

## CHAPTER SIX

# TANA RIVER

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The Tana River district occupies about 49 per cent of the Coast Province, occupying a total area of 38,782 km. sq with an estimated population of 181,000. It derives its name from the largest river in Kenya, which traverses the northern and eastern part of the district and drains into the Indian Ocean. Tana River district borders Kitui district to the west, Garissa and Ijara to the east, and Isiolo to the north. The main production system in this district is farming and pastoralism with a small portion of the population engaged in fishing. Tana River District is home to two major tribes: the Pokomo, who are farmers, and the Orma, who are pastoralists.

Tana River at one time had three major irrigation schemes: Bura, Hola, and Tana Delta, which influenced residents' lifestyles in terms of employment and sources of income. The collapse of these schemes forced the nomadic pastoralists to move during the wet season, while the farmers remained along the river. During the dry season the pastoralists move back to the river in search of water and pasture. The utilisation of the waters of the Tana River has been in the middle of a conflict pitting these two communities against each other. The Pokomo claim the land along the river and the Orma claim the waters of the river. This has been the major source and cause of a conflict that is usually predictable.

The conflict between these two communities and their different yet uncompromising lifestyles previously resulted in few casualties because the weapons of choice were traditional weapons such as clubs, spears, and bows. However, the increasing introduction of small arms and light weapons has caused the number of casualties to escalate and more property to be destroyed than in the past. The Orma communities belong to the larger Somali ethnic group and are believed to source their arms from their relatives in Garissa and Ijara districts, which border Tana River.

Tana River has the characteristics of any other conflict prone area in the country: underdevelopment, poor infrastructure, poor communication and social amenities, and social marginalization. Communities are arming themselves because of the need to defend against perceived attacks. They feel that the

government security machinery has not been able to effectively respond to violence. Isolation has led to increased demand for guns.

According to a stakeholders' meeting convened by the District Commissioner in July 2002, it was pointed out that no concrete data existed on the scope and extent of small arms and light weapons in the district. There are some undisputed facts, however. The ethnic clashes in Tana River District started in 2000 and slowly picked up intensity to unprecedented levels from late 2001 to early 2002. There were several reasons for the escalation and sustenance of the conflicts in the district.

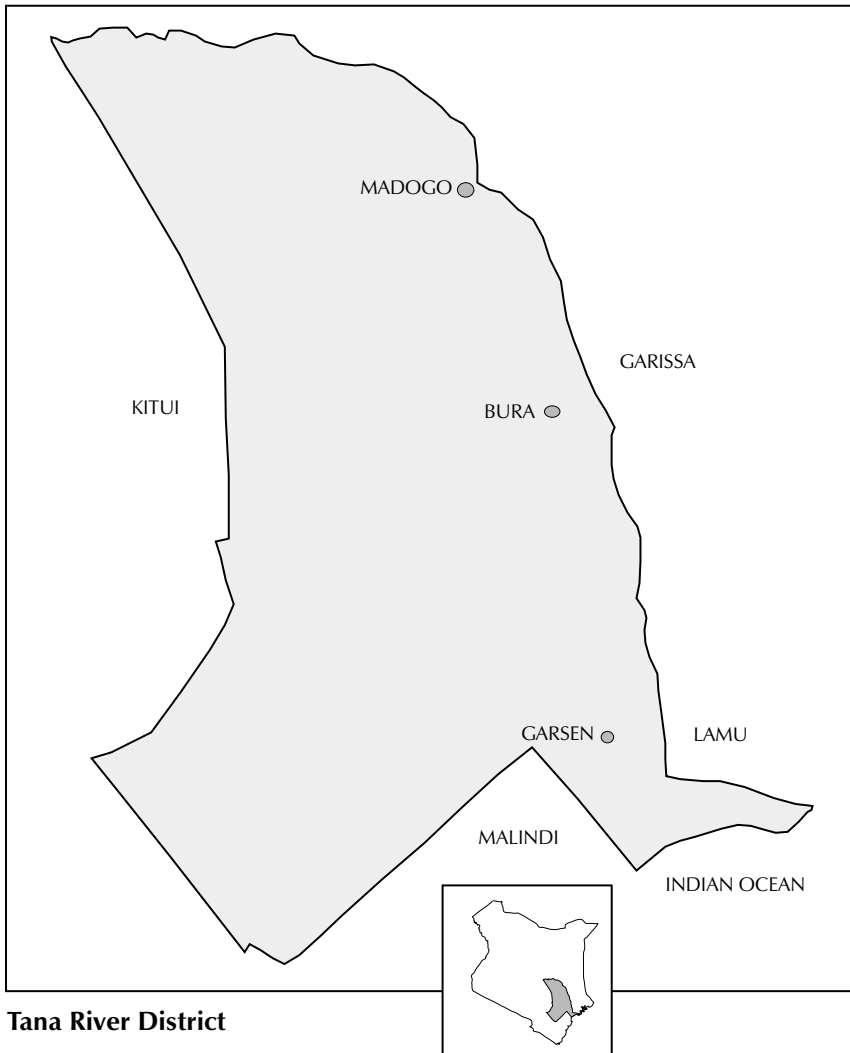
A land adjudication programme was started in the district without first adequately consulting with the communities. This programme was summarily rejected by the pastoralist Orma ethnic community because they saw the adjudication as a conspiracy between the Pokomo agricultural communities and the government to deny them access to traditional grazing areas and water access routes known as '*Malkas*'.

Environmentally, several factors are involved. The destruction of forests and bird breeding areas in the district have led to a lack of water, increased acidity, and serious soil erosion. The destruction of water sources has also led to human-wildlife conflicts with wildlife invading agricultural lands in search of water. The electricity generating company Kenya Generating Company (KenGen) has dammed the Tana River at various points upstream, resulting in water scarcity downstream as well as floods whenever the company opens the sluice gates of the dams. The flooding destroys irrigation canals and changes the course of the river, jeopardizing crops.

### ***Tana River Peace, Development, and Reconciliation Committee (TRPDC)***

The Tana River Peace, Development and Reconciliation Committee (TRPDC) is the umbrella peace and development committee in the district, although there are also various sub-committees at the divisional and locational levels. The objectives of the umbrella TRPDC include:

- To harmonize peaceful coexistence between the different communities in the district
- To initiate conflict resolution processes through the implementation of communal activities between the different ethnic groups



- To establish, enhance and empower community participation in peace building from the grassroots levels
- To strengthen cordial relations with the neighbouring districts
- To enhance community awareness on proper utilisation of the existing resources

- To undertake participatory research on the causes of conflict between the various communities within and outside the district
- To liaise with the district security committee on ways of building peace and conflict intervention strategies
- To initiate and implement development programmes that harmonize the communities living within the district.

The peace and development sub-committees draw their membership from local area chiefs, youth, elders and women representatives. The main activities of the sub-committees include holding peace meetings, organizing exchange visits to neighbouring districts to discuss peace, and the identification and advocacy for income generating activities as one way of sustaining peace. Financially, Oxfam, through the TRPDC, has supported most of the peace building work in the district. Oxfam has also been involved in development activities that relate to peace building work.

In a focus group conducted with members and leaders of the TRPDC on 28 August, 2003, three major sources of conflict were agreed upon by all present. First is the commercialization of conflict through the involvement of business interests, then issues of environment and water diversion, and finally the changing distribution of populations in the district. The group described how people are internally displaced in the fighting and migrate to other areas. Resettlement programs fail because chiefs “want the promotions and recognition that come with more population in their area, and they are pressured by businesses who also benefit from the influx of people,” according to one participant.

At the height of the ethnic clashes, the different communities were asked to identify leaders or representatives to attend a peace workshop in Malindi. At the meeting it was resolved that the religious leaders would go back home and visit the ‘no-go’ areas to initiate peace meetings among the conflicting communities. They did, and the religious leaders helped establish peace committees in the district, then withdrew to leave the committees to carry out the peace work.

The TRPDC is engaged in different specific projects to reduce the demand for guns and build harmony between clashing groups. In response to competition over river access, one project (waiting on funding) is to pave an access road to one part of the river where pastoralists will have unfettered use of the water

for their animals. In exchange for access, the pastoralists have agreed to the presence of a checkpoint for small arms so that farmers will be satisfied the route is not being used for gun trafficking.

Education drives aim to change the pastoralist tradition of children being used to tend cows rather than being sent to school. Children's lack of control over livestock has led to clashes, as cows trample crops near the river. Both children and the cows they tend have also died in deadly crocodile attacks in or near the water. Furthermore, educating Pokomo and Orma children together will build peace and future friendships. Adult illiteracy in this district is high, but there are government-funded schools that need to welcome both pastoralist and farmer children.