

EALA should table debate on protection of indigenous pastoralist communities

By Agnes Kabajuni

CLIMATE change is having an increasingly strong impact on pastoralists across East Africa causing recurrent droughts leading to scarcity of water and pasture. 2016 and 2017 have been devastating, with prolonged drought tearing deep into the very existence of pastoralist communities in Kenya, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. However, it is how governments in these countries have responded to the situation that needs to be examined deeper. There is a dire need for leaders to combine efforts to mitigate the disastrous effects of climate change, such as hunger and malnutrition, increased prices of cereals and deaths of livestock, and importantly, the conflicts emanating from unprecedented migrations in search of pasture and water.

In Uganda, indigenous pastoralists in Karamoja Sub-region have greatly been affected by the prolonged drought. Their economic livelihoods have been threatened as they have been forced to sell their haggard animals at low prices in order to acquire food, prevent death of these animals or reduce their herds to a manageable size that can feed on the scarce pastures. Hunger-related deaths in Karamoja Sub-region have become an annual event with the elderly, the children and the pregnant women bearing the brunt of the harsh conditions.

This year's extreme conditions have forced pastoralists to risk migration into lands occupied by other ethnic communities in Otuke, Agago, Alebtong, Amuria, Kween, Kapchorwa and Katakwi districts. The New Vision of February 13 put the number of those who moved into Otuke alone to 5,000 herdsman and about 10,000 heads of cattle.

As expected, these migrations have caused alarm among the residents of these areas. Conflicts over grazing rights have been reported, especially in Otuke with Northern parliamentarians politicising the issue and making accusations against the pastoralists, rather than looking at it as a crisis that needs urgent attention from government. Pastoralist communities are faced with disaster and as a nation we need to respond

to their plight, not with threats to throw them out of areas of refuge, but with a more proactive approach to finding amicable solutions such as mutual dialogues between leaders of both communities and government-led and facilitated negotiations to have the host communities allow pastoralists access to land not under cultivation during this drought season which they should vacate once rains return.

Elsewhere in eastern Africa, it has not been different. The Turkana and Dodoth from Kenya and the Topeth from South Sudan have migrated into Kaabong and Moroto districts in Uganda. In Kenya itself Samburu, Pokot and Maasai indigenous pastoralist communities have encroached on private and state-owned conservancies with tens of thousands of cattle. Drought has become perennial due to the change in climate and driven by an increase in animal and human population coupled with diminished free-rangelands for nomadic practices.

Consequently, the pastoralists have clashed with government security and private owners over encroachment and been accused of killing wildlife in Laikipia's vast and conserved savanna lands. Private conservancy owners are mainly descendants of the British that acquired large tracts of land during colonial times, displacing pastoralist communities.

Historically, these areas before

conservation were occupied by indigenous peoples, and their customary land rights were violated by the British colonial invaders. Kenya is no stranger to conflict between the pastoralists and their sedentary agriculturalist neighbours or even security forces in conservation areas. In 2012, more than 100 people died when the Pokomo and Ormo people clashed in Tana River in the north eastern part of the country. The 2016/2017 drought is having a disastrous impact on the already vulnerable indigenous pastoralist communities, driving them to encroach on other places. This year being an election one in Kenya, chances are that politicking makes these migrations very sensitive and prone to violent clashes.

Recently, the siting of hundreds of South Sudanese pastoralist communities who have crossed into Uganda in Yumbe District with a thousand cattle has challenged security officials who fear that the likely armed pastoralists due to the war in South Sudan might cause insecurity in the country. Drought has not spared South Sudan either, there is famine across the country and exacerbated by the current ethnic and politically driven civil war. This is happening at the height of the refugee crisis and Uganda is host to the largest numbers of South Sudanese refugees. Some of these are pastoralists who fled the con-

flict back at home with hundreds of cattle and to places like Moyo District where they are conflicting with the locals.

Although food insecurity caused by prolonged drought is threatening many populations across Eastern Africa, indigenous pastoralist communities have been disproportionately affected. Prices on their animals have lowered because of malnourishment, while the prices of cereals have shot up due to the poor harvest. Lack of recognition of their contribution to their countries' economies and culture has resulted in poor planning or none at all for these distinct indigenous populations to proactively mitigate impacts of climate change. For instance land use and governance encourages more settled herders and limits free-range nomadic practices, thus restricting animals to confined places leading to overgrazing, depletion of water sources and allowing little time for the vegetation to rejuvenate.

It is high time the East African Legislative Assembly tabled an urgent debate on the protection of indigenous pastoralist communities in the region. Minority Rights Group International urges governments to improve pastoralist communities' tenure security in customary and communal lands, put measures in place to address migration factors and respond to disasters caused by the ever deepening impact of climate change. This should include supporting food security and nutrition of pastoralist families depending on animals and providing supplementary animal feeds and water.

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Kenya has hailed Uganda for granting grazing permission for Turkana pastoralists