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**Pastoralism, mobility and conflict in Karamoja, Uganda**
Notes for the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples

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**Introduction**

These notes form a case study on pastoralism, mobility and conflict in the Karamoja region of northwest Uganda. Karamoja has the lowest human development indicators in Uganda, and pastoralism has long been subject to negative narratives from the highest levels of the Government of Uganda, and decades of inappropriate policies and development programs. Karamoja has also been characterized by violent conflict and government disarmament programs that have been associated with substantial human rights abuses. In recent years, the central government narrative has positioned pastoralism and mobility as the cause of conflict in the region, and this has been used to justify further disarmament efforts while also providing space for the emergence of "commercial livestock raiding" and land acquisitions by elites, especially for mineral extraction. In a context of continued anti-pastoralist policy and continuing land fragmentation, the future of indigenous pastoralism is uncertain. In contrast, the Africa Union (AU)recognizes the economic, social and cultural benefits of pastoralism in Africa, and the critical role of mobility in pastoralist communities.[1] Uganda is a Member of the AU but overlooks the AU policy in its domestic approach to pastoralism in Uganda.

The notes below are extracts drawn from a conflict synthesis report by Elizabeth Stites for the Karamoja Resilience Support Unit at Tufts University.[2]

**Conflict and disarmament in Karamoja: 1990s and 2000s**

The 1990s and early 2000s are often described as an extremely violent period in Karamoja, but the extent of this violence is difficult to quantify. Very few studies took place in the region after the late 1960s (due to insecurity), and none of those that did occur used a representative or quantitative approach to analyzing rates of violence. The work of medical anthropologist Sandra Gray and colleagues comes the closest and includes an analysis of mortality based on interviews with over 300 Matheniko and Bokora women. Their research shows that direct violence related to cattle raiding was the leading cause of death for adult men in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Raiding violence also undermined health services and delivery, thereby contributing to many deaths from preventable or treatable illnesses.[3] Qualitative research in central and southern Karamoja that investigated previous experiences of violence found that respondents rated violence in the 1990s and 2000s as worse than any earlier period in remembered history or oral tradition, and this violence had brought about widespread changes in livelihood systems, including the loss of livestock, out-migration, and sedentarization.[4]

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[1] African Union, 2010. Policy Framework for Pastoralism in Africa: Securing, Protecting and Improving the Lives, Livelihoods and Rights of Pastoralist Communities. African Union, Addis Ababa.
https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/30259-doc-pastoral_policy_framework_-_low_res.pdf
[2] Stites, E. https://karamojaresilience.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/TUFTS_2254_KRSU_Conflict_knowledge_synthesis_V2_online.pdf
[3] Gray et al., “Cattle Raiding, Cultural Survival, and Adaptability.”
[4] E. Stites, “Identity Reconfigured: Karimojong Male Youth, Violence and Livelihoods” (PhD diss., Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, Somerville, MA, 2013).

In addition to being more prevalent, raids in Karamoja became increasingly violent, reportedly starting in the 1980s and continuing into the early 2000s. Authors attribute the heightened violence of raids in this period to a number of factors, including the ready availability of small arms,[5] the increased commercialization of raiding,[6] the collapse of internal alliances,[7] the erosion of control by male elders over young men,[8] and the general absence of state control over or interest in the region.

After an almost 15-year hiatus in active engagement in the region, the early 2000s brought a profound shift in attitude by the Ugandan government towards the region.[9] The Office of the Prime Minister and the Uganda Peoples Defence Force (UPDF) implemented a short-lived forced disarmament program in 2001,[10] followed by a more comprehensive campaign beginning in 2006. Violence and insecurity initially increased following the start of the 2006 disarmament campaign due to the loss of firearms for protective purposes. Human rights violations by the Ugandan military were also widespread, including gender-based forms of abuse (such as requiring young men to lie naked in the sun with bricks on their chests and intentional injuries to male genitalia).[11] A policy of protected kraals, in which a community was required to corral all animals into an enclosure adjacent to a military barracks, resulted in widespread livestock deaths and upended traditional gendered divisions of labor.[12] Communities were repeatedly subject to cordon and search operations, in which the entire population would be removed from their homes, often before dawn, and made to wait while soldiers ransacked their huts and searched possessions. Those who did surrender weapons were not provided with proof of having done so, meaning that they could be harassed, arrested, and detained multiple times.[13] This period of intense disarmament continued for approximately three to four years, depending on the location.

**Relative peace: 2010-2019**

Despite the initial increase in insecurity at the community level and the widespread allegations of human rights abuses, security had improved across the sub-region by approximately 2010. These improvements were noted by officials, development actors, and local communities alike. Importantly, the improvement in security had widespread positive impacts, including on inter-group relations, herd mobility, access to

[5] Mkutu, "Small Arms and Light Weapons," "*Guns and Governance*."
[6] M. L. Fleisher, "Cattle Raiding and its Correlates: The Cultural-Ecological Consequences of Market-Oriented Cattle Raiding among the Kuria of Tanzania," *Human Ecology* 26, no. 4 (1998): 547–572; M. L. Fleisher, "Kuria Cattle Raiding: Capitalist Transformation Commoditization and Crime Formation among an East African Agro-pastoral People," *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 42, no. 4 (2000): 745–769; D. Eaton, "The Rise of the 'Traider': The Commercialization of Raiding in Karamoja," *Nomadic Peoples* 14, no. 2 (2010): 106–122.
[7] Gray, "Memory of Loss."
[8] E. Stites, "A Struggle for Rites: Masculinity, Violence and Livelihoods in Karamoja, Uganda," in *Gender, Violence and Human Security: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, eds. A. Tripp, M. Marx Ferree, and C. Ewig (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013).
[9] Czuba, "Extension of State Power."
[10] The 2001–2002 disarmament was an uneven campaign that left many communities vulnerable to attack by those who still possessed weapons. The Uganda Peoples Defence Force (UPDF) abruptly scaled back the campaign after only three months in March 2002 when two brigades of regular troops were transferred to north-central Uganda to engage with the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), leaving only local defense units (LDUs) behind in Karamoja. Revenge raiding and attacks quickly resumed, with those groups that had already disarmed (voluntarily or by force) bearing the brunt of these assaults. Many groups, especially those near the Sudanese or Kenyan borders, rapidly rearmed. See Office of the Prime Minister, "Karamoja Integrated Disarmament and Development Program (KIDDP)" (Office of the Prime Minister, Kampala, 2007); Bevan, "Crisis in Karamoja."
[11] Human Rights Watch, "'Get the Gun!' Human Rights Violations by Uganda's National Army in Law Enforcement Operations in Karamoja Region" (Human Rights Watch, New York, 'NY, 2007); Stites and Akabwai, "'We Are Now Reduced to Women.'"
[12] Ibid.
[13] E. Stites and D. Akabwai, "Changing Roles, Shifting Risks: Livelihood Impacts of Disarmament in Karamoja, Uganda" (Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, Boston, MA, June 2009).

natural resources, private sector expansion, growth of markets, dynamic internal and external trade, and access by national and international development and investment stakeholders.[14] By 2015, large-scale cattle raids were rare, though other, more localized forms of violence and insecurity continued, including opportunistic theft committed by young men and linked to the loss of male livelihood options.[15]

Communities in both northern and southern Karamoja credited security improvements in large part to the government-led disarmament campaign. In addition, two parallel local resolutions emerged in 2014 from local dialogue among communities and with the support of the security sector and local officials. Known as the Nabilatuk Resolution and the Moruitit Resolution in southern and northern Karamoja respectively and enforced by local "peace committees," these resolutions proved highly effective. Also known as "two for one" or "two for one plus one" policies, these resolutions required alleged thieves to pay back double the number of animals stolen in addition to one additional animal offered as payment to trackers or to the peace committee.[16] These community-based resolutions also gave male elders the impetus to again effectively sanction and punish the behavior of male youth in their communities,[17] who for many years had been engaged in what many elders considered openly rebellious actions.[18]

**2019 to the present: investigating the current violence**

**Commercialized raiding**

The concept of commercialized raiding has long been cited as a factor behind periods of increased insecurity and violence in Karamoja and other pastoral societies in East Africa. This is the case at present, as evidenced by the accompanying KRSU assessment of community perceptions on the renewed violence of the past three years in which both men and women (but not male youth) participants said that "traders" were the second-most involved stakeholder in the current insecurity (after "youth"). Other stakeholders—including youth—are viewed as raiding animals primarily in order to sell them in internal markets or to external actors. These aspects all point to a strong "commercial" component of the current conflict but fail to indicate if this component is causal—i.e., the commercial element is *driving* the raiding—or is simply the most practical and advantageous means of converting stolen animals into liquid assets. Answering this question requires an examination of what "commercialized raiding" means and how it has been understood in earlier periods.

At its most simple, the term commercialized raiding refers to the exchange of stolen animals for cash or other commercial gain. This contrasts with raiding for the purpose of restocking, raiding to settle scores, raiding to increase one's own herd size, raiding to accrue bridewealth, raiding to demonstrate masculine prowess, or any combination of the above. Put another way, commercial raiding means that animals are taken with the intent to sell.

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[14] J. Burns, G. Bekele, and D. Akabwai, "Livelihood Dynamics in Northern Karamoja: A Participatory Baseline Study for the Growth, Health and Governance Program (Mercy Corps)" (Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, Boston, MA, 2013); K. Howe, E. Stites, and D. Akabwai, with Mercy Corps, "'We Now Have Relative Peace': Changing Conflict Dynamics in Northern Karamoja, Uganda" (Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, Boston, MA, November 2015); E. Stites, K. Howe, T. Redda, and D. Akabwai, "'A Better Balance:' Revitalized Pastoral Livelihoods in Karamoja, Uganda" (Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, Boston, MA, July 2016).

[15] E. Stites, and A. Marshak, "Who Are the Lonetia? Findings from Southern Karamoja, Uganda," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 54 (May 2016): 237–52.

[16] Howe et al., "We Now Have Relative Peace."

[17] Stites and Marshak, "Who Are the Lonetia?"

[18] E. Stites, "A Struggle for Rites."

While commercial raiding is often linked to the modern characteristics of pastoral societies in East Africa, there is no clear date when this practice began. The timeline for the origin of commercial raiding varies based on location and historical interpretation. For instance, in his study of the Kuria of Tanzania, Fleischer argues that raiding evolved from a form of cultural expression to a capitalist strategy beginning in the colonial era.[19] Anderson also ascribes colonial roots to commercial raiding in his work on the Kalenjin in Kenya.[20] Other scholars of both Turkana (Kenya) and Karamoja locate the emergence of commercial raiding in the decades following national independence.[21] Mkutu, on the other hand, believes that the commercial component did not become the main motivation in Karamoja until the mid-1990s.[22] Regardless of the time period and region, the commercialization of raiding is best understood as a gradual and irregular process: some raided cattle in some areas are sold for commercial gain at certain times, while on other occasions the same raiders may retain or exchange stolen animals for traditional purposes, such as marriage, tribute, and increasing one's own herd size. The fact that raids—even by the same actors—vary in motivation, scope, and outcome means that we cannot explain any period of violence or conflict as being due purely to commercialization, but rather must see the commercialized element as one factor among many.

In Karamoja, the commercialized element is believed to have influenced raiding patterns and characteristics starting in the 1980s and 1990s and continuing today. One key pattern is in the characteristics and motivations of raiding parties as raids became more commercialized. Groups of young men engaged in raiding became smaller, in part because proceeds were shared directly among the raiders as opposed to being dispersed more widely throughout the community. Relatedly, young men engaged in these raids operated in smaller groups to avoid detection from *within* their communities: raids undertaken for commercial gain did not usually have the same approval or blessing of the male elders and community members that existed for traditional raids.[23] Animals from successful traditional raids had been incorporated into collective herds and paid as tributes to those who had planned and blessed the raids, including the elders. Commercial raiding, in contrast, largely benefitted the raiders alone, with fewer benefits (or blessings) passed vertically. Horizontal transfers that did continue were more circumscribed, with benefits going to the raider's friends, his immediate family, or to an in-law in the form of bridewealth.

Reflecting on an earlier period of intense raiding in Karamoja, from the 1980s to early 2000s, respondents and observers often cite businessmen, politicians, police, and members of the military as being either directly involved in the orchestration or receiving direct benefits from the raids. Allegations of external involvement and profit making are also a factor of the resumption of raiding and insecurity that has taken place in Karamoja since 2019. While very difficult to prove, these rumors of outside involvement are notable in part because they are so widely believed by the local population. Many sources on commercial raiding elsewhere in East Africa have explored the role of external actors and highlight a wide range of potential types and facets of involvement. This "external collaboration and assistance"[24] can reportedly take a variety of forms, such as an extended chain of transactions and actors originating with a specific

[19] Fleischer, "Cattle Raiding and Its Correlates"; and M. L. Fleischer, *Kuria Cattle Raiders: Violence and Vigilantism on the Tanzania/Kenya Frontier* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2000).
[20] D. Anderson, "Stock Theft and Moral Economy in Colonial Kenya," *Africa* 56, no. 4 (1986): 399–416.
[21] Ocan, "Pastoral Crisis in Northeastern Uganda"; J. Markakis, "Pastoralism on the Margin" (Minority Rights Group International, London, 2004); Mirzeler and C. Young, "Pastoral Politics."
[22] K. A. Mkutu, "Pastoral Conflict and Small Arms: The Kenya-Uganda Border Region" (Saferworld, London, 2003).
[23] Mirzeler and Young, "Pastoral Politics"; Akabwai and Ateyo, "The Scramble for Cattle."
[24] J. Oloka-Onyango, G. Zie, and F. Muhereza, "Pastoralism, Crisis and Transformation in Karamoja," in "CBR Pastoralism Workshop, Makerere University" (1993), 12.

order for cattle,[25] training in military tactics and use of modern weapons,[26] the involvement of external "armed military or bandit groups" seeking to "procure cattle in vast quantities either to feed warring armies or to sell on the market,"[27] logistics and transport support,[28] and the financing of cattle raids for commercial purposes.[29] Eaton is one of the few authors to directly challenge the reliability of the widespread allegations regarding the linkages between raiding for profit and external criminal linkages, saying that some scholars tend to rely on unverifiable assumptions to advance the more sensational aspects of commercial raiding.[30]

The commercialization of raids is certainly one factor in the resumption of conflict and insecurity in Karamoja since 2019. However, it is highly unlikely both to be the *only* factor and for the degree and extent of external involvement in commercial raids to be established with certainty.

**Conflict over mineral access, rights, and wealth**

Scholars have dedicated specific attention to the conflict over minerals as a subset of conflict over natural resources. Czuba argues in a 2017 working paper that the shift in state attention to Karamoja witnessed in the early 2000s and taking the form of forced disarmaments was driven not by a desire to bring peace to the region and incorporate the marginalized area into the central state, but instead by the goal of state managers for self-enrichment from the exploitation of minerals.[31] Czuba argues that these intentions are visible in part in the priorities of the government following pacification: rather than invest in social services to benefit the local population, the state left these efforts to the UN and NGOs and instead prioritized road building, electrification, and sedentarization—policies that either did not benefit ordinary citizens or actively harmed them by undermining pastoral livelihoods. These investments did, however, pave the way for land grabbing and exploitation of minerals. At the same time, the "UPDF's actions during disarmament can be seen as intending to keep the region's inhabitants docile, afraid of challenging the government, and unable to oppose its future actions."[32] The combination of pacification (through removal of guns and destruction of pastoral livelihoods) and the infrastructure investments in the region paved the way for self-enrichment of state managers through natural resource extraction. This process relates to conflict through its undermining of pastoral livelihoods and particularly the role and identity of young men, weakening of the customary system of authorities of the elders, and expanding of ready access to the region by external actors, including those who facilitate the quick sales of stolen animals.

The processes described by Czuba lay the foundations for mineral exploitation and profit on a commercial scale. Against this backdrop, however, takes place widespread artisanal small-scale mining (ASM), primarily of marble, limestone, and gold. Research by Iyer et al. in 2019 examined the ways in

[25] J. Schilling, M. Akuno, J. Scheffran, and T. Weinzierl, "On Arms and Adaptation: Climate Change and Pastoral Conflict in Northern Kenya" (Working Paper CLISEC-15, University of Hamburg, Research Group Climate Change and Security, Hamburg, 2011).
[26] Ocan, "Pastoral Resources and Conflicts."
[27] Hendrickson et al., "The Changing Nature of Conflict," 191.
[28] Akabwai and Ateyo, "The Scramble for Cattle."
[29] Mkutu, "Pastoral Conflict."
[30] D. Eaton, "The Business of Peace: Raiding and Peace Work along the Kenya-Uganda Border (Part I)," *African Affairs* 107, no. 426 (2008): 89–110.
[31] Czuba, "Extension of State Power." Czuba lists the following minerals and resources that have been detected in the sub-region: gold, silver, copper, iron, titanium, manganese, niobium, tantalite, chrome, rare earth and radioactive minerals, precious and semi-precious stones (ruby, sapphire, red and green garnet, labradorite, fluorite, quartz), and limestone and marble (p. 20). Oil exploration is also underway in the region.
[32] Ibid, 16.

which ASM contributed to conflict in Tapac Sub-County in Moroto District.[33] They found an increase in conflict over a number of factors relating directly to mining, including conflict over land access price negotiations and payment of surface rights. In addition, a number of factors contributed to increased tension in the area, including a lack of negotiations with communities regarding access to sites and the influx of outsiders seeking to benefit from ASM. Similar to Czuba, Iyer et al. identify the shift in authority from the male elders to the elected local council (LC) system as creating problems in conflict resolution and mitigation around land and mineral access. In addition, Iyer et al. point out that the contention over ASM and heavy involvement of the LCs in conflict mitigation has undermined the traditional role of women in being able to protest against threats to their resource base.

As described by these authors, conflict over minerals is primarily on a more systemic than interpersonal level and is unlikely to directly fuel the resumption of conflict experienced in the region since 2019. This form of conflict does, however, contribute to a broader environment characterized by tension between groups, the erosion of customary authority structures, the emergence of new forms of economic power and of economic centers of power, and increased involvement by external actors with little regard for local systems (including systems of resource management and conflict resolution). Taken together, these aspects contribute to a situation in which conflict is both tolerated and occurring at multiple levels between various actors.

[33] P. Iyer, S. Longoli, P. Lokol, J. Achia, and R. Kodet, "We Do Not Know Whose Land This Is: Land Ownership and Conflict Dynamics in Mining Areas of Karamoja, Uganda" (Karamoja Development Forum/Ford Foundation, 2019).