



Information brief: Beyond intractability - facilitating inter-communal cohesion and reconciliation in Marsabit County

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Background

Marsabit County is the largest County in Kenya – inhabited by fourteen ethnic groups¹ – has for long been plagued by inter-ethnic clashes, fuelled by competition for political, natural rangeland resources control and economic opportunities. Most recently, in June 2020, more than twenty people lost their lives² over water, grazing land, and boundary dispute between Saku and North Horr Constituency. The month of June 2020 is worst this year, with many incidences and signs of the conflict growing beyond the Marsabit County borders. Deadly combat ensued between the Degodia clan from Wajir, who claimed that they lost more ten people and over 300 livestock (camels and cattle) to the pastoralists of Marsabit. In less than one year, more than 150 people are known to have been brutally killed in the raw, deep, and bloody conflicts in the county.

The deadly fighting in Marsabit has largely been between Borana and Gabra along the border of Saku and North Horr Constituency. Boran and Gabra are the two largest ethnic groups in the County. During violent ethnic conflict between the two ethnic groups, the other ethnic groups including the Rendille, Burji, Garreh, and other minorities oscillate between three options of: actively taking sides in the fighting, remaining neutral, or most of the time doing nothing about the conflict between these two communities.

The conflict is manifested and reported as inter-ethnic fighting over water and pasture resources, community land disputes, a battle over cultural identity and territorial control. A deeper analysis however indicates that the real motive and purpose for the vicious cycle of violence in the recent past is the politics of clan (ethnic) supremacy.

A chronology of June 2020 violent conflicts

Between 8th June and 13th June 2020, Marsabit County experienced intensive three days fighting that involves Borana, Gabra, Degodia and Rendille ethnic groups, adding new complexities to an existing inter-ethnic violent clash. Below is a chronology of some of the deadly armed conflicts reported in the county in the month of June 2020:

1. The murder of four (4) Rendille university students on 8th June 2020 in Songa. The students Jessica Leado (23), George Obeille (27), Dan Lentare (17) and Chuchu Mosor (23) were attacked and shot by armed assailants while they were heading home on a motorbike in Songa location, Badasa area of Saku constituency within the deep territory of the Borana people. Jessica was a student leader Catholic University of Eastern Africa, and in her third year pursuing a Bachelor's degree, George was pursuing IT at

¹ Major ethnic groups in Marsabit County are the Borana, Rendille, Samburu, Gabra, Turkana, El-molo, Garri, Sakuye, Burji, Somali, Meru, Dassanach and Waata.

² See attached chronology of incidences of violent ethnic clashes between Boran and Gabra ethnic group

Kenyatta University. Dan was a high school student, while Chuchu was a motorcycle operator. The following day the Rendille held demonstrations to protest the killings, blocking the Marsabit – Isiolo road. The police responded with force, injuring two women in the attempt to disperse the angry crowds.

The community's elected leaders and members of the Rendille Professionals Association condemned the killings, saying their people have been victims for a long time. *“It is an open secret that the neighbouring communities have schemed to dispossess Rendille of their ancestral land because of their vulnerability,”* Hon. Musa Arbele, Laisamis Member of Parliament said at a press briefing. They demanded that the police arrest the assailants and charge them in a court of law. So far, no information is available as to whether the criminals have been arrested or not. Tensions also increased between the rival Borana and Gabra, as the former suspected the youths were killed by the Gabra bandits in their territory to interrupt the good relations enjoyed by Borana and Rendille for a long time. Gabra community denied the allegation, and blamed the Borana, demanding that they take full responsibility for the crime. This is a worrying development for the ongoing Marsabit senseless killing and part of many other unresolved issues of the conflict. They also demanded the immediate intervention by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC).

2. A clash between the Borana and Gabra armed herders in the Girisa, Saku constituency, on 9th June 2020. This incident happened at a dam where livestock come to water, about six kilometers out of Marsabit town. One person from the Gabra community was reportedly killed.
3. As a consequence of the attack on 9th June 2020, in Moyale constituency, a meeting that was planned for 10th June 2020 to bring together warring groups from around Badan Rerro – a new hotspot area boasting rich pastureland – was aborted because after news of another attack where gunmen shot and killed Borana youths who were riding on a motorbike killing one instantly, and injuring another seriously reached the area. One youth is reportedly missing and search party for him was dispatched.
4. On 10th June 2020, major hostilities heightened in Badan Rerro, pitting together the Degodia clan from Wajir and the Borana of Marsabit. This was triggered by the unresolved incidence in which a Degodia man was killed by unknown people. Assignment of blame continued like in the case of the Rendille students' attack. This time, the Degodia herders suspected that the Borana herdsmen were responsible, while the Borana vehemently denied any wrongdoing. In the process of counter-accusations and fighting, Degodia herdsmen carried out an attack resulting in the killing of two Borana travelers in the same area. Consequently, a full-scale organized conflict between the Degodia and Borana community in Sololo sub county ensued. In period of two weeks ten (10) people have been killed (three identified as Borana and seven from the Degodia community). More than 300 livestock were stolen from the Degodia clan.
5. By 13th June 2020, an increase in violent incidents between the Gabra and Borana around water points, and other issues linked to administrative boundary dispute was also reported. These issues have for long divided the people from the North Horr and Saku constituencies. A new constituency review process is expected to start before the end of the year. In these renewed attacks, five (5) Borana herdsmen were killed in an ambush that was blamed on Gabra militiamen. These five people were waylaid and shot dead as they were taking their animals to the JICA dam for watering. The County Commissioner Mr. Evans Achoki confirmed that *“more herders in Kukuto area were killed by cruel gunmen as they were headed to a watering point with their animals”*. These people were killed on a day when senior regional security

officers were involved in a helicopter crash in Meru as they were flying to Marsabit to try and unite the warring communities. These attacks have continued unabated despite persistent calls by the political leaders and government authorities to end the hostilities.

Responses and interventions to the conflict

i. The County and national level response

The violence and resultant tensions has resulted in over 100 households fleeing from Marsabit to Basir village in the neighbouring Eldas Sub-County of Wajir County. The political leadership, including the county government and members of parliament have come out to condemn the new eruption of inter-ethnic conflicts in Marsabit and with its neighboring county of Wajir. Governor Mohamud Ali and his counterpart Amb. Mohamed Abdi have called for an immediate cessation of hostilities as it is a hindrance to development of both counties. Governor Ali expressed concern that the unnecessary killings will impede the development of the county and the region. He said *“It is worrying that instead of focusing on developing our county, our communities have resolved to fight amongst each other despite the efforts we have put in fostering peace. We are aware of those fuelling these conflicts and we are determined to finding them,”*. He urged the members of the community to expose anybody involved in lawlessness.

H.E Amb. Mohamed Abdi of Wajir noted that both counties will be working closely with security forces to track down those behind the conflicts. *“We can no longer condone the killings and theft taking place between communities living in Marsabit and Wajir. We condemn them in the strongest terms possible and are working closely with security forces who have been put on high alert in maintaining the peace,”* he said. This is not the first time the region is experiencing inter-clan clashes, which is usually fuelled by fights over pasture for their animals among other resources. Eldas Member of Parliament, Hon. Adan Keynan has called for an immediate stop to the tensions. *“We will no longer condone further merciless killings of innocent citizens and banditry in the area, terming the clashes as lawless and interference to peace and development,”* he stated at a press briefing in Nairobi attended by the Governors of both Marsabit and Wajir, and other political leaders. *“We want to enjoy the fruits of devolution and economic development in our counties. We are calling on our communities to stop the fighting that has killed our people and deterred our economic and social progress,”* Hon. Keynan added his voice. They unanimously agreed that they will work with the communities in Marsabit and Wajir to bring a lasting solution to years of senseless killings.

The two leaders called for a reconciliation meeting immediately to discuss issues behind the conflict in finding possible solutions to them. They said the meeting will also open up avenues for follow-up discussions between the two fighting communities. Wajir County Deputy Governor Ahmed Muktar was meanwhile on the ground meeting with his counterpart Deputy Governor for Marsabit, Mr. Solomon Gubo, each leading the members of their county security team and Kenya Red Cross Society officials on a peace mission and rapid emergency responses.

Another meeting was called by the County Commissioners for Wajir and Marsabit with the members of peace committees and senior community clan elders from both the Borana and Degodia community. Unfortunately, this meeting was cancelled to allow for the burials of two more dead Boran youth discovered in the area . However, it is encouraging to note that community members exposed members who continued to create trouble between the communities and disrupt peace dialogues.

On 13th June 2020 the National Cohesion and Integration Commission facilitated a joint Borana and Degodia community peace dialogue meeting at Badharerro. The meeting was aimed at addressing a recent violent ethnic conflict between the Borana and the Degodia communities. This meeting brought together twenty-five elders from both communities, the Borana and the Degodia communities, political leaders and community members. The Commission held a second meeting with the County Security Intelligence Committee (CSIC) chaired by the County Commissioner. This meeting enabled the Commission to get a comprehensive briefing on the conflicts in Marsabit County and the various interventions that the National Government Administration Officers (NGAO) and other stakeholders had undertaken to address the conflicts.



At the end of the meeting the following eight resolutions were adopted:

Marsabit Governor reads out the resolutions from the peace meeting. Next to him is the Wajir Governor

1. Immediate cessation of all hostilities and a return to normalcy.
2. All livestock stolen shall be returned to their rightful owners. As at 26th June 2020 the members of Borana community have managed to recover and returned 382 camels to members of Degodia community.
3. Police to ensure that the perpetrators of insecurity are arrested and charged according to the law
4. Formation of an inter-ethnic (Borana and Degodia) Peace and Social Cohesion Committee to spearhead a durable peace process in Wajir and Marsabit.
5. Installation of Safaricom network to enhance communication and security information sharing along the common border of Wajir and Marsabit.
6. The national and county governments to identify and construct security roads along the common border of Wajir and Marsabit Counties to help with rapid and effective response to distress calls to ensure that matters security are attended to immediately.
7. Political leaders to join with the national government to cement the relationship between the two brotherly communities.
8. It was agreed that the next peacebuilding meeting will be held in Basir in Wajir County on a date that will be agreed upon by leaders and all the stakeholders.

The NCIC Commissioners held a series of close door meetings with the County Security teams, Marsabit Interfaith Council and youths drawn from Borana, Gabra, Rendille and Burji ethnic groups at Jirime Hotel, Marsabit town between 13th-17th June 2020. It was established that politically instigated violence, culture and identity supremacy and land dispute are the main causes of ongoing violent interethnic violence. The proximate causes of conflict are: political and ethnic incitement ³



NCIC team with the County Commissioner of Marsabit Mr. Evans Achoki and members of CSIC

including on social media, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons due to porous international borders, laxity and manifest corruption within the county security apparatus, failure to reinforce various peace agreements and resolutions and deep-seated hatred from past violent conflict that remain unresolved and unhealed.⁴

Regional and non-state actors' response

At the regional level, twelve (12) counties under the auspices of the Frontier Counties Development Council (FCDC) and Pastoralist Parliamentary Group (PPG) urgently also convened an extra-ordinary forum meeting on 10th June 2020 that was hosted by Drylands Learning and Capacity Building Initiative (DLCI). This meeting resolved to stand in solidarity with the people of Marsabit and Wajir counties and help them reconcile their disputes. The Sector Forum for Peace and Cohesion (SFPC)⁵ under the leadership of Mr. Ahmed Sheikh, CEC for Mandera County discussed the latest situation updates and developed appropriate rapid response strategies for stopping the ongoing hostilities. Other non-governmental organisations that support the Sector Forum also attended the meeting; (Saferworld, Equal Access International and Conciliation Resources). They also shared their expertise on peace building and promised to continue supporting to the resolution of bringing peace to Marsabit. DFID through DLCI-Saferworld project supported with 6,400 litres of fuel to facilitate the movement of the leaders, government administrators and security officials that moved to the ground to create peaceful area as buffer zone and make it possible for peace meeting to take place in hotspot area.

During the Sector Forum meeting, a number of recommendations were made by the Marsabit and Wajir teams, while other SFPC members contributed by sharing their ideas and experiences on how they have dealt with similar conflicts situation their respective counties in the past. It was agreed that cessation of hostilities was the most immediate intervention to save lives and property before any long-term solutions were explored. For the murdered Rendille youth, it was urgent that the perpetrators were tracked and apprehended

³ Politicians have been charged for inciting to violence but released for lack of evidence see:

<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001300115/mps-in-violence-case-released-on-sh1m-bond-each>

<https://allafrica.com/stories/201902210583.html>

<https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2018-10-23-marsabit-clashes-mps-chachu-ganya-ali-rasso-released-on-sh250000-bail/>

⁴ Report of NCIC visit to Marsabit County conducted between 12th to 17th June 2020

⁵ The 10 FCDC counties of Isiolo, Lamu, Garissa, Marsabit, Mandera, Tana River, Turkana, Wajir, West Pokot and Samburu; and Baringo and Laikipia counties which are part of the 15 PPG counties.

without delay. It came out clearly that inter-ethnic conflicts are a sensitive issue that should be handled cautiously, particularly when emotions are still high. It was encouraging from the two County reports (SFPC members) despite the stress and anger, the peace committees, clan elders and security agencies were working in tandem to restore peace. The SFPC members recommended the following immediate actions:

- Involvement of the county and national leadership to ensure the de-escalation of the conflicts and the commencement of peace negotiations.
- The Police to be deployed to track down and apprehend the criminals causing mayhem in the county
- Marsabit County government to call on its citizens to maintain calm and to prevail upon the Kenya Police not to use disproportionate force as people express their anger through demonstrations.
- The formation of a joint Ceasefire Implementation Committee consisting of Rendille, Borana, and Gabra ethnic groups so that all the communities are working together to promote peace.
- Deployment of enough security officers in the conflict hotspots to arrest runaway insecurity.
- Creation of safe passage for the Wajir pastoralists returning to their county and the formation of a temporary buffer zone between the two warring clans. However, the Badan Rerro joint meeting that was presided over by the leaders of Wajir and Marsabit resolved differently. *(Badan Rerro public peace meeting recommended that the IDPs camp in Basir be dismantled. The Borana community and leaders at the meeting said they are willing to welcome back the Degodia clan members who fled from Sololo Sub county following escalation of hostilities due to conflict that broke out).*
- Provision of humanitarian assistance in the form of water bowsers and fuel to assist the movement of people and livestock back to Wajir County.
- Wajir and Marsabit county teams to submit to FCDC/DLCI credible and correct information concerning the exact loss of lives and livelihoods.
- Reaching out to development partners to support the humanitarian response as well as building long-term foundations for peace, security and resilience in the two counties.
- Incorporation of youth into the peace process as one of the key peace actors- they should be urged to preach peace, especially via social media and at the community level.
- Bringing together professionals from all communities to build relationships and trust.

In response, DLCI working with the FCDC has since continued to mobilize the County Governments, national political leaders, the religious leaders, community elders and businessmen from both the Borana and Degodia communities. A consultative meeting was called on 11th June 2020 in Nairobi that resulted in a high-level joint press conference that was attended by both Governors and PPG members from two counties. The leaders requested the people on the ground to stop hostilities and restore peace. This meeting resolved to dispatch senior community and political leaders from the Borana and Degodia as well as ex Minister and peace advocate, Hon. Mohamed Elmi to visit the hotspot areas.

The peace meeting was organized urgently and it was addressed by both Governors, the national political leaders (PPG) from both counties, NCIC Commissioners and police commanders. NCIC reported that it is monitoring the social media platforms – especially Facebook and WhatsApp – for any hate speech and incitement to violence. They noted that the conversations they have seen so far are full of anger, expression of serious pain and desperation, and very few expressing hope for peace and return to normalcy. It was encouraging to note that there are youth from both sides that have vowed to seek peaceful means of resolving disputes and committed to engage in long term peacebuilding in Marsabit and beyond.

There is little confidence and hope with the people that the security agency will be able to take adequate action and manage the Marsabit conflict and deliver justice for the victims. Examples include lack of action and when several Facebook accounts are discovered and known to be promoting hate among the two warring groups with clear motive of stirring ethnic hatred. NCIC promised to use security technology and seek service of the cybercrime experts. NCIC said, it recognizes that some politicians are making inflammatory statements at the funerals that may incite people against each other. The Department of Criminal Investigation (DCI) also said it was investigating the matter. All peace actors agree that Marsabit county current conflict point to the formation of new ethnic alliance ahead of the 2022 general election. The key question emerging is what is happening in Marsabit county is the likely face of election violence and politically engineered conflicts in 2022? Marsabit conflict is being disguised as "resource conflict" over pasture lands while it is a fact that the fight is about the politics of 2022.

Beyond intractability

Interventions should prioritise the cessation of hostilities and de-escalation of tensions between the warring communities including spillover to the neighboring counties such as Isiolo and Wajir. Therefore, immediate response intervention should include promotion and facilitation of peace building initiatives that build inter-community cohesion, unity and reconciliation mainly between the two active fighting groups (Borana in Saku constituency and Gabra in North Horr Constituency of the Marsabit County. In the long-term, a multi-institutional and multi-sectoral interventions is needed to strengthen the implementation of peace work in Marsabit county.

The following recommendations should urgently be implemented:

- 1) **Strengthening inter-communal peacebuilding and resource sharing structures** to build trust and enable political leaders, community elders, interfaith leaders, peace committees, youth and women leaders to dialogue and resolve issues without resorting to ethnic mobilization and violence. Inter-generational dialogues need to be promoted between youth and elders to enable the young people to understand their common history and shared heritage. The capacity of local peacebuilding structures such as peace Committees, Council of Elders and *Nyumba Kumi* should also be enhanced to promote collaboration between local security and peacebuilding structures while, facilitating early warning and early response mechanisms.
- 2) **Capacity building through a collaborative process, of political leaders** to deal with structural aspects of conflicts and understand their roles in either inflaming or reducing conflicts. This will include bringing together the County Government, current and former members of parliament, prominent local leaders. They need to be trained and sensitized on the negative effects of hate speech on social cohesion of communities, understanding of community land Act of 2016, the role of political parties in promoting social cohesion and political inclusivity.
- 3) **Rigorous assessment of context, conflict, key actors, key conflict drivers, and cultural context** through the ground networks and knowledgeable members of the community, including professionals. All activities should be rooted in awareness and incorporation of cultural sensitivities and common wisdom
- 4) Development of a participatory framework for holding **political leaders in Marsabit to be accountable for their peace building public statements**. Development partners and civil society organisations should support any new initiatives by political and community leaders to enable them to face the challenge and walk the journey of delivering peace in Marsabit.

- 5) **Support and strengthen confidence and trust building between community structures** (elders councils, women and youth institutions) and security agencies to cooperate with each other in preventing and managing any future lawlessness and insecurity. Careful and strategic use of messages delivered by both professionals, elders, women and youth community leaders are critical for building the confidence and cohesion amongst the communities.
- 6) **Professionals from the Borana, Gabra and Rendille communities should be engaged to promote peace as they** play a major socio-economic and political role in their communities.

The Pastoralist Parliamentary Group (PPG) is also dispatching to Marsabit County a team of ten (10) MPs/Senators with the NCIC to create a strong foundation for establishing inter community dialogue and initiate the process of inter community reconciliation. The PPG team will also conduct rapid fact-finding mission in which the plan to meet and dialogue with various community groups and the opinion leaders, (Borana, Gabra, Rendille, Burji and other minorities) various other stakeholders in Marsabit county as neutral player in the first week of July 2020.

During the five (5) days peace mission to the Marsabit county, the PPG members also plan to meet with all the political representatives of the people and preside over a joint meeting that will seek to create a consensus on the proposed peace building dialogue framework that has to be acceptable to all in order to establish a strong foundation for long inter community reconciliation and cohesion. The Chairman of PPG, Hon. Alois Lentoimaga, MP Samburu North said; all these meetings will fully comply with the Ministry of Health directive on the social distancing. On return, the PPG team will actively engage with various government security agencies and the parliament. They plan to meet with the CS Interior, Inspector General of the Police, NCIC and other relevant parliamentary committees to initiate the process of finding a more robust sustainable solution towards ending inter community conflicts in the pastoralist regions of Kenya.

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