

THE ILEMI TRIANGLE: A FORGOTTEN CONFLICT

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The problems facing the people who live in the Ilemi Triangle, on Kenya's north western border, have up to now remained largely ignored by the outside world.

The activities of Somali pirates, the Sudanese President Al-Bashir's defiant attitude to the arrest warrant issued against him by the International Criminal Court and the political and economic turmoil in Kenya have all helped to push the conflict in this harsh, semi-desert land out of the public eye.

Nevertheless, it is in this area, of some 10 to 14,000 square kilometers, depending on who is doing the calculating, where one finds most of the problems which beset the continent of Africa. Inter-ethnic conflict, competition for dwindling natural resources, state neglect, a lack of adequate health care and schools and, more recently, the discovery of oil, all make the Ilemi Triangle a time-bomb which is ticking inexorably towards disaster.

It is this complex and multilayered set of circumstances which drew Fr. Patrick Devine, an Irish priest who has been working in East Africa for over twenty years, to examine the root causes of the conflict, to see if a lasting resolution to the region's apparently intractable problems could be found.

The Ilemi Triangle is a disputed territory, which is claimed by Sudan, Kenya and Ethiopia. Following numerous efforts to demarcate the area over the last 100 years, Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan have all made conflicting de jure and de facto claims. This has given rise to a situation in which there is little or no official state involvement in the region and government is at best ad hoc, with all the negative side-effects that this entails.

The Triangle is home to five major ethnic groups. The nomadic Turkana move in the territory between Sudan and Kenya and have always been vulnerable to attacks from surrounding peoples. The other ethnic groups in this area are the Didinga and Toposa in Sudan, the Nyangatom, who migrate between Sudan and Ethiopia, and the Dassenach, who live east of the Triangle in Ethiopia. These pastoral people have historically engaged in cattle raiding. Today, pressure on natural resources, principally water and grass, has exacerbated the already tense relations between the ethnic groups. In the past, disputes and conflicts of interest were settled with traditional weapons, today, each group has access to automatic weapons and the loss of life, in even the smallest skirmish, is correspondingly greater. The exact boundaries of the Ilemi Triangle have changed over the years. The British, as the principal colonial power in the region, were instrumental in drawing up the original boundaries.

The Ethiopian Emperor Menelik claimed Lake Turkana and proposed a boundary with the British to run from the southern end of the lake eastward to the Indian Ocean. The British, keen to create a buffer zone between the white settlers in what was then British East Africa and the “wild nomadic tribes of the north” had other plans. The line surveyed by Captain Philip Maud of the Royal Engineers in 1902-3, known as the "Maud Line", put the triangle in Sudan's control and under British hegemony. A subsequent 1907 agreement between Ethiopia and British East Africa was vague on the details of where the border was located. The de-facto border between Kenya and Ethiopia was then set at the Maud line, which ran east-west from the north end of Lake Turkana.

Later in 1914, the Uganda-Sudan Boundary Commission wanted to give Sudan access to Lake Turkana, resulting in the triangular shaped piece of land given to Sudan.

Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan have each been accused by international observers of using the ethnic groups to fight low-level proxy wars as a means of maintaining their claims to the disputed territory. After the First World War, Ethiopia armed the Nyangatom and the Dassenach, transforming traditional raids into pitched battles in which hundreds of people were killed. After the 1936 Italian invasion of Ethiopia, a raid against the Turkana in July 1939 by the Italian-backed Nyangatom and the Dassenach led to serious loss of life on both sides.

More recently, in the 1980s, it is alleged that the Kenyan government entered into an agreement with the Sudanese People's Liberation Army to administer the contested triangle in return for sanctuary and military and logistical support during the twenty-year civil war.

Since 1978, the Kenyan government has been suspected of arming the Turkana, while in the 1990s, it has been established that Ethiopia supplied the Dassenach with automatic weapons.

Now with the discovery of oil, interest in this neglected region has intensified and is likely to increase the possibility of open inter-state conflict. It will come as a further layer of conflict, in addition to the ancient tribal rivalries and the pressure on basic natural resources.

Until today, no serious research has been undertaken to study the roots of this multi-layered conflict, and no serious attempts have been made to establish a framework within which a lasting peace could be envisaged. Fr. Patrick Devine's study is the first of its kind to try and bring all the principal actors in the region to the negotiating table in order to examine the issues which have spawned the conflict.

Fr. Devine's approach to the conflict is to identify and attempt to satisfy the basic human needs of the people living there. He maintains that it is only when the essential needs of food, shelter, health and the primordial ontological needs of security, identity, recognition and development are met, can the sources of the conflict be tackled. His MA Thesis entitled "The Turkana-Dassenach Conflict: Causes and Consequences" submitted in June 2009 received the highest academic praise and its empirical approach is now becoming the primary methodology for researching similar types of conflict in the region.

In May 2008, Patrick Devine organized an expedition to the Ilemi Triangle with Professor Wanakayi K. Omoka, from the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya. Omoka is one of Kenya's leading sociologists and an internationally recognized scholar. They were joined by David McDermott, a young engineer from Dublin, who was to conduct a survey of physical infrastructure requirements. The aim of the visit was to meet representatives from the warring parties, local authorities, NGOs and church organizations working in the area. The information they collected was to form the basis of a detailed questionnaire that would establish the root causes of the conflict and identify areas where conflict resolution could begin.

Devine and Omoka returned to the area in December 2008 to renew dialogue with the principal protagonists and to brief a team of people who were to conduct the survey. Devine spent a further period in the area conducting research. He was on hand to assist the victims of an outbreak of fighting after Christmas which left several people dead. With local assistance, Fr. Devine was responsible for evacuating the wounded from the conflict zone.

Data analysis from the survey is currently being presented to all the relevant actors – ethnic, national, regional, international and NGO/Churches. According to Devine, now that the analysis of the data is complete, the principle root causes of the conflict have emerged from his research: “The elements that fuel this conflict include a scarcity of resources in what is a particularly harsh environment and the pressure placed upon them by mutually hostile groups who contest the ownership of the territory in terms of usage and access. Obviously, the traditional inter-ethnic fighting, exacerbated by cultural variations and the proliferation of weapons, is also a major factor. It became clear that cultural differences – and similarities – require greater investigation. There are also issues of state weakness – state neglect, official indifference, dereliction of duty and a virtually complete absence of governance and administration. The people there are living in an institutional vacuum. We also examined how the role of NGOs and church bodies working in the area are impacting the conflict. Finally, we looked at the political economy – how are resources being manipulated for the political and economic ends of various actors in the region? The idea was to test what impact all these variables, and their inter-relation, were having on the conflict.”

Now that these issues have been firmly identified and examined they can be addressed, in order to offer a long-term solution to the conflict. Devine says that peace-making is not just about achieving a short-term settlement by addressing the symptoms but rather it is about long-term resolution which addresses root causes and non-negotiable human needs. Sustainable development, he says, is at the heart of any peace process. The main tenet of Devine’s approach is that people’s basic human needs have to be understood and met so that the conflict resolution process can begin.

Devine recognizes the potential for a Catch 22 situation given that it is difficult to attract development funding in a hostile environment when it is exactly this absence of holistic development which fuels the hostilities in the first place.

Where Fr. Devine is making a difference to the people of the Ilemi triangle is that he has earned the trust and confidence of the key protagonists. He is slowly breaking down the vicious circle of conflict by discreet mediation and offering people a platform to express their sense of injustice and their fears. It is his courage and humanity, together with his extensive experience of conflict in East Africa that Devine brings to the Ilemi situation.

Mediation has begun and development projects are being examined. Health and education programs and a water conservation and access scheme have been identified as the priorities which aim to make an immediate, tangible difference to the people living in this inhospitable land. Working in conjunction with NGOs, churches and local authorities on the ground and in partnership with aid from various donors, Devine is confident that the spiral of violence can be halted and that peace will prevail before the conflict escalates into an international crisis.

Patrick Devine is currently engaged in establishing a Nairobi-based centre for conflict transformation and management - "The Shalom Center for Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation (SCCRR)". SCCRR will address the particular characteristics and root causes of conflict in East Africa and he is determined that its work will also help bring the conflict in the Ilemi Triangle environment to the attention of the world. The foundation of the centre is a long-held ambition for a man who has worked for over twenty years to preserve the dignity and freedom of the poverty-stricken and the oppressed throughout East Africa.

Fr. Devine's "The Turkana-Dassenach Conflict: Causes and Consequences" is currently being utilized by ministers in the Kenyan government and was requested by CEWARN (Conflict Early Warning Network) personnel in Ethiopia, as an aid to conflict resolution in Eastern Africa. His contribution to the formulation of recently published propositions, emerging from the Synod for Africa at the Vatican, concerning conflict transformation and the need for it to be formally introduced into educational programmes for religious and laity, has been publically commended. This all augurs well for conflict resolution and reconciliation in Eastern Africa, and for the numerous marginalized and neglected peoples such as those living in the Ilemi Triangle.

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