

Drought and deprivation in a land of plenty

A world away from the tourist beaches and safari parks, the coffee plantations and market gardens, are thousands suffering from lack of rain and corruption in the north of Kenya. Only the swiftest of aid can prevent catastrophe

Last week I sat with Sister Mathilde Casula, a 67-year-old Italian Franciscan, in a sweltering outpatients' clinic near the mosquito-infested town of Isiolo in northern Kenya. Sister Mathilde was dangling on her knee a three-year-old boy, Carlo: he looked happy and well fed. But his mother has Aids and it is likely that Carlo is HIV positive. "The problem is," says Sister Mathilde, "I don't have diagnostic tests or retroviral drugs."

It is 40 years since Mathilde founded a children's hospital and maternity clinic in a region where some five million nomadic cattle farmers live. More recently she set up a residential home and school for Aids orphans. She is now caring for 166 of them, a small local proportion of the estimated 900,000 Aids orphans in Kenya today. "Things have never been so bad," she said, describing the third year of a devastating drought in the region. "TB and malaria are endemic and every month we are seeing more than 70 cases of child malnutrition in the clinic. There are many more out in the villages whose mothers can't get here."

The wider picture is that some three million people, half of them children, are at risk of starvation this summer in the landlocked hinterlands that border Ethiopia and Somalia. Last month there were brief torrential rains but they served mainly to wash away top soil and devastate the unpaved roads, making relief difficult. Government food aid is spasmodic. Villagers told me that the distributors are keeping back more than half for private sale.

Travelling off-road through some 700 miles of the austere beautiful areas of parched scrub and encroaching desert on the frontiers with Ethiopia and Somalia, I saw last week the results not only of the drought but of a wave of internecine conflict over diminishing watering holes and pastures. Since last July, when 90 people, including 26 children, were slaughtered in a single cattle raid, hundreds of "pastoralist" villagers have been killed in rustling incidents. Thousands of displaced families have been seeking protection in townships such as Marsabit and Isiolo, creating tensions with the local inhabitants.



Sr Mathilde Casula with Carlo, aged three. His mother has Aids and he is thought to be HIV positive

Once again, the principal aid agencies have announced major appeals to help vast numbers of people under threat in a country that shares the already hopeless plight of the stricken Horn of Africa. The question arises, as it does with Kenya's northern neighbours: is aid reaching the people most in need? What can be done to pull the region out of its predicament long term? A further question is whether Church-based charities have anything positive to offer. Last year the media was dominated by the slogan "Make Poverty History". Does this new crisis find us suffering a bout of compassion fatigue and cynicism?

North Kenya constitutes a striking case study of every development and poverty problem that a region can endure. At the root is the environmental disaster – drought; and the drought is not just a cyclical freak of nature. It is a feature of climate change that is not going to disappear even with a season or two of rain. Drought has led to famine, impacting mainly on women and children, and the famine has exacerbated widespread poverty

and disease. Desperation, inflaming ancient ethnic rivalries between cattle-herding clans, has, in turn, led to a conflict that feeds upon itself and makes aid work difficult if not impossible. Last week two Catholic Church workers were shot dead in separate incidents on the lawless unpaved roads between Isiolo and neighbouring Marsabit. Another diocesan vehicle was raked with gunfire, and a driver transporting livestock in an Arid Lands Resource Management Project lorry was shot dead and his consignment stolen.

Against this background, northern Kenya has suffered from successive government neglect. Policing is virtually non-existent and there has been no investment in infrastructure in the 400,000-square-mile drought area. President Mwai Kibaki came to power four years ago on an anti-corruption ticket to end former President Daniel arap Moi's 24 years of systemic sleaze. But Kibaki's administration has been hit by two multi-million-pound fraud scandals, forcing the ministers of finance and education to resign. The Dutch Government last Friday announced that it was suspending aid worth £100 million to Kenya because it had not done enough to fight corruption. The same day, Kenyan MPs, who earn, with perks, more than £5,000 a month mostly tax free, awarded themselves nearly 100 per cent increases in travel expenses (to £1.90 a mile), while most people in the North earn less than 50p a day. This is a country, moreover, which suffers from an outside perception of prosperity that discourages sympathy. The contrast between rich and poor is dramatic: famine stricken northern Kenya is a world away from cosmopolitan Nairobi, the tourist Safari parks and the luxury beach hotels of Mombasa.

"The immediate answer to our long-term problems," says Joseph Samel, a Kenyan national who runs the Isiolo Catholic Development Agency, "is drought management and diversification." Joseph believes that the clans should voluntarily reduce their cattle to the minimum and take up horticulture. "At the same time the younger generation should try to seek casual jobs wherever they can to supplement the family income."

However, Mr Samel is well aware that there are deep cultural problems involved in change to farming methods: cattle ownership is an almost sacred element of life in the region, associated with diet, animist notions of belonging to nature, marriage dowries and perceptions of personal security. The villagers have neither the skills, nor the investment, nor the land ownership, to take up crop production, and the drought would affect horticulture just as it does cattle grazing. As for the young, there is no alternative work and education is scarce and not free above primary level.

So is the situation hopeless? What can we, in Britain, do to help the people of northern Kenya, and indeed other parts of the world? Despite its problems, I brought away from northern Kenya a profound sense of confidence and hope in the operation of local Catholic diocesan development organisations as a focus for on-the-ground aid.

The local Catholic centres in this region, run by qualified nationals, funded mainly by Cafod, are committed to a range of inter-related strategies. Their work includes the provision of extra water bore holes, training in horticultural skills and investment, food aid, education, and health facilities. Meanwhile networks created by dioceses and parishes are crucial to communication and the targeting of individual needs over very wide areas. These include a catalogue of essential requests for items that can make all the difference: the travelling schoolteacher in need of a motor bike, a seamstress whose sewing machine has broken, and Sister Mathilde's need for HIV-Aids tests and retroviral drugs.

The diocesan development organisations have also been essential in reducing potential conflict between Christians and Muslims. In Isiolo, a town where half the inhabitants are Muslim, and the Catholics represent only 10 per cent, the prayers of the muezzin nevertheless alternate with the Angelus bell. Interfaith meetings sponsored by the diocese extend to collaboration in aid programmes, creating harmony and lending a sense of trust to Catholic efforts to resolve tribal conflicts.

As Cafod launches an emergency appeal this week to help the people of northern Kenya, we should have confidence that our donations are effectively supervised at a national level from Nairobi, as well as efficiently administered and applied at a local level. Kenya itself must rectify its neglect of infrastructure, health and education. But there are urgent needs. Travelling through the region, I found signs of imminent starvation, as well as fear and despair. The people of northern Kenya, especially the women and children, require swift and unconditional aid if a catastrophe on the scale of Darfur is to be avoided.

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MADELINE BUNTING

'While Brown played Father Christmas, the job of government has fallen apart'



It's hard to see how New Labour can recover from the events of the last 10 days. And that difficulty is one for Gordon Brown to ponder every bit as much as Tony Blair. The latter may be wondering how he might limp on, but the harder task falls to Gordon Brown: how can he repair the legitimacy, credibility and authority of New Labour?

Recent events have savaged the Government's political authority: a sordid scandal, bereft even of some foolish affection, has engrossed a voyeuristic nation and humiliated a senior member of the Cabinet; an horrific bungle at the Home Office and dangerous criminals go free to commit more crimes. As if those two didn't form a damaging enough pincer attack on Cabinet performance, the Unique Selling Point of Labour for over a generation – its unchallengeable lead over all political parties for looking after the NHS – now looks fragile. Despite unprecedented new investment, job cuts and deficits abound.

The list goes on beyond these front-page headline stories. Equally damaging, although it may not be attracting so much media attention, is the ineptitude dogging the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, or Defra as it is known. New farm subsidies are causing havoc in many local rural economies as payments have been delayed for several months. Meanwhile over at the Department for Work and Pensions, 17,000 civil servant job cuts are impacting on the quality of work according to critical National Audit office reports and prompted a two-day protest stoppage earlier this week. Add to that bumbles in the tax credit system leading to a £2 billion overspend for the second year running.

The problem about all these stories, Prescott's travails apart, is that they share a common thread – they are all about managerial competence. That is precisely why the current Government malaise is so damaging. For central to emergent New Labour was its claim of efficiency. Blair's point, again and again, as he picked his way through the ruins of a twentieth-century

political landscape of Left and Right, socialism and capitalism, was that he would not be governed by dogmatic ideological principle but by what works. It was a claim to common sense, man-in-the-street good judgement and it was hugely successful in forging a new identity for Labour and electoral victory.

The cracks began to appear quite quickly – there were too many targets, too many initiatives, too many managers in health and education, too much measurement of everything. Yet, despite these qualms, the belief in Labour's managerial competence has survived a surprisingly long time and has contributed to three election victories. Only now is it becoming starkly clear that Labour's management of government has been riddled with absurdities: the immigration service was so busy meeting Government targets on asylum that it ignored the deportation of foreign criminals, and parts of Defra have been subjected to restructuring at precisely the same time as the department launches the reform of the subsidy payment system. Civil servants are more concerned about staying in their jobs than in doing them.

If managerial competence was central to New Labour's claim to govern, then the collapse of this central pillar of the whole political project is a major headache for Gordon Brown. He is implicated every bit as much as Tony Blair, no matter how this Houdini of politics might try to perform one of his disappearing acts. Trace the roots of the current crisis gripping the machinery of government across benefit agencies, job centres and the rural payment agency, and while some of those roots are in Number 10 with its short-term priorities, many others go back to Number 11.

While Brown has securely established Labour's reputation for economic competence, the less well-known story is how he has contributed to the Government's incompetence. Treasury pressures to cut costs and to prove best value and meet public service agreements have absorbed huge amounts of civil servant time. Brown's insistence on financial management via civil service cuts has left a swathe of furious Government officials, understaffed departments and demoralised staff. While Brown has played Father Christmas on health and education, within the machinery of government, workloads have ballooned, stress soared and the complex job of actually doing the job effectively has fallen apart.