national police and the army.²⁸

Some immediate action would help relieve the education crisis. Local leaders and education specialists have offered different options since the first wave of teacher killings occurred in 2014, including some discussed by Crisis Group in 2019, but their ideas have largely gone unheeded.²⁹ The authorities, possibly in partnership with the United States and European Union, which have programs aimed at tackling insecurity in the north, could provide stopgap funding to county governments so they can recruit tutors to replace the departed non-local teachers. This emergency measure would tide the counties over and – once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted – help prepare students for national exams due at year's end.

Over the longer term, other steps could help. Ideally, better security would allow teachers from outside the region to return. At the same time, the government could also offer a scholarship program for students from the north east to join teacher training colleges, and in so doing start building a cadre of native-born Muslim teachers whom Al-Shabaab is less likely to target than their Christian colleagues. It could lower university entry grades for students from the north east wishing to pursue a career in education. Some local leaders object to this proposal, saying it might dilute standards.³⁰ But, while imperfect, the option is preferable to the less pleasant alternatives, including the possibility of schools closing indefinitely due to an absence of teachers.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Andrew Franklin, security consultant, Nairobi, 21 February 2020. See also "Sad tale of poorly armed and unpaid police reservists", *The Standard*, 7 August 2018.

²⁸ "Extra-judicial killings in north eastern region should stop", *The Standard*, 24 July 2016.

²⁹ Abdille, "The Hidden Cost of Al-Shabaab's Campaign in North-eastern Kenya", op. cit.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, local educator, Garissa, 27 February 2020.

V. Conclusion

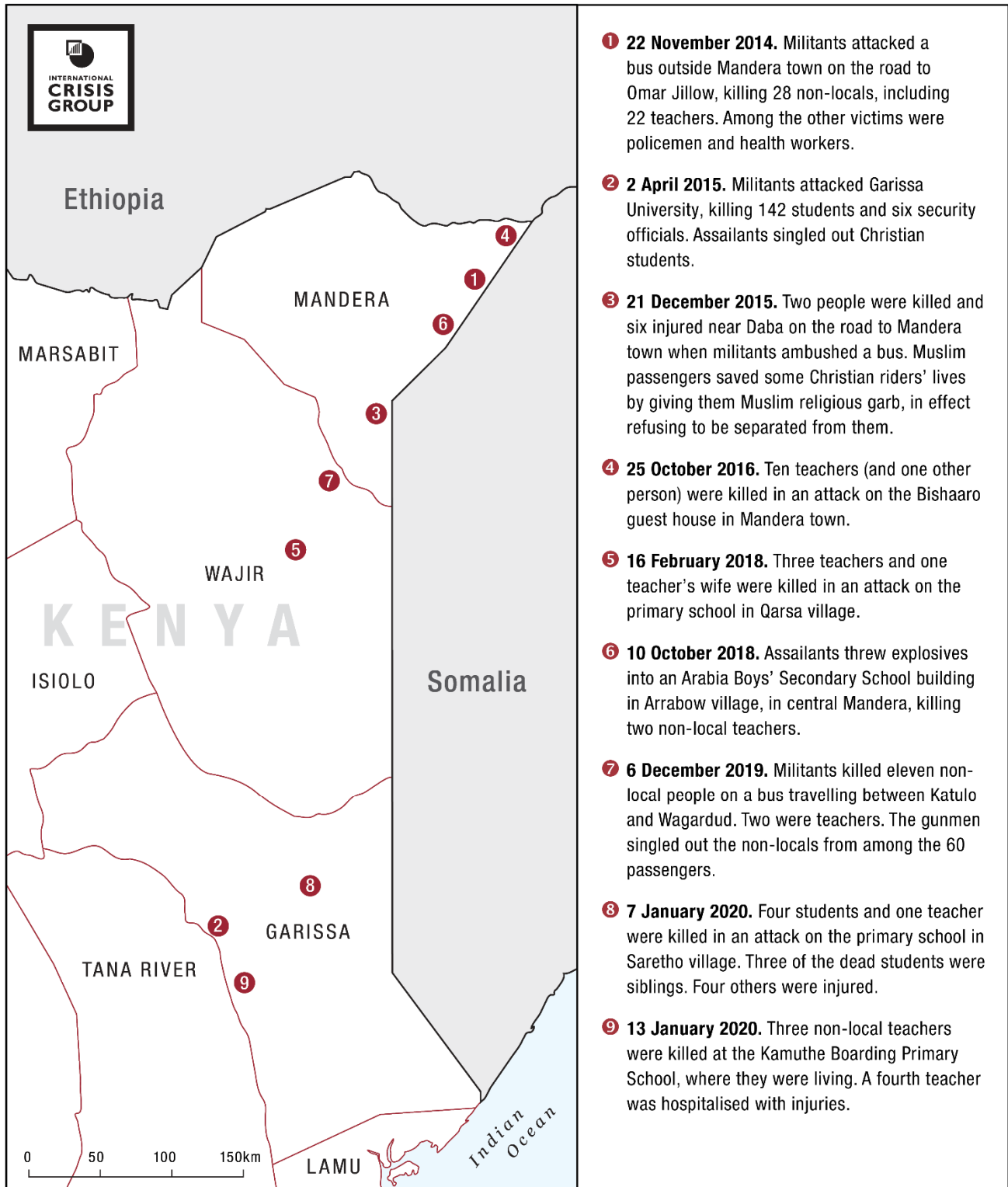
Kenya's government urgently needs to stem the tide of insecurity in the north east, drawing on the assistance of residents and local police reservists. The authorities should also explore emergency measures to fill the gap left by the exodus of teachers from schools in the area. When some level of safety is assured, they can adopt longer-term solutions, including training a cadre of local teachers from north-eastern Kenya whom militants might be less likely to attack. Failing to restore education will hand Al-Shabaab greater chances of success at attracting youngsters from this long-marginalised region than the group enjoys at present.

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Appendix A: Map of Kenya



Appendix B: Al-Shabaab Attacks on Teachers in North-eastern Kenya, 2014-Present



Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

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