

LATEST NEWS # 492, March 25, 2008

The following news concerns Kenya.

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Kenya troubles bring people back to God's Word

During a recent visit to the UBS World Service Centre, Nairobi-based UBS Africa Area Translation Coordinator Dr Margaret Muthwii described her experience of living through one of the darkest times in Kenya's history and reflected on how it has affected individuals, communities and churches.

"It was not only the trouble spots in the west of the country that were affected by the recent violence – the whole nation suffered. People in central Kenya were cut off from their families in the west, and it was unsafe for anyone to travel away from their home areas.



During the worst period, there was so much suspicion. You could see people in the streets studying each other's faces intensely, trying to guess which ethnic group they belonged to. I even got worried about my own safety – I am from the west but now live in central Kenya. Those were very bad days, mentally and emotionally speaking. I hope we never have to live through that again.

In the seven days immediately following the announcement of the election results we could not travel outside our own suburbs. You could hear gunshots and, if you switched your television on, you could see the shocking violence taking place not very far away. We were constantly worried that it would spread.

I am the Translation Consultant for the Kalenjin Bible Revision project, which is based in Eldoret in western Kenya – one of the worst affected parts of the country. I was due to visit the three translators in January but they telephoned me and advised me not to come. I kept in regular contact with one of the translators – Father Kiruy, a Roman Catholic priest. I could hear in his voice that he was really struggling to cope with what was happening there.

He described to me the terrible things he was seeing – things he would never have thought would be possible in our country. Thousands of refugees were fleeing to the showground in Eldoret and Fr Kiruy was driving into town to help minister to them. To get there he had to pass through various roadblocks where his vehicle was searched and his identity card scrutinised. During one of these stops he saw a person dragged from his vehicle and executed on the spot. These things were happening all over Kenya, not just in the west.



We thank God that the violence has now stopped. When the power sharing agreement was announced late last month it felt like the sun had come out again after a long period of darkness! People were smiling at each other and there were celebrations on the same streets on which there had been killings just a few weeks before.



It is hard to say exactly what ended the troubles, except to say that Kenyans knew that this was not the way we wanted our country to be. It was unrecognisable from the peaceful country we knew and loved. The international intervention was wonderful, enabling us to talk to each other at a time when we could not bring ourselves to do so. Much Christian prayer helped, too.

The National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK), which is the voice of the Protestant Churches in Kenya, released a public statement condemning the violence but also admitting that, like many Kenyans, the Church had been 'partisan' to the ethnic and political divisions in the country. This apology was wonderfully healing, and people really appreciated it.

Now amazing things are happening. People who have not attended church for years have started coming to services again, and those who have not opened their Bibles in a long time are returning to God's Word to search for answers and healing.

In recent weeks churches and individuals have been buying up tens of thousands of copies of a Bible study book called *Peace and Reconciliation*. Across Kenya people are gathering together in homes and church groups to read the Word of God, using this book as a guide.

The book deals with different themes such as the need for forgiveness and reconciliation within the family and within a troubled political situation. These two things in particular are very relevant to our situation in Kenya. We are a nation of many different ethnic groupings and there has been much intermarriage between the tribes. Many marriages have broken up, particularly in the troubled areas where it was literally unsafe for the couple to stay together. Some of them have remained separated and are unlikely to get together again.

There is generally a sense of optimism about the future as Kenyans reach for healing and forgiveness. But those with first-hand experience of the violence may take more time to heal. The government is telling people to return to their home areas, promising to help them rebuild their houses and give them seed to plant crops, but many are refusing to go, too traumatised by what they have been through."

Editor's note:

Dr Muthwii returned to Kenya late last week. In an email message sent on 19 March, she wrote, "Our Parliament met yesterday and it was the greatest sight to behold. The Members of Parliament talked to one another with great objectivity and sensitivity to what the country has gone through. We praise God for the peace we now are enjoying again."

Photographs:

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Dr Margaret Muthwii, UBS Africa Area Translation Coordinator. Photographed at the UBS World Service Center, England. (Photo: UBS/Andrea Rhodes)



KEN08DJ-1

As peace returns to their country following the post-election violence in January and February, many Kenyans have started attending church again in search of answers and healing. Here, worshippers return to their cars parked near the Nairobi Pentecostal Church after attending the second Sunday morning service. Overhead, on the left, people arrive for the third church service of the morning. Nairobi, Kenya. (Photo: UBS/Evariste Munyabarama)

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